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## **Abstract**

The overall aim of this thesis is to investigate the experiences and lived realities of non-traditional students in higher education. In particular, students who are both mature and working class, and have progressed from further education. Further education, particularly access courses, are considered to be the non-traditional route into HE. The first chapter is an exploration of the history of higher education from its traditional elitist origins to modern day widening participation. The second chapter is an examination of further education and the access course, which has partly enabled the widening participation drive. I demonstrate that non-traditional students who have no history in the field of HE, and have progressed through the access course route, undergo a unique and profound experience in which they re-shape their identities and their perceptions of themselves. I use the theoretical framework of Bourdieu's theories of habitus and cultural capital to explore the concept of class and educational success and failure, and why, according to Bourdieu, some classes succeed in education and some do not. However, my research findings do not support an uncritical application of Bourdieu's theory; rather that one's habitus can change to accommodate new practices. The findings of the research are based on interviews with ten participants, all of whom are or have been mature working class students in HE. Following thematic analysis of the interview data, five themes emerged, revealing the journey and transformations that my participants had undergone. During the final chapter of the thesis, I explore the participants' subjective realities and, located between a critical and interpretative paradigm, situate their lived experiences of being mature working class students in the academy. I conclude this research with a discussion of my most significant finding: that more needs to be known and understood about the unique experiences of non-traditional students, in order that they feel better accommodated, and that the institution can work towards achieving full inclusivity.

## **Acknowledgements**

Many people have assisted in this investigation into the experiences of non-traditional students in higher education. I would particularly like to thank the participants, who gave up hours of their time to recount their experiences and lived realities. I would also like to thank my supervisor, Dr Alan Skelton, and my course tutor, Dr Christine Winter, for their valuable support. I owe a debt of gratitude to my father, who recognised the importance of my education and has supported me throughout. Lastly, I would like to express my appreciation and heartfelt thanks to my friends, and especially to my children, who have endured the ups and downs of this prolonged period of study, yet never lost their faith in me.

## Introduction

The overall and main objective of this thesis is to examine and explore the lived experiences and perspectives of mature learners in higher education. Mature learners are categorised as non-traditional learners; non-traditional learners are those belonging to social groups who have little history in the field of higher education, according to Zinciewicz and Trapp (2004) in Taylor and House (2010: 46). Traditionally, accessing and participating in HE has been dominated by one hegemonic social group: white middle and upper-class males. This situation has persisted, and even though some groups are now well represented, such as women, other social groups have remained under-represented within higher education. Given this historical context the key research question is to seek and examine the experiences of learners who do not originate from that hegemonic group whose participation, historically, dominated HE. Fuller and Heath (in David 2010) asserted from their own research that mature learners also tend to be from the working class. The participants who took part in my research are all mature students who were returning to learn after a break in their education, and all define themselves or their backgrounds as working class.

Chapter 1 begins with a discussion of social class and moves on to provide an overview of the history of higher education and the widening participation movement. Widening participation was an initiative set up to enable non-traditional learners to enter higher education, after it was recognised and acknowledged by the Robbins report (1963) that people from excluded social groups, especially the working class, were missing out on the opportunity of acquiring a university degree. In addition talent was being wasted, talent that would be to the benefit of society and the economy, as many young poor people did not progress to HE for their own economic reasons. The New Labour government of 1996 decided that educational reform in all sectors was overdue and set a new participation rate of 50 per cent for 18 to 30 year olds. The driver behind this reform, and amongst the objectives at the top of the agenda, were creating social cohesion, and producing a more effective economy able to compete in the global market.

The concept of a stratified system of higher education is also explored in chapter 1. I will argue that although widening participation has been achieved, it is those

universities considered to be mass institutions who fully partake, and not the elite institutions for whom exclusivity is still evident. This concept is demonstrated from an examination of various universities' statistics that represent participation of learners who are deemed as mature. This chapter also analyses the recent emerging problem of student loans and debt acquired through participation in HE. For some, the debt acquired is seen as an investment in one's future, for others it is a high risk and frightening prospect. An examination of theories of debt aversion highlights differences in attitudes towards debt.

Chapter 2 closely examines the role of the further education sector in facilitating the progression of non-traditional learners to HE. Non-traditional learners, especially mature students, opt for non-traditional routes into HE, for example access courses. Access courses have come to be known as the third route into higher education as, unlike traditional A-levels, access courses cater for those who have had a long break in education and are returning as mature learners. Unlike learners who progress straight from school without a break in education, the mature students' education tends to be fragmented and non-linear and they may be juggling other roles and responsibilities, such as parenting, caring, working and housekeeping.

This chapter also looks at how critical pedagogy is used in the delivery of access courses, the curriculum, and the classroom in order to empower learners and enable them to question and challenge dominant social structures. This approach is particularly useful for students belonging to those social groups who were excluded from higher education, marginalised and remain under-represented in HE. Access courses, like most undergraduate degrees, are modularised. In this chapter I also explore the arguments and theories around modularisation and how some may construe this system as supportive, whilst others may construe it as lowering standards.

Chapter 3 focuses on the theoretical perspective used within the thesis. The chosen theorist is Pierre Bourdieu (1930-2002). Bourdieu's theories of habitus and cultural capital enable us to conceptualise and understand why some people participate in higher education and some do not. Focussing on the working class as the marginalised social group in HE, Bourdieu demonstrated how education perpetuates inequality and lack of opportunity. The theories or 'thinking tools' as he called them,

provide an explanation for why the working class do not participate in HE on the same scale as the middle and upper classes. Habitus enables us to understand that we have 'a sense of one's place which leads one to exclude oneself from places from which one is excluded' (Bourdieu 1984: 471). Whilst cultural capital enables an understanding of how, for example, possessing academic language can be an asset; not everybody has the privilege of acquiring such capital from their culture and class. I examine the theories in the context of my own research, and explore my participants' experiences of HE using Bourdieu's theoretical framework.

Chapter 4 is an analysis of the methods and methodology. The methods deployed for collecting data for the thesis was that of interviews. Interviews are a qualitative method that involves human participants and requires that data is coded, themed and interpreted. I chose this method because it was the most appropriate data collection tool for answering my key research question: Investigating the transition from FE to HE: what are the lived experiences and perspectives of non-traditional learners? I also include a short personal biography, as I myself was a mature student, and it is my own lived experiences and perspectives of being a non-traditional learner that lead me to conduct this research. I wanted to find out if other mature learners, having had a long break from education, and with a working class background, had undergone similar experiences.

My intention was to collect rich descriptions from my participants. During interview, I would capture their experiences and perspectives by questioning them about their feelings of being higher education students. In this chapter I analyse the interview as a data collection method, and why it is more appropriate than other methods. I explain the sampling strategy, who my participants are, and why I opted to ask the questions that I did. I also include a short biography of each participant so that the reader can gain an awareness of their backgrounds, genders, ethnicities and at what stage of their education they are in. Although I do not focus on all the marginalised groups that they belong to, as this would make the thesis too broad, I do pay special attention to class. Lynch and O'Neill (1984) assert that one's working class identity and status is altered by acquiring a higher education and I wanted to explore this concept through the interview data. The methodology is a qualitative one, and the approach to analysis is situated between the interpretive paradigm and the critical research paradigm. This is because my intention was not only to capture the lived

experiences, but to present them in order to create more awareness of the mature students' experience in HE.

Chapter 5 is a presentation of findings from the research data. During the data analysis and interpretation phase, five themes emerged. The themes are arranged into subsections, where each one is analysed with extracts from the interview transcripts. These extracts are interpreted along with the theoretical framework and evidence from the literature. Some of the secondary evidence supports the participants' experiences and perspectives whilst some refutes them.

Lastly, the conclusion outlines the key points and arguments of the thesis and what important contributions to existing knowledge the research has made. I reiterate each of the key themes that have emerged from data analysis, and provide a discussion of these framed within the context of the theoretical perspective. In addition, I discuss the scope that the thesis provides for further research within this area.

## Chapter 1: Widening the Participation into Higher Education

### Social Class

The term 'working class' is going to be used frequently within this thesis, even though the main focus of the thesis is on mature students as a non-traditional and under-represented group progressing to higher education from further education. Mature students tend also to be working class, and all of my participants define their backgrounds as working class, therefore it would be helpful to include a section where the term 'working class' can be discussed and defined.

Avis argues that although 'analytically we can separate relations of class from those of gender and race, in practice they are intertwined. We are all positioned in relation to our class, gender, ethnicity, sexuality and so on...' (2009: 14). However, followers of the cultural deprivation theory (Bernstein 1961), argue that the working class, regardless of race, gender, ethnicity and other factors, are inherently deficient, for example in the use of language, in comparison to the middle class. Whilst I acknowledge that class, gender, race, sexuality and other factors are intertwined, for the purpose of this thesis I will focus only on class as a social factor as dealing with all other social factors will be too broad.

The term 'working class' can be conceptualised in two ways: theoretical and operational. Theoretical conceptualisation involves using theories that examine values and behaviour, such as cultural deprivation theory. Operational conceptualisation involves using socio economic groupings according to occupations and qualifications. In this section I will discuss both.

#### *Theoretical conceptualisation of class*

Karl Marx (1848) theorised that society consisted of two classes: the working class and the ruling class. For Marx, the working class were a group of people sharing the same economic background and, occupationally, consisting of manual workers (in Haralambos and Holborn 2008). Later, Kohn (1977) proposed four levels of class: 'lower class (unskilled manual workers), working class (semi-skilled and skilled



workers), middle class (white collar workers and professionals), and the elite' (in Hughes and Perry-Jenkins 1996: 176). More recently, The Great British Class Survey (Savage et al. 2013) reveals that there are now seven classes in Britain. Whichever theory one adheres to, most theorists agree that there are consequences and implications for whatever class one belongs to, and these are usually educational and occupational.

Bernstein (1961) in Haralambos and Holborn (2008) theorised that an aspect of culture: speech, can be used to demonstrate deprivation within the working class. His work on elaborate and restricted speech codes goes some way to explaining that a restricted code, used by the working class, renders them culturally deprived and that this is evident in low levels of educational attainment. Conversely, an elaborate code, as used by the middle and upper classes, is a formal and sophisticated language favoured by the education system and therefore puts these classes at an advantage. Bernstein asserted that the ability to use appropriate language is an important factor in educational success. However, Bernstein takes a deterministic view of language and has been criticised for being too vague in his definitions of social class and failing to provide hard evidence to prove the existence and effects of the speech codes (Rosen (1979) in Haralambos and Holborn (2008)).

Bourdieu (1984), whose theories will be discussed in much more detail in chapter 3, argues that, not only are the working class culturally deprived, but that the cultural capital of the middle and upper classes is deemed as dominant and superior, and can only be learned in dominant class families. This means that the working class do not have access to the type of cultural capital that they need to be successful, thereby perpetuating class inequalities. Bourdieu also asserts that working class students are put at a disadvantage educationally because they are assessed in terms of the dominant culture and a capital that they do not have access to, therefore educationally they will always be disadvantaged. An aspect of the dominant culture is academia; vocationalism is associated with the working class culture but this is not valued in the same way.

However, Willis (1977) in his study of 'working class lads', argues that the working class are not culturally deprived, that they do possess cultural capital, as defined in their own terms, but that it is different to that of the middle and upper classes. In

Willis' work, the lads possess what they need to survive and be successful in their own culture. Moreover, not only do they reject school and qualifications, as they do not believe these will improve their employment prospects, but they see this type of work as effeminate; they actively choose unskilled manual work as a means of confirming and asserting their masculinity. 'Manual labour was seen by the lads as more worthy than mental labour' (Haralambos and Holborn 2008: 606). Using Willis' theoretical lens to examine class, it becomes apparent that each class has its own cultural capital but that they are not equally valued. The culture of the dominant classes is held in the highest esteem and this positions others as inferior. Bourdieu would argue here that the culture of the dominant classes will continue to be held in the highest esteem as they use their power to maintain their advantages. In this way, class inequalities are perpetuated.

### *Operational conceptualisation of class*

Avis comments that the 'mental-manual divide ... serves as an important role in the formation of class differentiation' (2009: 74). This divide can be construed as academic-vocational, or middle-working class occupations. However, the operational conceptualisation of class in society is different to the theoretical perspective described above as it uses socio economic groups (SEGs) to classify people according to occupation. This is similar to Marx's definition of class in which he asserted that the working class are a group of people sharing the same economic background and consisting of manual workers (Haralambos and Holborn 2008). SEGs are used by HESA when grouping higher education applicants according to their parents' occupational background.

In the 2010 report, BIS stated that in the academic year 2008-9, 13.7 per cent of participants in HE were from the four lowest socio economic groups, with the remainder of applicants from the three highest groups. The groups, called socio economic classes (SECs) by HESA, are arranged as followed, and are determined by the students' higher-earning parent's occupation.

NS-SEC 1	Higher managerial and professional
NS-SEC 2	Lower managerial and professional
NS-SEC 3	Intermediate occupations
NS-SEC 4	Small employers and own account workers
NS-SEC 5	Lower supervisory and technical
NS-SEC 6	Semi-routine occupations
NS-SEC 7	Routine occupations

The Office for National Statistics also uses an eighth class: never worked and long term unemployed. This type of operational conceptualisation of class is also used by The Office for National Statistics in order to analyse and present information on educational attainment:

Parental and family circumstances impact upon GCSE attainment. In 2002, 77 per cent of children in year 11 in England and Wales with parents in higher professional occupations gained five or more A\* to C grade GCSEs. This was more than double the proportion for children with parents in routine occupations (32 per cent) (ONS 2004).

Using this type of classification, it can be argued that those in the top SECs, so placed according to their occupations, are more likely to produce children who achieve high levels of educational attainment, and are most likely to progress to higher education. Once graduated with a degree, they too have the opportunity to occupy positions in the top SECs. This is what Bourdieu (1984) was referring to when he asserted that cultural capital is reproduced in the home.

Kirby (2013) comments that 'Class is almost totally irrelevant in modern Britain... we are not bound by class'. In a Radio 4 programme on class she opposes the results of the Great British Class Survey (Savage et al. 2013) and asserts that 'the traditional class structure has disappeared ... class is totally irrelevant in today's society...there is no class structure any more' Kirby (2013). However, there is also a theory to explain that class does not exist in society - we are individuals, and therefore there are no restrictions, implications or consequences from one's position in the social structure. Individualism or 'new individualism' (Haralambos and Holborn 2008: 492), is the theory that we are individually responsible for ourselves. It is seen by some as an unintended consequence of the welfare state, which has allowed people the freedom and opportunities not available before, and that family were relied on

providing in the past. Avis asserts that 'The notion of class as a relatively fixed social structure has been unpicked; instead we are offered a far more fluid and undetermined model of the social formation. The emphasis upon the individual...' (2009: 30). Individualists value independence and self-reliance and advocate that the individual is the focus, not the social structure. However, individualists also oppose external interference in one's own interests by society or institutions such as the government and family.

Within this thesis, I will be referring frequently to social class and using both the operational and theoretical conceptualisations of class. All of my participants were mature students returning to learn after a long break in education, and all defined their backgrounds as working class. During the interviews, I did not probe further into their definitions of working class or what that meant to them as I did not deem it necessary. What was more significant to me was that they had all had negative past educational experiences but that these had not deterred them from participating in higher education. Although Bourdieu (1984) would assert that one's class can be a determining factor upon one's educational achievement, for my participants, it seems that their individual determination can be attributed for their educational successes.

### **An historical overview of HE**

Participation in higher education in the UK has traditionally been dominated by privileged and powerful social groups. Gradually, universities have opened their doors and encouraged participation by women, working-class, minority ethnic groups, and disabled learners. Within some of these social groups, women for example, there are now large numbers participating, however, learners from some social groups are still considered to be non-traditional learners, not only because they were not part of the traditional and dominant group entering HE, but because they remain under-represented in. Taylor and House (2010: 46) cite Zinciewicz and Trapp (2004) as defining under-represented groups as 'those with no family history of HE experience, from low participation neighbourhoods, socio-economically disadvantaged students, students from ethnic minorities, and students with disabilities'. In addition to the groups already mentioned, mature learners who have been out of education for some time, and are also under-represented, have steadily

been encouraged to participate by returning to learn. A mature learner can also belong to any or all of the above mentioned groups, and this could be deemed a double disadvantage. A mature learner from the working class for example is double disadvantaged as they occupy two non-traditional learner categories. However, the government and higher education have made concerted efforts to enable non-traditional learners to participate in HE; this movement has come to be known as 'widening participation'. This section will explore why and how this movement happened, and look closely at the government's long term objectives behind widening the participation into higher education.

Pratt-Adams et al. point out that 'During the late 1950s and early 1960s, educational commentators and researchers started to document the achievement of children in state schools...there was a concern that poor boys [*sic*] of exceptional ability might not get their chance...' (2010: 86). They were referring to working class children in state education missing out on the opportunity to enter higher education, not because of ability but because of class and poverty. The working class were poor, and it was typical of working class children to leave school at the leaving age of fourteen and enter paid employment because that was what was necessary. The Robbins report, in his review of higher education in 1963, pointed out that HE needed to be widened and expanded to include learners from under-represented groups like the working class. Vignoles and Crawford point out that 'At the time he wrote his seminal report, around one in twenty of each generation were fortunate enough to enter university' (David 2010: 47). At this time it was mostly school leavers and those attending sixth form colleges who progressed to HE, and this would have meant staying on in education until eighteen years of age, not common amongst the working class for economical reasons. Higher education therefore, best accommodated traditional learners, having established their study skills and been prepared for the experience; for those who wanted to return to learn after a long period of absence and had not been prepared to progress, participation was unlikely. Mature learners, as I have already stated, would have been at a severe disadvantage, finding it very difficult to be successful in HE after a prolonged period of absence from education.

The Robbins Report (1963) endorsed the principle that a higher education should be available to all those who had the ability and qualifications to benefit. This

endorsement highlighted, for the first time, the inequalities and elitism present in the UK higher education system. Robbins presented the idea that HE should be available to everyone, as opposed to an exclusive few; this was a radical idea for the time, as David points out 'in the 1960s there was virtually no popular or public debate about entitlement to university access or participation' (David 2010: 13). It was an accepted view within society that only those from a certain background or class would take advantage of opportunities to enter higher education. However, and as Scott comments 'when the Robbins report was published in 1963 there were still only 24 universities, with a further six, the first wave of 'new' universities, in the process of formation' (1995: 11). Currently there are over three hundred institutions that offer higher education courses, clearly an enormous increase in a short span of time, so much so that it is now considered to be a mass system of higher education. The concept of mass HE will be thoroughly explored further on in this chapter.

Scott argues that universities in the UK are very modern institutions. He states that 'Two hundred years ago there were only six in Britain - Oxford, Cambridge and the four ancient Scottish Universities...together they enrolled fewer than 5,000 students' (ibid). Scott comments further that the early institutions were not a 'system' as we know it to be today, and it was 'Not until the mid-nineteenth century were there any public policy interventions to shape or reform what today would be regarded as higher education' (ibid). Nevertheless the early universities were a very selective and consequently an elite group of institutions that, despite the eventual mass expansion of HE, would remain that way. The ethos of elitism within HE, despite its humble beginnings of six universities, continues, even with mass expansion. 'British higher education has become a mass system in its public structures, but remains an elite one in its private instincts' (Scott 1995: 2). There is a very deep-rooted characteristic within HE, the legacy of elitism, that although may not be obviously present within the mass institutions, has permeated throughout higher education as a whole.

Thompson comments that '...the history of participation in Higher Education is largely a history of elitism which ordinary people, women, Black and minority ethnic groups, disabled people and the working class have battled to gain access and contribute to knowledge development' (2000: 26). It is this history of narrow participation that non-traditional students often find difficult to contend with. Reay et al. comment that 'Elitism is built into the very fabric of higher education whether elite or mass...very

little will change until the ethos and culture of higher education radically alters' (2005: 163). Furthermore, the 'battle to gain access' (ibid) that Thompson refers to reinforces the legacy of elitism in HE and it could be this factor that deters the under-represented groups from taking part. Reay et al. assert that 'Since 1998 participation rates have increased more rapidly among the middle classes than the working classes' (2005: 6). Further on in the thesis I will examine and explore the experiences and perspectives of non-traditional students in higher education. These students will be mature and from working class backgrounds, a social group that remains under-represented within HE.

The British higher education system has evolved into its present state as a result of increasing access. Widening the participation of learners taking part in HE has, over the course of the previous fifty years or so, helped to create a system of education that is completely different to the one that existed before; however, it has been a long and complicated process. A period that represents one of the largest spates of expansion is the second half of the 1980s and throughout the 1990s. Smith and Boccock comment that 'between 1987 and 1992 participation almost doubled from 14.6 per cent to 27.8 per cent' (1999: 285). However, and despite attempts to attract under-represented groups, this wave of expansion was the result of an increased number of traditional learners remaining in education post 16, and entering HE by completing A-Levels or vocationally related courses. It is important, at this stage, to draw a distinction between 'increasing' and 'widening' participation, as the two are not the same. Elliott (2003) argues that 'we are widening participation to enable those *who previously could not benefit* to have the opportunity to participate in HE, and by so doing creating equality of opportunity and a more just society. Certainly we have successfully *increased* participation, but how far has it *widened?*' (p. 62). Elliott is arguing for expansion that includes the non-traditional and under-represented groups, not merely increasing participation by the already over-represented middle and upper classes, as suggested previously by Reay et al. (2005).

Between 1965 and 1992, higher education operated under a binary policy which sustained two separate types of institutions with separate missions. The traditional, research driven, elite universities such as Oxford and Cambridge were one half of the binary, and the vocationally oriented polytechnics that were to become the 'new' universities were the other. The two different types of institutions catered for two

different types of students and, as already stated, the majority of these students were traditional in that they had progressed straight from school. One reason that the binary system of HE came into existence, as identified by Pratt (1999), was that traditional universities 'were reluctant to respond to economic and social changes; the intention was to create sectors with innovative courses, of direct relevance to the economy and reaching out to new groups of students...the [traditional] universities had long been regarded as conservative, remote and exclusive' (p. 258) The polytechnics were distinctive in that they concentrated on courses with a vocational emphasis, as opposed to being academically oriented, and they were comprehensive, not exclusive. This meant that polytechnics had wider access and learners from non-traditional backgrounds, who may have been denied access to traditional universities, could access polytechnics. Pratt points out that the binary policy 'overturned the assumptions of the Robbins Report' (ibid) and goes on to explain that 'polytechnics had become the larger sector in HE...they had substantially expanded at post-graduate level...particularly successful in increasing numbers of women, students from ethnic minorities and mature students' (Pratt 1999: 259). In terms of widening participation, the polytechnic side of HE was a success story. As Pratt asserts 'By the early 1990s, nearly a third of the age group was in higher education; in the early 1960s, the elite system had only admitted about 5 per cent' (ibid). However, and as Elliott has pointed out, even though participation was being increased, as 'nearly a third of the age group was in higher education' (ibid) it was not necessarily being widened enough at this time. Furthermore, the binary system created a hierarchy of education with the traditional universities at the top, occupying prestigious positions, and the polytechnics at the bottom. Under-represented and non-traditional groups may well have been able to access higher education but it was not deemed to be the same standard in comparison to the academic universities. Pratt-Adams et al. capture this concept when they state that 'the only measure of "success" was academic achievement; vocational achievement has never been celebrated in the same way' (2010: 86).

Under the 1992 Further and Higher Education Act, the two institutions were unified and polytechnics were given university status. They were to become *new* universities, whilst the traditional universities became the *old* universities. Watson and Bowden point out that '...[they] ended the binary line and nearly doubled the



number of UK universities almost over-night' (1999: 247). From 1992 there was one system of HE acting under one policy and it is interesting to note how the two, once very different institutions, were going to operate as one. Interestingly, Pratt points out that 'polytechnics had redrawn the map of learning' (1999: 260). They had challenged many of the old university's traditional ways, and demonstrated that degrees can be acquired by non-traditional learners in non-traditional subjects. They also operated a modular system of learning whereby qualifications could be acquired gradually; they used a variety of assessment methods which is more conducive to the success of non-traditional students, as I will demonstrate further on in chapter 2 on further education. Apart from a very few elite institutions, the system of modular degrees became widely used. Pratt comments that 'it was less that the polytechnics became universities than that the universities had become polytechnics' (ibid). It could be asserted, at this point, that this is what made possible the mass higher education in Britain that exists today.

With a retrospective look, it is obvious now that the binary era was the transition period from elite to mass higher education in Britain. Trow (1973) defines the mass and elite systems in terms of participation rates: 'elite systems [are] those which enrol up to 15 per cent of the age group; mass systems as those enrolling between 15 and 40 per cent; and universal systems as those which enrol more than forty per cent' (p. 15). Scott defines the difference between elite and mass as 'all elite systems are exceptional while most mass systems are similar' (1995: 6). However, this definition is ambiguous and does not help us to understand exactly what separates a mass from an elite institution in terms of higher education. Gellert explains that the era of the exceptional European university education comprised three strands: knowledge which places research at the heart of HE; the production of professional workers, in particular state functionaries; and the third, more centred on Oxford and Cambridge, involved 'civilising gentlemen with liberal intellectual culture' (Gellert 1993: 237-8). The United States of America possess their own traditional and elite institutions known as the 'IV League', so called because they were considered to be the top four in the country. In addition, the Americans also have a mass system of HE. According to Scott, 'The first mass system developed three decades ago in the United States...the transition from elite to mass higher education, was developed in America' (1995: 8). It seems that the Americans are the founders

of mass HE, and as a result, the American system was held in high regard and, not only came to be considered the hegemonic model, it was adopted by Britain.

1996 saw the election of a new government. When New Labour came into power, one of the overarching objectives high on the agenda was to improve quality and raise standards in education. This, it was argued, would create an effective and skilled workforce, capable of competing in the global market, keeping the country economically prosperous and in turn creating social cohesion. The first white paper from the new government, published sixty seven days after taking office, stated 'We are talking about investing in human capital in an age of knowledge; to compete in the global economy' (DfEE, 1997: 3). Most of the reform proposed by the new government would take place in mainstream education; however, higher education participation rates were high on the agenda. Writing in 1995, Scott stated 'The current age participation index in British higher education is 32 per cent' (p. 2), and although the widening participation movement was already well under way, one of New Labour's objectives was to increase that figure to 50 percent by 2010. Parry points out that, 'most European countries had not followed the United States in moving toward a "mass" system enrolling 40-50% of the age grade' (2003: 308); Britain, however, had not made a full commitment to the European community but remained independent to Europe in some respects. Although, according to Trow (1973), New Labour's objective of fifty per cent participation rate would actually constitute a universal system, as participation rates exceeded a mass system.

The United States' strategies on social and educational reform were influential on New Labour during their term in office. Initiatives such as academy schools, National Diplomas, and mass higher education were migrated across the Atlantic in a bid to improve the long term economic prosperity of Britain. The concern, as already stated, was the effect of globalisation and whether Britain would be capable of competing in the global market. Globalisation, as defined by Pratt-Adams et al., means that 'the world has been compressed in terms of time and space, so economic, cultural and political changes have become globally connected' (2010: 68). In simple terms, the world has become smaller, with countries closer together, communication easier, and this now means that the UK, for the first time, is competing economically with countries like India and China. Increasing participation rates in higher education, and equipping more of the population with higher level

skills, it is believed, will give us an advantage in the global competition. Therefore, one of the new government's major objectives was to raise standards and increase participation in post-16 education. The reason put forward for this objective was because 'Businesses need a well motivated and skilled workforce to compete in global markets' (DfEE, 1999: 3). Marginson and Wende explain why education is a key player in the competition:

Higher education systems, policies and institutions are being transformed by globalisation ... In global knowledge economies, higher education institutions are more important than ever as mediums for a wide range of cross-border relationships and continuous global flows of people, information, knowledge, technologies, products and financial capital (2006: 4).

Hyland and Merrill comment on post-16 education reform and state that the 'key objectives...[are] to foster greater social inclusion and cohesion and the raising of skill levels to enhance Britain's economic competitiveness' (2003:5). This was clearly one of the New Labour government's major concerns. Coffield highlighted why when he questioned our ability as a nation to compete globally: 'how well placed are we to meet this challenge ... we are currently the fifth biggest economy in the world, having already been overtaken by China; and within the space of a few years we are going to be overtaken by India as well' (2008: 3). Allen et al. make reference to Human Capital Theory, and explain the link between economic prosperity and a skilled workforce. They assert: 'a country's overall economic well-being and the effective development of human capital rely heavily on the ability of colleges and universities to nurture current and future generations of workers, professionals and leaders' (2006: xiii). It was a legitimate concern; fears that the UK workforce would not keep up or compete effectively with the challenge of what had become a globalised arena. In addition, Maguire, et al. point out that 'The persistent skills shortages in the higher level occupations have generated pressures to expand the higher education route and to broaden access to include more students of working-class origins' (Brown and Lauder 1992: 233). Jones and Thomas make reference to the (DfES) 2003 white paper: *The future of higher education* and state: 'the white paper stresses the need for higher education to continue and increase its focus on innovation in the context of research' (2005: 620). The concern regarding innovation and research is reflected in the white paper:

There is a real danger that our current [strength] in the world will not be maintained. ...Looking at Nobel Prizes, or at citation rates for scientists, indicates that although our position is still strong it is declining (2003: section 1:14).

Widening the participation into HE, and equipping more learners with higher level skills, seemed to be one of the solutions to the problem of threatened economic competitiveness, and the main objective encompassed two aims: increased numbers and more students from non-traditional backgrounds. However, Malcolm presents a different view of the situation; she is pessimistic that the government's intentions were honourable, and she comments on the 'feel good rhetoric of widening participation' (Thompson 2000: 12). Malcolm comments further by explaining that expanding HE '...could be seen as yet another way of mopping up unemployment... expanding HE would effectively keep another cohort of people busy while apparently pursuing laudable educational aims' (Thompson 2000: 16-17). If there were an alternative agenda to widening participation, the drive could still be seen as having a favourable outcome; pursuing a higher education is a positive and more productive outcome to long-term unemployment. Nevertheless, Malcolm remains sceptical, and points out that widening participation 'coincided with the abolition of student grants, their replacement by student loans, and the extension of tuition fees...likely to discourage underrepresented social groups from even considering higher education' (ibid). However, in order to achieve a 50 per cent participation rate, a system of free higher education was not economically sustainable and alternative means of funding had to be found. Later on in this chapter, I will examine the connection between the working class and debt aversion and how this impacts on working class under-representation in HE.

The theory of using education as human capital in order to achieve economic prosperity through a skilled workforce, first emerged in the 1960s. Olssen (2004) cites Schultz (1960) as stating 'I propose to treat education as an investment in man and to treat its consequences as a form of capital...I shall refer to it as human capital...it renders a productive service of value to the economy' (p. 147). This concept came to be known as Human Capital Theory (HCT).

HCT works on two levels: the personal and the social. The personal level is said to accrue a private rate of return; this benefits the individual as they invest in their own education in order to increase their earning power. If

the cost of an individual's education is offset against long term higher earnings, then it can be considered to be an investment. The social level, however, operates on a national scale and education is seen as an overall good for the country (Burnell 2011a: 4).

Olssen asserts that 'Education as a public good is seen in a number of ways, including the potential to develop the moral, ethical, social, cultural and political awareness of all citizens, as well as to assist in the effective operation of the democratic process' (2004: 148) The qualities listed by Olssen are all associated with social cohesion. Olssen also emphasises the connection between skills and productivity: 'workforce and management skills are seen as essential determinants of national economic performance' (2004: 150). There was therefore a strong case for raising participation rates in post-16 education, and especially in higher education. The government had established a clear connection between the educational achievement of the members in its society, social cohesion, and economic prosperity. The Secretary of State for Education emphasized this when he stated that 'Economic prosperity and social cohesion go hand in hand' (DfEE 2000: para 4).

It seems then that the transition from elite to mass higher education, took place on two levels. First the binary system, and consequently the unifying of two different institutions into one, which 'ended the binary line and nearly doubled the number of UK universities almost over-night' (Watson and Bowden 1999: 247). Second, the influence from the United States on New Labour in further massifying, or according to Trow (1973), universalising higher education, even though the participation rate was already at 32 per cent. Both of these processes meant that the widening participation objective could be achieved. However, and as I have already pointed out, increasing participation is not the same as widening the participation. Statistics in this section relating to widening participation discuss the increase of participants within the age range. This is referring to participants who are progressing straight from school and sixth-form college, aged eighteen to twenty. Although some of these participants may be non-traditional in that, as in my initial discussion, they may be women, working class, minority ethnic groups, and disabled learners, they would not be mature learners returning to learn after a long break in education. This category is an important one as mature learners are not progressing straight from school whereas all other categories may be. Higher education participation rates do not, therefore, accurately include all non-traditional learners, and unless a significant

number of learners are mature, the claim to have effectively widened participation cannot be made.

However, Trow (1973) was concerned about how size would impact on the system of higher education, especially in the area of standards. 'Elite systems tend to be highly homogenous ... with high and common standards...Mass systems begin to be more "comprehensive", with more diverse standards...' (p. 10). Trow also commented on how the system will change in character as it becomes massified, and will 'create new forms of higher education as it begins to move towards universal access' (p. 7). At the time of writing, Trow was referring to the American mass system of HE; in the UK, HE had not yet reached a system of massification. Writing again in 1987, the beginning of the period that represented one of the largest spates of expansion in UK HE, Trow interestingly comments that 'Where Americans feel guilt toward our racial minorities for past ill-treatment, and our policies reflect it, the United Kingdom shows a parallel guilt-driven policy towards its working class' (1987: 279). However, I have demonstrated that New Labour's widening participation policies were driven by economic prosperity and social cohesion, both of which are necessary to the democratic process in a time of globalisation. Trow seemed to be extremely anxious regarding the massification of HE in the UK, and in his 1987 article he expressed:

I am not particularly optimistic about this particular scenario coming to pass in the United Kingdom...I think we will see a genuine stratification of institutions emerge, though with unclear boundaries and disputed functions – and as a result, the emergence of a reluctant and resentful sector of mass higher education (p. 290).

Reay et al.'s study (2005) into the influence of social class on choices of higher education institutions, demonstrates that Trow's concern was genuine. Reay et al. assert that the upper and middle classes apply to one set of universities, and the lower class apply to a different set of massified universities. An examination of the current statistics, shown on page 26, reveals that the elite universities continue to attract very small numbers of mature students in comparison to universities considered not to be elite. Further on I will examine some explanations as to why the elite universities failed to meet widening participation targets, and the reasons behind this.

In the following section within this chapter, I will examine how financial incentives were used as levers to effect change and meet the widening participation policy objectives. The levers would work on two levels: an institutional level, and the individual level. For the individual, the incentive is private capital gain through increased earning power and job prospects, the effect of acquiring a degree. For the institutions, meeting widening participation targets would be rewarded with funding incentives. The Dearing Report (1997) recommended that, when allocating funds, priority should be given to institutions who are committed to widening participation and can prove, through a widening participation strategy, that targets are being met. The majority of HE institutions were responsive to this tactic, except for the older universities who, as Naidoo points out 'failed to meet basic targets for widening participation...' (2000: 33).

### **Analysing policy drivers and levers behind widening participation**

As I have explained, two objectives were to be achieved from widening the participation into HE and creating a mass or universal system of 50 per cent participation: social cohesion and economic prosperity. In The Department for Education and Employment green paper: *The Learning Age*, the then Secretary of State for Education, David Blunkett, stated: 'With increasing globalisation, the best way of getting and keeping a job will be to have the skills needed by employers...for individuals who want security in employment, and a nation that must compete worldwide, learning is the key' (DfEE 1998: 18). The sector of learning being referred to here is post-compulsory education: the learning and skills sector, and the higher level skills and qualifications acquired in higher education.

One of the levers used by the New Labour government to implement the widening participation policy was the concept of education as human capital, a theory I have already explained. Another statement from the green paper (DfEE 1998) reveals how human capital theory was used to lever the policy into place: 'everyone must have the opportunity to innovate and gain reward': (p. 10). This statement demonstrates how HCT can be implemented on a personal level, as gaining rewards can be attributed to personal gain. The green paper also states that '...the most productive investment will be linked to the best educated and best trained workforces' (ibid).

HCT is in operation here on a wider, social level, making reference to trained workforces. Naidoo comments further on the wider, social level and the government's expectation that 'higher education will contribute to enhance the nation state's competitive edge in the global market place by developing innovations in knowledge and technology and producing the new "smart" workers, who will take up key positions in the knowledge economy' (2000: 25). The widening participation policy seemed like a beneficial situation for all the stakeholders concerned: the government, businesses, the workforce, and individual citizens; everyone had something to gain. However, the government still needed a set of policy levers to implement the policy amongst HE institutions, in order to achieve its wider objectives, as it is they who were ultimately going to effect change.

When analysing policy, it is important to distinguish policy drivers and policy levers, and to separate what is driving the policy and what is being done to implement the policy, in order to effect change. Coffield et al. explain policy drivers as 'the overarching aims that guide government strategy' (2008: 141). For New Labour these were to increase participation in HE to fifty per cent amongst the eighteen to thirty age group, including those from under-represented groups. In order for the government to meet their aims, a range of policy levers were utilised in order to create the change which, in turn, would meet the aims of the policy drivers. Kooiman comments that 'policy levers are not an inevitable part of governance; rather they are "instruments" chosen to meet particular political aims' (2003: 45). Steer et al. support Kooiman's explanation 'We use the term "policy levers" to refer to the "governing instruments" that the state has at its disposal to direct, manage and shape change in public services' (2007: 177). For example, the levers that the government had at its disposal in order to effect change on participation rates in HE were, to award institutions who had met their widening participation targets with financial incentives. Once change had taken place, the driver, which is the overarching aim of raising the participation rate, can be achieved.

Financial incentives by way of funding, which would be awarded on the basis of meeting targets, were the main incentive presented to HEIs<sup>1</sup> for them to engage in

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<sup>1</sup> Higher Education Institutions



widening participation and make the policy work. Naidoo discusses these strategies and their utilisation:

Funding levers have been developed to encourage institutions which, in the Dearing Committee's terms, demonstrate a commitment to widening participation...extra funding, for example, has been set aside to promote partnerships and developmental work between universities, schools and further education colleges to promote access to groups of students traditionally excluded from higher education (2000: 29).

In addition, targets would be set, and measured, in order to monitor the effects of widening participation policy, and to ensure that institutions were becoming more inclusive. The more learners from under-represented groups they attracted, the more inclusive they were considered to be. However, as Callender and Jackson point out, 'the government's target of 50 per cent participation, which is driving many of their HE policies, is concerned primarily with getting students through the HE door, and not with which, or what, HE door they enter' (2005: 510). Whilst these levers, disguised as funding incentives, were effective in manipulating the new/mass institutions, the old/elite universities did not engage in widening participation to the same extent. Naidoo commented in the year 2000 that 'Analysis of student enrolment figures indicate that the Russell Group of universities, comprising old universities such as Oxford, Cambridge, Warwick, Bristol and Imperial College for example, have failed to meet basic targets for widening participation set by the funding council...' (2000: 33). All of the universities in the 'Russell Group' referred to here are considered to be elite as they are the top twenty universities in the UK, as demonstrated by league tables.

The following table demonstrates the differences in intake of mature students between old/elite universities, and new/mass institutions during periods after Naidoo's research (2000). The statistics represent mature, full time, first degree entrants. HESA<sup>2</sup> defines mature as aged 21 and over and although this age may not be deemed by some as mature, it does mean that these students have had a break from education, and not progressed straight from school. HESA comments on the statistics: 'These tables provide information about the participation of certain groups that are under-represented in higher education relative to the HE population as a whole (HESA 2012).

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<sup>2</sup> Higher Education Statistics Agency

	2002-03 intake: % of mature students	2009-10 intake: % of mature students
<b>Russell Group Universities (old/elite)</b>		
London School of Economics	3.0	3.0
University of Oxford	4.7	4.1
University of Cambridge	9.9	4.9
University of Birmingham	9.7	7.7
University of Manchester	14.8	9.5
University College London	13.8	13.1
University of Liverpool	12.2	13.8
Kings College, London	20.1	21.0
<b>Universities not in Russell Group (new/mass)</b>		
Manchester Metropolitan University	23.8	20.5
University of Huddersfield	30.5	31.0
Coventry University	25.2	22.0
University of Plymouth	29.2	35.0
Middlesex University	42.4	36.0
University of Greenwich	45.9	43.5
University of East London	55.5	56.7
London Southbank	61.3	62.6

Sourced from Table T2a: Participation of under-represented groups  
in higher education: mature full-time undergraduate entrants  
(HESA 2012)

The table shows a comparison of data from two different academic years that are seven years apart. Seven years is a reasonable time span for comparing differences and similarities in intake. Sixteen universities, some in London, others in various

areas, were chosen randomly to illustrate the differences in intake between the elite 'Russell Group' universities and the new 'massified' universities. All of the Russell Group universities have a lower percentage of mature student intake, in comparison to the new universities. Some, for example Oxford, Cambridge, LSE and Birmingham have extremely low percentages of mature students. The exception within the table is Kings College, with an intake of over twenty percent for both years. However, this could be because Kings has large cohorts of armed forces personnel who choose Kings to complete their undergraduate and postgraduate education. Kings has a long history of educating armed servicemen and women. The remaining Russell Group universities in the table show a mature student intake of less than twenty percent, compared with the universities not in the Russell Group, whose mature student intake is much higher. Some of the London universities not in the Russell Group are showing half or over half of their intake as being mature; London Southbank, for example, at over 60 per cent.

There are several possible reasons to explain why the old universities do not meet widening participation targets, and recruit such small numbers of mature students – a non-traditional and under-represented group. First, the rhetoric of human capital theory, as used by the government as an incentive for enticing under-represented groups, has been perceived by older universities to focus too much on personal gain. Second, the belief is that non-traditional students tend to be resource intensive and time-consuming to teach. A third reason could be that non-traditional students such as those in the mature category simply choose not to apply. I will discuss each of these concepts in turn.

Older and elite universities such as those Naidoo refers to as 'the Russell Group' (ibid), are traditionally driven by research. The output, in human capital theory terms, is for public investment. It could be argued that the older universities engage in research that ultimately results in social policy and social change. Callender and Jackson explain that 'the [current] policy rhetoric focuses exclusively on HE as a private investment for private returns rather than as a public investment for public returns. In turn, this signals the onset of the decline of the public mission of HE with moves towards the marketisation of HE' (2005: 512). Therefore, it could be argued that the Russell Group universities are avoiding massification and mass marketing of their products, as they view this as a decline in the traditional research quality of

higher education; a decline in the quality of their research could mean detrimental effects on social change. They choose, therefore, not to engage in widening participation to the extent of other universities, in a bid to preserve their research status. Scott comments that in mass higher education institutions, unlike in elite institutions 'most graduates will not enter elite occupations; and much research will be guided by more parochial user perspectives' (1995: 95). Scott's comment implies that different institutions have different research interests.

Unlike A-Level students, who progress straight from school or sixth form college, non-traditional, and especially mature students often arrive in HE without the already established and necessary study skills. When A-Level students arrive at university, especially those with higher grades, they arrive with effective study skills, having recently sat exams and completed course work; when mature students arrive, they may still be trying to perfect their study skills. Hatt and Baxter's research suggests that 'knowing the rules of the game distinguished the A-Level entrants from the other groups' (2003: 25). Traditional groups of learners tend to know what is expected of them, whereas non-traditional students are still learning the 'rules of the game'. In addition, those rules may have changed since they were in education; therefore, learning what their lecturers require of them takes time and effort. Bamber et al. explain this further: 'Working supportively with non-traditional students, is a teacher and resource-intensive business. The requirement is significantly more ... Their needs are greater and they need more personal attention ... they have less time for research in the usual sense...' (Thompson 2000: 165). Since the older universities are traditionally research driven, it could be argued that this type of resource intensive learner would not be suited to the environment of the research university. The admissions process would enable such universities to screen out applicants who they deem to be unsuitable. Naidoo captures the universities' approach to admissions when she states 'it is the elite higher education providers that "choose" the student, rather than the other way round' (2000: 33). In this, they can ensure the recruitment of learners who are able to cope with the high level of research expected of them.

Non-traditional mature students may choose not to apply to the old elite universities. As I have already demonstrated, this type of institution has low percentages of mature students. In the study mentioned previously by Reay et al. (2005), 500

applicants to HE were questioned on their choice of university in order to conclude their research. Reay et al. provide an account of the overlapping effects of social class in the process of applying to HE, especially on the issue of which HEI to apply to. The researchers use Bourdieu's theory of 'objective limits' to conceptualise how people instinctively know their place in the world, and avoid those places where they feel they do not belong; 'a sense of one's place which leads one to exclude oneself from places from which one is excluded' (Bourdieu 1984 cited in Reay 2005: 91). Reay et al demonstrate in their research how applicants' social class is a key determinant when choosing HEIs to apply to. This concept may also be applied to mature students when choosing which university to apply to, and seeing that some universities have extremely low participation of people such as themselves, are deterred from applying. Gorard et al. comment that non-traditional students 'had chosen institutions where they felt they would not be different. For the mature students this was because they were fearful of being socially and academically inadequate compared with younger students' (2007: 82). Another reason for not applying is that the elite universities set the entrance requirements high, and generally do not accept applicants with non-traditional qualifications. In the final chapter I will conduct an in-depth analysis of the experiences and perspectives of mature students in higher education, having progressed through a non-traditional route.

Mature students who have had a break in education before returning, often do so via Access Courses, an alternative route to A-Levels. One of the objectives achieved by the 1986 Conservative government was to create an alternative route into higher education. This was to further enable and widen the participation of learners who had not come through the traditional route, learners who had been excluded, and mature learners who desired to return to learn after a long break in education. There were originally two routes for learners into HE, depending on what type of learner they were: the academic route, via A-Levels, and the vocational route for the more practical students. Vocational degrees were often accessed via apprenticeships, and tended to be the more popular route for the working class as they could earn whilst learning the trade. However, as Pratt-Adams et al. point out 'the only measure of "success" was academic achievement; vocational achievement has never been celebrated in the same way' (2010: 86); the vocational route was not deemed as

prestigious as the academic route. The academic A-Level route into HE at the time met the needs of traditional learners, staying on until eighteen years old, and progressing straight from school. It was not particularly suitable to mature learners returning to education. The DES (1987) white paper *HE: meeting the challenge*, started to enable mature and non-traditional learners to participate in higher education by recognising that 'There were many people from a wider range of academic and practical experience...many of whom will not have the traditional qualifications for entry...' (p. 9). This meant that for the first time, there was a need to widen access into HE via alternative routes. Alternative routes will be examined in the following chapter when I discuss further education's role in the widening participation movement.

The government may well have had the best of intentions when implementing the widening participation policy to allow non-traditional and under-represented groups to take advantage of the rewards offered by acquiring a higher education. However, it seems that implementing policy from a government to a local level is fraught with issues, and may not result in the desired effect. The government implemented the widening participation policy in order to achieve greater numbers from all under-represented groups in HE across all institutions. The objective has been achieved in some institutions but not all. Macdonald and Stratta comment that 'policy is not necessarily implemented in a straight forward manner; it is circumscribed by the contextual features of individual institutions and the interpretations of those who deliver policy within them' (2001: 250). The government may well implement policies but if institutions choose not to put them into effect in the intended way, the government will not fully achieve their objectives. In the following section, I will examine some of the after-effects that widening the participation into HE has created. In addition, I will analyse the connection between widening participation and the theory of working class aversion to debt, an indicator that human capital/private gain, the lever used to implement the policy, is ineffective amongst this social group.

## **Widening the Participation into Higher Education: a discussion of the after-effects**

Having traced the origins of widening participation, and examined how the massification of higher education has taken place, it is clear now that the two phenomena are inter-related. The widening participation movement could not have been successful without HE being massified, and massification of HE could not have taken place without participation having been increased. New Labour's objective, as I have already stated, was to achieve 50 per cent participation by 2010. Moreover, that 50 per cent would not necessarily be within the age range of eighteen to twenty year olds, as previous participation targets had been; the new 50 per cent target would include eighteen to thirty year olds, a much wider age group, and encompassing mature learners. When the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS 2011) published their *Participation Rates in Higher Education: academic years 2006/07-2009/10*, the participation rate for eighteen to thirty year olds stood at 47 per cent. However, BIS state that this is an 'initial participation rate' (ibid), meaning that this statistic represents the number of students joining HE courses but not the number graduating. It remains to be seen how many of those 47 per cent actually exit higher education with a full degree qualification. Nevertheless, the New Labour government target, which was set thirteen years beforehand, was a mere 3 per cent off being met. Participation remained at 47 per cent.

With a new Conservative/Liberal Democrat alliance government now in power, participation rates for the year 2011-12 still stand at 47 per cent (BIS 2012a), unchanged from the previous year. This is an extremely high rate of participation, even in comparison to some other OECD<sup>3</sup> countries. A paper published by the Economic and Social Research Council<sup>4</sup>, looks at the effects of globalisation on education and compares other countries' participation rates in tertiary education (their term for all post compulsory education, including higher education). 'Canada was the first country to achieve the target of over 50 per cent of people aged 25 to 34 to enter the job market with a tertiary level qualification...followed by Korea, which has engineered a massive growth in tertiary provision since 1991' (2008: 6). The paper also states that 'China now has more students in tertiary education than the

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<sup>3</sup> Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development

<sup>4</sup> ESRC is the UK's largest funder of research on economic and social issues

United States' (ibid). These figures representing other countries' participation rates are precisely why the Labour Government of 1996 was anxious to create an effective and skilled workforce, capable of competing in the global market. One could argue that Britain, with the government having met its agenda, is now in a position to achieve the original objective of creating economic prosperity, and competing effectively in an international global arena. However, that discussion will not take place here. This section will examine some of the effects that widening participation has had, and analyse the advantages and disadvantages of what the current higher education system offers.

### *The Price of a Degree*

Until 1996, higher education in Britain had been state funded. Students in HE had the cost of their fees paid, and were also entitled to a maintenance grant to cover living costs. However, with participation rates at over thirty per cent, the highest they had ever been, the financial situation was not sustainable. Financing HE had become an enormous strain on the economy, and although it was believed there would be long term benefits, reform was inevitable. The publication of the Dearing Report (1997) led to the introduction of tuition fees for higher education students. This was a new and controversial reform and implementation meant that the government would meet with resistance. Baroness Blackstone commented that 'The fact that the committee's proposals were not unexpected does not diminish the political struggle that faced the government to gain acceptance of tuition fees for students' (Watson and Amoah 2007: xiii). For the first time in British history, educational reform meant that HE students would be paying for their education. For some this would prove to be financially detrimental. Watson and Bowdon argue that 'Ministers took the Dearing recommendation of a student contribution to course costs and ignored what the report said about living costs, especially for poorer students' (2007: 29). However, there was some government funding allocated for concessions and bursaries aimed at poorer students in order to ease the financial burden. Nevertheless, getting into debt for an education was not seen by everyone to be an attractive prospect. Further on I will discuss the impact of HE debt on under-represented groups in higher education.



The justification for tuition fees was made partly by arguing that a higher education and the acquisition of a degree would increase one's career opportunities and earning power, thereby making repayments feasible. David outlines the government's justification for the introduction of fees: 'the chief beneficiaries of university expansion, in terms of both educational and economical benefit, would be the individual students, rather than the wider social and economic benefits' (2010: 10). Once again, the use of human capital theory, with the emphasis on private capital gain, is the lever being pulled to entice prospective students into higher education, even with tuition fees. In addition, when implementing fees, there was a case to be argued for the tax-paying members of society who were not aspiring to go to university. Higher education was being funded through taxation but how would these people benefit if HE were being funded for certain groups, other than themselves, to take advantage of? However, with participation rates expanding, more people were graduating with degrees than ever before. With so many people now acquiring degrees it has become standard criteria for job placements. In addition, 'the more widespread a qualification becomes, the more it is devalued' (Bourdieu 1993 cited in Haralambos and Holborn 2008: 636). Once, acquiring a degree was prestigious, now it almost seems commonplace. Competition for jobs where once a degree was not required has increased, thereby reducing the potential for increased earning power. Moreover, and as Blackburn and Jarman assert - inequality persists in the job market between those who do and those who do not possess a degree:

As the number of graduates has grown the degree has become an increasingly common entry qualification for a growing number of high-level occupations. Thus higher education has played a progressively greater part in the reproduction of the occupationally based class structure. So it is not surprising that class inequalities have persisted. Nor is it surprising that class differentials among women are just as marked as they are among men (1993: 205).

Class differentials are further exacerbated by the type of higher education institution that one has acquired a degree from. When the widening participation movement increased participation rates to the extent that higher education became a mass system, there were a small number of old universities that maintained their elitism. As previously examined, these universities were mostly traditional in that they had not been polytechnics, acquiring their university status through the abolishment of

the binary system. As I have already discussed, the binary system created a hierarchy of education with the old universities at the top, occupying prestigious positions. Reay comments that 'these elite universities remain overwhelmingly white and middle class in composition...' (2005: 10). In addition, these universities, as Naidoo (2000) and HESA (2012) demonstrate through both qualitative and quantitative research respectively, do not engage in widening participation to the same extent that mass institutions do. Previously, I quoted Naidoo (ibid) who referred to the 'Russell Group' of universities, considered to be the most elite. Scott, who provides further explanation, infers that it is this group of universities that will contribute to Britain's economic competitiveness in an international global arena:

... the pressure to create an elite sector... is reflected in the emergence of an informal grouping of the vice-chancellors of Oxford, Cambridge, the main London colleges and the big civics, the so called 'Russell Group' (named after the Russell Hotel where they meet) (1995: 52).

Previously I examined, with statistics from HESA (2012), how Russell Group universities under-recruit mature students in comparison to universities not in the Russell Group. Fuller and Heath assert that mature students are one of the non-traditional and under-represented groups who 'are more likely than their younger peers: to come from lower socio-economic backgrounds...' (David 2010: 141). David concludes her research into widening participation as stating that 'there remain systemic and systematic forms of inequality for individuals and institutions...despite widespread commitments to equality and diversity as defining fair access or widening participation in higher education...' (2010: 150-151). It seems then that the hierarchy that existed under the binary system persists within the new mass HE system. The elite universities remain at the top, and they preserve their traditional boundaries of excluding non-traditional groups. Bowers-Brown (2006: 70) quotes Osborn (2003) as asserting that 'one part of the [HE] system only, takes on the bulk of the widening participation remit'. The effects of this are that universities are class based, and that class inequalities are perpetuated through recruitment and admissions. Archer and Hutchings state that 'the continued dominance of particular elite routes by the wealthy middle classes ensures the reproduction of class privilege within an expanded system' (2000: 567).

Naidoo, who has also conducted research into widening participation and maintaining quality, comments that 'students from non-traditional constituencies are viewed by elite universities to be time and resources intensive...[they] threaten institutional arrangements...such as research' (2000: 33). Therefore, Naidoo is arguing that non-traditional students are unlikely to gain places at, for example, the Russell Group institutions, because these are for the preserve of traditional students. In addition, it seems that 'the demand for places at elite universities far outstrips the number of places available, it is the elite higher education providers that "choose" the student, rather than the other way round' (ibid). Naidoo has also conducted an examination of student enrolment figures for the Russell Group of universities, and has found that they 'have failed to meet basic targets for widening participation set by the funding council for 1998/99' (ibid). This point is also supported by the data on mature students presented by HESA (2012), which is more up to date. It could be argued that elite universities need not engage in widening participation if they so choose. Moreover, if they, as Scott (1995) infers, enable Britain to compete globally, they may be entitled to the privilege of 'cream-skimming', meaning that they admit only the best. Marginson and Wende assert that 'research-intensive universities... tend to be the most implicated in globalisation' (2006: 4), implying that the elite universities carry the burden of being a part of global competitiveness not shared by mass universities. Nevertheless, when the widening participation policy was implemented by government, it was supposed to be put into effect by all institutions.

If the current system of HE is not fair and equal, and as suggested, class inequalities are perpetuated, there may be a detrimental effect on its participants. Reay et al. (2005) assert that 'higher education is not the same experience for all, neither is it likely to offer the same rewards for all' (p.163). It seems then that different universities offer different experiences, and therefore, the outcomes for learners will also be different. Previously, I discussed the point made by Elliott (2003) that participation in HE was widened in order to create 'equality of opportunity and a more just society' (p. 62). The Robbins Report (1963), as I have already stated, endorsed the principle that a higher education should be available to all those who had the ability and qualifications to benefit. However, if the elite institutions are preserving their boundaries, and excluding non-traditional groups, class inequalities are being perpetuated, and this is not conducive to equality of opportunity. Archer

and Hutchings comment on a 'two-tier system' (2000: 568), that fails to achieve real social mobility; 'In this system, working-class students remain disadvantaged, concentrated within less prestigious and local institutions' (ibid). Non-traditional students and under-represented groups may now have access to higher education; however, it is not the same system that middle and upper class students have access to, and moreover, they do not have access to the same opportunities. Reay et al. capture this point by asserting that 'higher education is going through the process of increased stratification...while more working-class and ethnic minority students are entering university, for the most part they are entering different universities to their middle-class counterparts' (2005: 9).

Another concept that further exacerbates the situation is the historical and deep-rooted notion that vocational areas are for the working class, whilst academic subjects are for the upper class. Bowers-Brown comments on 'an elitist view that links those from working-class backgrounds to being inherently better at vocational subjects...many elitists see low-participation as part of a predestined route, in which people are either academically minded or vocationally oriented' (2006: 66). If this view exists, it stems from differences in opportunities, and exclusion, as highlighted by the Robbins Report (1963), not heredity. One is not biologically pre-determined to pursue a vocational or academic career, what determines this is access to and equality of opportunities. In addition, as Bowers-Brown points out, this view does not take into account that some subjects are both vocational and academic, including most science based careers, such as medicine (2006).

If a degree acquired from an older elite university is considered much more prestigious than a degree from one of the new institutions of mass higher education, the opportunities for advancement will be greater. Bowl, commenting on working class students, argues that 'the reality is that they are likely to be entering lower status higher education and leaving with lower status qualifications which reap smaller rewards' (2003: 152). All higher education students are now paying their own tuition fees, as well as incurring debt from maintenance loans. However, Bowl is inferring that for some students, the rewards will be greater than for others. In the previous section, I discussed human capital theory and how investing in education is a strategy to achieving economic prosperity through a skilled workforce. One of the government's objectives behind widening participation was to create an effective and

skilled workforce, capable of competing in the global market, and keeping the country economically prosperous. As I have already explained, HCT works on two levels: the personal and the social. The personal level is said to accrue a private rate of return by individuals investing in their own education in order to increase their earning power. It is considered to be an investment if the cost of the individual's education is offset against long term higher earnings. As well as the economic benefits, there are also the value added social benefits. However, under the current stratified system, Reay questions the success of HCT 'in relation to labour market access and returns from investment in higher education' (2005: 9). The point here is that, unless you are investing in a degree from an old/elite university, such as one from the Russell Group, earning power may not necessarily be greatly increased, and therefore there may be little rate of return, and few social and economic benefits.

It seems that one of the main disadvantages that widening the participation, and the consequential massification of HE, has had is that, although participation has increased, it has not increased enough within under-represented and non-traditional groups. Hatt and Baxter stated that, in order for the fifty per cent target to be met:

HE will have to attract students who, to date, have been under-represented within the national student body. Although those from working class backgrounds, with disabilities, from minority ethnic communities and with non-standard entry qualifications are already well represented in some post-1992 institutions and in certain subject areas, they are under-represented in the total student population (2003: 18).

I have already discussed Elliott's (2003) argument that participation may well have increased but that that is not the same as widened, and therefore does not offer equality of opportunity for all. Naidoo supported this point at the time of writing and concluded her paper on widening participation by asserting that 'controlling admissions policies...has resulted in elite universities maintaining highly selective admissions criteria that function to exclude students from under-represented groups (2000: 34). An example of 'highly selective admissions criteria' (ibid) would be to prioritise A-Level students over access students. However, the University of Leeds is one example of positive action taken to encourage non-traditional student participation; 'the University of Leeds give special consideration for students who satisfy certain criteria, for example, if they are the first generation in their family to

enter HE, in receipt of the Educational Maintenance Allowance<sup>5</sup> and at a school where fewer than 60 per cent of pupils achieve five 'A' to 'C' GCSE passes' (Taylor and House 2010: 48).

As access courses are popular with mature learners returning to learn, excluding them would account for such low numbers of mature students within the Russell Group universities. During the academic year 2009-10, 21.7 percent of students entering HE were mature; the total number of mature students entering the Russell Group universities represented 9 percent. (HESA 2012). However, all universities engage in outreach work, and many are inclusive by implementing policies that meet the needs of non-traditional students: part-time courses, for those who cannot commit to full time study; distance learning and on-line courses for those who cannot travel or study on campus; and mid-year starts for students who may not be ready to start at the traditional time of year. All of these widening participation initiatives are offered by Russell Group universities too. Bowers-Brown cites an 'Early Outreach' scheme that 'targets groups of people for whom higher education is alien or perceived as "not for them"' (2006: 65), and several Russell Group universities took part in the government's Aimhigher programme that encouraged school leavers to participate in HE (ibid). However, Bowers-Brown believes that in order to compensate for the lack of participation amongst under-represented groups in higher education 'university culture must be demystified' (ibid). Widening participation policy and initiatives are not enough; higher education, as a sector, has been shrouded in elitism for too long. 'The historical domination of HE by middle-class groups has thus positioned it as an "unknown" and "alien" (and therefore less desirable or "thinkable") culture to working class groups' (Archer and Hutchings 2000: 557). Until demystification takes place, and especially amongst the old/elite universities, participation by non-traditional and under-represented groups may remain low.

Despite mass expansion, with participation rates for the year 2010-11 standing at 47 per cent (BIS 2012a), under-representation of non-traditional learners persists. David comments that 'despite the overall expansion of the sector, the incremental growth in student numbers remained greatest for those in the middle class holding traditional

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<sup>5</sup> Educational Maintenance Allowance (EMA) was a New Labour initiative aimed at attracting more learners from low socio-economic groups into Further Education. It was abolished by the new Conservative/Liberal Democrat Alliance Government.

GCE A-Level qualifications' (2010: 171). In the 2010 report, BIS stated that in the academic year 2008-9, 13.7 per cent of participants in HE were from the four lowest socio economic groups; Bowers-Brown supports this statistic by asserting that '...the rates of participation by lower socio-economic groups do not match that of the higher social groups' (2006: 71) Previously I stated that the main aims of the widening participation policy was to increase numbers (participation rates), and especially amongst under-represented groups (non-traditional students). One could argue that the first aim has been met - numbers have increased, whilst the second has not as participation has not necessarily increased amongst under-represented groups. Vignoles and Crawford back up the point by further claiming that 'the twenty per cent most disadvantaged students are around six times less likely to participate in higher education compared to the twenty per cent most advantaged pupils' (David 2010: 49). Furthermore, and as Reay et al. point out that although '[under-represented groups] are entering university, they are entering different universities to their white middle class counterparts' (2005: 162). Reay et al.'s research centres around non-traditional groups and examines how class, race, and gender are represented in higher education. Their research concludes that, as HE moves from an elite to a mass system, the question now is not 'who goes and who does not go to university' but rather 'who goes where?' (ibid).

It is reasonable to suggest that one of the effects widening participation has had is that HE has moved from a system underpinned by class based inclusion and exclusion to a system that is stratified between mass and elite institutions; the mass HEIs for the non-traditional and the elite HEIs for the traditional. Using mature students as the symbolic under-represented and non-traditional group, HESA's statistics (2012) demonstrate that in the academic year 2002-03, the proportion of mature, full time, first degree entrants was 22.6% entering HE in England. In 2009-10, the figure was 21.7; a small decline in mature students of almost 1%.

Furthermore, as already stated, the total number of mature students entering the Russell Group universities represented 9 percent of the cohort. However, as I have already discussed: Kings College has an unusually high percentage of mature students because they have large cohorts of armed servicemen and women who are completing their higher education whilst in the services. If Kings were discounted from the Russell Group, and the statistics were based on the remaining elite

universities, the proportion of mature students would be 8.2 percent of the cohort. The ambiguity with using HESA's data is that they use age 21 to denote mature. Whilst this indicates that the students are not school leavers, aged 21 does not connote 'mature', and it would have been useful to compare data of other age groups such as, over 25, and over 30; HESA does not supply data by age. Nevertheless, the statistics do show that a very small percentage of over 21s are entering Russell Group universities in comparison to other universities.

The abolishment of grants and introduction of tuition fees was one of the most important after-effects of widening the participation into HE. As I previously discussed, the Dearing Report's (1997) recommendation was that, for the first time, HE students should contribute to their course costs. However, this idea conflicted with the objective of increasing numbers from under-represented groups. One such under-represented group in HE was the working class. As Piatt observes 'even in the era of full grants, working-class participation was extremely low' (2001). Therefore, introducing fees for higher education did not seem to be the logical approach to increasing participation by groups who had been reluctant to take part, even when higher education was free. However, the government had policy levers at its disposal, which when pulled would, as defined by Steer et al., 'direct, manage and shape change in public services' (2007: 177). The Office for Fair Access (OFFA) was established in order to safeguard and promote fair access to higher education (OFFA 2012). This new department, it was hoped, would ensure that HE fees did not have a detrimental effect on widening participation, and that students from the non-traditional and under-represented groups were not deterred from entering HE. Bowers-Brown commenting on OFFA in 2005 state that 'The 118 agreements that have been approved to date show that £300 million has been set aside in non-repayable support for students' (2006: 62). This is a very positive and pro-active step in ensuring that fair access amongst all social groups is achieved. A survey of OFFA's website (May 2012) shows that many of the UK universities have submitted agreements, including many but not all of the Russell Group institutions, and that some of the universities are offering substantial fee waivers and maintenance bursaries to 'students from less well off households' (ibid).

### *Debt Aversion*



Research suggests that the middle and working classes have different perceptions of debt (Callender and Jackson 2005). This may explain why numbers participating in HE increased amongst the middle class, but changed very little amongst the working class. Reay et al. assert that 'Since 1998 participation rates have increased more rapidly among the middle classes than the working classes ... Almost 80 per cent of students from professional backgrounds study for a degree, compared to just 15 per cent of those from unskilled backgrounds' (2005: 6). One of the government levers implemented on an individual level was to entice prospective students into HE using the human capital theory of private gain. Even though students who did not qualify for fee waivers were to pay tuition fees, a higher education was still construed as private investment. However, it would only be perceived as an investment if the rate of return was going to be higher than the cost. This simple concept is made complex by the long term vision that is required in order to focus on the eventual greater rate of return. Writing in *The Times Higher Education* supplement (14 Dec 2001), Piatt suggests that the government severely underestimated the level of debt aversion amongst the working class 'A degree may be a sound investment, but it is an unknown quantity and a greater risk for those from non-traditional backgrounds. Rates of return are meaningless in the absence of successful graduate role models'.

One of the reasons that the working class would be deterred from higher education is that participating would mean incurring financial debt. Callender and Jackson's (2005) research project examines student debt and whether debt deters students from higher education. They argue that debt is a deterrent for prospective students from the working class, but not necessarily from other classes, suggesting that the attitude towards debt is different depending on one's social class. Class values, and ideologies, differ between the working and the upper classes. The upper/middle class, including politicians, view debt as a long term investment. They have financial resources at their disposal, and, usually, higher earning power. The working class however, view debt as risky, an added burden, and as Piatt has pointed out, 'an unknown quantity' (2001). Gorard et al. (2007) conducted analysis of a survey commissioned to examine the decision making process of HE entrants. The findings were that it is not only the working class that are averse to debt; 'Those who were most debt averse were from the low income social classes, lone parents and Muslims especially those from Pakistani origin and black and ethnic minority groups'

(p. 53). The groups cited here are all under-represented in higher education: working class, women (as they usually are the lone parents), and minority ethnic groups. These are the groups that the widening participation agenda were aiming to attract.

One's financial security revolves around factors such as savings, earning power, the ability to secure financial resources, and these factors are often influenced by one's social class. Callender and Jackson state that 'Students who are poor before going to university are more likely to be in debt and to leave university with the largest debts, while better off students are less likely to have debts and leave with the lowest debts' (2005: 511). Another factor that influences one's decision to enter HE is having money as a resource at one's disposal. During their research, Callender and Jackson found that 'middle-class students ... had the necessary resources to survive. More importantly, they could secure additional funds if required... [working class students] had less money and were less confident they could secure the resources needed...' (2005: 514). Callender and Jackson's research also suggests that working class students are financially worse off in the long term, compared to middle class students. The outcome of this research contradicts the human capital theory as previously explained; higher education can be deemed a risky investment for the working class, as it may not secure the financial rate of return that the policy levers initially inferred. 'They [ the working class] also can expect higher than average debts on graduation...but lower than average wages' (Callender and Jackson 2005: 534). The Dearing Report's (1997) recommendation has made it harder, not easier, for the working class and low socio-economic groups to participate in higher education.

When the Dearing Report (1997) recommended the introduction of tuition fees for higher education students, the policy lever utilised by the government was that of private financial long term gain. In David's critique of the report, she states that 'the view promulgated at the time was that participating in higher education was an excellent personal investment that would generate an estimate annual private rate of return of between 11 and 14 per cent' (2010: 172). Although there are many variables, for example what courses and careers are being pursued, and at which universities, this percentage is an attractive rate of return. However, as Callender and Jackson (2005) point out 'When governments seek to develop evidence based policy, as a generality they place greater weight on quantitative data compared with

qualitative data and on data derived from large representative samples' (p 514). This seems to suggest, that rather than focus on the statistics, it would have been more informative to have conducted qualitative research, and elicit the views and perspectives of the people involved, especially the prospective students. For example, gathering qualitative data on types of courses and future careers would have enabled an accurate interpretation of how a higher education becomes a personal investment. Nevertheless, as already discussed, this was the lever used to entice prospective learners, and especially those from under-represented groups such as the working class, into higher education. However, as Malcolm points out, the widening participation movement, the very initiative designed to attract the working class, 'coincided with the abolition of student grants, their replacement by student loans, and the extension of tuition fees to universities, all of which are likely to discourage under-represented social groups from even considering higher education' (Thompson, 2000: 17). The government seemed to overlook the theory of working class aversion to debt. Instead, the middle class, the over-represented group has benefitted with increased numbers participating. Piatt points out that 'Contrary to the myth, middle-class participation has not reached saturation point' (2001).

Callender and Jackson's research suggests that one's attitude or perception towards debt can differ according to one's social class. Through exploring this concept, they assert that debt is a deterrent to the working class and the low socio-economic groups. Many mature students returning to learn and accessing higher education are also working class and therefore affected by this concept. Fuller and Heath's research, as I have previously quoted, highlights that 'Mature undergraduates are more likely than their younger peers: to come from lower socio-economic backgrounds...' (David 2010: 141). Moreover, if these groups do not perceive student debt as an investment, human capital theory will not work effectively. Callender and Jackson also note that the higher education reforms have 'shifted the cost of going to university away from the state to students, and away from students' families to students themselves' (2005: 511). With students now having to bear the full weight of the cost of their higher education, differing attitudes towards debt, and perceptions of long term private gain, have surfaced. It seems that the upper and middle classes took full advantage of widening participation policy, whilst the working class

remained the under-represented group. Commenting on the 50 per cent HE participation target, Bowers-Brown asserts that 'Even if this expansion were to be achieved purely through widening participation, the levels of participation by social class would still not be equal' (2006: 71). With the massification of HE having taken place, it is clear now that the situation is not quite what the Labour government had planned. Debt from tuition fees has deterred the very groups that the widening participation agenda sought to target. However, what is not clear from the research is whether the working class' attitude towards debt is a general aversion, or specifically an aversion towards debt acquired for educational purposes.

At the time of writing this thesis, and 16 years after the Dearing Report, HE tuition fees are under review again. After the last election, a new government took power and once again HE was on the political agenda. A new inquiry into HE tuition fees was commissioned and the outcome: The Browne Review (2010) recommended the removal of the current cap on tuition fees, which would mean an increase to the current cost of tuition, which would naturally be passed to the student. This time however, the cost of a higher education for some would be a three hundred per cent rise on what the initial fees after the Dearing Report were. This steep rise in the cost of a higher education was likely to further deter the under-represented groups that the previous government's widening participation policy had worked so hard to include. Bowers-Brown commented in 2006 that 'students from poorer families can accumulate a debt which may be equal to their parents' annual income (p. 62). Under the new government's HE tuition fee reforms, the same students, who are not fortunate enough to gain fee waivers, are likely to accumulate debt that is many more times their parents' annual income.

Despite under-representation by non-traditional groups overall across all higher education institutions, there have been reform and initiatives at post compulsory level, in further education colleges, designed to improve participation amongst working class and mature students. One such initiative was the introduction and expansion of access courses. Alongside the traditional A-Level course, they were considered to be the alternative route into HE. The next section of the thesis will examine further education's role in progressing non-traditional learners to HE, and will look at this strategy in detail.

## Chapter 2: The Transition to Higher Education

### Further Education: supporting the progression of learners into HE

It is useful to begin with an historical overview of Further Education, in much the same way as I began the first chapter on higher education. Further education is the post-compulsory sector; post-compulsory, or post 16 education, encompasses everything within UK education not provided by schools and universities. Therefore, post compulsory education in the UK contains a highly diverse range of learners and covers a wide range of providers such as colleges of Further Education (FE), Sixth Form colleges, Adult and Community Learning, and Work Based Learning. When New Labour gained power in 1996, with educational reform high on the agenda, one of the first reforms undertaken was the amalgamation of all post compulsory education into a new sector to be known as The Learning and Skills Sector (LSS). The rationale behind the new naming of the sector was to bring several different providers and centres together cohesively, and with a common focus on the overall objective which was to raise educational standards in order to cope with global competition and demand (Hyland and Merrill 2003). At the time it was explained that:

Colleges are at the heart of our ability to respond to the rapid transformation in the world around us because it is skilled people, and their creativity, enterprise and ability to innovate, who drive economic and social change today... (DfEE, 2000 paragraph 2).

The government were also keen to change the perception of post compulsory education. FE had often been referred to as the 'Cinderella sector' (Foster 2005) because it was deemed not to play an important role within UK education, unlike schools and universities. It had therefore been somewhat overlooked. However, during his address to a conference, Kenneth Baker (1989), the Secretary of State for Education at the time, was keen to stress that FE 'was not just the Cinderella sector of education...The whole thing costs £1 billion a year. It is a big, big enterprise' (Hyland and Merrill 2003: 3). Foster had also commented that FE had been like 'the disadvantaged middle child between schools and higher education' (2005: 5-6), implying that it was neglected and did not attract the same amount of attention as schools and higher education had. The government were keen to overturn this

perception and recognised the advantages that FE had in playing a key part in preparing the workforce to compete in the global market. Several years after New Labour had gained power, the face of further education had undergone change and was 'No longer marginalised between school and higher education, FE has become part of a seamless policy web, connecting schooling, higher education and work related learning...' (Gleeson et al. 2005: 448). One example of this would be that FE came into Ofsted's<sup>6</sup> remit, and inspections would be conducted in the FE sector in the same manner that they were in schools.

Further education colleges are historically associated with vocational training. This is because the 1944 Education Act was the first to make further education a legal duty of LEAs<sup>7</sup> as, according to the act, they were now required to 'establish and maintain county colleges which were to provide school leavers with vocational, physical and practical training' (Green and Lucas 2000: 16). As stated in the previous chapter, it was mostly school leavers and those attending sixth form colleges who progressed to HE, and this would have meant staying on in education until eighteen years of age, not common amongst the working class at this time. The school leaving age was fourteen and unless a student was staying on for HE, they would be entering the job market. Green and Lucas point out that 'One in five school leavers progressed to full time education after the school leaving age' (ibid); these were the traditional learners, progressing straight through to HE without a break in education. The 1944 Act created another route for school leavers: technical colleges which, in partnership with employers, gave rise to vocational training and apprenticeships. The historical focus for providing vocational training has persisted in FE colleges and they continue to be the largest provider of Science, Technical, Engineering and Maths (STEM) courses. However, modern day further education provides a much broader and more diverse curricula including, as I shall explain further on, undergraduate provision.

Sixth form colleges, although still deemed to be post-compulsory education, differ from colleges of further education in several ways. Sixth form colleges cater for the 16 – 18 age group. Some sixth forms are attached to schools, and students will progress internally straight from year 11 into the sixth form which becomes years 12 and 13; other sixth forms are housed in completely separate buildings and a transfer

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<sup>6</sup> The Office for Standards in Education: the official body for inspecting schools

<sup>7</sup> Local Education Authorities have responsibility for education within their jurisdictions

from one educational institution to another is needed. Traditionally, sixth forms provide academic qualifications such as GCSEs and A-Levels, purposely intended to bridge the gap between school and university. Occasionally, sixth forms may offer other types of courses for the 16 – 18 age group, such as NVQs and BTECs, although the objective primarily for sixth formers is to progress to higher education. Unlike colleges of further education, sixth form schools and colleges admit traditional students who have not experienced a break in their education. Green and Lucas comment on the differences between traditional learners progressing straight from school and non-traditional mature learners: 'Whereas full time 16-19 year olds need well-defined structures, provision and support, adult students have many different needs from younger students – they are more likely to need more flexible modes of study, locally available provision... child-care support and relatively inexpensive provision' (1999: 35). The focus of this thesis is on non-traditional students entering HE, for reasons I have already explained; therefore a brief overview of sixth forms and their purpose is all that is needed. However, it is worth noting that Green and Lucas also comment on the proportions of A-Level students entering colleges of further education in comparison: 'unlike sixth forms...they tended to have a disproportionate share of more disadvantaged students' (2000: 24), implying that sixth forms admit A-Level students who are at the higher end of ability, and more likely to succeed.

Further education provides an extremely broad and diverse range of courses. Any learner from the age of sixteen can enter further education and there is no upper age limit. Hyland and Merrill comment that 'FE colleges are now characterised by a diverse student population, and are no longer the preserve of largely young, mostly male apprentices and A-Level students. Different groups of students – 16-21 year olds, adults, part time, full time students – contest for space in colleges' (2003: 46). As well as the traditional connection with vocational and practical courses, colleges also provide a range of full level 3 qualifications such as BTECs, Access Courses, National Diplomas and A-Levels; all courses that are pre-requisites for entering higher education. Some FE colleges also offer HE provision - undergraduate courses where learners can qualify for a full degree. In 2009-10, eight per cent of the HE population were taught in colleges of FE - that is around one in twelve students (BIS 2012b). However, the focus of this thesis is on non-traditional learners entering

higher education institutions. Therefore, this chapter will concentrate on learners progressing from courses such as the access course, which is the non-traditional route from further education.

The first chapter provided a detailed examination of how widening the participation into HE was achieved. The widening participation movement centred around non-traditional learners from under-represented groups gaining access to a once elite institution with a once narrow participation of a privileged few. Zinciewicz and Trapp (2004) define non-traditional learners as groups under-represented in HE such as the working class, ethnic minority groups, disabled learners, and historically, women (in Taylor and House 2010: 46). Mature students are also non-traditional as they would have had a break in education before returning, as opposed to the traditional student who enters HE straight from school. Leathwood and O'Connell discuss the classification of non-traditional students:

This label may be applied to mature students, those who have entered through alternative routes, those with qualifications other than the standard A levels, those with long term disability, students from working-class backgrounds, and students from minority ethnic groups ... In the move from an elite to a mass higher education system, it is these students that represent 'the masses': homogenized, pathologized and marked as 'Other' compared with existing students who are perceived to be there as of right (2003: 599).

The theory of the 'other' in relation to non-traditional students will be examined further on in this chapter. Widening participation aimed to give equal access to all groups, regardless of social class, background, gender and ethnicity. This gave rise to the mass higher education of a large proportion of the population which, it was hoped, would enable the then government to achieve its objectives of social cohesion and economic prosperity within the competitive global market. However, the widening participation movement would not have been possible without the pivotal role that further education plays. Hatt and Baxter declare that '...if the government target of 50 per cent participation in HE by 2010 is to be achieved then HEIs will need to recruit students from different educational and social backgrounds. Many of these entrants will have progressed to HE from a college of further education' (2003: 18). In fact, many of these entrants will have undertaken an access course in order to gain entry to higher education. Access courses are offered by colleges to learners who are over 19 years of age. If learners are between 16 and 18



they are usually guided onto A-levels, or an equivalent level 3 course, depending on the subject they wish to pursue in HE. Access courses have therefore become the popular choice with mature students returning to learn after a break in education. According to the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA), in the academic year 2010-11 16.5% of mature students entering full time undergraduate degree courses did so via the access course route.

Access courses are new compared to the well established A-Levels in the UK. Access was considered to be the third route into HE since the 1986 Conservative government, prior to this period, there were two main recognised routes into HE: progression from the traditional academic A-Levels; and progression from/into vocational areas such as construction and engineering via practical courses such as BTEC and National Vocational Qualifications. Both of these routes, as already explained, mainly accommodated students progressing straight through from school or college. For mature learners who had not taken part in education for some time due to, for example, family commitments or work responsibilities, it was extremely difficult to access education, especially higher education. Therefore, it was decided by the government in power at that time to widen access into HE by creating an alternative route, and one that would accommodate learners from non-traditional backgrounds, including mature students. Therefore, access courses were initially introduced under the Conservative government (Hyland and Merrill 2003). The original two routes into HE would still exist; A-levels continued to be the popular route amongst the traditional school leavers, and courses such as BTEC and National Diplomas catered for learners who may be pursuing vocational degrees.

In retrospect, it can be argued that in order for widening participation to be successful, the creation of more routes into higher education than existed were necessary. Although the Robbins report (1963) instigated the initiative of non-traditional learners participating in higher education, they did not consider which routes non-traditional learners would use in order to access HE. The 1987 white paper *Higher Education: meeting the challenge* recognised that gaining entry to HE need not only be based on the narrow criteria of qualifications from two traditional routes. As cited previously: there are many people from 'a wider range of academic and practical experience...many of whom will not have the traditional qualifications for entry...' (DES: 9). The 'wider range of experience' refers to life experience such

as raising children, working, travelling, and caring for others. This type of mature student may have valuable life skills to bring to the access course, and to university, but may be lacking in traditional study skills that a school leaver, for example a sixth former, may possess. Study skills such as reading academic texts and writing essays are activities that school leavers would be recently accustomed to undertaking, whereas mature learners may not have engaged with an academic text, or written an essay, for several years. In addition, if a learner has had a long break in education, they tend to lose confidence and hesitate in re-entering the classroom; this further exacerbates the problem faced by mature students. Hyland and Merrill discuss the learner with 'negative memories of school' and how the 'FE campus remains threatening and not a place for them' (2003: 67). However, if all the learners on access courses are going to be mature, the prospect of re-entering education, along with others who have also had a break in their education, becomes less daunting.

Access courses then became the popular route for the non-traditional group of mature students who wanted to return to learn and enter HE. By the late 1980s a wide range of subject areas were on offer. Hyland and Merrill assert that 'Access courses have grown in popularity and diversified into a wide range of discipline areas' (2003: 63). Students could gain entry to a range of degree courses from physical sciences to philosophy by progression from the access course route. Burke refers to this as the 'access movement' (2002: 7), and she explains the phenomenon as 'education that explicitly aims to widen access to groups who have been socially and culturally excluded from educational participation' (ibid). This also meant that non-traditional learners such as the working class, and minority ethnic groups, who may not have considered entering the historically white upper classed elitist institution of higher education, could now aspire to pursue a degree course. Burke asserts that these courses were begun in order to widen the participation to marginalised groups: 'The access movement was initially driven by a commitment to redress the balance set by the legacy of institutional classism, racism and sexism' (2002: 64). Thompson interestingly notes that 'It was largely women who had been denied education earlier in their lives who took up the opportunities offered by Access' (2000: 25). Many mature students are also women, and historically women were excluded from higher education. Arnot asserts that 'it was not until 1948 that

the last bastions of male privilege fell and women were allowed to take the same degrees as men in Cambridge University...this battle for equal rights and equal treatment of men and women still has resonance today' (2002: 188). Further on in this chapter, I will argue that, although participation has been widened to include non-traditional social groups, in many circumstances, they remain marginalised as the 'other'.

With the Conservative government committed to widening participation into HE, alteration of educational policy began in order to accommodate the different types of learners that would now be taking part. Parry comments on the 'first of four policy phases or moments in a concerted effort, over ten years, to reduce the social class gap in participation' (David 2010: 36). However, the Conservative government would not be in power to see the movement through; New Labour would take over in 1996 and set the 50 per cent participation target that would lead to the universal system of higher education, as cited by Trow (1973) in chapter one. The Conservative government also recognised that changes would need to be made within HE itself; the white paper states that 'increased participation in higher education need not be at the expense of academic excellence; indeed the stimulus of change should help to sharpen awareness of the different types of achievement that properly form part of the output of higher education' (DES 1987: 9). Further on I will examine how changes in the structure of degree courses, in order to accommodate different types of learners, took place in higher education.

The post-compulsory sector is extremely effective in dealing with different levels of academic achievement. Green and Lucas comment on the 'second-chance nature of so much FE provision' (2000: 172), and they go on to explain that '[FE] recognises that those who fail at school may succeed if alternative routes to becoming qualified are available' (p. 185). When access courses started to be the chosen progression route into HE by learners from non-traditional backgrounds, FE providers paid careful attention in how best to accommodate this type of learner. In addition, they wanted to ensure, not just their successful progression into HE, but that they were being equipped with the necessary skills to survive their degree course and graduate. Diamond comments on access education by stating that 'provision could be designed to meet local needs and be responsive both to the expertise of staff and to the local communities...[this] allowed for varieties in the organisation of the

curriculum...in particular, it specifically rejected the conventional A-level approach to teaching and learning' (1999: 186). Access courses were designed to accommodate a new type of learner, and these learners would be unlike those who progressed from the earlier and traditional A-level and vocational routes. Burke asserts that 'Access education targets social groups whom have historically been excluded from education' (2002: 77). However, as I have already stated, returning to education after a long break can be daunting and learners can be reluctant to re-enter the classroom. The key to successfully retaining and progressing access students lay in how learners would be supported, and how the courses would be delivered and assessed.

### **The route to HE for mature learners**

The primary objective of the Access to Higher Education course is not only to prepare learners to enter HE, as the name implies, but to cope with and successfully graduate from their degree courses. In a previously written assignment, I examined the access course curriculum and described the course structure as:

... a package of units, both core units and subject specific units. The core units enable students to acquire core skills essential for degree level of study such as academic writing, research skills, critical thinking, and self-reflection. Subject specific units are oriented towards the students' own academic interests. It is a system of accreditation; each unit has a credit value and students have to achieve a total of 60 credits, 45 of which have to be at level 3, in order to qualify for the diploma. The 60 credits do not necessarily have to be achieved in a single academic year, students can accumulate credits within a longer timescale suitable to themselves, if they so wish (Burnell 2011b: 6).

This system of credit accumulation has several advantages: first, working with a system of accreditation, allows learners to accumulate credits through modules or units as they progress through the course, enabling them to manage their learning with flexibility; second, units can be re-taken later in the course if not successfully passed first time; third, the credit accumulation system is very similar to the undergraduate system of modules and points. This enables students to learn how to manage their achievement and prepares them for course management at undergraduate level further on in their studies. However, Young points out that in

order for this system to be successful, students have to learn how to manage their own learning; Young calls it 'learning to learn' (1998: 86), and not all students arrive in FE with the ability to do this, therefore a level of guidance and support by tutors is needed. Other strategies used in FE for retaining this type of learner are to timetable classes with a late start and early finish; this accommodates those who have childcare responsibilities and school runs. Some colleges provide access courses that are taught in the evening, and most courses can be completed as part time mode of study. All of these flexible strategies are designed to meet the needs of non-traditional learners and those having had a break in education, and possibly returning with added responsibilities such as parenting. This echoes the 'second-chance nature of so much FE provision' (Green and Lucas 2000: 172) that I discussed earlier.

Further Education lecturers are facilitators of learning. This means that rather than lecturing to students in a traditional transmission style, they interact and facilitate learning through differentiated teaching methods, and mixed ability teaching. Many of these methods are student centred. The idea behind student centred learning is that students learn by interacting with the tutor and with each other, as well as peer supporting each other. Unlike traditional lecturing, 'The interactive classroom rejects the model of teacher-as expert...The student is regarded as a source of knowledge, and collaboration between teacher and learner is central to the pedagogy' (Burke 2002: 71). In the classroom, students are encouraged to be critical, make contributions, and everyone's contribution is valid and valued. However, Young (1998: 97) warns of the 'limitations of approaches that over-emphasize the active role of learners and he argues against the suggestion that 'students or trainees will learn by themselves if certain barriers, such as college attendance at particular times are removed...' (ibid). When access students arrive in the FE classroom, they have usually decided they want to progress to university, and as already explained, this is what access courses are designed to do. The accreditation system means that credits are gained through a variety of assessments with chances to re-take and re-submit work if not successful in meeting criteria first time. Being able to re-submit work that falls short of passing is an enormous advantage to learners who are returning, or have had a negative school experience, and maybe lacking confidence and self-esteem. It enables them to build up academic skills gradually, and with

guidance from tutors and other forms of support within the college, steadily raising levels of ability until they are confidently ready to undertake study at undergraduate level. Even though students may be focussed on HE, again Young warns that it would be an error to assume 'that self-direction is a natural trait of adults and that the learning habits and critical capacities which underpin such learning will develop without the guidance and support of teachers' (1998: 97). Learners may well enrol themselves onto an access course knowing that they want to progress to university; however, it must not be assumed that they will know the direction that they wish to take. Therefore, guidance, support and collaboration with access students is crucial in the progression process.

Within FE, and especially since the sector came into Ofsted's remit, tension exists between facilitating learning and ensuring students achieve. Even though access courses were originally designed to accommodate a completely new type of learner, the access course, like most courses within post compulsory education, has more recently become more dominated by its learning objectives and assessment criteria than by the experience that the learner receives. I had examined this issue in a previous essay:

The package of units, as described previously, comprises lists of assessment criteria that learners' work is assessed by. If learners do not meet the assessment criteria of a unit then they do not achieve that unit. Therefore, in some cases, access courses have become driven by teaching learners to meet assessment criteria and achieve units. Access tutors have been tempted to adopt this approach because colleges have become extremely focussed on and driven by retention and achievement data, as this effects their funding... (Burnell 2011b: 14).

Hyland and Merrill comment on this situation in FE by stating that 'with the emergence of a new funding system rewarding retention and achievement of students, the problem is placed squarely at the door of college tutors and managers' (2003: 140). Therefore, there is enormous pressure on tutors to ensure that students satisfactorily complete the course. This may mean that learning objectives, implemented in a systematic and measurable way, can be used to deposit knowledge into learners, and, when measured, ensure a successful outcome. The way the access course is structured means that this would be relatively easy to do. Burke, in her work with access students, comments on a scenario she once witnessed: 'Although the teacher desires a generative open discussion with students,

the regulative, pre-set criteria have undermined her attempts' (2002: 68). In implementing pre-set criteria in a systematic way, the curriculum becomes technical, and the classroom experience mechanical. As a result, important and natural learning experiences for the student maybe lost or overlooked. Access course tutors are caught in the tension between maintaining college achievement rates, and enabling a positive learning experience for the learners whilst on the course. Previously I have commented that:

The idea of an access tutor teaching to meet assessment criteria so that learners can achieve and acquire the diploma, and therefore maintain the college's achievement rates, goes against the very ethos of access courses. This approach will not only inhibit learners' ability to gain autonomy and independence through the learning process, it will not prepare them for study in higher education by allowing for the emergence of skills such as critical thinking, reflectivity, and rational debate, and therefore the course will not meet its own objective (Burnell 2011b: 15).

Burke, referring to the scenario above, also describes the frustration of witnessing such an approach during her research: 'Although the access teacher attempts to have an open discussion, this is undermined by the assessment criteria, which determines how the discussion is framed and prescribes the responses required from students in order to produce "correct" answers' (2002: 68). In practice, the students' experience on the access course would depend on individual access tutors, and how they implement the learning objectives within the classroom. Ideally, a balance between enabling learners to build their confidence, acquiring skills needed for successful transition to HE, and meeting the units' assessment criteria in order to pass the course, needs to be achieved.

Previously I quoted Diamond as commenting on the approach to access education and how it can 'be designed to meet local needs... [and] rejected the conventional A-level approach to teaching and learning' (1999: 186). Traditionally, A-Levels were based on one summatively assessed exam at the end of the course. Although the system has changed and A-Levels are now split into two one year courses, they are still summatively assessed at the end of the period of study. This traditional method of assessment may be ideal for school/college leavers who have firmly established study skills, but for non-traditional learners, especially those who have been out of education for a long period, it is the route to failure. Dimbleby and Cooke uphold the credit accumulation system as the ideal mode of progression. They recognise the

benefits of units and modules which are part of a larger qualification, and also comment on the advantages for the learners as ‘a significant step forward in the pursuit of lifelong learning for everyone...[that] would also help to widen participation and enable colleges to be inclusive organisations’ (Smithers and Robinson 2005: 72). In addition, as I have already stated, this is also the system that undergraduate degrees are based on: accumulating modules and points; therefore learners would be managing systems of learning that they would already be familiar with. However, modularisation is also criticised as a decline in educational standards and in the final section of this chapter, I will explore this concept more thoroughly.

Dimbleby and Cooke criticise the system of A-levels as not fitting with what they feel should be an all inclusive system of learning:

A major stumbling block to this attractive scenario could well be GCE A-levels. A truly flexible credit framework would have to encompass these also. New Labour, however, seems anxious to avoid appearing to pose any threat to “the gold standard” of A-levels. The eventual policy outcome of the Dearing (1996) Review has been that while A-levels have been repackaged as modules they are still to retain their integrity. That is, while the qualification can be taken as components, the components are not free standing... Inclusive learning cannot be delivered if we continue to think of qualifications as ways of excluding people from progression (in Smithers and Robinson: 2005: 72).

The “Gold Standard” mentioned here has also been commented on by Moore and Young who criticise the A-level system as being ‘a “Gold Standard” against which all other curricula must be evaluated’ (2001: 447). If A-levels are deemed the gold standard then other courses of equivalent level would be seen as sub-standard, or even non-standard. This concept is one that learners are very aware of and, as discussed in the previous chapter, with the old/elite institutions excluding under-represented groups, access students often feel at a double-disadvantage; first because they are mature, and second because they have progressed through a non-standard route. Burke comments on the gold standard and states that ‘It is against these standards that access students are judged as less worthy. They are automatically categorised as “non-standard” because they have not taken the traditional A-level route at age 18’ (2002: 81). This concept will be explored more in the next section. Access courses have evolved out of the widening participation drive, and educational reform based on raising HE participation rates of learners who



were non-traditional and/or returning to learn. This was a significant and lasting social change. On the other hand, A-levels have changed very little in order to meet society's needs, as Moore and Young point out: 'In the period of 50 years since A-levels were launched their basic structure has remained unchanged, while whole new fields of knowledge have been created and the economy and society as a whole has changed out of all recognition' (2001: 447). Therefore, the ideology of A-levels being the "Gold Standard" is a skewed one. In the final section of the thesis, when I explore the experiences and perspectives of non-traditional learners, I will also look closely at the experiences of those who have progressed to higher education through non-traditional routes.

### **Criticisms of the Access Course**

The access course has evolved from an educational need to support mature, non-traditional learners who may have been out of education for some time. In a previous assignment, I argue that:

Even though these learners may possess valuable skills, acquired from their past life experiences ... they may also be lacking in conventional study skills, such as the ability to read critically and write analytically. Students enrolled onto access courses also often suffer a lack of confidence and find it difficult to recognise their potential, academically. (Burnell 2011b: 5).

However, Burke argues that a lack of confidence in this type of learner is not as a result of being out of education for a long period. She asserts that western binary thinking reinforces the notion that '...middle-class culture is superior and working-class culture deficient...' (2002: 86), implying that working class students have internalised feelings of failure. Reay supports this concept and asserts that 'The university sector, more than any other sector, epitomizes middle classness ... How then can the mature working-class student maintain a sense of authenticity and still hope to fit in?' (2002: 338). Therefore, providing a route for this type of learner is only part of the solution; a further and more complex situation is that they may feel uncomfortable, unconfident and unwilling to contribute in the classroom. Based on her own research into the experiences of access students, Burke also found that:

...it is not surprising that many access students were afraid of being noticed in the classroom...students [wanted] to remain silent and unnoticed...desire for invisibility is shaped by historical, political and cultural contexts. Students do not want to be revealed as not belonging, not middle-class, and therefore, according to the embedded logic, not intelligent (2002: 86).

Widening the participation to enable non-traditional learners to enter an educational arena that they have never been a part of, nor have ever felt welcome in, is one issue; a further and more complicated issue is how to create an inclusive environment that accommodates these learners in a way that raises their self-esteem and enables them to recognise their potential and, therefore, succeed.

As already stated, access tutors are facilitators of learning, they interact and facilitate learning through differentiated teaching methods and styles, many of which are student centred. However, as I have already discussed, access course tutors may also be caught in the tension created by maintaining college achievement rates, and be tempted to teach to test in order to maintain good achievement rates, thereby overlooking important learning experiences for the student. Northedge takes a different view, and criticises student centred learning by commenting that 'Teaching should always be student-centred, in the sense of paying attention to the learning processes fostered within each student. However, there are dangers in an uncritical embrace of student-centredness, if it undermines the role of the teacher, and undersells the immense contribution of the academy and academic knowledge' (2003: 170). In other words, there are times when students need to be inducted into academic communities by knowledge experts. It can be argued that whilst we are facilitating learning, we are denying students the valuable knowledge that they need. Northedge comments on his own experiences of teaching adults:

[they] strongly resisted the notion of my hovering in the background, gently facilitating. Some pointed out that they were paying good money to be taught. They wanted to use their hard won study hours learning what educated people know, not "exploring" collaboratively with "uneducated" peers (ibid).

However, in order for access students to gain confidence they need to be able to make contributions, and interact with both tutors and peers. Burke comments on student interaction: 'It places importance on the idea of a student centred approach in the classroom. Curriculum, pedagogy and materials are expected to be directly

responsive to students' needs' (2002: 58). Responding to students' needs in a student centred approach enables learners to feel that their voices are valid, and that they can challenge and contribute, thereby encouraging them to think critically and construct arguments. This style of classroom management is known as 'critical pedagogy' and it empowers learners, enabling them to challenge domination.

### *Critical Pedagogy*

Critical pedagogy is defined by Pratt-Adams et al. as a 'teaching philosophy that has been developed in order to improve the educational experiences of marginalised and oppressed people' (2010: 99). It is not a sub-standard method but an alternative method; alternative to the traditional pedagogical practices that have been historically upheld as the superior method, and serve to re-create unequal social power relations. Critical pedagogy challenges ideologies of traditional teaching methods and meets the needs of wider social groups, thereby increasing chances of success, and creating more equal power relations. Northedge asserts that 'For students with little experience in academic communities, the struggle to develop an effective voice...can be long and difficult. Support in establishing voice is a vital component of courses for students from diverse backgrounds' (2003: 25).

Critical pedagogy was pioneered and established as a teaching practice by Paulo Freire, and later by bell hooks. Freire (1993), who was teaching adult literacy in 1970s Brazil, believed that students needed to reflect critically on the causes of their oppression in order to overcome it. hooks, a black African-American feminist, looked for ways of understanding and resisting the exclusionary and oppressive practices she was subjected to at university, and used critical pedagogy as an approach (hooks 2000). A typical feature of critical pedagogy is that learners bring their own knowledge and experiences to the educational process, this way, as previously stated, by sharing their experiences they feel their voices are valid and valued. Burke comments that 'one of the key concepts of critical pedagogy is that of "student voice"' (2002: 58). This concept challenges notions of traditional teaching where the teacher is positioned as dominant and oppressive, and students are passive. Bowl states that 'The fundamental basis of the relationship between students and their tutors is that it assumes that the tutor has knowledge and the student does not'

(2003: 157). Critical pedagogy overturns this notion by allowing students to share their experiences, deeming their knowledge to be just as useful as the tutor's. Burke comments further by adding that 'Access educators have attempted to empower students through the practice of critical pedagogy in the access classroom...critical pedagogy has been seen as a tool for empowerment, leading to personal and social transformation and challenging the traditional hierarchical relationship between teacher and student' (2002: 86). In this way, students are also taught how to challenge and speak out against other oppressive practices, such as those involving race and gender, challenging inequalities, and addressing the needs and interests of marginalised groups. Mercer comments on the mature students in her research and what they had gained from the experiences of higher education:

They spoke with enthusiasm about how such an increased confidence had augmented their ability in social situations, for example overcoming feelings of intimidation when confronted by professional people, and being able to speak in situations where previously they would have felt very daunted and probably said nothing (2007: 25).

Previously I quoted Burke as commenting on how western binary thinking reinforces the notion that '...middle-class culture is superior and working-class culture deficient... (2002: 86). Social constructions such as class and gender are reproduced through binary thinking. For example, the widely accepted western ideology that men are strong and unemotional; women are weak and sympathetic; the middle class succeed in education, the working class fail; teachers have knowledge, students do not. These social constructs, reinforced through polarised opposites, serve to internalise negative feelings in the people who are positioned as inferior; in the examples above these would be women, working class and students. Freire explains this concept further when he comments that 'Self-depreciation is another characteristic of the oppressed, which derives from their internalization of the opinion their oppressors hold of them...they are good for nothing, know nothing, lazy and unproductive...in the end they become convinced of their own unfitness' (1993: 45). In his book, Freire does not use the term working class, he refers to 'peasants' that have internalised negative beliefs about themselves, and feel inferior to the middle and upper classes (ibid). Access learners, in much the same way, return to learn with internalised feelings of negativity. They are non-traditional learners, dichotomised against the traditional learners; they may be working class, mature,

women, from minority ethnic groups; all of these social groups have been positioned as non-traditional and therefore inferior to the dominant traditional group.

Furthermore, they are double-disadvantaged, as I have previously explained, access courses are deemed to be the sub-standard route into HE - another binary: A-Levels are the gold standard; access courses are the inferior route.

Freire based his theory of critical pedagogy on a concept he called 'conscientization' (1993). During conscientization learners are empowered and made more aware, through educational practices, of oppression by hegemonic or dominant groups. Freire asserted that once the oppressed are conscientized, or awakened to their situation, they will be empowered to change the social world and social conditions, and break down the oppressive structures. However, if non-traditional students feel excluded from higher education, and that they do not belong, it would be difficult for them to participate and therefore recognise and overcome the internalised feelings of inferiority. Reay et al. (2005) write about how education amongst the working class is far from straight forward; '...the link between class and education, in which failure is emblematic of the working class relationship to schooling, frequently makes working class transitions to higher education complex and difficult' (p. 84). Nevertheless, at FE level, despite the embedded logic, learners can acquire the skills and confidence needed to make the successful transition to HE. However, another contested area is the question of what type of HE we are preparing learners for. During chapter 1, I examined the stratified system of HE in terms of the elite and mass institutions. The statistics for the two types of universities indicate that non-traditional mature learners are severely under-represented within the elite universities. Northedge argues that widening participation has meant that 'non-traditional students have been treated as "charity" cases to be rescued from ignorance. The stately home of elite education is simply extended by adding a large paupers' wing. "Proper" students continue to define the norms, whilst the rest tag along behind as best they can' (2003: 17). If this is an accurate interpretation of the situation, then the purpose of widening participation to give people fair and equal access to a once elite education system is undermined.

However, Burke also criticises the idea of empowering learners through critical pedagogy. She makes the case that if teachers are empowering students, this places them as powerful, and students as powerless, and this is a detrimental

starting point. Burke states that empowerment aims to 'give power to the less powerful, which implies that tutors have power to distribute' (2002: 86). This concept further reinforces the unequal power relation of the classroom.

Empowerment becomes problematic when it assumes that tutors possess power over students, which creates new forms of disciplinary regimes. Empowerment is then merely another mechanism for marginalised groups to be observed, regulated, categorised and trained by those deemed to 'know better' (ibid).

In addition, Freire himself witnessed the danger of empowerment through critical pedagogy when that power is misused; Pratt-Adams et al. state that 'Freire recognised that not all oppressed people continue to value their own community once they have achieved; in this case the oppressed become the oppressors' (2010: 104).

Critical pedagogy, a teaching method that can be facilitated in the access classroom to prepare learners for HE, can be deemed as an empowering and positive method increasing confidence, encouraging dissent, and enabling learners to realise they have valid contributions to make. This in turn can sharpen skills such as critical thinking, learner autonomy and pro-activity, further increasing the learners' chances of success. It is widely recognised that education can be used to create opportunities, and empower learners to fulfil professional roles that they may not have applied for before. However, there are also criticisms of critical pedagogy in that it 'puts the teacher in the position of superior rescuer' (Burke 2002: 59), leading students into emancipation where they will be free to make life choices. In addition, there are concerns about the negative aspects of using education for empowerment. Baxter and Britton discuss the risks attached to empowerment and using education to change the course of one's life. '...empowerment may not be unproblematic, that the personal changes which higher education brings may have negative as well as positive effects, in other words, that risks may accompany opportunities' (2001: 88). One such risk is Bowl's (2003) theory of habitus clash; another is Freeborn's theory of educating yourself out of you own class and being 'forever, neither fish nor fowl' (2000: 10); and Reay's research into the concept of 'classlessness' (1997: 228). However, in order to change one's life, one has to take risks. One of this risks, albeit psychological, that non-traditional learners take, is to step outside of the boundaries of their culture. Whilst discussing Bourdieu's theory of habitus (Bourdieu and

Passeron 1977), Bowl comments that 'working class people may not think they are eligible for opportunities to achieve because of their internalised assumptions that certain opportunities are "not for the likes of them"' (2003: 129). This concept can be further understood through an examination of the theory of habitus; this will be explored in detail in the following chapter, and contextualised in the final chapter on the learners' experiences.

### *'Otherness'*

Previously I stated that access students are double-disadvantaged, first because they are non-traditional; second because access courses are deemed to be the sub-standard route into HE; A-Levels are the most common and traditionally accepted route into HE. Bowl comments on the students in her study as 'being negatively labelled as "Access Students", an indication that they were not in higher education by right but because of their disadvantaged status' (2003: 140). She also comments that they would 'describe themselves negatively as learners, rather than positively as people with considerable insight based on their wide experience of life and work' (ibid: 164). Access students are then well aware of the stigma attached to their status, and despite the critical pedagogy that underpins the access course, they may well arrive in HE feeling inadequate. Gorard explains how such students are 'othered', and that support with academic writing and timetables that meet mature students' needs are special requirements and 'not the norm' in HE (2007: 104). 'Students from non-traditional backgrounds are disadvantaged by an institutional culture that places them as "others". For example, the typical student is often assumed to be young, and with no other responsibilities' (ibid). This position is the dichotomy to that of mature students who are often juggling jobs and family responsibilities alongside their studies. However, it is these extra responsibilities that mean mature students often bring valuable life skills to the course, are better organised and motivated.

'Otherness' is a theory in social sciences used to understand how society and social groups exclude 'others' who are deemed not to fit in, or not part of the dominant hegemonic group; hence they are not like 'us'. To be 'othered' is to be positioned as different – not the norm. 'Others' are subordinated or made inferior, and 'othering'

often involves the demonizing or dehumanizing of certain social groups which justifies their exploitation, sometimes abuse, and often 'exclusion from whatever benefits society may offer' (Kirk and Okazawa-Rey 2004: 64). De Beauvoir (1949) used the theory of 'other' in her feminist work to describe male-dominated society and how woman is the 'other' in relation to man. If 'otherness' is the state of being different, in this context, woman is different to man. However, she is not only different, she is inferior and subordinate, and is therefore justifiably denied rights and opportunities. De Beauvoir (1949) refers to the 'other' as the minority and the least favoured one of the two sexes; hence the title of her book: *The Second Sex*. Said (1978) also uses this theory when writing about colonialism but describes it as 'ethnocentricity', which is a form of 'othering'. Ethnocentricity is the belief that one's own ethnic group is, not only superior to all others, but that meaning is assigned to other ethnic groups, using one's own as standard, and therefore deeming others to be sub-standard. In addition to this, 'members of subordinate groups tend to be judged by those in dominant positions according to negative stereotypes' (Kirk and Okazawa-Rey 2004: 64). Reay et al. comment on the concept of 'otherness' when they examine the non-traditional students in their own study entering higher education: 'This positioning as other causes tensions for the working class students, tensions which raise powerful issues around authenticity, shame and belonging' (2005: 104). 'Otherness' can be experienced by any marginalised group in society and those typically affected are women, working class, disabled, homosexual, and minority ethnic groups as all have been, at some point during British history, positioned as subordinate and inferior members of society.

In addition to these issues, there is also the dilemma of which type of HE institution access students should apply to – elite or mass. In chapter 1 I discussed how applicants' social class is a key determinant when choosing HEIs to apply to (Reay 2005). Bowl reiterates this point when she states that 'Internalised messages about the status of different institutions affected the choices which participants felt able to make' (2003: 130). The analysis of statistics in chapter 1, representing mature students in both types of university, indicate that this type of non-traditional student participates more in mass institutions, compared with elite ones. Although Naidoo (2000) discusses how elite universities failed to meet widening participation targets by excluding non-traditional students, and the statistics in chapter 1 demonstrate that



non-traditional students remain under-represented in elite universities, certain theoretical perspectives can be used to understand how people instinctively know their place in the world, and avoid those places where they feel they do not belong. As I have already mentioned, Bourdieusian theories such as habitus and cultural capital enable us to conceptualise the experiences of non-traditional students in higher education. This theoretical perspective will be examined in more detail in the following chapter 3.

### **Supporting non-traditional learners in HE**

One of the most important changes to the higher education system, and one that was to the non-traditional student's advantage, was the introduction of the modular system. There have been concerns expressed about the standards and quality of teaching and learning on modular courses, and the degrees that learners graduate with (Trow 1973, 1987). These concerns reverberate from the binary system of polytechnics and old universities as it was the polytechnics, later to become the new universities, who pioneered modular degrees in the UK (Pratt 1999). Green and Lucas point out that originally it was the 'US community colleges...[who] pioneered modularisation and credit accumulation and transfer...' (2000: 230). This allowed them to have 'the most accessible HE system in the world' (ibid), which enabled them to establish such a high participation rate. As discussed previously in chapter 1, New Labour were influenced by American systems of education and introduced many new reforms and initiatives in the UK that came from the US. However, not all academics were supporters of the system, either in Britain or America.

In the previous chapter I also discussed Trow's (1973) criticism of a mass HE system and how he felt it impacted on quality. One of the features that Trow examines in his paper is that of 'academic standards' (1973: 13). Trow's concern was that in moving from an elite to a mass system of higher education, standards become 'variable' (ibid), indicating that parity of esteem amongst HE institutions may be lost. His concern was real if some institutions were awarding degrees for modularised courses and some were not. Ideally, all institutions should be using the same system of award and accreditation. At the time of writing, it was probably too early for Trow to fully evaluate the modular system; however, there has been much evaluation in

more recent times. Wagner (in Schuller 1995) asserts that 'The development of modularization is one of the more successful innovations in UK higher education and repays careful study' (p. 19). In addition, and as I have already discussed with reference to access courses, modularisation works effectively in further education too, especially given the types of students that FE attracts. Young explains how, in FE, 'modularisation focuses on students as *managers of their own learning...and as decision makers and choosers of learning programmes*' (1998: 86). Acquiring such skills ensures greater success upon progression to HE, especially if degree courses operate a similar system. In addition, this is part of the experience that Young refers to as 'learning to learn' (1998: 86); this involves students acquiring skills of autonomy and self-management. Merrill, in her study on the experiences of adult learners in HE, comments that 'Those studying at a new university with a modular curriculum faced fewer problems than those in the old universities with a traditional curriculum structure' (2004: 86). The newer universities would have been polytechnics, the pioneers of modularisation in the UK, and the institutions where widening participation began.

It seems that some of the old, traditional universities maintained their traditional systems, meaning that non-traditional students would struggle and find acquiring degrees from these institutions difficult. In addition, this perpetuates the stratified system of HE described by Trow (1987) and further highlighted by Reay (2005) as being an elitist divide between old/traditional universities and new/polytechnics. Writing more recently in 2006, Trow comments that 'The curriculum in elite institutions has tended to be highly structured...the courses of study, shaped largely by the character of the final exam, were on the whole highly specialized' (Forest and Altbach 2006: 254). If a learner is progressing from a system of modularisation, such as the access course, they will inevitably find the traditional system difficult to cope with. Nevertheless, for Trow (2006) the modular system means a decline in standards; 'In institutions of mass higher education, the curriculum becomes more modular, marked by semi-structured sequences of courses, with the focus on earning unit credits' (ibid). Trow goes on to comment on the '...rejection of academic forms, structures, and standards...' (ibid) within mass higher education, implying that real academic study can only be undertaken in the elite institutions; all other courses take place in the 'paupers' wing', as identified by Northedge (2003: 17).

In order for participation in UK higher education to be widened, and for non-traditional learners to successfully take part, two changes were initiated: the modular degree system of accreditation, and increased support on the part of the institution. However, contrary to Trow's argument (2006), which is campaigning for a return to the traditional system, it can be argued that modularisation leads to a decline in standards and the quality of learning, as it encourages curricula to become technical. Previously I criticised the access course for implementing pre-set criteria in a systematic way, where the curriculum becomes technical, and the classroom experience mechanical. Burke, in her work with access students, comments on a scenario she witnessed: 'Although the teacher desires a generative open discussion with students, the regulative, pre-set criteria have undermined her attempts' (2002: 68). Advocates of the system of modularisation claim that it is progressive. However, it is not progressive in the true sense but instrumental. In a previous essay (Burnell 2011b), I quoted Winter on a concept that she refers to as 'scientism' in teaching (2006: 218). Although Winter uses a critique of the Geography National Curriculum, the principle is the same:

...an instrumental process that assumes we can pre-specify what should be taught, teach it and then evaluate whether or not the pre-specified objectives have been learnt successfully...It pays no attention to the wider purposes of education, to the complex nature of learning and teaching, to the richness and complexity...It conceptualises education as a technical process of skills acquisition, for which there are step-by-step instructions (ibid).

In criticising increased support on the part of the institution, Merrill notes that some universities would expect learners to adjust to the institution, as opposed to the institutions changing their practices to accommodate them (ibid). The widening participation movement required that universities become more accessible in order for non-traditional learners to take part; it seems that some HEIs were reluctant to change. In another study by MacDonald and Stratta, they demonstrate that tutors at an unnamed university, during an interview about widening access, did not deem it part of their role to change: 'Opening up access to HE was about allowing students entry and support in fitting into the undergraduate system; it did not require any radical change on the part of tutors or the institution to deal with the new situation' (2001: 253). Scott comments on polytechnics as being '...open rather than closed

institutions, inheriting the wider access traditions of further education...Their mission was not to reproduce elites...but to maximise the local and regional skills base' (1995: 58). Again, it seems that the new universities, formerly the polytechnics, were more adept at accommodating and supporting non-traditional learners, and enabling them to succeed.

If the traditional system that befitted traditional students, prevented or hindered non-traditional students from being successful, change was necessary in order for widening participation to take effect in all HE institutions. O'Donnell and Tobbell make an interesting point when they state that 'The challenge for universities is to develop programmes, policies and initiatives that best facilitate adults' transitions. For this to be possible we must move beyond *what* adults experience to an understanding of *why* and *how* they experience this' (2007: 314). In other words, widening participation involves more than merely opening the door; it involves an understanding of the non-traditional students' lives and experiences. Hatt and Baxter note that 'In some subject areas, academic staff have been accustomed to teaching and assessing a relatively homogenous body of students...' (2003: 19). By this, they mean the traditional student, with established study skills, and progressing straight from school. Teaching the non-traditional student who has had a break in education, possibly a negative educational experience, and who may have just completed an access course, would require a different approach. I have already discussed how older universities view non-traditional students as resource intensive learners who would not be suited to the environment of the research university. Thompson (2000) comments on how non-traditional learners have greater needs, and need significantly more personal attention; Thompson also points out that 'course materials need to be plentiful and to hand' (ibid). However, it seems that supporting non-traditional, especially mature students in the ways that they need, can be construed as lowering standards.

Many non-traditional mature students are time-poor. They often have intensive duties outside of college or university which may include childcare, family responsibilities, households, and paid jobs in order to provide for their families (Arnot 2002). Even though each student is different, and has different needs, their one common issue is that they will have had a break in education instead of progressing straight through. The mature student's education may have been fragmented, and

non-linear, developing at different stages of their lives. This may differ from many traditional students whose progression tends to be continuous. In addition, mature students are often juggling several roles, and cannot dedicate their lives to study. It is unusual for any student in these times to be able to study without having to work or juggle other responsibilities but for the mature student, the extra pressures can be intense. Some of these issues are discussed during interviews with my participants, and the findings are presented in the final chapter 5. FE colleges recognise that mature students have individual needs and colleges and tutors try to cater for these needs with adjustments in provision and high levels of support. Universities however have come under scrutiny for making adjustments and providing, what some have deemed, too much support. Naidoo discusses quality in HE and comments that 'The shift from elite to highly diverse mass systems...have resulted in increasing government concern over quality in higher education' (2000: 30). Thompson points out that providing too much support can 'undermine standards' (2000: 165). Thompson makes a valid point by questioning how much support is too much support; 'beyond a certain level of assistance it becomes difficult to claim that the end result actually reflects the student's own work' (ibid). Too much support not only undermines the institution's standards but also the student's standards as it questions their true academic ability.

However, Bowl asserts that 'If widening participation is to be made a reality, the nature of the relationship between the university and its students needs to change' (2003: 157). Bowl explains that often universities do not explain or make explicit what is expected, and that they take for granted that students know the 'institutional rules and norms' (ibid). In the previous chapter, I quoted Hatt and Baxter's research which suggests that 'knowing the rules of the game distinguished the A-Level entrants from the other groups' (2003: 25). Hatt and Baxter are suggesting that this traditional group of learners tend to know what is expected of them before they arrive, whereas non-traditional students are often still trying to decipher the rules and this can put them at a disadvantage. Crozier et al. conducted research into the experiences of middle class and working class students entering higher education, with similar findings: 'middle class students to varying degrees had more preparation to university life and knew what to expect than all working class students in our study ... their schools groomed them, endowing their habitus by providing insights and

relevant experiences' (David 2010: 66). However, outcomes such as these can be over-generalised and there are other variables to consider. For example, parental expectations, one's environment, levels of confidence – all impact on a student's progression and achievement; it is not always related solely to social class.

Bowl also asserts that it is 'tempting to conclude that widening participation means dumbing down – that the academic calibre of students is declining as mass education becomes a reality' (2003: 157), when in fact universities could do more by way of supporting non traditional students by making the rules of the game much more explicit. That way the learner's academic capability may not need to be brought unnecessarily into question. When Hatt and Baxter comment on 'knowing the rules of the game' (2003: 25), one of the rules they are referring to is the use of academic language. The middle class students in Crozier et al's study, who were groomed by their school and 'endowed with habitus' (David 2010: 66) would have been accustomed to communicating in the language of the academy, whereas mature students, and the working class students in Crozier et al's study, would have to acquire the language on entry. Even though traditional students will have different needs depending on their schooling and background, mature students will not have had the grooming as described above, as they will have experienced that break away from education. Northedge asserts that 'The student's goal is to become an effective participant in an unfamiliar knowledge community' (2003: 21); Northedge criticises 'student-centred approaches that leave the students floundering within everyday discourse' (ibid), and emphasises the importance of being able to participate in the discourse of what is an unfamiliar arena. Bourdieu complained that students who know the language, and can communicate in the discourse are favoured by lecturers as being the best students; 'It is almost assumed that good students will master this mysterious academic discourse without being told (or needing to be told) how to do so' (Webb et al. 2002: 130). For mature students having had a break in education, support in mastering the discourse, in order to participate successfully, is needed. Some universities offer literacy support for students, and Gorard asserts that 'Some HEIs separate students from non-traditional backgrounds to provide generic skills instruction to bring them up to the standard of others' (2007: 105). However, this is an added burden for non-traditional students

and, on top of the already high workload that acquiring a degree entails, and may further disadvantage them.

Positive action, unlike positive discrimination, involves taking action in order to 'ensure that irrelevant barriers are not preventing someone or a particular group of achieving success' (Gaine and George 1999: 4). Many aspects of education involve positive action, for example, removing stereotypes from textbooks; de-gendering subjects such as Maths and science to enable girls to participate; allowing pupils to acquire qualifications in their mother-tongue language; changes in the curriculum that value what children from diverse backgrounds bring to school with them. These examples of positive action in education enable learners to achieve and be successful, regardless of social group or background; this is the ethos that underpins inclusion. Although not on the same scale, smaller changes such as modularisation, and support in acquiring academic language can also mean that non-traditional learners in higher education are included, achieve and be successful. Modularising undergraduate degrees does not necessarily undermine the system or lower standards, it alters the system in order to allow a wider diversity of learners than is historically represented, to successfully achieve. Carr asserts that 'education has continuously been reconstructed to take account of changing social, political and cultural conditions...' (1991: 187). Positive action involves making changes; change is not equal to deterioration.

In addition to the modularisation of undergraduate degrees, providing support in learning the rules of the academic game is another form of positive action institutions can take in order to ensure the success of its participants. Making the rules explicit, as Bowl (2003) asserts, enables learners to know exactly what is required of them, especially learners who have had a break in education, or who come from backgrounds/families where academia is not a presence in the home or everyday life. In the first chapter, I discussed higher education before the widening participation movement, and how HE needed to be opened up and access widened to non-traditional and under-represented groups. In order for this to happen successfully, changes had to take place to allow these new groups to be successful. Making changes to the institution in order to allow a diversity of learners to take part, especially under-represented groups, is known as inclusion. Previously, I quoted Dimbleby and Cooke who commented on modularisation as 'a significant step

forward...and [will] enable colleges to be inclusive organisations' (Smithers and Robinson 2005: 72). If widening participation is going to be successful in HE, in much the same way as it is in FE, higher education needs to change and become a fully inclusive system.

However, some theorists would argue that, despite the emergence of widening participation, inclusivity and equal opportunities for once excluded groups, the working class relationship to education is one that remains complex and strained. Previously I quoted Reay et al. (2005) who write about how education amongst the working class is far from straight forward; '...the link between class and education, in which failure is emblematic of the working class relationship to schooling, frequently makes working class transitions to higher education complex and difficult' (p. 84). One example of a complexity would be the impact on one's social class identity. Lynch and O'Neill assert that 'the position of working class people in education is structurally and substantively different from all other groups: if one is working class and formally educated ... one loses one's defining social class identity' (1994: 307). This concept will be explored in more detail in chapter 5 – the research findings. In the following chapter, an examination of Bourdieu's theories of habitus and cultural capital demonstrates the complexity of the relationship between the working class and education, and enables us to understand why some groups succeed in education, and some do not.



## Chapter 3: Theoretical Perspectives

### **Pierre Bourdieu (01.08.1930-23.01.2002)**

Bourdieu theorised many interesting and education related concepts during his time as a sociologist; two such theories are particularly relevant to this field of research: habitus and cultural capital. These concepts can be applied to this thesis as a theoretical perspective, a framework, with which to answer, or at least offer an explanation to answer the question: what are the lived experiences and perspectives of non-traditional learners? Bourdieu did not set out to establish theories but to find ways of explaining and illuminating the social world. In fact, Bourdieu did not call them theories but ‘thinking tools’ with which to try and make sense of what people experience in the social world. During this section I will examine and overview each of the Bourdieusian theories, and how they relate to this particular topic of non-traditional mature students in higher education.

In a documentary filmed for French television shortly before his death, Bourdieu said ‘my personal experience sensitises me to things that others wouldn’t notice; makes me nervous or irate at things that others would find normal’

(<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Csbu08SqAuc>). Unfortunately he does not elaborate on this and the interviewer does not ask him to. Bourdieu was born and raised in a rural town in south west France. His father, who did not complete his education, was a manual worker and ‘Life appears to have been very much that of the traditional rural peasant’ (Grenfell 2008: 12). However, Bourdieu showed intellectual talent and went on to graduate from one of France’s most elite universities with a degree in philosophy. It is said that Bourdieu did not like to talk about his upbringing and ‘spent most of his life avoiding reference to his personal life’ (ibid: 11). Bourdieu’s sensitivity to ‘things that others wouldn’t notice’ may be a result of his impoverished upbringing, before educating himself into a different social class. Experiencing two different worlds that are polarised within society would enable him to empathise with people who are born into lower classes and not experienced opportunities for advancement.

## *Habitus*

Habitus is defined by Maton as an 'enigmatic concept' (Maton in Grenfell 2008: 49); something that cannot be clearly explained or understood, a puzzle. However, one thing that was clear to Bourdieu, is that some people succeed in education, and some do not, and that, he argued, is mostly due to which class one is born into. Bourdieu claimed that each class has a different habitus, and these will determine the values, practices and beliefs that that class possess and play out. Nash asserts that 'Bourdieu's concept of *habitus* is the essential core of what should be properly regarded as a theory of socialisation, but a rather limited one' (1990: 442).

Socialisation theory helps us to understand that our behaviours are not innate but learnt, and acquired through the process of growing up in our culture. Each culture has a set of values, norms and beliefs that, once acquired, regulate our behaviour whilst we live in that culture's society. Sub-cultures such as class also have norms, values and beliefs and these usually exist within the main culture (Haralambos and Holborn 2008). However, this is an evolving process, and cultural habits can change, just as we, as members of that culture, can change our own habits and beliefs.

Bourdieu's theory takes this concept a step further, he argued that we have 'internalised, "embodied" social structures...[which] function below the level of consciousness' (Bourdieu 1986 cited in Nash 1990: 442), and impose limits on what we feel we can and cannot do. Nash explains that 'people are limited in what they can think and do because of these really effective limits to what they know about what is possible for them' (1990: 443). In other words, we are not conscious of the limits and therefore, unlike re-socialisation, cannot change them. In educational terms, Bourdieu was asserting that for some social classes, education is obtainable, and for other social classes (namely the working class), it is not easily obtainable, and that is because the working class habitus is limited not to include educational aspirations. However, in one of his works he suggests that 'habitus can be changed by changed circumstances' (Bourdieu 1990 cited in Sullivan 2002: 152).

Habitus, like the primary socialisation process, is initially transmitted in the home. It begins with the values and practices of parents. Reay asserts that 'The family for Bourdieu is both a habitus generating institution and a key site for the accumulation of cultural capital' (Grenfell and James 1998: 56). As I have tried to explain, it is more than what is acquired through socialisation. Naidoo comments that 'habitus,

which as a result of socialization engenders in individuals a “disposition” below the level of consciousness to act or think in certain ways’ (2004: 458). This engendering implies that unlike socialisation, where re-socialisation can take place and a person’s values and norms can change, the engendered habitus does not or cannot change. This suggests that habitus is therefore deeper and more permanent. However, Bowl (2003) suggests that, rather than changing habitus, a new habitus can be laid over old but that this causes a habitus clash or conflict. This conflict, in certain situations, leads to feelings of not belonging. The clash occurs because one’s habitus, lifestyle, expectations of particular social groups, and a set of dispositions are embodied and internalised.

In one of his works, Bourdieu referred to ‘...the system of dispositions towards the school...’ (Bourdieu 1977 cited in Sullivan 2002: 149 ), suggesting that different habituses will project different attitudes towards education. However, Bourdieu was not suggesting that we are pre-programmed, and once our habitus is set we are unable to alter our destinations; we are free to make decisions and act in ways that we choose. However, we produce our thoughts and actions through our habitus and our actions and choices will result in behaviours that may limit what we feel we can do. Webb et al. comment that:

...habitus can be understood as the values and dispositions gained from our cultural history that generally stay with us across contexts...These values and dispositions allow us to respond...but the responses are always largely determined – regulated – by where (and who) we have been in a culture (2002: 36-37).

Although habitus has been referred to as engendering and internalising, Bourdieu (cited in Sullivan 2002) does suggest that ‘habitus can be changed by changed circumstances’. In the context of my research, the changed circumstance was widening the participation into HE for under-represented groups. This allowed the working class, for example, to access higher education on a scale that broke with tradition. In this context, people either changed their habitus to include a new practice, that of HE, or, as explained by Bowl, that ‘old habitus can be overlaid by new, as when the student takes on aspects of [the new] university habitus...’ (2003: 147). Bourdieu suggests that one’s thoughts and actions will be determined by our cultural history, our original habitus, and this may mean experiencing the inner conflict and feelings of not belonging. However, Bourdieu has been criticised for

implying that people are unaware of their actions and that they lack individual freedom (Sayer (2004), Farnell (2000) in Reay 2004). Reay (1997) cites Bourdieu (1990) as stating that 'habitus continues to operate long after the objective conditions of its emergence have been dislodged' (p. 231), meaning that the original habitus will always be there. This would explain Bowl's theory of 'habitus clash' (2003), experienced from laying new over old.

Passeron and Bourdieu (1977) addressed the question of why people from middle-class backgrounds are more likely, and those from working-class backgrounds are less likely to attend university. Maton explains how habitus works in practise, and in relation to the social field, or social setting, in which we find ourselves:

Imagine, for example, a social situation in which you feel or anticipate feeling awkward, out of your element, like a "fish out of water". You may decide not to go, to declare it as "not for the likes of me", or (if there already) to make your excuses and leave. In this case the structuring of your habitus does not match that of the social field... Social agents thereby come to gravitate towards those social fields (and positions within those fields) that best match their dispositions and try to avoid those fields that involve a field-habitus clash (Grenfell 2008: 57-59).

When Passeron and Bourdieu wrote *Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture* (1977), they used the field-habitus clash theory to suggest that working –class people did not enter HE because they did not feel comfortable in this social field, it did not match the structure of their habitus. In addition, Passeron and Bourdieu asserted that the middle-class have a built-in advantage as they have been socialised into the dominant culture, therefore higher education is quite naturally a part of their habitus. 'When habitus encounters a social world of which it is the product, it finds itself as a "fish in water", it does not feel the weight of the water and takes the world about itself for granted' (Bourdieu 1989 cited in Grenfell and James 1998: 14). When working class people enter higher education, not only are they feeling the effects of being the "fish out of water", but that they are also at an immediate disadvantage having not shared the same habitus as the middle class. Higher education therefore is an uneven playing field. The working class student maybe able to change their habitus but they will remain at a disadvantage, having no cultural history or identity in the field. Bowl's research into non-traditional learners in HE demonstrates that 'these students were constantly engaged in an uphill struggle...the odds were stacked against them from the outset...' (2003: 125).

Widening participation has enabled under-represented groups to access, and now be a part of HE, and to succeed and receive its rewards. However, the issue now is that 'differentials in habitus ensure that not everyone plays the game on equal terms' (ibid: 126). Reay critiques the habitus theory by stating that 'Middle class women are predominantly engaging in a process of replicating habitus while their working class counterparts are attempting a much harder task; that of transforming habitus' (Grenfell and James 1998: 70). The middle-class merely have to reproduce the habitus of entering HE, whereas the working class have to create new habitus and find a place for themselves within HE. In the final chapter on the research findings, I examine and discuss the theory of the 'third space', a space that has emerged for the non-traditional student in higher education. This space is unique as it is an in-between space, not middle class and not working class, but is inhabited by the new type of student who has emerged from the widening participation movement. The emergence of the third space suggests that higher education is now a part of the working class, non-traditional learners' habitus, but that it is still different to the middle and upper class habitus. The new and in-between space allows the non-traditional student to feel more comfortable and less like a fish out of water in a field where they have no history or sense of belonging.

Bourdieu has been criticised for focussing too much on class and overlooking other oppressed social groups. Habitus is a methodology that also can be used to analyse social power relations and how dominant groups oppress and control subordinate social groups. Reay (2004) cites McClelland (1990) as stating that habitus 'can easily be applied to the analysis of gender (or racial and ethnic) disadvantage as well' (p. 436). However, it seems that Bourdieu failed to do this, as Reay points out, 'gender is subsumed throughout much of Bourdieu's writing under his primary focus on social class' (2004: 436). Yet one of Bourdieu's final works was entitled *Masculine Domination* (2001). However, this is also criticised as not focussing on 'current relationships between the sexes and contemporary masculinities and femininities, but gender divisions in Algeria in 1960s' (ibid). It seems that Bourdieu missed an opportunity to apply his theoretical framework to the range of historically oppressed and subordinated social groups, and instead focussed primarily on one: the working class.

Sullivan comments that ‘...the dominant habitus is a set of attitudes and values held by the dominant class. A major component of the dominant habitus is a positive attitude towards education’ (2002: 149). The dominant classes in HE are the middle and upper classes, therefore it is these classes that best facilitate success in higher education. Bowl makes the point that traditional students progressing straight from school are more likely to succeed in HE as ‘at school they were able to devote time to developing the habitus and accruing the cultural capital they need to operate within the institution’ (2003: 134). However, Sullivan is also critical of Bourdieu stating that ‘[he] seems to suggest that the dominant habitus consists of more...that it includes (or at least gives rise to) competence in specific social settings (ibid: 149). Other critics of Bourdieu have stated that he is not specific enough with his examples, and uses non-committal phrases such as ‘the effect is as though’ (Grenfell and James 1998) which is not rigorous enough to test the theory. Bourdieu also abstained from giving specific examples of the dominant habitus and what it contains. Reay (2004: 433) cites Bourdieu (1990) as stating that ‘the habitus goes hand in hand with vagueness and indeterminacy’, which is not helpful when examining what enables one class to succeed and another to find their place in an unfamiliar arena. This comment renders the theory quite unconvincing. Nevertheless, Maton asserts that ‘once one thinks in terms of “habitus”, its effects can be seen everywhere’ (Grenfell 2008: 50).

### *Cultural Capital*

Bourdieu’s theory of cultural capital enables us to further understand habitus and how it ‘works’ in the social world. Bourdieu identified several types of capital; in addition to cultural he also named social and economic. Economic capital relates to financial and monetary assets. Social capital relates to networks of people, relationships on a personal and professional level. Cultural capital however, is harder to define and just as enigmatic as habitus. Sullivan quotes Bourdieu as stating that ‘cultural capital consists of familiarity with the dominant culture in a society, and especially the ability to understand and use ‘educated’ language’ (2002: 145). This is an interesting example and Nash asserts that ‘all forms of capital are subject to conversion’ (1990: 432). In chapter two I examined how non-traditional students

often enter higher education without knowing the rules of the game, or being able to articulate themselves in the language of the academy, putting them at a disadvantage to more traditional students. Bourdieu was arguing here that 'educated' language can be converted into success within higher education; Webb et al. agree and comment how 'Cultural capital, such as a university degree, can be exchanged for a desired job' (2002: 110). Education then becomes capital that can be traded for career and opportunities. Without this cultural capital, Bourdieu argues, one's chances in life are limited.

Cultural capital is more than 'educated' language. It is the 'values, tastes and lifestyles' (Moore in Grenfell 2008: 102) that one inherits from one's culture and background. This differs from habitus in that habitus is a way of life, whereas cultural capital refers to the resources one has at one's disposal. The 'values, tastes and lifestyles' that Moore (2008) refers to are, for example, certain foods such as delicacies, high cultural activities such as art, theatre and music, as well as certain sports associated with the wealthy and ruling classes. This particular set of 'values, tastes and lifestyles' (ibid) will enable one to succeed more so than someone with a different set of 'values, tastes and lifestyles' because, according to Bourdieu and Passeron, the education system attaches highest value to legitimate taste (1977). Moreover, 'Education is an important field because of its capacity to confer capital, particularly cultural capital, upon its participants' (Webb 2002: 110). In other words, possessing cultural capital leads to the possession of more cultural capital. The clearest definition and one that provides definite examples, comes from Bourdieu himself. Bowl cites Bourdieu (1997) as stating that there are three situations in which cultural capital may exist:

First, in embodied form, it is exemplified in features of the individual which are construed as having value, such as accent, familiarity with academic discourse or the appearance of being cultured. Second, it can exist in the objectified state, in the form of cultural goods, such as books, instruments and machines. Finally, it can exist in the institutionalised state, particularly in the form of qualifications bestowed by educational institutions... (2003: 127).

The type of cultural capital that one possesses will depend on the habitus that one has been born into and raised with; therefore cultural capital is not fairly or evenly distributed throughout the social class structure. The dominant classes will possess

the most desired cultural capital, and will therefore succeed most in education. This is why, Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) asserted, educational attainment of social groups is directly related to the amount of cultural capital they possess. Moreover, this will be reproduced from generation to generation, within the habitus, to enable one's children to be socialised into the values, tastes and lifestyles attached to their family's cultural capital. This is what Bourdieu referred to as social reproduction.

Social reproduction sustains or perpetuates characteristics of a given social structure or traditions over a period of time. Patterns of behaviour, cultural values, religious beliefs, and the importance of higher education are all passed down from one generation to the next. This phenomenon also reproduces social inequalities as patterns of behaviour are also being reproduced amongst the working class, keeping them at a disadvantage. However, they are not seen as inequalities because they are embedded in cultural practices and have been in existence for so long they become normal and accepted. Bourdieu (1977) believed that the dominant classes use social reproduction to reproduce inequalities, and sustain them, so that people feel it is normal and natural and do not question them. Nash explains that 'a culture is produced in which "settling for what you have got", not "pushing your luck" becomes the common sense of that culture' (1990: 439), and this is partly achieved through education. Bourdieu argued that the role of education in society is the contribution it makes to social reproduction, that inequalities are reproduced within the education system, and as a result are legitimate and unquestioned. Therefore, the system enables the dominant classes to maintain their position, and the working class a restricted position, within the social class structure. The acceptance of the restricted position is what Bourdieu referred to as 'the resignation of the inevitable' (1984: 372) which is endemic in working class habitus. Sullivan asserts that for Bourdieu, 'educational credentials help to reproduce and legitimate social inequalities, as high-class individuals are seen to deserve their place in the social structure' (2002: 144). Sullivan goes on to argue that 'some lower class individuals will succeed in the education system but, rather than challenging the system, this will strengthen it by contributing to the appearance of meritocracy' (ibid: 146).

However, Bourdieu is criticised again for overplaying the unconsciousness and unawareness of the working class (Sayer (2004), Farnell (2000) in Reay 2004), and implying that people contribute to their own oppression by being oblivious to their



domination. Willis (1977) in his study of working class 'lads' from a town in the North of England conducted the study in order to demonstrate that the boys who were part of his research deliberately failed at school and set themselves up for the working class jobs that awaited them. It was not that they held low aspirations for the future and had resigned themselves to their fate, but an act of cultural resistance. The boys saw no point in working hard at school and gaining qualifications that they did not need so they adopted an anti-school culture and failed. Because they had failed educationally, they went into low paid jobs. However, the boys saw these jobs as a chance to assert their masculinity, so for them it was not failure. One of Willis' points was that the school system reproduced working classness that set the lads up for working class jobs, and they accepted this in the way that Bourdieu described 'the resignation of the inevitable' (1984: 372). Although we may experience some verisimilitude between Bourdieu's theories and the educational system in the UK, it must be born in mind that this theory was established by Bourdieu in France, and at a time when society was different to that of present day Britain.

Bourdieu did offer a solution to the problem. Jaeger explains that in order to break the cycle of oppression, 'Parents must possess cultural capital; they must invest time and effort in transmitting cultural capital to their children; and children must absorb this cultural capital and transform it into educational success' (2009: 1944). However, working class parents cannot 'possess' the kind of cultural capital that is valued in academia, if they do not have it to start with. In addition, they already possess a different type of cultural capital, one that is valued amongst their own social class. Acquiring the cultural capital that Bourdieu referred to could be achieved through returning to education. However, in order to move into an unknown habitus such as HE, they must be aware of their domination and oppression and not, as previously stated, resign to the inevitable (Bourdieu 1984: 372). Also, Sullivan criticises Bourdieu for failing to demonstrate that 'parental cultural capital is inherited by the children and that this is the mechanism through which higher-class pupils tend to attain higher educational credentials' (2002: 155). Moreover, Bourdieu's theory that the family home is the ideal site for generating cultural capital is flawed. Reay recognises that Bourdieu is situating this responsibility with mothers, as they are deemed the primary carers and therefore responsible for the transmission of cultural capital. 'It is mother's time that accrues profits...once mother's time is harnessed to

the acquisition of cultural capital, it is no longer free time. It becomes mother's work time' (Grenfell and James 1998: 57). This places enormous burden on mothers to ensure that, in addition to all other parenting responsibilities, their children are acquiring the type of cultural capital needed to succeed. In addition, Reay points out that Bourdieu's theory fails to take account of mothers from minority ethnic groups. 'For women educated in countries other than Britain the resulting strangeness of their child's educational experiences undermined their ability to mobilise cultural capital with the ease that the middle-class British born mothers did' (Grenfell and James 1998: 65).

It could be argued that the widening the participation movement in the UK has broken the cycle of social reproduction and social inequality within the under-represented groups who were historically excluded from HE. With the new mass system, higher education is now more inclusive than before. Widening participation students can now expect to have academia as part of their cultural capital that can be reproduced within their own families. Vocationalism has long been available to non-traditional students, and especially the working class, this discussion took place in chapter 1 during the section on polytechnics. However, unfortunately vocational courses do not share the same prestige as academic courses do. Pratt-Adams et al. capture this concept when they state that 'the only measure of "success" was academic achievement; vocational achievement has never been celebrated in the same way' (2010: 86). However, this does not mean that the different kinds of cultural capital should not be valued in the same way. As I previously stated, the working class possess their own kind of cultural capital, often affiliated with non-academic subjects. Nevertheless, Webb et al. criticise the system of academia by stating that:

Even though more and more people in western societies now have the opportunity to attend university, the system as a whole continues to work to reinforce privilege. This is done in a myriad of ways, such as making distinctions between elite universities, and less prestigious centres of higher education (2002: 128).

The concept of a stratified system of higher education was also demonstrated in chapter 1 with an examination of mature student participation rates between elite and mass institutions of HE. Nevertheless, higher education does have a new generation of non-traditional students, from social groups who were once excluded,

thus working class habitus has changed. These learners now make choices outside of the 'common sense of their culture' (Nash 1990: 439), and this disrupts the cycle of reproducing social inequalities within higher education. This will be demonstrated with deeper detail in chapter 5, which will focus on the perspectives and experiences of these learners, people who did not have until now, higher education as part of their cultural capital.

## Chapter 4: Methods and Methodology

### Objectives and research questions

Having thoroughly examined the history of widening participation, and critically analysed the route that non-traditional learners progress through, I will now turn my attention to the learners themselves. This chapter will be a discussion of the methods deployed in order to capture the experiences and perspectives of non-traditional students in higher education. For these students, higher education has been made possible by the widening participation movement, and non-traditional routes such as access courses. In addition, since New Labour announced education reform, and proposed a fifty per cent participation rate by 2010, higher education has undergone transformation and evolved into a mass system, or universal system as defined by Trow (1973). One of Trow's criticisms of the changing British higher education system was a decline in standards. However, it can be argued that in order for widening participation to be successful, and for New Labour to reach its target, changes had to take place in order to accommodate and ensure successful progression of non-traditional learners. For the purpose of my research, I have chosen to focus on mature students and their experiences of accessing higher education as an under-represented group. In addition to being mature, learners who return to education after a long break are more likely to come from a working class or low socio economic background (Fuller and Heath in David 2010: 141). It is the lived experiences and subjective realities of these learners that my research aims to capture.

Initially I started with a core research question: Investigating the transition from FE to HE: what are the lived experiences and perspectives of non-traditional learners? This is the most important question to address in relation to capturing and understanding the subjective realities of my participants. In order to put the perspectives and experiences into context, the first half of the thesis includes an historical overview of higher education, and an examination of alternative routes for non-traditional learners entering HE. In addition, I developed six supplementary research questions to address in order to analyse the full context of the situation:

- What policies and government reform enabled the widening participation into HE movement to take place?
- What are the wide-ranging after effects of widening participation into HE; for example, on society and universities?
- How does FE prepare learners for the transition to HE in terms of providing support and provision?
- To what extent is FE's role inhibiting or enabling the transition?
- Now that widening participation has been achieved, what are the experiences of learners who progressed from further to higher education?
- In respect to personal, emotional and social experiences, what issues are faced by non-traditional learners in terms of their age, class, gender, ethnicity or background?

Questions one and two involved conducting a thorough literature review of widening participation including policy analysis. In addition, an examination of statistics representing mature student intake of both mass and elite universities reveal that not all universities engage in widening participation to the same extent. One of the effects of widening participation has been the debt incurred by students who are on degree courses, and I have presented theories of debt aversion to explore this area. My aim was to highlight the differences between the old/elite institutions and the new/polytechnics. It became apparent there are also differences in experiences between traditional and mature students. All of these concepts are dealt with during the first chapter of the thesis.

Questions three and four involved conducting another literature review, this time focussing on Further Education and the role that the sector plays in enabling and progressing non-traditional learners to HE. Implementing policies that effect widening the participation into HE was the first step taken by the government. The next step in the process of reform was to create alternative routes, via further education, for non-traditional learners to take. The aim of the second chapter of the thesis was to examine these routes closely, and critically analyse the access course in relation to mature learners who are returning to education after a period of absence.

In order to answer questions five and six, the focus is now turned to the learners themselves. These are the non-traditional learners, from the under-represented

groups that widening participation policy was designed to enable. However, at this point I decided to change the last question slightly and focus only on mature students returning after a long break in education. Including the other social characteristics such as social class, gender and ethnicity would make the thesis too broad. This is not to say that the other variables are not important but they will not be focussed on here. Avis argues that 'analytically we can separate relations of class from those of gender and race, in practice they are intertwined. We are all positioned in relation to our class, gender, ethnicity, sexuality and so on...' 2009: 14). As I have already stated, mature students tend to be working class or from a working class background (Fuller and Heath in David 2010), and all of my participants described their backgrounds as working class. Lynch and O'Neill explain what makes working class students different:

Working class people who succeed in the education system have to abandon certain features of their background class habitus ... in a way that is not really true for other socially mobile groups. Once educated they will cease to be working class in a way that a woman, no matter what her social class position, will never cease to be a woman; a person who is black will never cease to be black, and those with a major physical disability will never be without it. Their defining identity in social class terms is automatically changed by virtue of their educational success; there is no other marginal or dominated group for whom this holds true to the same degree (1994: 318).

According to Lynch and O'Neill (1994), this would be the only marginalised group whose identity or status is altered once they have acquired a higher education. Other groups' identities remain stable and unaltered by education. However, my overall objective is to explore and illuminate the experiences of mature, non-traditional learners, having progressed from FE to HE. Initially, their class was not the main focus, their route of progression was; however, I became aware that their class may well influence and shape their experiences. As can be seen from the layout of the thesis, I begin with a very broad view of the HE horizon by conducting a literature review of the widening participation movement. Gradually I narrow the view with an examination of FE and access courses as the non-traditional route, and finally zoom in on the learners themselves. This enables me to answer the core research question thoroughly, and whilst exploring the landscape surrounding the key area of research.

## **Personal significance**

The following extract has been taken from my research proposal (Burnell 2011c) where I included a discussion on why I chose this topic and what significance it bore to me. It is important to include this information here as it forms part of the research methodology. One could say that I entered the research field with some pre-conceived notions about what I may find, due to my own personal experiences. As I would prefer to be up-front about these experiences, the following is a short personal biography.

*Why embark on a research project that involves investigating the experiences of non-traditional learners in higher education?*

This research topic is of particular interest to me because of my own personal experience and academic journey as a non-traditional learner. Coming from a working class family of Irish immigrants, I attended a failing school in London's East End and left early without a single qualification. After a dismal start in education I resigned myself to thinking that I may never be academically successful or gain a professional position in employment. However, the New Labour government of the 1990s changed people's perception of higher education and started to open up possibilities for participation that had not been explored before. In addition, the access course movement had created an alternative route into HE that meant people like me, without formal or traditional qualifications, could apply for places on undergraduate degree courses. Learners who entered higher education this way came to be known as non-traditional students, and I became one such person. I returned to education after a long period of absence, completed an access course, and progressed to university. I could be deemed as a widening participation success story.

Whilst I was extremely grateful for being given the opportunity to study in higher education, given my background and lack of formal qualifications, I was also aware that learners like me had no history and very little to identify with in this historically and traditionally middle/upper class institution. As I have already explained in previous chapters, until the second world war, university education was the preserve

of a small elite, less than 2 per cent of the relevant age cohort were attending university, and among women, the percentage was less than 0.5 (Blackburn and Jarman, 1993). Moreover, the concept of mature students at this time did not exist. Even though the Robbins Report (1963) endorsed the principle that a higher education should be available to all those who had the ability and qualifications to benefit, it was not until the DES (1987) white paper *HE: meeting the challenge*, that alternative routes to HE started to become popular and non-traditional, mature learners like myself were really able to participate in higher education. Even then, it would take another ten years, and New Labour educational reform for the widening participation movement to get into full swing. I entered university to complete my first degree in 1997, at the height of the widening participation era.

Widening a traditionally narrow arena to include learners from under-represented groups is a major step towards social inclusion. However, if this new type of learner does not feel comfortable, included, or does not have any history in that arena then the effects will be felt. For me the personal effects were minimal. I attended the local East London university where many learners were from similar backgrounds. I studied alongside people from my own social class who were also enjoying the benefits of widening participation. I did not consider applying to an elite university, or even an institution outside of my local vicinity. In fact, whilst at the local college of further education, completing my access course, I was encouraged by my tutors to apply to universities that had a large proportion of mature and working class students. It was felt that widening participation students should apply to universities who were engaged in the widening participation movement. In chapter 1, I cited Reay et al. (2005) who conducted research into the overlapping effects of social class in the process of applying to HE, and especially on the issue of which HEI to apply to. They use a Bourdieusian (1984) theory called 'objective limits'; in other words, avoiding places where we have no history or sense of identity: 'a sense of one's place which leads one to exclude oneself from places from which one is excluded' (p 471). However, as my academic career and confidence grew, I found that applying to more elite universities in order to complete higher degrees, did not seem so unusual, and I did not feel out of place.

After completing my first degree, I trained as an access course lecturer, and returned to the place where I had begun, further education, enabling other mature, non-



traditional students to realise their dreams of entering higher education. I often encountered people like myself, from working class backgrounds, with negative school experiences, and fearful of returning to education after a long period of absence. My personal experience meant that I could empathise with these students. My professional position as a lecturer in an inner London college of Further Education meant that I had a clear vantage point on which to study with fascination cohort after cohort of non-traditional mature students making the transition to higher education. I maintained contact with some students who went on to complete their first degrees and, would listen with immense interest to their stories of passing through a world, and becoming graduates, where not too long ago they, like myself, would have been excluded. It was during one of these encounters that I decided to focus on this area as a research topic for my doctoral thesis.

The main area of interest for me is how these students cope with issues of identity and social class, and with their personal journeys and struggles. These may be issues that, generally, traditional students who are progressing to HE straight from school, would not have to deal with. That is not to say that traditional students entering HE would not have their own issues to deal with because they would have. However, they would not be centred around maturity, and as is so often the case with mature students - social class. One such issue for example, and one that I can empathise with is re-negotiating one's identity within the social class into which one is born, after having been re-educated into a different social class. Freeborn asserts that 'Educating yourself out of your own class, but doing it at an age where assimilating into the educated class is not realistic, not even entirely desirable, means that you become, forever, neither fish nor fowl' (2000: p10). The metaphorical concept of 'neither fish nor fowl' is one I can profoundly identify with. Widening participation opened doors to people that would have remained forever closed. However, entering these doors may have brought certain effects on students' personal lives, and this is the area that I intend to explore. Some research into this topic has already taken place, some of which I will discuss in the following chapter on the learners' experiences and perspectives.

## **My positionality**

One of the dangers of conducting research in an area that one can identify with, and has deep personal interest in, is researcher bias. Consideration of my own positionality and subjectivity within the chosen area and procedures of research, how my own values and beliefs are situated, and the influences these have on the research methodology are an extremely important phase of the research process. In addition, the use of 'insider research' (Mercer 2007) poses both strengths and problems. All of these issues will be examined in this section.

Opie (2004) states that 'the most significant factor that influences choice and use of methodology and procedures is "where the researcher is coming from" in terms of their philosophical position and their fundamental assumptions...' (p. 18). The assumptions referred to derive from the researcher's own ontological and epistemological beliefs. My own ontological and epistemological beliefs stem from my position as an interpretivist; 'The key element of interpretivism is that it is defined or constituted in terms of human beings attributing meaning to, or interpreting phenomena under investigation' (Burgess et al. 2009: 55). Cohen et al. explain that the 'interpretive paradigm is to understand the subjective world of human experience...efforts are made to get inside the person and to understand from within' (2000: 22). This involves eliciting from human participants accounts of their subjective realities. Burrell and Morgan argue that interpretative knowledge is of a 'softer, more subjective, spiritual or even transcendental kind, based on experience and insight of a unique and essentially personal nature' (Burrell and Morgan 1979: 1-2). In a previous assignment on research methods, I asserted my own position thus:

I believe that knowledge about the social world is subjective and based on experience and interpretation. I also believe that the world is experienced and constructed by the people that live in it and can therefore be interpreted by them. In addition, I hold the constructivist view that the social world is not made but rather, in the making (Burnell 2010: 4).

Elliott (2007) defines the constructivist view as 'the emphasis is on understanding the *production* of that social world' (p. 18); this implies that the social world is being produced and that there is more to be interpreted and understood as it evolves. However, critical realists believe that an independent objective social reality exists prior to individuals' constructions of that reality. Therefore, according to critical

realists, concepts such as social class already exist prior to an individual's awareness of them. Cruickshank (2003) asserts that critical realists argue that 'the self can obtain knowledge of a reality that is separate from our representations of it' (p. 1). I do possess an understanding of my participants' realities as I share very similar experiences to them in being non-traditional and mature students in higher education. However, if I did not share these experiences, and if I was not aware of them, I could still obtain knowledge of them. Nevertheless, the social world is constantly evolving and changing and, due to the actions of people who have sought to change the world, the one we live in now is not the same as it was. For example, one hundred years ago it was believed that women should not be educated, that they were not capable of being intellectual, that they were emotional and hysterical creatures better suited to placid activities such as homemaking. The social world has changed and so have people's views. That view is no longer the accepted reality of what women are capable of; moreover, it was not an accurate view as now many successful academics, lawyers, politicians and leaders are women.

It is usual for social researchers to pursue topics that are close to their experiences of the social world. Critical research is the paradigm whereby researchers start with a criticism of the social world, that there is something wrong and needs to be fixed. The criticisms usually involve social inequalities and injustices; 'Critical researchers see the world as being divided and in constant tension, dominated by the powerful, who oppress the people and use the state and its institutions as tools to achieve their purpose' (Sarantakos 2005: 51). Therefore the critical research paradigm is a step further from interpretivism, not content at interpreting the social world, the critical researcher aims to change it. My research can be situated in between the interpretive paradigm and the critical research paradigm. My overall objective was to elicit and interpret the subjective realities of my research participants, and then to situate these lived realities in relation to broader debates, such as educational inequality, in order that they can be acknowledged and understood. I do feel that not enough is known and understood about the experiences of mature students returning to learn, and that the assumption is that their experiences are similar to that of traditional students. Chapter 5 presents the findings of my research and it is apparent that this group's experiences and lived realities of higher education are unique, and the ways in which they are perceived and treated could be better

comprehended. If more is understood about them then more can be done to accommodate and include them. Gray asserts that 'The assumptions that lie beneath critical inquiry are that: Ideas are mediated by power relations in society. Certain groups in society are privileged over others and exert an oppressive force on subordinate groups' (2004: 24). In chapter 1 I explored and discussed the traditional and dominant culture of higher education and how elitism and prestige excludes certain subordinate social groups. Through the widening participation movement, the system is now more inclusive, and more social groups are now included but, as I have discussed, the legacy of elitism remains, and as non-traditional students have no history in the field of HE and nothing to identify with, this can make their experiences fraught and difficult.

My own experiences have meant that my values and beliefs as a researcher have impacted upon my chosen area of research. Denzin and Lincoln assert that 'what social scientists choose to investigate...they choose on the basis of their values' (2005: 142). In addition, my positionality as the researcher has influenced the chosen method and interviewing procedure that I have chosen to employ. When it comes to interpreting the data from the interviews, how can I be sure that my own experiences and background are not impacting upon the outcomes of the research? For Bourdieu, reflexivity is one of the most important aspects of research in the field of sociology; Webb et al. comment that 'Bourdieu posits the need for a "reflexive" relation to our own practices' (2002: 50). In other words, take nothing for granted, constantly question what we are doing and why we are doing it. Webb et al. outline Bourdieu's three key points to be considered in order to achieve this: our own social and cultural origins; our position in the field; and avoiding 'intellectual bias' (ibid), that is treating research ideas as real social problems to be solved, and not problems to be contemplated or discussed for one's intellectual amusement .

It is also important to be reflexive, to be aware of one's position within the process, how one is situated, and the assumptions that one holds. Cohen et al. comment by saying that 'highly reflexive researchers will be acutely aware of the ways in which their selectivity, perception, background and inductive processes and paradigms shape the research' (2000: 141). Reflexivity, therefore, is something that constantly has to be considered and reflected upon throughout the research process in order to be aware of the influences researchers may have on the process and outcomes.

Being up-front about one's values, beliefs and position as a researcher is not a disadvantage; we are all thinking, feeling human beings and our values will impact upon our research in some way. In a previous assignment, I discussed the case of Deutsch (2004), a white female who discusses her positionality as the powerful researcher whilst collecting interview data for her thesis:

Deutsch comments on the unequal power relation between herself and one of her research participants, a young black female, and whilst during the process how she inadvertently concentrated on the gap between them, not the link, making the participant the object of her research. Upon reflection, Deutsch considered this to be a problem, and even damaging to the research process. In the paper, she comments on the ethics of the situation, on the participant's discomfort at being objectified, and how this made her feel (Burnell 2010: 5).

I share strong links with my participants and I do feel that I can empathise with their experiences. I share with my participants the social characteristic that the research focus is on: mature student. In addition, I too define my background as working class. Therefore, my subjectivity could be seen as an advantage that strengthens the research process, as opposed to Deutsch's case, damaging and detrimental. However, there are some characteristics that we do not share; not all of the participants are white, nor are they all female.

Mercer (2007) discusses the concept of 'insider research'; that is research conducted with a social group to which the researcher also belongs. Mercer (2007) comments that 'the researcher who shares a particular characteristic, for example gender, ethnicity or culture, with the researched is an insider, and everyone else, not sharing that particular characteristic, is an outsider' (p. 3). One could argue that this would give the researcher an advantage, the ability to empathise, or particular knowledge about a situation that may strengthen the research process and ensure an accurate outcome. However, this is a contestable view and Mercer (p. 5) cites Simmel (1950) as asserting that 'only the neutral outsider can achieve an objective account of human interaction, because only he or she possesses the appropriate degree of distance and attachment from the subjects of the research. It is the stranger who is able "to survey conditions with less prejudice"' (ibid). Simmel believes that the researcher's shared background or experiences would be a hindrance in the research process and possibly even contaminate the data, as the researcher would be too close to the social problem being researched in order to

approach it with complete objectivity. However, Mercer does point out that 'Human beings cannot be so easily categorised; individuals within a particular group will not share exactly the same perceptions and, therefore, it is not enough to be female, black, or gay' (2007: 5). Feminists would disagree, arguing that feminist research can only be conducted by women as it is only they who can fully empathise. What the literature does demonstrate is that there are strengths and weaknesses of being both inside and out.

The complication of insider/outsider research is in dealing with characteristics of identity, some social and some innate. Some characteristics, or features of identity, such as age and ethnicity are innate and do not change; other features are socially constructed, such as class, and according to Paechter (1998), gender. These may be changeable and evolving, as well as open to interpretation. Mercer (2007: 3) cites Merton (1972: 22) as arguing that 'individuals have not a single status but a status set'; more importantly, the set can change. The dilemma for the researcher is to decide whether their own 'status set' is an advantage to them and choose to conduct research where they are an insider, and whether they should reveal their social characteristics to their participants in the hope that they will achieve greater rapport and credibility with their participants. Hammersley rejects the notion of insider/outsider research and asserts that 'there are no overwhelming advantages to being an insider or an outsider. Each position has advantages and disadvantages, though these will take on slightly different weights depending on the particular circumstances and purposes of the research' (1993: 219). What is even more important in the researcher/researched process is to maintain an equal power relation, and to prevent the participant feeling objectified, as discussed above in Deutsch's example. During my own research process, which I will discuss in the following section, my participants were all known to me, and they knew of my background as a mature student from a working class family returning to education after a long period of absence. However, it could still be argued that the interview process itself creates an unequal power relation as the researcher is the one leading the process, asking the questions, writing the thesis and deciding what is included or omitted.

As I have already stated, both the researcher and the participants will have different sets of values, beliefs and those 'philosophical positions and their fundamental

assumptions' that Opie (2004: 18) speaks of. Therefore, however much the researcher feels that they can empathise with their participants, it will be difficult to interpret their experiences with the meaning that the participants intended to make known. In addition, no two people, however similar their backgrounds or experiences of the social world, will have exactly the same interpretations of it. Derrida (1972) comments on how 'there is no clear window into the inner life of a person...there can never be a clear, unambiguous statement of anything, including an intention or a meaning' (cited by Denzin 1989: 14). However, researchers are human beings, affected by their emotions and, as Stanley and Wise (1993) comment, 'Our consciousness is always the medium through which the research occurs; there is no method or technique of doing research other than through the medium of the researcher' (p. 157). Although I can empathise and relate very closely to my participant's experiences, having had similar experiences myself, I have to be upfront about my own assumptions, positionality and subjectivity within the research process. This is all I can do to avoid contaminating or distorting the data with the meanings of my own experiences and perspectives of being a mature student in higher education.

### **The interview as a qualitative method**

Unlike quantitative research that employs positivist methods and collects quantifiable data, qualitative research involves collecting 'subjective accounts and perceptions that explain how the world is experienced and constructed by the people who live in it' (Wellington, et al. 2009: 100). Silverman (2011) suggests that 'a strength of qualitative interviewing is the opportunity it provides to collect and rigorously examine narrative accounts of social worlds...' (p. 144). In other words, qualitative research is used to collect accounts that help to explain and understand the experiences of people who live in the social world. The social world experiences that I intend to capture and examine are those of the non-traditional students progressing from further to higher education. The reason that I want to capture these experiences is because widening participation led to an important social change, and people who were traditionally excluded from higher education were now able to participate. However, as I have previously explained, the new non-traditional learners in HE had

no history in the field and nothing to identify with, the social groups to which they belonged had been excluded and remained under-represented. Silverman asserts that 'it is possible to find realities within interviews...' (ibid). These realities are the subjective accounts of the people involved, and these accounts are gathered by asking questions. Interviews are therefore an obvious choice of method with which to answer my original key research question: Investigating the transition from FE to HE: what are the lived experiences and perspectives of non-traditional learners?

Researchers need to ensure that their chosen methods and procedures capture relevant and justifiable information. 'They must be able to argue that the procedures they use collect the sort of data that legitimately and validly answer the questions they have posed' (Opie 2004: 21). My justification is that other qualitative methods of data collection, for example questionnaires and surveys, would not offer me the same opportunity to capture the realities of my participants' lived experiences as they would not allow for the same degree of openness, narration and thick description in their responses. However, there is a question mark over what reality is. Mercer (2007: 12) cites Anderson and Jones (2000) as stating that people's 'accounts of their reality are themselves constructions of reality and not reality itself' (p. 44).

Nevertheless, interviews offer people the opportunity to tell their stories and it is these stories that contain the lived realities of the participants' social worlds. Interviews that are unstructured, semi-structured or open in a way that allow the participant to narrate their experiences, create a space for the interviewee to recount and reflect on their subjective experience in a way that they may not have done before. This can sometimes be an advantage; it can be enlightening and empowering for participants to give voice to their experiences, '...the ways we give meaning to ourselves and others and the world at large sometimes happen through stories...' (Webster and Mertova 2007: 7). In this way, the open interview offers benefits to those taking part in the process that other research methods do not. Re-telling one's experiences can be emancipatory as we are often unaware of what is happening to us or the impact that social issues are having on our lives. Recounting our experiences gives them meaning and helps us to understand what is happening, thereby making sense of situations. 'Reflecting critically on the stories that we read, hear, live and tell may help us to understand how we can use them more responsibly



and creatively and free ourselves from their constraints' (ibid). Silverman (1997) points out that 'all we sociologists have are stories...what matters is to understand how and where the stories are produced...and how we can put them to intelligent use in theorizing about social life' (p. 111). Gaining insight into the rich complexities of a person's lived realities or, according to Anderson and Jones (2000), constructions of their realities and social experiences, is putting stories to intelligent use. 'Through narration of their realities and experiences, the participant is empowered and possibly freed of constraints; by listening and interpreting meaning, the researcher is making connections, and constructing knowledge and understanding about the production of the social world' (Burnell 2010: 15).

For my participants, storying their experiences created mixed emotions. Yvette told me after the interview that she did not realise how she felt about being a mature student until she had answered my questions, and that the interview for her was a journey of self-discovery. Nyla became upset during her interview and broke down and cried whilst re-telling her experiences of being a mature student in HE. However, she told me after the interview that she uses her experience in her job, and is empathic towards other mature students, knowing first-hand what their difficulties are.

Silverman states that around 90 per cent of social science research involves the use of interviews (2011). Gubrium and Holstein (2002) describe interviews as the method that 'provides windows on the world' (cited in Silverman 2011: 150). However, in order to ensure a clear view out of the window onto the social world, the researcher has to very carefully construct the questions on which the interview will be based. It is the interview questions that allow the opportunity for the interview participants to narrate their lived experiences. Fontana and Frey comment that 'Unstructured interviewing can provide greater breadth than do other types given its qualitative nature' (Denzin and Lincoln 2005: 705). For my qualitative interviews, I decided on four questions, therefore I would define the interviews as semi-structured. The semi-structured interview allows the researcher to ask open questions, but gives the participant the time and freedom to answer. After conducting a pilot interview, I realised that my original questions were not open enough to allow my participant to freely narrate their experiences. After careful consideration, the following questions were used to interview ten participants:

- What are you gaining or what did you gain personally from being a higher education student?
- What feelings have you experienced as a mature student in HE/what positive and negative feelings have you had?
- Has the experience of being in HE changed you as a person in any way?
- What issues do you think mature students face in HE?

Not all of the questions are completely open; question one assumes personal gain, and question four assumes that mature students face issues. These assumptions were made from personal experience, the experiences of other students, and what was contained in the literature review. For example, I am aware, from personal experience and the experiences of others in a situation similar to mine, that lack of confidence and belief in oneself is an issue that mature students face. Having had a negative school experience, left school with no qualifications, and returned to learn after a long break, it is inevitable that one will lack confidence and experience self-doubt. Therefore, the questions were constructed with prior knowledge of mature students' experiences in mind. The same four questions were asked during every interview. The interviews varied in length from half an hour to an hour and twenty minutes. The interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed into word documents using the 'intelligent verbatim' style which omits the 'erms' and 'ahs' of speech. A sample transcript can be found in the appendix at the back of the thesis, along with the participant information sheet and ethical clearance letter. The participant has consented to this transcript being included here.

The participants knew the topic that the research was focussed on, and they had all read the participant information sheet. However, it was important not to lead the participants in any way during the interview but to carefully elicit their experiences and allow them to express these in their own words. There were however, certain experiences that I was particularly interested in hearing about. Each question contains a key phrase/word and if I list these key phrases/words in isolation to the questions, it becomes apparent that, in formulating these interview questions, I intended to elicit a particular type of information, that of a deep and personal nature. The key phrases/words are: **personal gain; positive/negative feelings; experiences; issues**. I knew that when I reached the data analysis stage of my

research, I would be looking for themes in the data that would enable me to answer the final research question: In respect to personal, emotional and social experiences, what issues are faced by non-traditional learners? However, I did not want to contaminate the data with my 'insiderness' knowledge (Mercer 2007), as already previously explained. Having been a mature student returning to education with a working class background, I knew what issues I had encountered but I did not want those issues be revealed in, or have an effect on, the interview process. Although insiderness can be seen as an advantage, allowing for familiarity, empathy, and equal power relation, Mercer also points out that 'What is much more debatable is whether or not this heightened familiarity leads to thicker description or greater verisimilitude' (2007: 6).

Whilst interviews, as a qualitative method, have many strengths, they can also create some problems. Because of insiderness, it can be tempting, as the interviewer, to be acquiescent and share information, thereby positioning themselves as bias and not impartial. Mercer cites Gubrium and Holstein (2003) as commenting that 'Interviewers are generally expected to keep their "selves" out of the interview process. *Neutrality* is the byword' (2007: 10). However, it could be argued that because I assume, through the construction of my questions, that my participants experience personal gain and issues, my research and method is biased. Although interviewers are expected to remain neutral and keep themselves out of the interview process, this is extremely difficult when the participants are discussing personal and emotional issues that one can relate to so closely. Mercer (2007) comments on the problems she encountered during the interview process of her research, and how 'despite my desire not to, I do indeed put the word...into my informant's mouth' (p. 9). Mercer then contemplates whether her contribution to the interview hinders construction and interpretation of meaning. However, it could be argued that Mercer was simply encouraging her participants to delve deeper into their experiences, and by giving her view, she was engaging with them over the experience that they had both shared.

Another potential problem with using interviews as qualitative method is collecting reliable data that can be interpreted with accurate meaning. The data generated during interview has to be interpreted, that is the nature of this method. However, how can we be sure that interpretation is accurate, that the meaning is what the

participant wanted to convey? Denzin (1989) states that ‘A story that is told is never the same story that is heard. Each teller speaks from a biographical position that is unique and, in a sense, unshareable. Each hearer of a story hears from a similarly unshareable position...there are only multiple versions of shareable and unshareable personal experiences’ (p. 72). Fontana and Frey comment that ‘Many studies that use unstructured interviews are not reflexive enough about the interpreting process...’ (Denzin and Lincoln 2005: 713), implying that researchers who are highly reflexive are most likely to produce accurate interpretations of the data. Burgess et al. comment on reflexivity as the ‘conscious revelation of the role of beliefs and values held by a researcher in the selection of a research methodology ... encouraging you to provide an honest and ethical account of your research’ (2006: 88). I have provided a thorough account of my objectives, personal experience and positionality; I will discuss my sampling strategy, data analysis and interpreting process further on. First I will present the participants and explain the sampling strategy that I used in selecting them.

### Participants’ biographies

<i>Participant</i>	<i>Portrait</i>	<i>Stage in education at time of interview</i>
Jane	Jane is a mature white woman with a grown up family. She was born and raised in Essex, a London suburb, and does not appear to be working class but says that her parents were. She works as a Lecturer in Early Years in an Essex University.	Completed first degree in EY. Completed Masters degree. Now year three of Doctorate in Education.
Joy	Joy is also a mature white woman with a grown up family. She was born and raised in a Yorkshire mining town. She is what you might call traditional working class and is proud of her background. She works as an Early Years Practitioner in a day nursery for children.	Completed first degree in EY. Completed Masters degree. Now year three of Doctorate in Education.
Yvette	Yvette is a mature black woman from an African-Caribbean background. She is a	Just finished first

	single parent of two children and was born and raised in East London. Before returning to education, she worked in an office.	degree in Counselling.
Tammi	Tammi is also a mature black woman from an African-Caribbean background. Although now married, she was a single parent for many years. She was born and raised in East London. She works for the local council and has maintained her role with them throughout her higher education.	Has finished the second year of a first degree in Sociology, and hopes to progress to third and final year.
Kasim	Kasim is a mature man from an Asian background. He is in a relationship and has no children. He was born and raised in East London. Before returning to education, he worked as a fitness instructor.	Has finished the second year of a first degree in Social Work, and hopes to progress to third and final year.
Mike	Mike is a mature man from a mixed African and white background. He has two children from a previous relationship. Although born in Nigeria, he was raised in East London. Before returning to education he worked as a builder.	Has finished the second year of a first degree in Sociology and Politics, and hopes to progress to third and final year.
Peter	Peter is the youngest member of the sample at 23. He is a black male with an African family background. He was born and raised in East London. Since leaving school he has had several low paid jobs and attempted a college course in engineering before completing an access course.	Just completed second year of Business degree, progressing to third and final year.
Nyla	Nyla is a mature woman with a grown up family. She is from a Turkish background and was born and raised in East London. Before returning to education she worked in a factory. Whilst in HE she was a single parent to two children. Since completing her degree she has worked in a college of FE in inner London.	Completed first degree in History and Literature. Completed PGCE teacher training for FE.
Nicole	Nicole is a mature Scottish woman and single parent to two children. She came to London from Scotland in her twenties and worked as	Completed first degree in Spanish before moving to Peru.

	a barmaid before returning to education. She lived and worked as a teacher in Peru for seven years. Since returning to the UK she has decided to return to education again.	Currently on Masters programme and teacher training course.
Kath	Kath is a mature black woman from an African-Caribbean background. She is a single parent of two children and was born and raised in East London. Before returning to education, she worked in the performing arts.	Just finished first degree in Drama.

### Sampling strategy

The participants consist of individuals who were selected because they meet certain criteria that typifies them as experiencing or having experienced higher education as mature students. The participants were all known to me through a professional and academic network. Some had been access students at the college where I worked, before progressing to university; others I knew as colleagues or associates. The sample, as the table demonstrates, consists of both men and women – three men and seven women. Their ages range from 23 to 55, and they are an ethnically diverse group.

There were four criteria that I used to select the sample for interview. First, all participants needed to have been raised and educated in the UK. This was important as I wanted them to have progressed through the UK education system in order to avoid culture clashes with other countries' education systems.

Second, the participants defined their own background or family as being working class. I made no assumptions about this but asked them to define themselves. As I have already explained, this is a social group, historically under-represented in HE, that mature students tend to share as their background. Within the sample there are also women and minority ethnic groups, both also under-represented in HE, although as I explained previously in this chapter, I will not be focussing on these as social characteristics.

Third, they had to have had a break in education before returning as mature students. This is an important factor in capturing the experiences and perspectives of mature learners in HE, and is also the main focus of my research.

Fourth, they had to have accessed higher education through further education. This would mean they will have entered HE via a non-traditional route, another important focus of the research.

During the transcription stage, each participant was given a pseudonym. The names you read in this thesis are replacements for the participants' real names. However, assigning pseudonyms was not something I was comfortable with. Even though they are important for the protection of participants' real identities, I felt that replacing somebody's given name with a false name interferes with their cultural identity. Names are often representative of one's culture, family, background and religion. My own name, for example, conveys information regarding my Irish family background, and that in turn is indicative of my cultural heritage. Delamont (1992) in a discussion on pseudonyms states a case for protecting cultural identity. During her own research into Welsh schools, she had chosen English names as she wanted to protect the schools' identities. However, the Welsh Research Office objected because the names did not sound Welsh (p.177); Delamont was forced to choose Welsh pseudonyms for the schools that took part in her research. I have attempted to replace my own participants' names with similar or culturally representative pseudonyms, in an effort to refrain from interfering too much with their identities.

Even though the participants are all very different, their experiences are very similar, and common themes started to emerge from their stories during interview. The following section will be an examination of thematic analysis and how I interpreted and analysed the interview data.

### **Data interpretation and analysis**

Before any analysis could take place, the first step in the process was to listen to all ten of the interviews whilst following the transcripts in order to ensure they had been accurately transcribed. I then emailed the transcripts to the participants, as promised. All acknowledged receipt of their transcript and nobody requested that

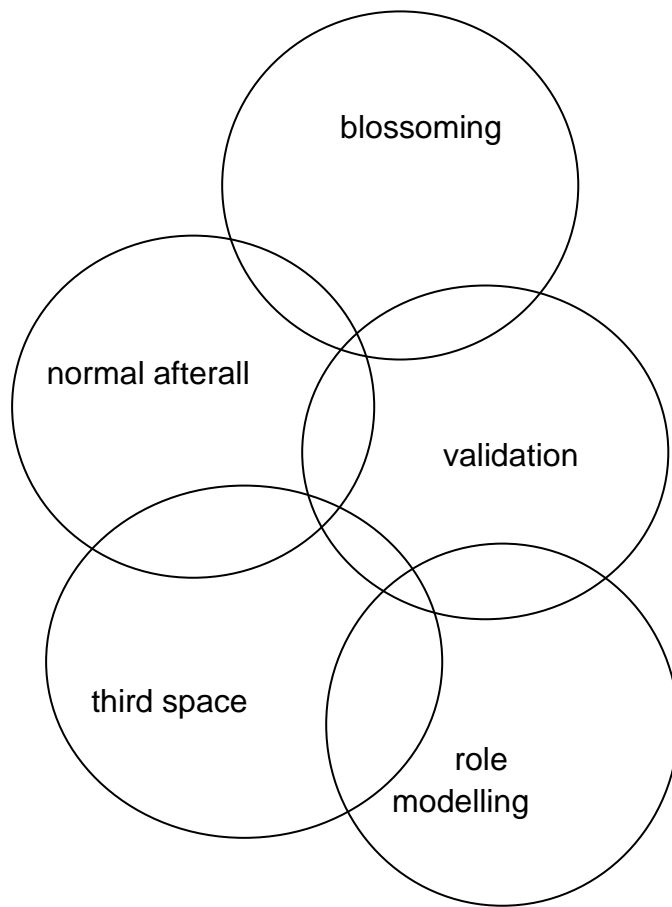
their data be changed, or part of their data not be used. I decided upon the thematic analysis approach (Silverman 2011) which involves coding transcripts and identifying themes that regularly occur. Codes are the utterances or parts of the interviews that hold meaning; themes emerge from the coding and they demonstrate the issues, patterns and concepts within the data. Silverman (2011) identifies several analytic approaches to qualitative data; the thematic analysis approach seemed most befitting for my data set because during the interviews I recognised similar themes emerging from each of the participants' experiences of being mature students in higher education. Although each participant's story was different, in many ways they were also similar. Silverman comments on qualitative research as 'finding and describing patterns and structures, observing routines. When you've seen the same thing again and again, you may be onto something' (2011: 285).

I decided against using computer software as an aid for data analysis; I did not feel that it was a vital tool for interpreting my participants' responses, and preferred to complete the analysis by hand. Gibbs notes that 'Most of the classic studies using qualitative research were undertaken without electronic assistance' (2011: 40). In addition, I felt that manual coding would bring me closer to my data and with only ten interviews this would be beneficial. With my initial research questions in mind, I began to read and re-read the transcripts whilst highlighting any utterance that I deemed important to my research. Gibbs refers to this as 'concept-driven coding' (2011: 44), as influences to coding come from 'research literature, previous studies, topics in the interview schedule, hunches you have about what is going on...' (ibid). This approach differs to 'open coding' (ibid) where the researcher has no pre-conceived notions and retains an open mind. Open coding is common to researchers using grounded theory approach; I did not feel that my theories were going to be grounded in the data but rather informed by and developing pre-existing theories of non-traditional learners' experiences in higher education. I had read an abundance of literature on mature students' experiences of HE, and written an extensive literature review, therefore I was well aware of what the pre-existing theories were. Gibbs asserts that this type of reasoning is referred to as 'deductive explanation' (2011: 5); it can be used as a hypothesis testing approach that looks to confirm or disconfirm pre-existing theory. 'Often what researchers are doing is checking hunches; that is, they are deducing particular explanations from general theories and

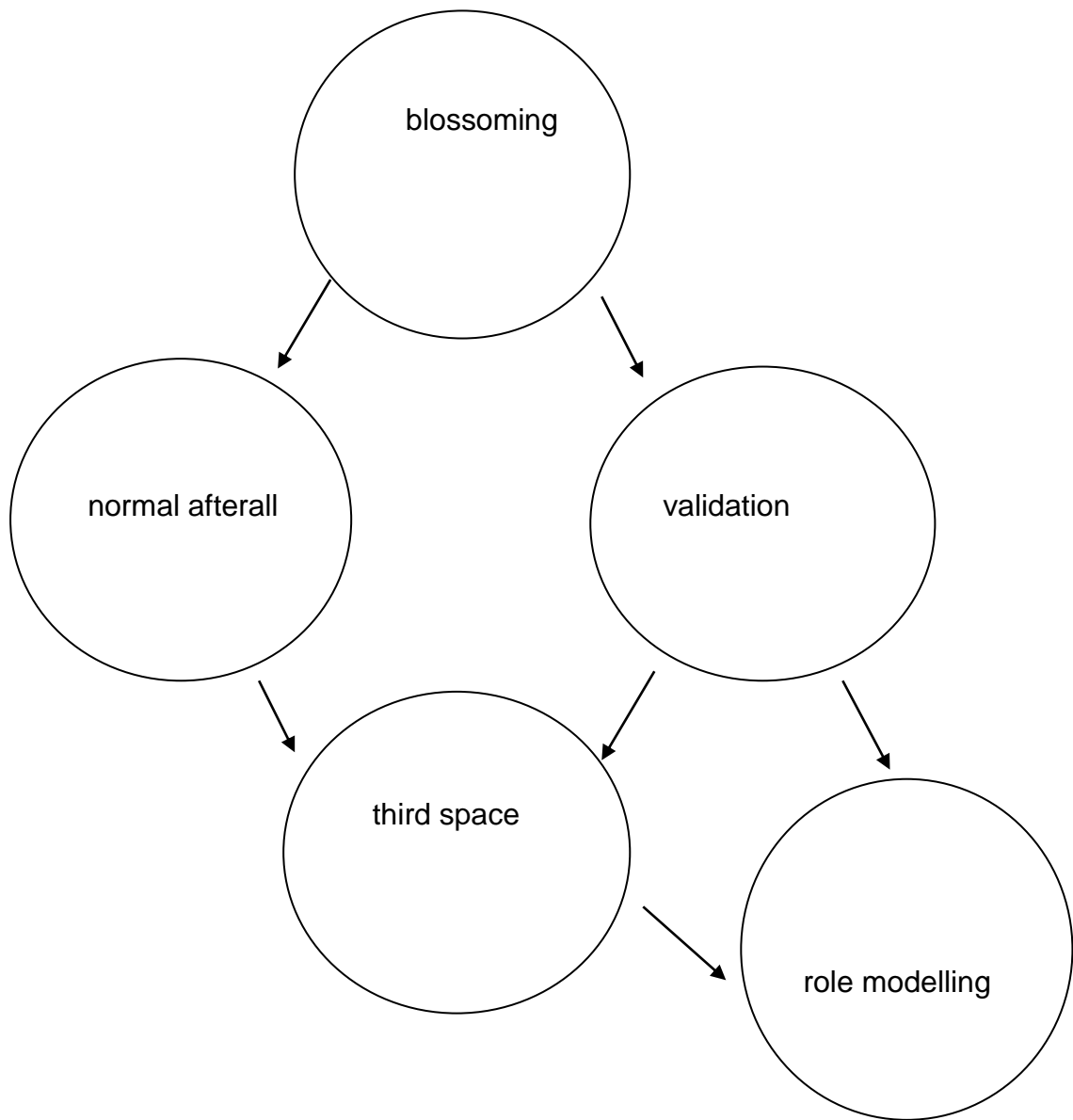


seeing if the circumstances they observe actually correspond' (ibid). However, it is also common for qualitative researchers to move between deductive and inductive reasoning during their approach to data analysis. Many of my themes and sub-themes were present in the literature and pre-existing studies. However, some emerging sub-themes were generating new insights that I had not encountered in the literature. These may be considered as grounded within the data and I will discuss these in the following section on the findings.

The process of identifying themes and sub-themes began once I had reduced the data to sets of coded utterances. Saldana states that 'Coding is not a precise science; it's primarily an interpretive act' (2012: 4). Therefore, meaning was attributed to my participants' coded utterances from the interview transcripts based on my interpretation of their experiences. However, Gibbs warns that 'one should try to pull out from the data what is happening and not impose an interpretation based on pre-existing theory' (2011: 46). Interpretation became easier when I began to sort the codes into the themes that had emerged during the process. Initially I identified eight broad themes. Upon further analysis, these were reduced to five, and within each theme there are several sub-themes. At this point it is tempting to list the themes to demonstrate what they are. However, the emergent themes that represented my participants' experiences of being higher education students, do not stand in isolation to each, and did not emerge neatly one after the other, but cross over, cross-reference, and contain inter-sections. Therefore they may be presented like this in figure 1 *the emerging themes*:



In addition to crossing over, and creating inter-sections, the themes demonstrate that my participants underwent a process during their experiences of being in higher education. This process consisted of stages, each stage is a new experience, and each stage leads on to the next one. Therefore the themes may present themselves like this in figure 2 *the stages*:



The following and final chapter focuses on the findings of the research. The chapter is structured using the themes as headings; each theme is explained, explored and analysed. As well as presentation of my own data, I discuss the research of others, and the literature that has been produced from similar studies conducted around the experiences of non-traditional students in higher education.

## Chapter 5: Research Findings

### **An interpretation of the data**

This chapter is an analysis and interpretation of the research findings. As previously explained in the methodology, ten participants, all mature students from working class backgrounds, took part in the research. Interviews were used to collect data on the participants' lived and subjective realities and experiences of being in higher education. The participants were a diverse group. The bibliography table in the methodology demonstrates that the participants were a mix of male and female, some were white and some from minority ethnic groups, and with a wide age range. Also, some had finished their higher education, whilst others were still in the system.

Each theme that emerged from the data is presented here under its sub-heading. Although I present the themes in what seems like a staged theory process, the participants did not all follow the same streamlined path. For some, the stages were blurred or crossed into each other. The crossing and intersections of the stages are demonstrated visually in the diagram on page 106. Each participant's account of their lived realities illustrated a different experience. However, each experience contained common themes which indicated that there is a commonality between mature working class learners who enter higher education at a time in their lives that may not be considered as traditional.

### *Blossoming*

I have used the 'blossoming' metaphor as a label for the first theme that emerged from the interviews with my participants. All ten of the participants made reference to gaining confidence. Whilst this is to be expected, amongst all learners both traditional and non-traditional, the learners who took part in my research discussed how the experience of education changed them as people; they underwent a positive personal transformation once they had entered HE – they blossomed. It could be argued that the blossoming effect will inevitably take place in all learners; as they progress through the levels of education, they will develop, transform and grow.

What makes mature learners different is that they will have had a variety of different life experiences - jobs, children, domestic responsibilities - before entering higher education and none of these past experiences has allowed them to develop in the same way. Reay asserts that 'it is the mature students, more than their younger counterparts in sixth forms, who have invested in a vision of education as a means of self-fulfilment' (2002: 402). Mercer notes that 'the link between the personal and academic may be more pronounced amongst older students' (2007: 29). Mature learners are on two parallel paths that both enable different kinds of development: one path for academic achievement and qualifications; one path for personal development and transformation.

As I listened to the participants' accounts of growing and gaining in confidence I wondered why it had taken this long for them to transform themselves. It was not that they did not possess potential but that they had not found the opportunity to fulfil it before. Higher education enabled this to take place; it enabled the blossoming effect to occur. Peter told me during his interview that before he had entered HE, '*my self-esteem was a lot lower but I feel after going through this stage that it's helping me gain more self-esteem and confidence*'. Britton and Baxter's research into mature students in HE found that the most common narrative was one of 'unfulfilled potential' which 'involves the realisation of those aspects of self which have been denied in the past' (1999: 185). For my participants, however, it was more than that; Jane said: '*I think I've grown incredibly as a person throughout the higher education experience*'. Mike expresses his experience as '*a whole change, it's a whole transfer from who I was to who I am now ... my identity is a different person, a much prouder person*'. It seems that realising one's potential, and fulfilling it, leads to significant changes in one's self and identity. Tammi struggled to articulate her feelings: '*personally I feel I've gained, I'm able to, I don't know, I've become more ... outgoing*'. Yvette simply said '*I'm a stronger woman now*'. Mercer, on her study of mature learners, comments that 'academic success brought with it self-belief' (2010: 28), and that was very apparent during the interviews with my participants. Mercer also observed that 'This is often viewed as a period of profound self-development and growth' (2010: 25). Nyla's experience of HE supports Mercer's comment, she explained that '*you go through HE and you become a different person by the time you got to the end of it ... I became stronger and stronger*'. These utterances are not

making reference to academic skills, writing essays or getting good grades, they are referring to intense changes to identity - changes to who they are; 'some kind of re-negotiation of the self occurred through educational development' (Mercer 2010: 28). Joy captured this concept of re-negotiating the self when she asserted *'I'm in the process of redefining who I am'*.

During the process of transforming, some of the participants recognised that they were leaving, or had left their pasts behind. Kasim explained that when he is at university, *'my past is my past and it doesn't actually have any bearing'*. Tammi is focussing forward and expressed her ambition: *'I feel like I have got a goal, I have got an aim ... I know where I want to go, so I'm reaching for it. There's a purpose in my life that's how I feel, before I didn't...'*. These utterances imply that they are heading towards new lives, not just lives that involve new jobs or careers, but new identities. Mike narrated his story and told me about his life before he discovered higher education:

*'I used to get into a lot of trouble with the police, I used to steal and rob, I was in gangs and I thought I was cool, and I wanted to be a gangster and all that. So, it feels a lot different now ... I changed my whole mentality around ... through education, I am learning stuff and I am becoming someone that it's a shock to me ... it is going to be a big transformation from who I was to who I am'*.

Mercer, in discussing the mature students in her own research comments that 'academic growth ... had a positive effect on their perception of themselves. This provided a self-belief which then acted as a motivator to continue' (2007: 29). Mike's narrative and Mercer's (2007) theory highlight the blossoming effect and that once a person begins to blossom through their educational experiences, a whole new identity emerges. Britton and Baxter (1999) argue that for mature students 'education is a key site for the construction of identity' (p. 179). Mike again captures this concept when he says:

*'... to feel smart and again to feel like, to not feel dumb and not to feel like a thug or a criminal that is all through education ... makes you feel like, you have been in a bubble and then suddenly you stepped out of the bubble and then you are in wide world'*.

However, 'the self is not a fixed entity that we develop whilst growing up and then remains static throughout adulthood' (Mercer 2007: 21), and Mike recognises this very clearly when he comments on his changing identity:

*'I am still learning and my identity is still being built and I think pretty much does everyone till they die -- identity is being constructed and we are changing and we learning new things ... So I feel I never stop changing and our identity never stop forming...'*

In the interview, Mike demonstrated lucid awareness of his changing identity and Mercer refers to this as 'reflexive awareness' (2007: 22). 'Such an awareness allows us not only to reflect on who we are, but to envisage possibilities for whom we might become' (ibid). Peter also commented on his experience of education: '*it makes you more aware as a person*'. He went on to explain '*every experience that I go through betters me, every experience negative or positive I feel that it does help me*'. Peter recognises that even the unpleasant experiences are necessary in shaping and forming our identities. Kasim is shaping his identity by realising his potential and possibilities for the future:

*'the biggest change that I see in myself is that I'm willing to look at a picture at the end of it and work towards that. I've never done that before in my life. I've never had that confidence to believe in myself'*.

The blossoming effect is apparent here as Kasim continues to travel his personal journey, and demonstrates a clear link between self-discovery and academic progression. Baxter and Britton endorse education as 'empowering, in that it opens up employment opportunities and is a vehicle for the development of the self' (2001: 87). However, Baxter and Britton also recognise that there are risks involved: 'the personal changes which higher education brings may have negative as well as positive effects' (ibid: 88). One of the effects may be a sense of displacement from one's old habitus. Transforming oneself may mean growing away from family and friends as they leave old identities behind. Baxter and Britton found that:

the students in our study are constantly aware of being seen as superior by their old friends. It is this imputation of superiority which causes most anxiety for them. Superiority is the other side of the coin to shame, the former is experienced in relation to friends who shared a previous (working-class) habitus, the latter in relation to a middle-class habitus into which one is entering or becoming established (2001: 96).

I questioned all of my participants on the positive and negative feelings that they had experienced as mature students in higher education. The majority expressed only positive feelings; one participant, Nyla, related how she had felt disapproval from her family because of her decision to enter HE as an adult. Whilst she did discuss

positive experiences, she also warned that '*HE also can put a wedge between you and your family, if you are not careful*'. She went on to explain how, similarly to the students in Baxter and Britton's study, there was perceived superiority:

*'I think it's changed over the years, at the beginning ... just tolerating it in the sense of I was doing something that maybe they didn't think I'd be able to achieve so, it wasn't significant and just ignoring it, I think they also went through a point of them resenting it in the sense of thinking that maybe I had airs and graces, because I now had a qualification that they didn't and sometimes if I put an opinion forward, it would be very strongly disputed by a group in the family, maybe just to put me in my place...'*

Nyla also explained that she is the one who underwent transformation, whilst her family remained in their positions: '*I started thinking differently, feeling differently I was the one that changed, not them, and because I was the one that changed, I suppose in a way that they might have resented it*'. Nyla gave an example of how she had changed by explaining that the language she had begun to use was different:

*'there would be many a time where when my brothers and my sisters said, why did you say it like that, why don't you just say it simply, why do you have to talk like that, and I'm not even aware that I have done it*'.

For Nyla, her new and emerging identity as a HE student was clashing and causing conflict with her former identity. Baxter and Britton encountered a similar situation in their research and comment on their participants as having to 'maintain relationships with people who still know them in their old identities. This involves them in the quite stressful strategy of concealing aspects of their new selves in certain situations' (2001: 98). During the interview, I probed Nyla on why her family may have felt like this. She went on to explain that:

*'they felt that the educated, the more middle class educated person perceives themselves to be maybe something better than the other so, maybe they thought that's what I had become, that I too had become like the elite members of society*'.

In the final sub-section on habitus I quote Nyla as saying that she felt there was a crossing over '*into the others' domain*' when she entered higher education. This may also be felt by those who are being left behind. Archer and Hutchings (2000) cite hooks (1994) as commenting on the 'engagement with education as involving a betrayal of one's origins' (p.568). If higher education is seen by the working class as



part of the middle class world, entering it could be construed as a betrayal of one's working class roots. Lynch and O'Neill have theorised that working class identities are changed by education (1994: 322), and that pursuing a higher education means that you cannot be working class anymore. That is frustrating for people like Nyla who have constructed their identity around being working class. Nyla's experience is also very similar to habitus clash theory, as used by Bowl (2003) in her research on non-traditional students in higher education. This will be explored more in the final sub-section on habitus.

Even though all of the participants recognised that they had undergone a change, a transformation, the experience was explained and articulated more effectively by those who had completed their higher education and were reflecting back on it. They had the clearest view of the experience as being life changing. One could say that these people, through their higher education, had *blossomed*, as opposed to those who were *blossoming*. Those who were still in education were able to recognise that a change was taking place but found it more difficult to explain. When Nicole reflected on her experiences of HE several years ago, she said: '*emotionally and intellectually it changed me*'. Because Nicole had completed her first degree several years previously, she was able to reflect back clearly on the process of blossoming into a new identity. Mercer comments on the differences in discourse between learner participants in her research, and who are at various stages of their degrees: 'participants who were interviewed at the end of the second year appeared more confident and secure about their own ability. It seemed that academic success brought with it self-belief' (2010: 28). It is self-belief, and the consequent growth in confidence, that enabled students to blossom. It seems that their experiences of higher education also brought about a personal transformation.

### *Normal after all*

The second theme that emerged from the data during analysis was that the participants had gained a sense of feeling *normal after all*, despite their past educational experiences and mainstream schooling leaving them with feelings of failure. All of the participants expressed how their schooling had made them feel, and how they felt about education whilst growing up. For Yvette, the feelings were

implicit: *'I think I grew up thinking that I wasn't intelligent and I don't know why I had that feeling'*; Jane had a similar past educational experience that left her feeling that she was not capable of achieving a higher education:

*'I was always perceived to be the child in the family who was not particularly clever ... I wasn't a particularly high achiever at school, I failed the 11+... it would have been nine years before I went into, well actually thought I can do a degree'.*

Tammi told me: *'I felt as I said, before I felt dumb'*. For Kasim, his perceived failures were openly expressed to him: *'I've always been called thick and stupid when it came to education. A teacher called me a spastic as well when I was at school. So, I never really thought of myself as having any intelligence when it came to academics'*. With these perceptions of themselves in relation to education, it is no surprise that they developed into adults who felt that higher education was not the place for them, and was out of reach. Just as Baxter and Britton (1999) noted that education is a 'key site for the construction of identity' (p. 179), my participants had already constructed themselves as educational failures from their experiences of school. Askham discusses the 'cycle of failure' (2008: 92) which places limitations on learning; Askham describes the learner's state of mind: 'I had a poor experience at school, so whatever else I might have achieved in life, my self esteem as a learner is low; so when I return to education I do not expect to perform well' (ibid). Askham's theory resonates in Kasim's words when he said *'I've overcome a lot of things; the only thing I never overcame was education'*.

However, once the participants had returned to learning, and entered HE as mature learners, their perceptions of themselves began to change. Joy told me that *'I couldn't believe I'd actually achieved something at degree level ... It helped me to see that I was not as hopeless as I'd been told I'd been when I was at school'*, and this enabled her to break the cycle of failure. For Yvette, the realisation came part way through her higher education:

*'I often felt I didn't have the capabilities to do a degree so the fact that I am actually doing one and nearly finished and been doing really well has made me think wow you know you are intelligent, you are capable of more'.*

Archer and Hutchings (2000) cite Reay (1997) as asserting that 'working class identities are not associated with academic success' (p. 552). Therefore, when my

participants realised that they could achieve academic success, they experienced a sensation of being normal after all, and they were not going to let their past educational experiences define them as failures any longer. Yvette expressed how she felt before she embarked on her degree course: *'there was a part of me that was unable to hold conversations with very intelligent people because I felt like less than'*. Tammi explained that higher education *'made me realize, oh I can do it, I am good, I am good enough you know, I could do more'*. Jane expressed disbelief at her academic achievement and said that she is *'amazed that I've done this, where I am now to where I was'*. Without their educational achievements, the participants may not have been able to redefine themselves and shake off the feelings of failure which had been acquired through their previous educational experiences, and carried into adulthood.

Peter was my youngest participant at 23 years old. Although he may not be deemed a mature student in comparison to the other older participants, he did have a break from education between leaving school and returning to college. Whilst narrating his story, Peter told me how school used to make him feel, in comparison to how he feels in HE now:

*'especially coming from my background...*

why do you say coming from your background?

*...I don't know but when I was going through school teachers used to tell me that I wasn't really, this is not for you, school's not for you, you're not going to make anything of yourself and all those kinds of things so I kind of believed it in a sense... I didn't feel that I fit in and I didn't have a place here... I'm happy in the place I'm in now'.*

Peter's young years mean that his memories of school are still fresh in his mind. Even though he is still in the early stages of his degree, he told me that *'it feels like I've actually gained something'*, which implies that he did not feel that way about his compulsory schooling. He had not believed that he could enter higher education; like the others, school left him with the legacy of failure. Now that he was actually undertaking his degree, he feels an enormous sense of achievement at just being on the course. I did not question Peter about why he had returned to learning despite an unpleasant school experience but Crossan et al. comments that:

Non-traditional learners becoming involved in formal learning are often (if not always) initially tentative about engaging in the process. Their previous life experiences have often given them little confidence about engaging in the process of learning, and indeed in some cases will have resulted in hostility towards educational institutions ( 2003: 58).

During Nyla's interview, she described how '*I was crippled with self doubt and lack of confidence and didn't think I could go to university*'. Overcoming her self-doubt, she completed an access course and progressed to university. Once there, the *normal after all* sensation emerged: '*you realize actually I can do this ... It enabled me to achieve a sense of satisfaction and inner happiness...*'. Mercer (2010), in her research on adults returning to higher education encountered a phenomenon she labelled as 'resolving demons from the past' (p.29). From discussions with her participants, it emerged that they too had had negative experiences from compulsory schooling. Returning to education and, in my participants' cases, embarking on degree courses, allowed them to prove themselves, to demonstrate that they were not the failures they had been labelled as, and to feel that they were as good as everybody else. Mercer comments that education allowed them to 'reclaim something that had been missing from, and affecting their sense of self for many years previously' (2010: 30). Mercer's research participants, just like mine had 'appeared to have resolved issues from the past' (ibid), and gone on to achieve what they once thought was not possible. In addition, they had been able to heal the wounds created by past negative school experiences. Nyla, in her interview, referred to the '*personal journey ... where you're discovering things about yourself*' and how this led to her '*healing past experiences*'. For my participants, higher education was more than just education, it was a therapeutic healing process that enabled them to acquire a position of normality.

### *Validation*

Following on closely from *normal after all*, the next theme to emerge from my data was labelled *validation*. The reason for this label is that it seemed many of my participants were looking for or had achieved a sense of validation by participating in higher education. Once they realised that they were not the educational failures they had been lead to believe, or indeed had been told, and had put their demons to rest,

the sensation of feeling validated began to emerge. Mike was the only participant to actually use the word to describe his feelings: '*I feel more validated, I feel more, I feel proud of who I am what I'm doing now being a student in university*'. Joy used an interesting metaphor to describe how she felt: '*I belong to this university...it's like membership to a private club that I got in eventually*'. Kath used another metaphor to describe how she felt on completion of her degree:

*'there's a sense of well I have a degree, so I kind of tick the box... that is what is validated, I am clever to a certain extent ... my comments are valid ... it wasn't that I didn't feel it before, I didn't know I didn't feel it before until actually starting my studies'*.

*Validation* is more than feeling *normal after all*, it is the sensation of really belonging, that one is actually good enough to have achieved, or be achieving, their degree, of having '*ticked the box*', as Kath expressed. Walters discusses mature learners and how their 'motivation for learning may also be associated with a desire to change ... to prove oneself' (2000: 273). Walters also conducted research into mature learners' experiences in higher education, and theorised the mature students' three Rs – *redundancy, recognition and regeneration* (2000). In her work, Walters explains the process that mature learners go through. The first is *redundancy*, which is the learner leaving the old and redundant parts of one's life behind. Walters explains that 'one is continually restructuring the reality of the past by reinterpreting it as one moves from one perspective to the next' (ibid: 272). The second stage is *recognition*, which is the learner recognising that change is possible. Walters comments that 'it is this recognition which fuels the motivation of mature students and their participation in education' (ibid: 274); realising that they can change leads to the desire to effect change. The final stage in Walters' process is *regeneration*, and this is similar to my *validation* theme in that it is the outcome of the process. Walters explains that this stage involves 'a restructuring of one's frame of reference to a new, more appropriate and more personally satisfying one' (ibid: 275). Walters also comments that the data gathered for her research denotes that 'higher education is one potential means for individuals to begin the process of restructuring their lives' (ibid), which is something that my own data also strongly indicates.

Yvette felt a sense of *validation* when she commented that '*I feel I can call myself an educated person now*'. Previously in the interview she talked about how she felt

intimidated by intelligent people because she felt '*less than*' them. Achieving her degree has enabled the *regeneration* that Walters has theorised (2000). Tammi referred to the same feelings of belonging that Joy did, she explained how '*I actually find that I belong somewhere now*'. Mike explained his feelings of *validation* by saying that '*before I weren't proud of who I was, I used to walk around with my head down ... I feel like I belong in uni now*'. Previously, Mike had told me about his job as a builder, and how he did not like to talk about it as he felt that people were not interested and it was nothing to be proud of – '*It's just a job, it's not a career*'. However, when he became a higher education student, that not only changed his perception of himself, he also started to feel that people were more interested in him:

*'when you say you are studying, I am studying politics and sociology, people ask you, what is that, where do you want to go with that, what are you doing with that and it's more interesting and stuff. And to me, it's feel more, it feels like I am working towards something a lot bigger than just a job'*.

Mike is the same person now, studying politics and sociology at university, as he was when he was a demolition man. What has changed is his sense of self, and how he feels that other people perceive him. Before, he thought that people did not find him interesting, now he feels that they do. This shift has enabled the sensation of being *validated*. Crossan et al. explains the process as 'one of discovery of a real self – of opening a door to something that is both new, yet has always been there' (2003: 61). Peter explained his shift to feeling validated by saying that it '*makes you feel that you're a better person now and you've got your place in society*'. When I asked him to explain how being in HE and completing a degree makes him feel that he is a better person who has a place in society, he replied '*cos society upholds that, they hold that at a high level you know they feel someone who's gone to university is accomplished and is someone, you know?*'. I suddenly realised that the feelings of *validation* came from infiltrating and participating in an aspect of the culture of the dominant class. By participating in higher education, the arena that non-traditional students were once excluded from, people like myself, and my participants are proving that we are good enough, that we are as good as the others – the middle and upper classes. However, further on I will discuss the concept of the 'third space' and how non-traditional students do not become part of the upper class culture but

create their own, alternative space to inhabit. Crossan et al. refer to one of their own participant's identities and comment that:

Her identity as a learner is also closely linked to her perceptions of herself in relation to class and gender. Like many working class women in educational settings, she was continually under pressure to prove that she was performing adequately (2003: 62).

Crossan et al. are drawing on work from Skeggs (1997) who asserts that to be from the working class 'generates a constant fear of never having got it right' (p. 6). It seems that, where education is concerned, the working class are desperate to measure up to the middle/upper classes and prove that they are just as clever, and therefore just as valid. Nicole told me of her experience, having finished her degree, of going back to the university because she was interested in studying another subject:

*'had I not done my degree, and had that piece of paper, I wouldn't have felt confident to walk in and talk to this doctor of anthropology who is like quite – like highly esteemed within his own area'.*

Having achieved her degree, and thereby achieved *validation*, Nicole felt qualified to approach the anthropologist. In chapter 2, I examined the concept of 'the other' and how 'otherness' is a theory in social sciences used to understand how society and social groups exclude 'others' who are deemed not to fit in, or not part of the dominant hegemonic group. In the situation she described, Nicole did not see herself as 'the other' anymore and therefore does not feel excluded; she now belongs. In discussing identifications of class, Skeggs comments that in her research with her own participants, 'in every judgement of themselves a measurement was made against others. In this process the designated 'other' ... was constructed as the standard to/from which they measured themselves' (1997: 74). Peter's measurement of himself is evident in his comment: *'society upholds that, they hold that at a high level you know they feel someone who's gone to university is accomplished'*. Once he has completed his degree he, as with Nicole, can achieve a sense of belonging, and not feel 'othered'. Leathwood and O'Connell assert that for some 'Doing a degree is legitimising oneself in the eyes of others' (2003: 610). This may well be some of the motivation behind my participants pursuing a higher education; along with the sense of feeling *validated*, they may feel that others, particularly those from middle and upper classes, people who would have been traditional students, would

now view them as legitimate. However, does that mean that they have now left their own social class and become part of the dominant upper/middle class culture?

### *The Emergence of a Third Space*

In a 1996 paper on class by Reay, she demonstrates her awareness that, as she becomes immersed within the academy, there is a gradual shift in her position of occupying an identity entrenched in working class values; 'Becoming academic is simultaneously an erosion of working-classness' (1996: 453). Reay is implying here that as one enters the world of academia, one's working classness, and the identity that goes with it, ebbs away. Similarly, Lynch and O'Neill discuss how working class identities are changed by higher education: 'no other group finds that school is about learning to be the opposite to what one is' (1994: 322). This research strongly suggests that pursuing a higher education means you can no longer occupy a working class identity. This is a frustrating situation to be in for people who have constructed their identity, especially whilst growing up, around being working class. Nyla's experiences, especially her relationship with her family, demonstrates the intensity of this frustration. Previously, I cited Reay (2002) and her 'imposters', so called because they felt that they did not belong in the world of higher education. Askham discusses the anxieties and identity conflicts of 'the adult who chooses to leave one world to enter the intellectual world of learning' (2008: 89). Askham cites Elliott (1999) as calling this 'inhabiting two discourses at once' (2008: 89). Reay also uses a case study to highlight issues of 'classlessness' (1997), and recounts how Christine, a working class woman with a degree deems herself 'classless' because she is now not working class, but nor is she middle class:

Christine told me later in the interview that she "came from a very working-class background". To claim middle-class status for Christine would constitute a denial of her past, while to continue to call herself working class could be construed as a denial of her educational achievements. For Christine, classlessness is the consequence of compromise' (1997: 228).

However, the research at this time was implying that there were two polarised positions: the uneducated working class and the educated middle class, and that learners inhabited one or the other. What seems to be the case now is that there is



an in-between space. My participants, and myself, have experienced a shift in class identity. This puts us into a complex subject position where we have a foot in both worlds. Previous relationships were forged within the constraints of working class values, and those values did not include education. Now, an emerging sense of identity set within the boundaries of the dominant class may mean the need to negotiate both worlds simultaneously.

In the previous chapter (4), I discussed the concept of re-negotiating one's identity within the social class into which one is born, after having been re-educated into a different social class. Freeborn asserts that 'Educating yourself out of your own class, but doing it at an age where assimilating into the educated class is not realistic, not even entirely desirable, means that you become, forever, neither fish nor fowl' (2000: 10). Freeborn is not referring so much to class but the mature student group who return to learn after a break in education; I have previously discussed that mature students do tend to be from the working class (Fuller and Heath in David 2010), and all of my participants have identified their backgrounds as being working class. Freeborn's statement may be true for those of the older generation, those whose education took place at a time when the widening participation movement was just underway, and non-traditional students were beginning to participate in HE. For the newer generation, however, the 'neither fish nor fowl' metaphor does not apply in the same way. It is possible, several years after the widening participation movement began, that a third space has emerged for students who are non-traditional and historically under-represented, but have found new identities in the academy. If the students' new identities do not fit comfortably within the habitus, if they feel awkward and out of place, like they do not belong, they create a new space to fit more comfortably in. This way, the learners can be a part of the academy, experiencing the new habitus, without feeling awkward or not belonging. Existing within their own space is less of a habitus clash, and not quite feeling like a fish out of water, but more achieving a sense of belonging within a new space that has been created by them.

It seems that the non-traditional mature student group, through creating a new identity, feels that they do now belong in HE, that they have an identity in the academic arena, that they no longer feel excluded or obstructed. The space they occupy, however, is a new one. Elliott referred to 'inhabiting two discourses at once'

(1999) cited by Askham (2008: 89), the discourse of their own class, and when they were at university, the discourse of the academy, and these discourses may have conflicted with each other. However, it seems that a middle discourse has transpired - the discourse of the third space – inhabited by students of the widening participation movement. This concept is also discussed by Crozier et al. in David (2010); they assert that ‘Universities traditionally have not been places for the working class’ (p. 74), that they have no history and nothing to identify with in the academic arena. However, in their study ‘the working class students navigate their way through ... making or appropriating the space for themselves and hopefully others like them’ (ibid). Therefore, upon joining, they do not become part of the dominant upper class culture of HE but have created a space for themselves within an arena to which they are new, and with it, a sense of identity and belonging. One of the ways this has been achieved is by ‘learning the rules’ of the game. I previously quoted Hatt and Baxter’s (2003: 25) research on the use of academic language. Traditional students are accustomed to communicating in the language of the academy, having not had a break in education and carried their skills straight through to HE, whereas mature students would have to acquire the language on entry making their experience a different one.

Not all of the participants experienced the third space in the same way. Nyla talked about the resistance from family and feelings of betrayal as she ‘*trespassed over into the others’ domain*’. Nyla attended university at the time when widening participation was a new movement, and non-traditional students were very new to HE.

Conversely, Peter, my youngest participant, and still on his degree course, recognises that he has to acquire what ‘*society upholds*’ and what he needs to feel ‘*accomplished*’. For Peter this is not betrayal of his class or identity but as Reay (1996) asserts, compliments his identity and becomes part of his habitus. Although participation in higher education has shifted in the past 15-20 years since widening participation began, and is now more inclusive, the legacy of exclusivity remains and for some this means occupying that third position. For students who are non-traditional, they will never be part of the dominant hegemonic culture of HE, but neither are they the educational failures that they had come to believe they were. Access courses, as discussed in chapter 2, were to become the non-traditional route into HE (DES 1987). Consequently, they have led to the emergence of a third space

in the academy, in which a new identity that does not clash but rather compliments the existing one has emerged, and is occupied by the non-traditional mature student.

Hall and du Gay discuss what they refer to as 'subaltern identities' (1996: 91), and they draw on Bhabha's theory of the 'third space' (1994) to define the space in-between two opposing identities, in this case the opposing identities of the uneducated working class and the educated middle class. The uneducated working class were traditionally excluded from higher education, the educated middle and upper class were included; the widening participation student is neither of these. Hall and du Gay assert that 'the subaltern is neither one nor the other but is defined by its location in a unique spatial condition which constitutes it as different from either alternative' (1996: 91). The widening participation student cannot identify with the educated middle class as that is what they are not. Neither can they identify with uneducated working class as that is what they have moved away from. This explains why Christine, the participant in Reay's (1997) study on identifications of class, defines herself as 'classless'. However, several years on and such students have created their own space, and with it constructed their own identity, one which includes higher education. English comments that:

Third space is where we negotiate identity and become neither this nor that but our own. Third is used to denote the place where negotiation takes place, where identity is constructed and re-constructed, where life in all its ambiguity is played out (2004: 100).

When questioning my participants on their feelings and experiences of being non-traditional students in HE, none of the participants, except one, expressed feelings of exclusion from higher education because of their class or background. The participants, once grown in confidence, having developed their ability, and laid the demons of their past to rest, were able to reconstruct their identities and inhabit a new space, created by them and others like them.

### *Role Models*

The following theme to emerge from the interview data was that of *role modelling*. The participants who are parents all talked about setting a good example and being a positive role model for their children. Some mention that they will be the first in

their families to acquire a higher education, and view that as changing the course of history; Yvette said *'in my family in this country I think I'm going to be the first one to have a degree ... I've changed history for my family'*. Nyla commented that *'I was the first person to go to HE in my family and my son was the second'*. For these students, setting a new precedence has been part of the experience of higher education. Kath describing her experience stated *'It's made me encourage my children to go on to further and higher education'*, and Tammi shared the belief by saying *'because I'm studying and my children are seeing me study, it makes them want to study'*. Social reproduction theory (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977) explains how the values, tastes and lifestyles attached to the family's cultural capital are reproduced from generation to generation, and higher education is one such value. Bourdieu also argued that the role of education in society is the contribution it makes to social reproduction. However, Bourdieu did not view this positively but believed that the dominant classes use social reproduction to reproduce inequalities, and keep the working class at a disadvantage. Widening participation has disrupted the cycle of reproducing social inequalities within higher education as access can now be gained by non-traditional groups who were once excluded. However, this has also meant an expansion of middle-classes in HE. Reay et al. assert that *'Since 1998 participation rates have increased more rapidly among the middle classes than the working classes'* (2005: 6). Nevertheless, for students like Yvette and Nyla, now with higher education as a value within the family's cultural capital, not only will they encourage their children to take part but also be visible positive role models for them.

Writing soon after the widening participation movement began, Archer and Hutchings cite Pugsley (1998) as suggesting that *'middle-class parents had decoded the 'rhetoric of equality' (1998: 11) ... [whereas] working-class families lacked this knowledge and competence, which placed them at a relative disadvantage in the HE marketplace'* (2000: 557). In chapter 3, I discussed Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital and how he explains that the working class habitus is limited not to include educational aspirations, therefore educational inequalities are reproduced through lack of cultural capital within the working class. Bourdieu did offer a solution to the problem of inequalities being reproduced; Jaeger explains that in order to break the cycle of oppression, *'Parents must possess cultural capital; they must invest time and effort in transmitting cultural capital to their children; and children must absorb*

this cultural capital and transform it into educational success' (2009: 1944). Parents cannot suddenly 'possess cultural capital'; however, in research conducted by Reay (in Grenfell and James 1998) on the differences between working class and middle class parents' attitudes towards their children's education, she comments that 'the importance attached to education by working class mothers was often in spite of their own negative experiences' (p. 64). The students who took part my research returned to higher education as mature students having had negative experiences. Having achieved this, they now possess the educational cultural capital needed to be transmitted to their children in order to break the cycle of oppression. Mike explained that '*I am the first boy that's been to university ... now my little brother wants to go, so it's like kind of paving the way...*'. It also seems that the working class participants taking part in my research have decoded the 'rhetoric of equality' Pugsley (1998: 11) cited by Archer and Hutchings (2000: 557) and broken the cycle of 'settling for what you have got' (Nash 1990: 439).

Mike has a wider agenda that extends beyond his family. He intends to be a visible positive role model for the youth in his community who are experiencing a similar upbringing to himself, and his intention is to break this cycle of oppression too. During the interview, he explained how HE can change lives and provide opportunities and prospects but that this route is not utilised by everybody. Mike explained that:

*'they all want to become legit, and they want to become legal and they want to have this ... I can show them that okay, education kind of works and it gets you out of that trouble ... there is other ways to do things and that's what I want to provide to them, I want to provide that, understanding that there is another way out, there is another way to do things. The kids on the street, the young males in particular because I feel like they are lost and they have just been blamed by society, ... let's help them out or use them to help the younger ones so there is not, another generation of hatred and anger and kids that are stuck in that same bubble, some people live and die in that same bubble, never breaking out of it'.*

The 'bubble' that Mike refers to is the cycle of social disadvantage, unemployment, poor living conditions and lack of opportunity. One of the objectives that the widening participation agenda sought to achieve was social cohesion. Previously I quoted Hyland and Merrill who commented on post-16 education reform as 'The key objectives... [are] to foster greater social inclusion and cohesion' (2003:5). In

addition, the Secretary of State for Education stated that 'Economic prosperity and social cohesion go hand in hand' (DfEE 2000: para 4). Both are referring to the creation of educational opportunities that would lead to employment and greater earning power, and thereby help to create cohesion amongst society.

Tammi reiterated Mike's message of giving something back when she explained that:

*'I want to give back to the community or give back to people in terms of, because I want to actually go into teaching. So, I want to be able to learn more and give it back to the youngsters and teach them that there is more to aim for and not just hanging on the street or you know, getting involved in crime and stuff like that'.*

Waller in Bathmaker and Harnett (2010) discusses the impact of educational success and how 'generational advantages are passed onto our children' (p. 57). This phenomenon, he argues, 'further illustrates education's power to transform the lives of individuals, families and wider communities' (ibid). All of the students that took part in my research have been able to transform their lives through higher education. The creation of job opportunities and higher earning power is one form of transformation but another and possibly more important side is that of increased confidence, self-esteem and self-belief. Those who are acting as role models are also transforming the lives of their families, and in some cases the wider community.

### *Habitus: clash and conflict*

Bourdieu's theory of habitus, as I have explained in chapter 3, is a useful tool to use to explain why some social groups aspire to education and some do not. However, once people have decided to participate in higher education, especially coming from social groups that would once have been excluded, according to Bourdieu, they are entering a new habitus. Bourdieu's habitus theory has been used to demonstrate that people from different social classes experience education differently, and that this is due, Bourdieu argued, to different values, practices and lifestyles. Different habituses will project different attitudes towards education (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977). However, Bourdieu also asserts that 'habitus can be changed by changed circumstances' (cited in Sullivan 2002: 152). The widening participation

movement led to social change by creating opportunities for people to take part in higher education; people who would have once been excluded. This change in circumstances meant that their habitus would be changed too, and would now include higher education as a new practice. This would mean that the habitus they had been socialised into, and can identify with, would be altered as a result of participating in higher education.

However, Bowl's research demonstrates that new habitus can be laid over old (2003), which is not so much changing habitus as Bourdieu suggests but adapting the existing one. This may mean that the old habitus would still be there, and practices from a new habitus would be overlaid. However, Bourdieu asserts that one's thoughts and actions will still be determined by the original habitus as it 'continues to operate long after the objective conditions of its emergence have been dislodged' Bourdieu (1990) cited in Reay (1997: 229). This is where Bowl's theory of 'habitus clash' (2003) comes into play; habitus clash is the conflict felt when sensations of not belonging in the HE arena and of being a 'fish out of water' (Grenfell 2008) are felt. The widening participation movement enabled a social change that included people who had been excluded to take part in higher education. If Bowl's (2003) theory of habitus clash, created by the process of laying new habitus over old, creates a conflict that causes feelings of not belonging, that would place non-traditional students at a further disadvantage. They are already disadvantaged by being in under-represented groups, having progressed through the non-traditional route, and having to learn the rules of the game, as discussed previously.

All of my participants described their family background, when asked, as being working class. The working class habitus, according to Bourdieu, is limited not to include educational aspirations. However, with the change in policy, and subsequent reform, people from working class backgrounds can now aspire to higher education. With that opportunity now available, I wanted to know what the lived experiences and perspectives of these learners are. During interviews with the participants, I questioned them on their feelings and experiences of being mature students in higher education. Eight of the participants described lived realities that bore strong verisimilitude with the habitus clash theory. Some of the participants talked about their family background and upbringing:

*'I think I came from a family of uneducated people, I don't think ... it's because they were not intelligent it's just that they didn't have much of an education themselves ... so I was never encouraged with my schoolwork'.*

Yvette's utterances resonated with Bourdieu's idea that different habituses will project different attitudes towards education (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977) because the values, practices and lifestyles will differ between each habitus. Nicole made reference to the lifestyle she was exposed to during her upbringing: *'in my family no one had actually attended university and I grew up in a very working class background – there weren't any books at home ... I never felt that university was an option for me'*. Nicole did not aspire to higher education whilst she was growing up because, as Bourdieu and Passeron have asserted, the working class habitus is limited not to include educational aspirations (1977). However, as an adult, higher education became a reality and she began to adjust her habitus and include HE as a practice. This evidence does not support an uncritical application of Bourdieu's theory; if one's thoughts and actions are still determined by the original habitus, as Bourdieu asserts, why would my participants have been allured to participate in HE?

Nyla also referred to her background and the practices and values within the family that reflected attitudes towards education:

*'I think that when you come from a working class background, especially one that is not academically inclined, you have ... a kind of notion that possibly this isn't where I should be really, that I have kind of gate crashed ... this is where the more intelligent more wealthy people go ... there was always the sense of, I got through just by chance, I didn't really earn it, I didn't really meet the criteria, I was just lucky that I you know got in through a fluke and expected at one point to be caught out'.*

Feelings of not belonging, of gate-crashing, would be common amongst learners who did not have HE as part of their habitus during up-bringing. Reay (2002) refers to the 'imposters' in her study on non-traditional adult students, and the deep-rooted feeling of identity clash. Reay labelled her participants 'imposters' because that was how they described their lived reality: pretending to be somebody else. Reay describes that 'Education was, in the main, a world into which they fitted uneasily' (2002: 404). Baxter and Britton (2001) comment on the learners from their research and describe the change in identity: 'They are leaving behind old identities and establishing new ones, losing the certainty of their old identities in this process of transition' (p. 89). This bears resonance with Lynch and O'Neill (1994) who assert



that the working class are the only social group whose identity and status is affected and changed by acquiring a higher education. Joy, another participant, explained how she felt during the transition:

*'somebody has already told you you shouldn't be there ... you're still wondering if maybe they've made a mistake and you shouldn't be there ... there's still that little voice in the back of your head going they will find you out one day you shouldn't really be here'.*

Crossan et al. et al. note that non-traditional learners' identities are 'contradictory, volatile and fragile' (2003: 65), and that their sense of self may include a deeply rooted explicit rejection of education despite a current high participation rate (ibid). Nyla's fragile identity is reflected in this statement when she describes feeling that: *'I'm going to get caught out and asked to go back'*. Nyla's insecurity of herself as a non-traditional mature student, whilst she lays new habitus over old, made the transition into her new identity as a higher education student turbulent and unpredictable. Reay (1997) in her study on feminist theory, habitus and social class, notes that when making the 'transition through education out of the working classes ... produces not only discordance, but can generate alarm, fear and panic' (p. 231). Jane articulated this concept when she said *'I did have moments of self doubt ... I feel threatened by extremely academic people and because the route that I've come through'*. The route she is referring to is the non-traditional route. In chapter two, I discussed traditional and non-traditional routes into higher education, and that mature students who go down the non-traditional route experience a double disadvantage. Gorard et al explain how mature students are 'othered' and the assumption is that they are in need of special requirements that are 'not the norm' in HE (2007: 104). 'Others', as I explained in chapter two, are those who are deemed not to fit in. Nyla explained her feelings of being othered:

*'I think that there is still that them and us idea in education of those who come through certain routes and those who come through, well those who come through traditional routes and those who come from widening participation'.*

Nyla went on to talk about *'the perceived notion of the other and ... those who are educated and from a middle class background'*. In this excerpt of the interview, she described her upbringing and the expectations that she experienced:

*'throughout my childhood and growing up, we were the other; we were the working class ones. We were the ones who entered factories to work, we were the ones who became cleaners and we were the ones, as my parents worked. My mum worked in a cake factory, my father owns a mini cab. So, in our house and growing up it is innate in us to believe that what we are going to do is follow our parents that we were going to go into a factory and because, as a mature learner, I went to college and slowly worked my way up there is always a sense of I'm not where I should be. My place should be in a factory and that I'd somehow trespassed over into the others' domain and was making it slowly through but, all the time feeling that I don't really belong...'*

The participants quoted here all draw a distinction between two groups of students who are perceived to be polarised in higher education; those who have HE as part of their habitus (the middle class), and those who do not (the working class). Nyla sees the two as very separate worlds and even mentions *'trespassed over into the others' domain'*, which is an interesting metaphor to use to describe her subjective experience. Kasim described his lived reality of being part of the world that is deemed incapable, and the feelings of inadequacy that he experienced:

*'coming from that working class background and things like that [HE] are seen as unattainable to our lot ... it was just a completely different world. We were led to believe that they were really clever and superior over their East London counterparts ... the stigma and these associations that you're not good enough'*

It seems that the process of adjusting one's habitus, and laying new habitus over old, can have enormous effects on one's identity. These effects are either caused by habitus clash as argued by Bowl (2003) or by changing one's habitus and adding a new practice in conjunction with changed circumstances, as asserted by Bourdieu (cited in Sullivan 2002). However, in some cases it has been neither as a third space has emerged for the non-traditional student to occupy. Nevertheless, in widening the participation to include under-represented groups in HE, habitus does not appear to be as powerful as Bourdieu suggested, and even less so for those occupying that third space. It can however, for some, be extremely difficult to cope with. Nicole explained that *'sometimes it's actually a real struggle, because you're still carrying all the baggage of your past ... and those feelings that you didn't achieve well at school'*. In addition, feelings of self-doubt have plagued the participants, leading to them questioning their adequacy. All of the participants who took part in this research progressed to HE from FE, therefore all were academically qualified to progress to

the next level of education. Even though their academic credentials were not in question, they still lacked faith in their ability. Leathwood and O'Connell explain that in this context, 'poor self-esteem or lack of confidence are not individual traits or personality failings but the product of social relations' (2003: 609). The relation is one built on history - of the middle/upper class being in a dominant position, and the working class being in a subordinate position. Leathwood and O'Connell assert that it is this social relation between the two classes that has manifested feelings of self-doubt in the participants, and caused them to question their position as they move into middle class territory and experience feelings of not belonging. Baxter and Britton comment that 'The process of moving between classes has very strong emotional and affective aspects which colour the lives of those who experience it' (2001: 95). However, I have explained the phenomenon of the third space, and how these learners do not become part of the dominant class, but occupy a third space that has emerged to accommodate them, the space in-between two opposing identities .

In chapter 3 I explained Bourdieu's theory of habitus, and how he argued that we have 'internalised, "embodied" social structures...[which] function below the level of consciousness' Bourdieu (1986) cited in Nash (1990: 442), and impose limits on what we feel we can and cannot do. Bowl asserts that 'working class people may not think they are eligible for opportunities to achieve because of their internalised assumptions that certain opportunities are "not for the likes of them"' ( 2003: 129). However, all of the participants in my research have broken those limits and, despite internalised assumptions, have entered higher education. Some of their negative assumptions have come from past educational experiences that have produced a cycle of failure; if they failed in education previously, they then feel that they may fail again. Despite this, the participants' experiences do not fully support the habitus theory. As powerful as their original habitus may be, they have overcome its internalised structures to participate in a practice that once belonged to a different habitus. Crozier et al. argue that 'One of the great achievements of the English HE widening participation policy and strategies is that it helped working-class students to overcome that sense of place that leads to self-exclusion from places that they do not feel is rightly theirs' (David 2010: 68).

However, not all aspects of adjusting one's habitus produce negative effects. Some of the participants described positive feelings during the transition into HE. Peter commented favourably on his experience and explains that '*I'm gaining more knowledge about the world you know, knowing how the world works and just basically what it takes to be an educated person in society*'. Kasim, who talked of the stigma he felt from his working class background, commented that '*I'm becoming more aware, because this is an arena I've never been in before, so I've never really been aware of how people look at each other doing different degrees*'. Mike talked of the pride he feels of being a university student but he also stressed the importance of genuinely becoming a student, and really buying into the experience:

*'...in education you have to learn to deal with all sorts of people and I have to become a student to actually be a student. I don't know if this is making any sense, but you can't just act a student, you have to actually become a student ... I did never see myself as a student and it's even hard to look at myself, I do now and do it proudly*'.

Merrill (2001) in her discussion on the perspectives of adult learners comments that 'Adult students have to present the self in lectures and seminars and quickly learn the student role' (p. 7). In chapter two I discussed how traditional students progress to university straight from school or college. Whilst this may not automatically mean that they have an easier experience, or are guaranteed to succeed, it does mean that they have had recent experience and exposure to the necessary study skills needed to survive in HE. Non-traditional students, however, and especially mature ones who may have had a long break in education, are in the process of acquiring the skills they need to survive in their new environment, and many have progressed from access courses where they will have been taught these skills for the first time. One could argue that this could be an advantage as access courses are structured to accommodate mature learners, additional support is available and, as discussed in chapter 2, access courses are designed to equip the learner with study skills needed for success in HE. However, Hatt and Baxter's research suggests that 'knowing the rules of the game distinguished the A-Level entrants from the other groups' (2003: 25). They assert that traditional students tend to know what is expected of them before they arrive, whereas non-traditional students are often still trying to decipher the rules, and education is part of the middle class habitus - it is not part of the working class habitus. Crozier et al support this theory when they

assert that 'middle class students to varying degrees had more preparation for university life and knew what to expect than all the working class students in our study' (David 2010: 66). All of the participants quoted so far have expressed feelings of self-doubt, not belonging, and 'fish out of water' (Grenfell 2008). Nevertheless, these feelings did not deter them and they persisted with their higher education.

### *Discussion*

Bourdieu's theory of habitus is compelling. He asserted that one's habitus is deeply engendered within individuals and that this creates a "disposition" below the level of consciousness which determines how we act or think (Naidoo 2004: 458). However, Bourdieu did not account for individual differences within the working class, and that some people may aspire to different goals. In the first section of chapter 1, I discussed the theory of individualism and how this overturns notions of class and the opportunities that may be available or restricted according to one's social class. For example, some working class parents do want their children to succeed and achieve more educationally than they did, especially if their own experiences of education were negative. In addition, some parents may push their children educationally, even though they may not have experienced this from their own parents.

Reay (in Grenfell and James 1998) discusses her research into the differences between working class and middle class parents' aspirations for their children's education. In the case of one of her participants, she comments that 'awareness of the negative impact of her own schooling had resulted in a resolve to have a very different relationship to her son's education ... repairing the damage of one's own education in interaction with the child's' (p. 63). Sullivan (2002) points out that Bourdieu argued that some from the lower class would succeed but that this only gives the appearance of a meritocracy and that mostly, the lower class would not succeed. However, as I have already discussed, BIS (2010) reports that in the academic year 2008-9, 13.7 per cent of participants in HE were from the four lowest socio economic groups, indicating a level, albeit a low level, of success amongst the working class. Bourdieu, himself once from a low socio economic group, also succeeded by ascending up the educational system from rural France to an elite Parisian university. My participants, although a small sample of ten, and myself, all

from working class backgrounds, have achieved educationally despite previous adverse experiences in school.

The evidence from my data strongly suggests that habitus is not as enduring as the theory suggests. Although the participants do experience some difficulties whilst participating in HE, they are able to include education into their old habitus. For some this was easier than for others. Peter, for example, talked about his unpleasant experiences at school, and his failures at college, none of this however deterred him from university. Nyla recounted her experiences of being brought up in a working class family with an absence of educational role-models. Although she felt as though she did not belong in HE, she persisted, and succeeded. Yvette felt that her family did not value education but she returned to learn and completed her degree. Webb et al (2002) explain that we modify our behaviour and that 'our responses are regulated by where and who we have been in a culture' (p. 36). This helps to explain why we gravitate towards social fields that match what we know and feel comfortable with. However, sometimes, like my participants, we are pulled towards other fields, ones that offer opportunity and prospects.

Hodkinson (in Grenfell and James 1998) discusses how people find 'turning points' in their lives which means that they change course, and in turn alter their habitus; 'As a person lives through a turning point the habitus of the person is changed' (p. 101). Hodkinson also asserts that 'At a turning point a person goes through a significant transformation of identity' (ibid), and this is exactly what Mike experienced on his journey of entering higher education; not only did it transform his life and his habitus but also his identity. I did not question my participants specifically on why they returned to learn, however, I can deduce from the data that they had all reached turning points in their lives. Having entered higher education, some working class people may well experience feelings of being out of place within the HE social field, because of their internalised feelings of exclusion, embodied through their culture (Webb 2002), however, if they persist and battle on, as the evidence suggests, they can prevail, and transform their lives.

## Conclusion

The previously discussed themes that emerged from the data, did not emerge in isolation to each other. Each one crossed into and merged with the next one, there were no clear boundaries of where one ended and another began, and the participants experienced the themes at various stages of their education. However, it became apparent that all the participants had undergone some kind of process, a transformation as they passed through the stages of being a mature working class student returning to higher education. To be working class, as I have already explained, is to 'abandon certain features of their background class habitus ... in a way that is not really true for other socially mobile groups' (Lynch and O'Neill 1994: 318). One such feature is that education has been synonymous with working class failure. In addition, all of the participants expressed feelings that bore strong resemblance to the habitus clash theory (Bowl 2003). However, once they had adapted and the persistent self-doubt had submerged, higher education became a part of their cultural capital. The process also enabled them to transform their lives and, in some cases, their identities.

All of the participants experienced the theme that I labelled *blossoming* once they had entered higher education. The personal journey had begun, they gained confidence both academically and personally and they felt themselves grow. Once blossomed, they moved into the next stage of feeling *normal after all*. All of the participants had had adverse experiences at school. The experience had left them feeling a failure, inadequate, and in some cases, stupid. These feelings stayed with them into their adult lives, and it was not until they entered higher education that they realised they were not educational failures. HE became a healing process and healed the wounds inflicted at school; gaining a sense of being *normal after all* allowed the participants to conquer feelings of being othered. They had proved, by progressing to higher education, that they were just as good as everybody else.

The following theme to emerge was that of *validation*. However, at times I felt that *normal after all* and *validation* were one and the same. What enabled me to separate them was realising that some participants were actually seeking validation and that the HE experience had enabled them to achieve that. Some of the participants talked about the experience of being a valid member of society and that this had led to new

found feelings of pride, achievement, and newly gained confidence. They felt that because they were higher education students, people now took them seriously. This enabled them to settle their demons down and lay the past to rest. It became apparent to me at this stage that the participants were reshaping themselves and their identities, and occupying a new space that had arisen from the need of one.

It seemed that some of the participants were seeking validation by infiltrating the arena of HE, and adopting those values. Reay et al (2001) comment that 'Almost by definition, aspirant working classness is pretentious – a hankering after the 'other' rather than an acceptance of the self' (p. 337). For some this felt like a betrayal to their working class roots, for others this was merely conforming to what was required in order to 'legitimising oneself in the eyes of others' (Leathwood and O'Connell 2003: 610). However, as working class students they had no history in the arena, and could not occupy the space of the middle/upper classes as that is what they were not. Therefore a new space had emerged, a third space where negotiation takes place, and where they reconstructed their newly emerging identities around being working class students in higher education.

The next theme to emerge was *role model*. Only after the participants had undergone the previous stages could they become role models for their children and the wider community. Some had a true sense and commitment of wanting to give something back and make a difference. They truly believed that education was transformative and they wanted to enable others to change their lives. Of course, the largest change was to their own lives. By reaching the turning point, overcoming their inner demons, and returning to higher education, they were able to alter their habitus and add cultural capital, thereby enabling their own children to follow, and in turn breaking the cycle of educational inequality. Now higher education will be reproduced in the home and this supports Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital reproduced from generation to generation, within the habitus, to enable one's children to be socialised into the values, tastes and lifestyles attached to their family's (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977). Jaeger explains that in order to break the cycle of oppression, 'Parents must possess cultural capital; they must invest time and effort in transmitting cultural capital to their children' (2009: 1944), and that is precisely what is happening within these participants' homes. Having endured the



ups and downs of HE, they are now using the opportunity to enhance their lives and their futures, and for those engaged in role modelling – the futures of others too.

When the Government reformed education and widened the participation into higher education, they could not have foreseen the full impact it would have on some people's lives. The Robbins Report (1963) highlighted the narrow participation and inequalities present in HE at that time. The Conservative Government's DES (1987) white paper *HE: meeting the challenge* recognised that many people with ability were not being given opportunity, and subsequently the creation of access courses as the non-traditional route. The ending of the binary line and amalgamation of all HE institutions into one system; and the Labour Government's target of 50 per cent participation rate in HE by 2010. All of these reforms, and more, have evolved the system of HE into what it is today. It was inevitable that widening the participation would change the nature of HE; however, it was not anticipated that the HE experience would have such a profound and transformative effect on people's lives. One of the most important social changes is the transformation to some people's lives - those from the non-traditional and under-represented groups, and I am one such person, who once did not believe that they would be able to gain access to, and achieve a higher education, have not only done that but have also altered their habitus, identity, and perception of themselves.

However, if the cultural capital of the working class were valued in the same way as the cultural capital of the dominant class, and if vocationalism was held in the same high esteem as academia is, the experiences of people like myself and my participants may have been very different. Nevertheless, for us higher education has been a powerful and transformative experience, and that is one of the most important findings of this research: that not all higher education students undergo the same experience. Those from the non-traditional groups, and especially mature students, can undergo a profound and unique experience of a deeply personal nature. Hodkinson, commenting on habitus, states that 'in relatively unusual but far from rare circumstances, significant transformations can and do occur' (Grenfell and James 1998: 103). Placed within a critical research paradigm, the findings of this research suggest that more needs to be understood about this type of student and the experiences and journey that they undergo. The criticism is that non-traditional students do have a different HE experience compared to traditional students, and

this needs to be better understood and appreciated by the academy as a whole. However, as I have already discussed, only 13.7 per cent of participants in HE were from the four lowest socio economic groups (BIS 2010), which means that many more people from within these groups are not accessing HE and not gaining that transformative experience.

HE has been a healing process for those who have had a negative educational experience. Those who did not succeed at school were labelled as failures as they did not measure up to the curriculum yardstick. In addition, they were doomed to fail in the world of work as they had no qualifications to carry forward. This had psychological impact on my participants and they have used the HE experience to put their demons to bed and heal the damage done by the school experience. Now looking back, we can clearly see that without the widening participation movement, this particular social change could not have taken place. As well as the student experience, widening participation has affected universities too as they have had to adapt to accommodate a different type of learner, and this has made them more inclusive. The new and more inclusive system of HE has shown that negative educational experiences can be reversed and students can demonstrate, given the opportunity, environment and support, that they are not failures. This has also had positive impact on social mobility. However, there are of course many people out there who have not had the opportunity to access higher education. They therefore continue to carry their demons around, believing they are failures, having not had the opportunity to transform.

What is significant about my participants' transformations is that they would not have taken place without them accessing higher education. However, it has to be born in mind that a limited sample of ten participants was used to generate data for this research. The participants share both similarities and differences in their biographies, each one had an interesting story to tell, and their stories produced the data that became the findings; these findings are not necessarily generalisable, but they do have general relevance. The argument is that, the larger the number of participants involved, the more generalisable the findings are. However, Burgess et al. (2006) point out that greater importance could be given to 'the relevance of findings to professional practice and how useful they are to others in similar situations rather than their wider generalisability' (p. 60). Every student, whether

traditional or non-traditional, will have their own unique experience; what these findings do show is that the participants in my study have undergone a transformative process, and a shift in their identities and perception of themselves. This is the most significant contribution that this research makes. In addition, and as I have already stated, non-traditional students undergo a different HE experience compared to traditional students, and this needs to be better understood in order that we continue to work to include and better accommodate non-traditional students.

The topics and issues examined in this thesis provide scope for further research. For example, the wider debate is the question of whether widening participation has led to greater social mobility amongst the working class, especially as BIS (2010) assert that only 13.7 per cent of participants in HE were from the four lowest socio economic groups. Undoubtedly some important social changes have been made, some of which I have referred to, however the information and data collected centres around non-traditional students and their journey to and through higher education from non-traditional routes. This was the boundary that I drew around my research. However, if I were to conduct further research in this area in the future, I would want to examine and explore these students' career paths and professional journeys. Follow up interviews with the same or similar participants would allow me to explore the experiences of the learners once they move from HE into the world of employment. I would be interested to find out if they would have to undergo another shift in habitus, whether they had accrued enough of the right type of cultural capital to be socially and professionally mobile, and if they experienced again any of the stages/themes that I have identified from this primary data. This research project has the potential to become a longitudinal study, and one I may well pursue in the future.

## **A critical discussion of the research process and outcomes**

When I began this research my intention was to interpret the experiences and subjective realities of non-traditional students in higher education. This was because I wanted to find out and learn more about their journeys, having had a challenging but interesting experience, both professionally and personally myself. As I worked through the process I realised I was actually engaging in critical research, and my intention had shifted. I was still interested in the experiences and lived realities of these students but I also realised, once I heard their stories, that higher education institutions needed to be more aware of these experiences in order to better accommodate students from non-traditional backgrounds, and that this awareness could lead to a more welcoming and inclusive system. Although the widening participation movement has enabled non-traditional students to access higher education, I realised from listening to my participants' stories that their experiences were profound in many ways; this was partly because of the elitism that HE continued to be shrouded in, and partly due to their own cultural histories and backgrounds. All of my participants were at or had been at universities not in the Russell group. Having demonstrated that the Russell group universities have a much lower intake of mature students, I may have expected that my participants would feel completely at ease in universities with a higher intake of mature students. However, they had already formed perceptions of themselves as educational failures; this became apparent during the interviews with the participants, as they all described in different ways how they perceived themselves as failures. This would mean that for them, the transition to higher education would not be an uncomplicated one. This, I realised towards the end of my research, is what I needed to raise awareness of.

Whilst selecting my participants, I was not at all conscious of which university they were, or are still at. I merely wanted to capture the experiences of non-traditional students in HE. However, in hindsight I realised that in order to fully validate my participants' experiences of being non-traditional students at universities not in the Russell group, I should have compared these to the experiences of the same type of student at universities in the Russell Group. Initially this was not a concern but since finishing the research and examining the outcomes, I now know that this is an important consideration. This does however give me scope for further research and this would make an extremely interesting future project to embark on. In addition, this

would allow me to be more critical of the system of higher education and the impact that this has on the structure of society, although initially this is not what I set out to do.

Critical researchers usually start with an issue that they are affected by, something that bothers them. They research it because they want to change it. The aim therefore is to critique and transform current social structures, be they political, cultural, economic or gender related. These kinds of social structures constrain and exploit humankind, therefore examining, confronting and criticising the structures may help to support emancipatory changes (Gray 2004). In the case of my research, the social structures consisted of a traditionally dominated white middle class higher education, still to some extent an elite system; and non-traditional mature students who were also working class.

Even though the working class possess a type of cultural capital traditionally associated with vocational success, this is not deemed to be on a par with academic success. In addition the working class have a history of educational failure, not because they were incapable of achieving but because they lacked the opportunities and the cultural capital needed to access and achieve in higher education. Some of these attitudes and beliefs were resonant in my participants' experiences of progressing to HE, they recognised that they lacked the right kind of background. I missed an opportunity here to promote the importance and the value of different kinds of cultural capital amongst different social groups. In retrospect, I could have used my research to highlight this important point, and how all types of cultural capital can be valued, especially within the educational system. Initiatives for widening participation did attempt to redress the balance by enabling participation of under-represented groups, but given the deep-rooted traditions and beliefs, it has been argued that the non-traditional student is beginning their higher education on an uneven playing field (Reay 2002, Burke 2002, Bowl 2003), and this would have an effect, both academically and psychologically.

My own participants did not recognise that they may have been disadvantaged because they were non-traditional or had progressed through a non-traditional route. Only one: Nyla, openly expressed her feelings of exclusion from a system she called '*the others' domain*'. Nyla felt as though she was an imposter in a system to which

she did not belong. This echoes Reay's (2002) research in which her participants felt they did not belong in HE. However, Nyla went to university at a time when widening participation was just under way. She would have entered a system that was emerging from elitism. Reay's research was published in 2002 which indicates that her participants were also at university around this time. The other participants in my research did not express these feelings of exclusion or of being an imposter but, as I have pointed out, they did perceive themselves as educational failures. This was largely due to negative past experiences, especially at school. Kasim, for example, recounts how the teachers at his school made him feel worthless, and yet he went on to graduate with a very good degree. It is possible that my participants did not experience the imposter feeling because they had entered university when widening participation was well under way; it may also be because they were at universities not in the Russell group. However, and as I have pointed out, until I do a comparison, this is merely speculation. What seems to have happened more recently is that a space has emerged for the non-traditional student to occupy and this has eradicated the imposter feeling.

The third space is of course a psychological space as opposed to a physical space. Its emergence coincided with widening participation and the need for non-traditional students to feel a sense of belonging, to feel comfortable, and have something to identify with. Non-traditional students cannot occupy the space in HE originally created for traditional students as they are not traditional students and do not fit here comfortably. Nor can they occupy a space for working class or mature students because historically they have no space. Therefore, a middle or additional space has emerged for those learners who need a position within the academy. This is their own space; in it they do not feel like fish out of water, as theorised by Maton (2008), and therefore non-traditional learners will gravitate towards it. Maton uses the 'fish out of water' (ibid) metaphor to describe the social fields as theorised by Bourdieu. Bourdieu (1977) argued that we gravitate towards social fields that best match our dispositions and avoid those that create a field-habitus clash. Therefore, the third space could be described as a new social field, existing within higher education for non-traditional students.

This phenomenon may well explain why my research does not support an uncritical application of Bourdieu's theories of habitus and cultural capital. If the third space

has become part of the non-traditional learners' habitus then there is minimal habitus clash, as explained by Bowl (2003), and these learners will begin to accrue the cultural capital that, according to Bourdieu, is needed to succeed in education. Originally I decided to use Bourdieu's theoretical framework because his theories enable us to understand and problematise the issues around including and excluding certain social groups in higher education. I also used the theory of 'the other' and Freire's (1993) theory of critical pedagogy, as well as some theories around the experiences of mature learners as researched by Mercer (2007), for example self-development and laying demons of the past to rest. All of these theories are relevant but only help to explain in part the experiences of non-traditional learners. Fascinating as Bourdieu's theories are, in this context they cannot be fully applied. Habitus and cultural capital are very relevant and present in my participants' lives but not in the way that Bourdieu describes in his own research. I have been critical of the theories because they do not fully support the experiences of my participants; they have overcome the powerful effects of their habitus and participated in HE despite originally not having the cultural capital needed to succeed.

However, and despite this, Bowers-Brown (2006) assert that the working class remained the under-represented group as it is not they who benefit from widening participation policy. Commenting on the 50 per cent HE participation target, they assert that 'Even if this expansion were to be achieved purely through widening participation, the levels of participation by social class would still not be equal' (2006: 71). The ten participants in my research can speak for themselves: they have all been successful in participating in HE, and that is a change to their lives that is extremely important to them. However, the question remains - how far has widening participation policy succeeded in changing the lives of the working class? Can the policy be deemed a success if only small numbers of under-represented are being incorporated into the system? I have demonstrated that the lives of ten working class mature learners have been transformed, on a personal level, by higher education, and that their experiences, although fraught, have enriched their lives. However, I cannot claim that my research is generalisable or representative of how all non-traditional learners experience HE, and this is a major criticism of the outcomes of the research. I can only really make claims based on the experiences of the participants that took part.

I was well aware, when I chose the ten participants, that this was an area of weakness within the research process and one that would be criticised. I decided on a sample of ten because I knew that interviews could last up to an hour and a half and I had time constraints and a word limit, and by the time I had written 20,000 words of a literature review, even though I would have preferred to have interviewed 20 or 30 participants, I simply did not have the scope, time, or words to do that. With the benefit of hindsight, I would have opted for a larger sample, and reduced the length of the literature review. Another factor in the sampling strategy was that the participants had to meet certain criteria so that they could fit in to the boundary of my research: they had to have been raised and educated in the UK; I did not want to encounter culture clashes and descriptions of how the UK education system compared to the one back home. The participants had to define their own backgrounds or family as being working class. However, this question may have been flawed as I did not use any pre-set criteria to measure the concept of class. I relied entirely on their own definitions of their backgrounds and did not probe any further as to why they felt they were working class.

In focussing on social class, it is now apparent that there is scope to extend this research by comparing my own participants' experiences to those of middle and upper class students. David (2010) embarked on a similar research project when she compared findings in experiences between middle and lower classed students in order to highlight the differences in their experiences. In addition, and because I wanted to capture the subjective realities of mature students, the participants had to have had a break in education before returning to learn. Finally, they had to have accessed higher education through further education and this would mean progressing down a non-traditional route, probably an access course. This, I felt, would enable me to address the question of progressing from FE to HE, and thereby operating within the boundary of my research.

In retrospect, I realise that there were too many supplementary research questions and in attempting to answer them all, I decreased the space in which to answer the most important one: what are the lived experiences and perspectives of non-traditional learners? However, I do think it was important to put the situation into context and to examine and analyse the circumstances leading up to the widening participation movement, and the non-traditional learners with whom it was intended



to target. As I have already commented: with hindsight, I would have opted to reduce the length of the literature review in favour of a larger sample, and therefore generated more interview data, and more of the participants' subjective realities.

The interviews themselves were not straight forward and problem-free. Although I did conduct a pilot interview, and as a result adjusted the interview questions, I did feel that the first few interviews were practice runs. I found it very difficult to maintain an equal power relation between my participants and myself, even though I was conducting what Mercer calls 'insider research' (2007). Conducting critical research, as I have already discussed, involves starting with an issue or a tension within the social structure. These issues can be sensitive and often difficult to engage people in and get them to open up about. Initially, I thought that being an insider would be an advantage and that my participants would see me as 'one of them'. Maybe I felt that the interview process would be smooth and straightforward, but as I have commented on in the thesis, some of my participants were moved and emotional during interview and this was difficult to deal with. One participant did not want to engage with me on a personal level, and despite my probing, she would not talk about how her experiences in HE affected her on a personal or emotional level, she only wanted to discuss her experiences on an academic level. Despite admitting early in the interview that she had changed as a person, when I tried to find out what had changed, she became adamant that nothing had really changed. I closed the interview early as I did not want to upset the participant. I kept a diary of notes that I made entries to after every interview. On this occasion, I looked back at my notes and wondered if there had been an unequal power balance between us, if the participant had felt objectified and that is why she would not open up to me during the interview. If this were the case, it was a wasted opportunity to capture the lived realities of this experience.

All of my participants did agree that higher education had transformed them and this was a consistent theme in the data. Not so much transform in terms of social mobility, higher earning power, and improved material gain, but on a deeper and more personal level. They had a new found confidence in themselves, they had eradicated their demons of the past and overturned their perceived educational failure labels. I became aware that these experiences of being non-traditional students in HE may be frustrating and fraught with difficulty, but the experiences are

valuable and necessary in order that the transformation can take place. In addition, this was an inadvertent success of widening participation policy – originally intended to increase opportunity, widening participation had enabled people to develop and transform personally and psychologically.

What HE practitioners can learn from this research is that non-traditional learners undergo unique and profound experiences of a deep and personal nature whilst in higher education. HE remains shrouded in elitism because of a tradition that excluded certain social groups. Although those groups do now participate, more positive action needs to be taken in order to achieve the ‘demystification’ of HE that Bowers-Brown (2006) comment on. As students of the widening participation movement grow up, many become lecturers themselves in the academic arena. They are positive and visible role models for the current cohort of non-traditional learners and this may enable some of that demystification to take place. One of my participants comments on how her experiences in HE equipped her with empathy and, when she became a lecturer, enabled her to build positive relationships with her own learners, who were also mature. She talked of role-modelling and being an example of widening participation success, although Bourdieu would have said that the odd success story merely strengthens the idea of meritocracy and perpetuates inequality. Nevertheless, creating a space for my participants’ stories to be told, and enabling their voices to be heard, is the most important outcome of this research. I intend to publish the findings chapter of this thesis so that the experiences can be appreciated and better understood. The participants generously gave up their time to recount their subjective realities for my research, I will now ensure that those realities are known. My intention is to publish the findings in a journal aimed at FE and HE teachers and practitioners. This will enable the findings to reach the appropriate audience.

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## Appendices

### Appendix i:

#### Interview Participant Information Sheet

Research project Title: **Investigating the transition from FE to HE: what are the lived experiences and perspectives of non-traditional learners?**

You are being invited to take part in a small research project. Before you decide it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Ask me if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether or not you wish to take part. Thank you for reading this.

I am a post-graduate student at Sheffield University. I am writing a dissertation on investigating the transition from FE to HE: the lived experiences and perspectives of non-traditional learners.

The overall aim is to explore the issues and experiences of learners who have made the transition from further to higher education. I plan to collect data on these experiences through unstructured interviews, and use the narrated experiences of participants within my dissertation, alongside the theoretical literature, in order to explore and analyse some of the issues experienced by non-traditional learners in higher education.

I am approaching you as one such learner who has made the transition from further to higher education. I hope you will agree to be interviewed by me.

It is up to you to decide whether or not to take part. If you do decide to take part you will be given this information sheet to keep (and be asked to sign a consent form) and you can still withdraw at any time without it affecting any benefits that you are entitled to in any way. You do not have to give a reason.

The interview will be scheduled at a time and in a place that is convenient to you. The interview will last between 45 and 60 minutes. The interview will focus on the key topic:

- My experience and perspective of being a non-traditional learner in HE.

If you wish to raise a complaint regarding any aspect of the research, you should contact my supervisor Alan Skelton at the University of Sheffield: [a.skelton@sheffield.ac.uk](mailto:a.skelton@sheffield.ac.uk) If you feel that the complaint is not being handled to your satisfaction, you should then contact the University's 'Registrar and Secretary': [registrar@sheffield.ac.uk](mailto:registrar@sheffield.ac.uk)

By signing the consent form, you are consenting to the interview being audio recorded. The recorded data will only be used for analysis for my dissertation; no

other use will be made of them, and no one else will have access to the recordings. I will destroy the data following the analysis. All the information that I collect about you during the course of the interview will be kept strictly confidential and stored on a password protected computer. Neither you nor your institution will be identified in any reports or publications.

This research project assignment has been ethically approved via the University of Sheffield's School of Education Ethics Review Panel.

Thank you for taking the time to read this information sheet. For further information, please contact me [ionaburnell@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:ionaburnell@yahoo.co.uk)

## Appendix ii:



The  
University  
Of  
Sheffield.

Head of School  
Professor Jackie Marsh

Department of Educational Studies  
The Education Building  
388 Glossop Road  
Sheffield S10 2JA

**Telephone:** +44 (0114) 222 8096  
**Fax:** +44 (0114) 2228105  
**Email:** [jacquie.gillott@sheffield.ac.uk](mailto:jacquie.gillott@sheffield.ac.uk)

12 December 2011

Dear Iona

**Re: Investigating the transition from FE to HE: what are the lived experiences and perspectives of non-traditional learners?**

Thank you for your application for ethical review for the above project. The reviewers have now considered this and have agreed that your application be approved with the following optional amendments.

(Please see below reviewers' comments)

**7. Approved with the following suggested, optional amendments (i.e. it is left to the discretion of the applicant whether or not to accept the amendments and, if accepted, the ethics reviewers do not need to see the amendments):**

The consent form for signing looks as if it needs a bit more 'tailoring' for this particular project e.g. the title still says 'Model...'

It might be nice to give copies of your dissertation for your informants to read and check the interpretations. Also, your consent form is very 'formal' you could adapt it to make it read more easily.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'J Gillott'.

**Mrs Jacquie Gillott**

**Programme Secretary**



### **Appendix iii:**

#### **Interview transcription number 10**

Interviewer: So, hi \*\*\*\*\* and thanks very much for agreeing to take part in this interview and in my research.

Interviewee: Well, fine.

Interviewer: Can I just please confirm that you were born and raised in the United Kingdom?

Interviewee: Yes.

Interviewer: How would you define your background?

Interviewee: In terms of social class? Working class...

Interviewer: Okay.

Interviewee: Scottish working class.

Interviewer: Okay. And did you have a break in education before returning?

Interviewee: Yes, I did. I had a break from 1989 and I returned, I think it was 1993.

Interviewer: Okay. So did you leave school in '99?

Interviewee: I left school at 18 and then I returned to education at 22. I did an Access Course.

Interviewer: Right, okay. And so that answered my next question really. Did you access higher education through further education?

Interviewee: Yes, during the Access Course.

Interviewer: Before going on to your degree?

Interviewee: Yes, I did.

Interviewer: Yeah, okay then great. So the first question is, what did you gain personally from being higher education student?

Interviewee: In terms of – can you clarify higher education? Are you referring to university or the degree or...

Interviewer: Yeah, your degree. What did you gain from that on a personal level? Yeah.

Interviewee: What did I gain? On a personal level, I would say the confidence in myself to actually pursue my dreams and ambitions of what I wanted to do for my career. I think had I not gone to the University, I would never – well, I think first of all I have to say that the Access Course, throughout the Access Course, I was crippled with self doubt and lack of

confidence and didn't think I could go to university. But from the very first day on the Access Course, it was you will go to university and when you keep getting told that and it's very – that positive message that you are capable then you feel that that's something that is open to you, but when I grew up I never felt that university was an option for me.

Interviewer: Why?

Interviewee: Because in my family no one had actually attended university and I grew up in a very working class background in which you grow – there weren't any books at home. We didn't have any discussions at home and I had an aunt that did an open university, so she was kind of my mentor, but I didn't spend much enough time with her to actually, during my formative years, for her to actually have an impact on me. But I always knew that I wanted to go to – well, actually I can't say I always thought I wanted to go to university cos I didn't think I was capable of that. So actually going to university was a huge sense of personal achievement and especially to be the first one in the family, I was really – and I spent – and I went to university as a single parent. So as well, so I had been defined until the moment I went to university I defined myself, my daughter was eight months old when I started. I defined myself as a single parent all of a sudden. So if you looked at the media at the time I was defined as the underclass single parent and on unemployment benefit. So therefore going to university was great, because not only I was pursuing the dream of studying, something I hadn't felt was possible, but also I was able to change my personal life, my perception of myself.

Interviewer: Okay.

Interviewee: So that was really interesting.

Interviewer: Okay. When you said you didn't feel you were capable, why wouldn't you have been capable?

Interviewee: I didn't do that well at school. So I think when you don't do well at school, so I have been thinking a lot about this lately and that I think that you have the sense that you haven't achieved and so therefore you ascribe it to lack of – you don't attribute it to perhaps thinking that oh it's because of my personal circumstances, it's because at home education wasn't respected or because I changed three schools in one year, during the year 10 the GCSE here. I was really happy at my first school, but you tend to think it's yourself that you weren't capable that you didn't work hard enough. So then I think that that was kind of something that always held me back.

Interviewer: Right.

Interviewee: And my – at the time and my mum's husband really was anti-education and anti-student, so I grew up with that message at home that it wasn't something that was acceptable. So yeah, and I didn't get the grades at school where it was even seen as a possibility and then when I was 18, I remember someone mentioning an Access Course, must have been in my last years of then school, so I remember actually thinking this education system doesn't suit me. This is not working for me right now. I will go back as an adult and

so I kind of switched off with school, because I realized that that was a potential and I just felt – I just took that decision. I don't know how aware I was of it, but I took a decision that it wasn't working for me in Scotland and all I wanted to do was leave home when I left school. So then I thought I can return to as an adult which I did. So I went to university when I was 25 as a single parent.

Interviewer: Okay. So you have named confidence as one of the things that you felt you gain on a personal level from being a higher education student. Tell me more about that confidence. So, how does that manifest itself? Where does it come from, how does it make you feel, what did it do?

Interviewee: Well, when I – I think when you get your first assignments back at uni and you have realized that you've passed them and actually you've got quite a decent grade. And then you've got other students beside you who have gone the traditional way straight from university, I mean school to university and then you realize actually I can do this. But I think the university that I attended, they had excellent pastoral care and I think they were very aware of the fact that there were mature students and single parents and I think that they – the mentor system was fantastic, so they were there to help you throughout. So I think that was really, really, really good. But also and I think my degree, I did languages, which was something I never thought I was capable of doing. So I loved languages at school and I didn't do very well in my GCSEs and I just had a clash with the teacher. So I always deep down had this hidden ambition and dream to learn the language. And when I went to Uni, I realized you could take the languages module, so I started and I did European Studies for a year or basically phoned up the university and said look, I want a year abroad, please tell me which subject I have to do to get it. That's how I chose my degree and they said do European Studies. So I did that for a year and I found that interesting, because I did Anthropology and Law, History. However, the day we did southern Italy was just – that was it that was the – I couldn't take it anymore. But then I realized I could – because I was part-time, I realized that I could start again and do Spanish with linguistics and that would give me a year abroad. I think that was instrumental, because I started again and I did quite well at languages and the teacher was fantastic. So I was not only learning a new skill, I was also fulfilling an ambition and I think that's really, really important. I think when you had this hidden dream to actually feel that you're working towards something is just – that gives you so much inner confidence and I think you also adopt another kind of identity in self when you're learning a language, because you learn about a new culture and you learn a lot by yourself in the process of learning another language. And, so basically I had to go for an interview for my year abroad and I was interviewed and I remember being so nervous. I remember sitting outside and I just felt how am I going to be able to do this, I still kind of defined myself I'm a single parent. And the girl who sat next to me was from Cambridge and she was from a very upper middle class family and she took great delight in telling me all about her background. And I was comparing myself thinking I'm a single parent living in East London, how – I mean, because it wasn't a competition, but I felt oh my goodness, if I'm chosen this is someone from Cambridge whose father is a doctor and will they actually choose me and I went in and interview went quite well and I was chosen, so I went to Peru with the British Council with

my daughter and I taught a university for a year. And I think going through that process of being selected or being accepted and flying to Peru my own with a child and having the support system of the British Council and teaching at a university which was something that I never thought I would be capable of and I think that that just helped improve myself esteem, made me see that I was capable and then it also let me see that teaching was a profession that I was interested in and then I came back and finished my degree. So I think that was really, really, really good, really good for me.

Interviewer: Okay. Great, all right. And what feelings of you or did you experience as a mature student in higher education? What positive and negative feelings did you have?

Interviewee: I start with the positive. Positive I think, you take it seriously. You really want to follow through. You want to complete the course. And I think you're quite aware of yourself and your study skills and I mean I'm not saying I didn't find it difficult, but I felt that after coming from the Access Course, they had prepared us so well. So I think I knew how to structure an essay, I knew how to do research, I enjoyed the lectures. I was fortunate that I was in the university in which it was kind of – it wasn't an old traditional institution and I know myself that I work better in that kind of an atmosphere which is more like it was an ex polytechnic and I like that atmosphere. So that was really positive, also they were really understanding of the fact that I was single parent, mature student, so that was really, really good. Negatives, I think that just sometimes you just think that you can't do it, because you get a piece of work and you just get – I think you can – I don't that maybe just doesn't matter which background you come from, but as a parent, you're running a house. You think – you see these young people that come straight from school and they are just still in the flow of education and then you think that they just kind of follow through seamlessly and they can just throw together an essay. I mean it might not be like that for them, but that's how you perceive it from the outside and you kind of sometimes it's actually a real struggle, because you're still carrying all the baggage of your past and how – and those feelings that you didn't achieve well at school. So I think...

Interviewer: And that stayed with you, a legacy?

Interviewee: Yeah, stays with you definitely, definitely and I think it's really difficult to not compare yourself as well. So you look around and you think that everyone is doing so well and that comes naturally to them, but I'm sure it doesn't, but that's the image that they seem to be projecting. But I think one of the really good things was because of the university I was at, there was a support – as I mentioned earlier, a really good pastoral care, but I also think that the friends I made were really, really, really good, because we met out of university, what we're all – we were adults who had kids, some didn't have kids, but still they had other kind of I wouldn't say problems or issues to deal with, but they had life – they had life experiences as well and I think that's really, really important. So I think that that was there, a really good support network of friends and pastoral care. So in terms of difficulties or the negatives, I mean there are some things that obviously I would have changed about the course, but I think that's just – nothing is perfect and that all was thing – I look back and I think oh, I wish we'd had more theory on this course, but I mean that's – I mean really that

was not relevant, you can go and look up the theory and I realized you can go and look up yourself if you are really interested. Not everything needs to be spoon fed, but – and no, I think I did have times where I felt that I was falling apart and I couldn't reach deadlines. But I think that was more looking back, I would procrastinate, but that was more because of lack of self confidence which I mean I see that the University experience helped me and I became so much more confident, it doesn't mean to say I was confident all the time.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Interviewee: I still had these mini crises as I would before an assignment or something I would sometimes have these little meltdowns which I think and I still have them and I think that stems back from my school experience.

Interviewer: So you were gaining confidence slowly, but you weren't cured overnight, so good to speak.

Interviewee: I still have these meltdowns now, I still have them. But what I have realized is as an adult, I often set myself unrealistic and expectations of what I think I can achieve, because I think you put yourself under more pressure as an adult. I think you do, because I think you've worked so hard to get there. You want it so badly, it wasn't expected of you. So I think that you kind of build it into this huge thing where you want to do so well. And so sometimes when you get mark back, you're really tough on yourself. I think you're tougher on yourself as an adult, because you expect so much from yourself.

Interviewer: Yeah, and almost like you've got more to prove to the next person, but then that person who maybe comes down from school.

Interviewee: Yeah. And especially when you're studying with younger people, but one of the good things about studying with young people is as an adult as well as that you can learn so much from them if you're open to it, because I realized that one of them that just come from A-Level was absolutely fantastic in note taking. And I remember once borrowing her notes and copying her notes after the lecture that I had to miss and they were amazing. And I looked at how she did them, so I felt as long as you are willing to absorb and observe, you can actually learn a lot from the youngsters as well. And I'm sure they learn a lot from the mature students.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Interviewee: So, but I think in terms of drive and unless you've got someone that's really young and really, really competitive, I think mature students do tend to put themselves under a lot of pressure.

Interviewer: Okay. Any other positive or negative feelings would you say?

Interviewee: Well, one of the positives is through having my degree enabled me to get a job that I love and I think that's a real positive. And I wouldn't have had that and I know I keep mentioning confidence, but I wouldn't have had the confidence to go for the interview had I

not done my degree, because I realized that I went for a job to teach English and it was a secondary school in Peru, I wasn't aware of what I was getting myself into. I didn't actually realize the kind of secondary school it was and the levels, but I realized when I went for the interview that I'd studied linguistics and I taught for a year in a University of Peru. So I knew that if there is something I didn't know, I knew I had the research skills that the university experience had taught me that very rarely do you write an essay about anything that you've actually covered in your lecture. I mean you touch on it and it skims surface, just like the iceberg and you think well that's interesting, we discussed that briefly in the lecture and then you go off and research. So I think in terms of a positive it kind of throws out areas of interest, but then enables you, it equips you with the skills to then go off and...

Interviewer: To find out more?

Interviewee: Yeah, to find out more to research to teach yourself something and also just having to maybe stand up and present, it's an awful experience at the time and I remember my first presentation at Uni, oh my goodness I was so nervous, but over there were four mature students in the group who were far more nervous than the young ones, because we had never done it before. And I think we probably got through the 20 minutes presentation in 10 minutes, because we were talking so fast, with nervous. But looking back, it was a fantastic experience, because it made me stand up in front of the group.

Interviewer: Yeah. And all adds to the self confidence building, self esteem building that you talked about earlier.

Interviewee: Yeah, it was. I remember actually I had to drive over to South London to go and meet up, because one of the guys in the group, he was disabled. So it was really difficult for him to get over and we all went over to South London and it was – I mean it was quite difficult. Obviously, we had to arrange child care and, but it was excellent, because we got together and also got to learn from them. So I think it was really good as well.

Interviewer: So it wasn't just about an educational experience, it was also about networking and meeting people, learning from others?

Interviewee: Yes.

Interviewer: And a lot more of a sort of a package really?

Interviewee: Well I think as well. I think before I actually went to university, before I did my Access Course, I used always think I want to read books, but how do you know which book to read, I want to watch films, but how do you know which film to watch. I want to have conversations beyond, what happened on eastenders or what did you have for dinner. So I was working in a bar, but I remember when I worked in a bar in Cyprus when I left home I went back packing and worked in a bar and I remember buying myself a French and German, how to teach yourself French and German in three months. And I remember I got to – I had to work in the bar and I go to wash glasses and I would think this is not me. This is not me, I want to do something else, but I didn't know how to do it and I didn't know how to meet the people. So I thought well, I can kind of – because of my background I can dip into

any group and I've got a wide range of friends who are from all walks of life and have all like levels of education or who are without formal education. And so that's great, I love that, I love that I have got that. But I needed intellectual stimulation even before I'd gone to university and I think that going to university enabled me to make friendships and to know – to have friendships in which you can discuss, have interests and discussions and who you meet on an intellectual level. So I think that was really, really a real positive. A real positive, because I have met someone recently who I know I can see in them the stage I was at before I went to university and I can see them they are desperate to study, they are desperate to meet new kinds of people and I realized...

Interviewer: A burning desire in them.

Interviewee: Yeah. They've got it and you can see and it's so frustrating, because I feel like saying you're looking for like-minded people, but you're not going to find them because of your age, because you just don't go out and meet people that is leaving in nearly 30s and I think the only thing that would allow you to meet like-minded people is to do a university degree now.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Interviewee: And I can see that, so I think that that's been instrumental for me in changing my perception of myself, allowed me to meet new people and – so yeah, I think the fact that you do go to uni as a mature student as well that you – that opens a whole new world in terms of networking and socializing, but it also means that you have empathy for people who haven't gone to university. I don't think you feel – you feel privileged and that you've had the opportunity, but I think you've got empathy because you realize that not everyone has the opportunity and it doesn't mean to say that they're not capable, but they've just not had the route in life that's allowed them to access it.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Interviewee: I think that's quite – for me that's what I feel.

Interviewer: Do you put that down as a positive or...

Interviewee: I think it's a positive, because I remember I – well actually an ex who grew up in a very academic family and it was always – he basically you will go to university and you will be the best and he is now on his third master's degree and I think he has done three master's degrees and he is now doing a PhD. But he is not getting self satisfaction from it. So he is – the higher education system is just making him compare himself more to all of his friends. But I remember once when we were at home and someone was coming around, who was an electrician and in the country where he comes from that's not a career that's highly respected and you don't go through the – I mean...

Interviewer: Because it's a manual trade.

Interviewee: A manual trade. I remember he said to me, wait a minute, how do I talk to someone who hasn't been to university, how do I do that? Well what do I say to them? I don't know anyone who hasn't been to university.

Interviewer: Right.

Interviewee: I thought...

Interviewer: He didn't have the social skills that you have because of your background and your experiences of meeting diverse range of people, he had a very narrow skill set, yes.

Interviewee: Yeah. And I also think for example like the last school I taught at, it was just assumed that every girl would go to university and out of a year group of 99, 98 would go and the one that didn't go was generally from one of the most affluent families and so she would – they were all going to marry well and she would live off the family money

Interviewer: She didn't really need a career.

Interviewee: She didn't need a career. There was always one, but I don't think that was – I think that that wasn't that educational system didn't suit that child. Had they been another – I think they needed a different kind of school which is highly academic, but I think for me I'm going to restart teaching here. I'm going to go through a graduate training program. I also think what I'm going to have is I'm going to be able to look at students and I'm going to see students who want to go to university and they're going to work hard towards that goal and I'm going to see students and I'm going to see in them this isn't your place. This is not for you right now, but that doesn't mean to say you're not capable of great things in the future and I had one student like that. I was a form teacher and school just wasn't for her and I used to say so you're going to do so well in the future. This is just not your place.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Interviewee: And I can see all of the talent that you have and you will go far. But I know you're not enjoying this experience, but it doesn't mean to say you won't enjoy the next experience of education, because I've been there. So I think I loved university, I didn't like the last experience of school.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Interviewee: So I think it was good, so I've got positive...

Interviewer: Yeah that is very empathetic to be able to see...

Interviewee: Yeah. That's what I...

Interviewer: Observe it, yeah.

Interviewee: Just because I think that I didn't – I left school feeling like a failure. But I left university feeling really proud of myself.



Interviewer: Yeah. But why do you think this happens? Why do you think people have such a negative school experience and then later in life they seem to find themselves and flourish through a different educational experience?

Interviewee: I think for me two main points stick out; one could be the family system. If the family don't support education, I think that there is often a working class fear. Though I know it's like a sweeping statement in a general term working class, but I grew up in a council estate in Scotland and although my mum had a very good job, which maybe would have deemed her middle class in terms of outlook and I would say we were a very working class. And I think that if the family don't support, they'd often have a fear of it. If their child becomes educated then they're going to meet different kinds of people, but I knew when I did my degree I met someone and I remember thinking I can't introduce this person to my family, to my mum. I just couldn't, because I knew they wouldn't mix. My mum hadn't gone through an education. My mum has since done a master's degree and I could now introduce to these people, because doing the degree has given her the confidence, but before she would have completely shut off. So I think if the family structure encourages you or discourages you, I think that's really and it's the whole like house...

Interviewer: The key.

Interviewee: Yeah it's the key, how is education perceived at home, how was it discussed? I mean I can see my daughter just got her GCSE results and then she was telling how concerned she was about her friend who didn't do very well. And it was quite interesting, because my daughter showed no interest in her GCSEs, but then when she got them she realized the value of doing well and it would give her future opportunities where she could see that her friend was limited with opportunities straight away. But the friend – her friend doesn't get any encouragement from home. There's no sense of respect for education, her brother's been expelled from three different education establishments, because he doesn't go to school. He is like a not a school refuser, but he won't go.

Interviewer: Disengaged?

Interviewee: And – yeah, disengaged. And so that's really basically the message that that young girl got from home. So she -- and she doesn't – you can see she just lacks confidence in herself and you can see that you think it's – there's a clever girl in there, but she doesn't know she is clever. So I think that family is very important and then the other one I think of why they don't well at school, because that was the question, wasn't it?

Interviewer: Yeah.

Interviewee: why they switch off. It depends on the school where you are, but I would say that as an adult I learn visually. But I think that pedagogy, I mean it's advanced so much and it was so – I mean I know that you can't say that we're going to – when we teach a lesson, we're going to take that. You got to look at the videos, you're kinesthetic and you can't appeal to each and every student, because they've all got their own styles, but you try to tap in so at least each student will get one part of the lesson that appeals to them.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Interviewee: But I think that when I was at school I didn't know how I learned, I didn't know. I think I didn't have any awareness of self study skills and how I actually absorbed things, but I always realized that I'm very – like if I look at someone and turned away I can tell you every single thing have got one and that's not judging their clothes, it's just that I'm visual.

Interviewer: yeah.

Interviewee: I just – I talk a lot, so people don't think that I'm observant, but I'm. And so I've realized I'm actually very visual – which has helped me, because for studying languages I realized that I'm not oral. If I sing a song in English, I sing all the wrong words. So now I don't think it's because I'm so bad, I can't hear anything in Spanish. Look, I try to sing in Spanish or English, I want to sing wrong words when I hear it, I have to see it written. That has enabled me to realize that I'm not a failure at something, I just have to use my own strategy. So I think that students when I was at school, who weren't really equipped with the skills, I moved to a very traditional school. So I mean I can't talk for everyone, but if I say for myself in my first school it was a very tough school. Teachers had to be very dedicated to want to work there. You wouldn't just choose to work. I mean if you weren't really committed to teaching, you wouldn't work in that school.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Interviewee: I mean I saw violence, but the teachers were so passionate and they just – I don't know how they did it, but they managed to teach us and I loved that school. And then I moved to a more traditional one which was deemed better and if you know there were ofsted reports at that time then you would have looked at the school but, it didn't suit me as a person. It was very traditional. I was turned off on the first day. I basically went into the German class, I'd been top in German, I'm the top three in my last class and I'm not a competitive person but I knew that if I was in the top three that I would cope with the work. So there were 30 people and I thought okay, so I did really well in my last class, I must be at least average in this class. So on the first day the teacher said put your hands up if you have not finished this exercise, so I put my hand up and she started shouting, what do you mean you have not finished? Why haven't you finished that? And I just thought, well I'm being honest and I'm working really hard at it.

Interviewer: She did ask?

Interviewee: I know she did ask and I'm really trying to do it. And I remember sitting at the back in tears and I thought I will never ever open a book for you again. You've humiliated me in class, you've just made me afraid of you and I can't work under fear. And so I think that very authoritarian style did not suit me. So I think if you've got students who're disengaged and failing, I would say a lot of that comes from the family and also from it could be fear, peer pressure, it wasn't cool. I was in this kind of – actually it's really strange, because all my friends were really like studying, but I was just – I was a bit like one of the –

like the ADD child that just couldn't concentrate and I was being wild like I was – I was always looking for the next adventure and going out and kind of trouble I could get into. It was like...

Interviewer: So that was more fun?

Interviewee: That was more fun, but maybe that's where I felt comfortable because I don't know, I just didn't – I remember once I took three weeks off school, because I was so frightened of my teacher, I didn't know how – that same teacher, I didn't know how to ask her for help. I had no one at home I could ask. So they phoned my mum and said I hadn't gone to school for three weeks. Why, all because I was too frightened of the teacher. So I said...

Interviewer: How old were you?

Interviewee: 17. I know I was made prefect after that, but I think that was just because I got on with a lot of people, they voted for me. But so I stayed on to school till I was 18, because basically I thought well this is a bit of a dos actually and I was so afraid of what I would do next and I knew university wasn't an option. But basically inside I wanted to do really well, but I just didn't have the skill, I didn't have the concentration, I procrastinate, I never got round to doing anything, but now looking back it was just that I didn't feel confident and there was a lot going on at home. So I think a lot. So I lost and I probably digressed a little bit but I think the students, I think nowadays the classes are like in terms of – there is an argument for mixed ability, but I think there are students that if they struggle with school, they have strategies in place. They can take them out; they can work one on one. I think nowadays they're identified, well, I think it's gone the other way though I think there is so much pressure on teachers to get their 5 A-Cs. But I think already they can – if they can see a student that is struggling, there are support systems there to help. So I think that the education system has improved and what – and I hate to use the word service, because it makes us sound like a business, but what the way in which they are and the skill – just not the service they're offering kids, but just the whole structure is more suitable for like those mixed abilities to enter school and so I think also in terms of what the use of technology in classrooms nowadays, because I'm thinking like if you've got young disengaged boys then maybe you can kind of use the technology to grab them. So I think that before we've gone away the three skills, the three Rs and used to be drummed into you rote fashion and I think that was very difficult setting rules, there was no terms of peer and working with your peers. So I think nowadays the whole group work, peer work and teaching critical thinking, students having a voice in the classroom, I think that's really important for them.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Interviewee: And I think that's – so I think that's quite interesting.

Interviewer: Okay, great. And what would you say that the experience of higher education has changed you as a person in anyway? Could you give – if so could you give some examples of how it might have changed you?

Interviewee: I'd say it's changed me in terms of – emotionally and intellectually it's changed me. I would say I feel like I have learned so much more like when you are actually at uni you don't feel like you're learning anything, because you have a lecture each weekend about a different subject and you feel like you just skim the surface and you think well, I haven't really learned anything and you walk away thinking well I couldn't actually tell you anything I've learnt on this degree and I think a lot of students feel like that. You walk away and you think, what do I really know until like you're in a classroom and then you're teaching a poem and then you realize actually you've learned a lot about the enlightenment and that you've covered the French Revolution and you realize – and then so all of a sudden you have this like bank of knowledge like that you don't actually realize that you have. I think it's just there and then you're actually like well, I already know something about this or – and also think it gives you the – inspires you to learn more. I think once you've entered education, I think more for me, and it's made me want to be a lifelong learner. I just want to continue. I love being in education, I love being a student. I love learning and I love being in the classroom. I love learning something new. I love being having a great teacher and I love watching them and thinking why are you such a good teacher? What am I learning from you? What can I then take to the classroom when I'm teaching? So I think that it – and I think it just gives you so many skills, new skills, but it makes you respect education, makes you want to – for me it's made me want to continue. So I think, yeah, so I think intellectually I've moved on and well, I never thought I was intelligent before whereas now I wouldn't say I'm not intellectual but I'm intelligent. I can actually say that, and not feeling like I'm showing off. I now think oh, that's a bit arrogant, but actually I can say actually I'm intelligent.

Interviewer: Yeah, you have a capacity for that.

Interviewee: Yeah, I'm intelligent. There are people who are much more intelligent than I am, but that's fine, because I actually like the level I've reached. I like the fact that I can – I have interests in a range of subjects and I know that I can write an essay about need be and so I feel that that's been really good and, but the only thing is once you start learning you want to learn more.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Interviewee: You feel like – actually interesting and I want to learn more about that.

Interviewer: Bug.

Interviewee: Yeah. It's like – yeah that's contagious. So I'd say that and emotionally as I said earlier just being able to have belief in yourself to just feel like it's just offered me so much and now I feel like exposure to art, literature, theatre, I mean I can go and watch a play now and I can actually understand it. I mean I'm not going to understand everything at times, but I feel like I can tap into so many new and – well I can – well, I said I can go to the theatre, I can really get pleasure from it. I can watch a film, I can deconstruct it. I can analyze it, whereas before I watch a film and think sure that means something, but I don't

really know what. You knew there was something there, so I just think you get greater pleasure of things in life.

Interviewer: But how does – I mean yes, I agree with all that on a sort of a practical level. But how does that affect you and how is that changed you on a personal level and you've used that word emotion a couple of times – emotionally, how or what is that like to you?

Interviewee: I just liked myself more. I like myself more. I feel more confident. I mean I feel like it's a continuum and I feel like I'm still on it and I feel like it's like a little bit of a roller coaster. So I'd say like I'm on the roller coaster and sometimes I have real highs and I think, yes, I can do this. I've achieved something. I've got my degree and then I couldn't have applied for doing teacher training if I didn't have the degree and then you realize how important the degree is and actually the mark that you get and you think oh, I should have realized at the time and put more work in, but anyway so you feel like that real sense of satisfaction gives you more confidence and in other times you take dips, because I think that's life and that's what happens. But I think generally it's made me much happier and a real sense of achievement. And I think the fact that you are committed to something and that you've followed something through when you feel like you failed at something in the past, I think that's really good for you to feel that you have followed something through and you haven't given up and when you reached the hurdle, because there are lots of hurdles as a single parent studying.

Interviewer: Is it healing do you think as a process?

Interviewee: Yes. I would say that's a good word.

Interviewer: Sorry I'm putting words into your mouth.

Interviewee: No, you can.

Interviewer: But how do you think that works then and how does that affect?

Interviewee: I think it does – it makes you go back and so then that kind of act, how you attribute past failures. I think you can then look back and think it's not because I wasn't intelligent enough, it's because – so maybe it's making excuses for yourself and maybe it's like maybe this will, okay the attribution theory that, okay so I can actually say it's because you know I didn't get on with teachers and because of my family and I can maybe talk myself into believing it has nothing to do with me. But I do think it makes me think that you know that you always had the intelligence or the ability not intelligence, I know that's kind of a difficult term to define, but you were always capable, but now I just think that wasn't the right time for you. So don't be hard and then I think wait a minute, because you've gone as a mature student, I spoke about the empathy earlier, I think I've gained so much more.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Interviewee: So I feel like I've actually – I possibly not have more to offer than someone who did the traditional route, but I have different skills to offer. So I think that that's also

something that I feel that's really, really, really good. And I don't think I'm as judgmental as someone, so I think – because you have to struggle and you have to really work hard and you realize how difficult it is and not that everyone can do it.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Interviewee: So you feel like, you do actually feel really lucky and really privileged. And I think also having lived abroad and having witnessed poverty and having seen people who had they grown up in a different society would have had the opportunity. I just feel how lucky I am. I've come from a country that has a support system for kids, kind of not the same system for all students, but at the time I got a grant I was supported through that. It enabled me to achieve a sense of satisfaction and inner happiness. And I know that you think okay, but looking at a piece of paper on a wall, it's not going to make you happy. When you are on your death bed it's the relationships you build. You know what, you think oh, I'm doing all this and it's just for a piece of paper. It's not just for the piece of paper, I mean I've had this conversation with my lecturer on a course, teacher I'm doing, I have just finished and she talks about this transformative learning and it's about what you learn about yourself in the process. So okay, I've learned how to write an essay, but actually I also learned much more than that about myself.

Interviewer: And your capabilities?

Interviewee: And my capabilities, but also about my defects as well. Really good at procrastinating and not doing work and I've also realized during my degree, because I was younger and I could work. I could only work at the last minute and I've realized I was quite hard on myself thinking you're really lazy, looking back it wasn't.

Interviewer: Why do you think that – why did you do that do you think?

Interviewee: Well at the time I just thought I was lazy and the more I thought I was lazy it was like that self-fulfilling prophecy and then I would keep telling myself negative, because I'm really, really hard on myself and I think oh, you're lazy, you're lazy. But in retrospect now, through doing further higher education courses, I've realized that it's the pressure that I put myself under, so that continued and I continued, I was talking about self confidence whilst I've improved, there is still a long way to go.

Interviewer: So. Okay sorry, explain that to me a bit more. How does this procrastination thing really work?

Interviewee: Like okay, I think – sorry, do you want to say – do you want to finish?

Interviewer: I just want you to explain that to me. You say that you were procrastinating and sort of blaming it on the fact that you're lazy and you didn't want to do it. But was that the real reason?

Interviewee: At that time I thought it was I'd get myself into an awful state and then I remember at one point thinking you should really study drama, because you are such a good

actress you can go into your lectures and tell them that you have like – written the whole essay when you haven't actually written a word and if you can put this much effort into going and getting through tutorial, I'd think you should just write it, because it's there. And then I remember once being in a tutorial and saying I'm going to need an extra day, because it's actually – well, this is what I've written, hadn't written a word

Interviewer: So why were you putting it off?

Interviewee: Oh, this is the thing. I thought it was laziness, it wasn't. It was lack of self confidence. I thought actually...

Interviewer: Oh, it was avoidance then?

Interviewee: Avoidance, yeah. I thought I was – and looking back as well, I wanted to do really well. I wanted to do really, really well.

Interviewer: So you're putting yourself under pressure?

Interviewee: Yeah, putting myself under so much pressure and I get this and I still get it now. I didn't get it then, but it probably manifested itself in other ways maybe because I was kind of still a bit of a party animal I think. So I think I was still kind of living life in a way that I don't live life now, when I say party I mean like – because you're still young you want to go out and you have a drink and things – now I think I actually internalize on my emotions, like I don't go out on a Friday night with my friends and then any emotions I built in, get released when we have enough glasses of wine. Now, I actually think about everything and I think I'm getting, this is – I describe it as an inner tidal wave of fear that just rises up and I think I can't do it, I can't do it, I can't do it and then I have to stop and it's actually going now. I'm starting to learn how to deal with that and it's just you want to do so well. You put yourself under so much pressure. You think I can't fail at this, because I'm an adult and you can't just keep going back and trying again, you have to do well.

Interviewer: But that feeling is also clashing with the other feeling of lack of confidence and a sense of I won't be able to do it.

Interviewee: Yeah, you won't be able to do it and then I think also this is me, I have so many ideas in my head at once, but I find that very difficult to sit and concentrate because I have like 50 thoughts come in to my head at once. I think it's called – someone's referred to as it the monkey mind. We have these thoughts and sometimes when I'm sitting the thoughts like ricochet round like ping pong and now instead of thinking, oh, I can't do, I can't do, I think okay, so you have got lots of thoughts, what are they, write them down.

Interviewer: Organize them, yeah.

Interviewee: Just organize them and stop getting to agitated about it. So I think it's also learning how to deal with your own self and how to organize yourself and rather than think oh god, this is too difficult thinking okay, how are you going to organize this looking at calmly, so I think that's a...

Interviewer: So you've learned all this?

Interviewee: Yeah.

Interviewer: Through the educational experience, really?

Interviewee: Yeah.

Interviewer: As an adult.

Interviewee: Yeah. I would say I've learned more about myself, that's been the most important thing apart from receiving that piece of paper that's enabled me to go on and apply for jobs after whatever or courses, it's been what I – I'm not that person anymore that says I want to watch a film, but I don't know which film to watch. I want to read a book, but which book do you read.

Interviewer: Yeah. Now you know?

Interviewee: Yeah, now I've got lots of books.

Interviewer: So it's almost like a parallel track really. On one side you've got the practical qualifications and this is where it's going to get you and this is good and kind of enables your career advancement. And then on the other side you've got this whole sort of personal journey going on where you're discovering things about yourself, healing past experiences, and...

Interviewee: Yeah and I think it's because it's good to look back and think school just wasn't for me at that time. It just wasn't for me. It's not that I'm a failure. It just wasn't the right thing for me at that time. And I think that's really, really helpful and I think that's the positive way to look on it now and then to not think and even to not lay blame to anyone. The teachers were working within a system at the time. The training they'd had, it didn't suit me, but it suited other students. So okay, it's fine. I realized that the experience at the university – and I think it was particularly that university as well that helped me.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Interviewee: It was that university. I'm not sure how I would have got on another one.

Interviewer: Right. Why do you say it was that university in particular? What was it about? Was it the location, the environment?

Interviewee: Location, it was near my house. Location, it was near my house. So it wasn't my first choice. I didn't actually want to go there, but then I realized I was actually limited as a single parent living in...

Interviewer: So more of a practical choice really there?

Interviewee: Practical, now I think it was for the best and I had a fantastic mentor who'd also been a single parent and she had also lived in as a single parent in Peru. So she was the one



who recommended I go to Peru for my year abroad and not Paraguay like everyone else. So I think that that was helpful. I mean I don't know how I would have got through, because she could recognize in me at times when I was – I wasn't getting something done through lack of self belief as suppose to laziness. She could – in retrospect she could probably see that, but she was incredibly supportive and I just think that there the lecturers were extremely approachable and as a mature student who kind of feared education; not feared but didn't necessarily feel that that was a place that they were meant to be, that that was very – that was really, really helpful for me.

Interviewer: Were there a lot of the mature students there?

Interviewee: Yes, there were a lot of mature students who were single parents.

Interviewer: Yeah. So you said earlier about the social networking and supports that you had?

Interviewee: Yeah, that was really important. I mean even things like they would tie in reading weeks on weeks when the kids were off school so that you could – they really, really tried to accommodate parents as well which I think is really important because it's...

Interviewer: Giving you the best opportunities.

Interviewee: Giving you the...

Interviewer: To succeed and achieve.

Interviewee: Yeah. And I mean I remember even once giving a child an lecture and the child got to sit and draw and I just think for a lecturer I mean you wouldn't be aloud to do that now, I'm sure. But I mean at the time thinking, I mean this child didn't disrupt the class in anyway, they were quiet, they were back, they were sitting and drawing, but that just shows how they understood.

Interviewer: Yeah, how accommodative.

Interviewee: Yeah, accommodative.

Interviewer: They were, yeah.

Interviewee: Yeah. To think that they understand the realities for parents who study and also after I finished my degree I was so – I started as a single parent and graduated pregnant with my second child. And I remember I thought I finished my degree and I thought I'm pregnant, so I can't apply for a job, because no one is going to employ me. What am I going to do? So I didn't just sit there and I went back into the uni, I just walked into the Anthropology Department and went, hello, can I come in your course please. Well, basically they said, yes. So I did two units in anthropology and it was really difficult and he said well not – as you were a graduate, I'm not going to put you into year one, so he put me in the third year of the last two units and they were amazing. I absolutely loved. I learned so much.

Interviewer: So did you wish you've done that instead of the course that you've done?

Interviewee: Yeah, I did. But it was a really difficult course. But had I not done my degree, and had that piece of paper, I wouldn't have felt confident to walk in and talk to this doctor of anthropology who is like quite – like highly esteemed within his own area. And I wouldn't have had that inner confidence and I actually did really well in the assignments and I was really pleased and I loved the experience. The marks didn't count towards anything, because it was something I was doing as interest, but had – if I had got pregnant before and felt okay so I've got nine months that I've not been able to work, what would – I wouldn't – if I didn't have that degree, I wouldn't have even thought to do that. So it kind of opens the door to that in terms of having interest. I want to learn more and just always kind of building on that. So I think actually I could...

Interviewer: Yeah. Yet more possibilities, Yet more opportunities, Yet more confidence building stuff.

Interviewee: Yeah and that's...

Interviewer: It's like a wall, isn't it going up brick by brick

Interviewee: Yeah. And I just can't see anything negative and I can't think of a negative of going to university. Now it is a lot different because of the fees involved and I know there are lots of graduates in terms of job opportunities, but I still think that in terms of what it does for you as a person.

Interviewer: Your personal...

Interviewee: Personal experience. Whereas I have a friend and she didn't get that, she said I really regret going to the same university. She didn't do the right degree, she didn't think it was a very good course and I just feel like she didn't use that as an opportunity to learn about herself as well, I feel like you have to really embrace it. You have to actually want it – you have to be engaged, you have to be passionate about it. You can't expect them to do all the work. You have to put something in as well. So yeah, I think I can't really see a negative in terms of going to university especially as a single parent, especially as an adult.

Interviewer: Okay. The next question is what issues do you think face mature students in higher education, particularly in mature students?

Interviewee: All right. Financial, that's what and I would say prevents a lot of mature students from actually going plus how do you manage to run a home and study and like financially how does that work? I was really lucky that when I went, you were still given grants from the government. So I felt it really supported. So I think that's really, really, that's a huge, huge and practical issue. Also childcare, if you've got children I think. So lots of practical issues and is there an educational establishment near your house that you can actually attend, so I think there are all, what courses do they offer? I mean if you start, because I know someone who wanted to start an Access Course, but then they realized that to do the Access Course they would then do a three-year degree and then so they're thinking

well, I'm already 38, well, I'll be 42 by the time, I mean – so that put them off and I remember thinking well, if you're going to work till you're 65, then actually that's a lot of time and you will enjoy the whole time. So you have got four years of enjoyment, because it's not just all stress and deadlines and that is well I think sometimes you actually get off on that. It's like it's kind of good to like kind of get stressed that is something like that there is something, it's positive stress in a way as well. And so I think in terms of, I think looking at the timeframe, because they were already mature so they were saying, well, I can't take four years out of my life, but they don't see that that's four years that will be so well spend and enjoyment...

Interviewer: And investment.

Interviewee: An investment, yeah. And the whole process, so I think that's it – practical, family, thinking some people just don't know. I mean I remember one of my friends, she did an Access Course and she'd never heard of them until she met me. So she has done a degree and she always said I was her inspiration. So that's quite interesting to think that you kind of enter into the system not believing that you can do and then all of a sudden someone else tells you that you're her inspiration. So I think it's also your peers or how well advertise the courses are and I think as an adult as well, it's finding what your interest is and you think I want to study, but what do I study. There is so much out there. How do you know what to choose, I think that's why I did an access to combine studies which was fantastic, because I realized that I really enjoyed the sociology, history and politics, okay I went into languages and linguistics, but still even now still I have a real interest in sociology and history not so much politics now, but – and so I think...

Interviewer: All within the social science.

Interviewee: Yeah, all within social sciences. Yeah, I really enjoy social sciences and humanities and also because I started a – I have done my lectures for the master's. It's really interesting that they start discussing like a big name in a certain field and I think, oh yeah, I recognize that name, and so it's really good to think okay I might not remember everything about it, but I know I could easily go back and look at my notes or I can actually just look them up, but that's really good. So I think – but anyway, so what would – what issues would they have, practical and then I think this thing is which I've mentioned in relation to myself, some people just don't think they are capable and I've had that so much with people. Oh, I always want to do that, but it wasn't any good or I wasn't any good. I wasn't able to do that, oh, I couldn't do that, you hear that all the time from people when they ask you what you do or they're asking how you getting on or like the neighbours know that I'm studying and they are - don't know how you do it, and I think this is – it's the fear of the unknown as well. People think that they wouldn't be capable but the support system...

Interviewer: And also possibly a bad educational experience?

Interviewee: Oh, definitely.

Interviewer: If they were in education before and they didn't have a good experience, then they kind of carrying that through and think...

Interviewee: Yeah, and I think a lot of people don't realize as well that actually you can – if it's something you've always wanted to do like with me the languages, I was on my Access Course and wanted to choose a degree and I'm kind of notoriously indecisive, So every day I would come in and they will all go and what you're doing today? I will do sociology now and then they will be like, and tomorrow there'll be another thing. So and I remember one of the girls, she was a really good linguist. She said I'm going to do linguistics with Spanish and I said is that possible, what can you start a language? she said yeah and I was like, oh, I remember sitting on the bus thinking...

Interviewer: Thinking it...

Interviewee: Thinking it through. I'm obsessed with languages, but I almost feel I'm carrying that I'm a failure at languages, I'm a failure, I can't do it. And anything, but she can do it. And then I thought that's amazing that you can start university without a language and they will get you up to a level. So I think it's also not actually being aware of the opportunities that are out there. You think oh well, you've got to be really clever. You want to do science, you got to at least have a – like I've been really good at science in school, no, you can do an Access Course in Science and also there are courses out there. So I think it's also just not being aware and...

Interviewer: Yeah, lack of information.

Interviewee: Yeah, lack of information and also fear of the unknown I think, so...

Interviewer: Okay.

Interviewee: Yeah and encouragement as well. If you're not going to be encouraged by your – like your family and I remember people saying to me when I did my course, why have you done language, everyone speaks English, why would you do that? Why would you waste four years learning the language? Everyone speaks English. But then afterwards, well, I think it's amazing you've done it, but not kind of understanding why you would invest time...

Interviewer: Yeah, again they don't see the long-term investment.

Interviewee: Yeah. So I think it's a lot about, it's about long-term investment. It's about looking towards the future. I think it's also having a goal in mind. You have to have something to look towards and sometimes through your situation, family life, you don't actually know how to create that goal, because I remember walking into the university once and saying to them, I really want to study and he said well what course do you want to do, well I don't know. What are you interested in and I remember thinking well, so how can I really think I'm good at anything so, how can I be interested in it? So I think that's also important.

Interviewer: Okay. You've mentioned a few times that you've got children.

Interviewee: Yeah.

Interviewer: So I just sort of wondering whether they factor into any of this in anyway? I mean for example, would you see a positive in being a mature student in terms of your – having your children and the way they view you and they or not?

Interviewee: Yes, definitely because my children have seen me do – go through a few courses. They have seen the stress I put myself under before I have to submit an assignment.

Interviewer: So has it put them off?

Interviewee: Well I have to say that my – well, my daughter did say to me last week, mummy, I wish you worked in a shop it would be so much easier as I was asking her to help me.

Interviewer: Yeah

Interviewee: As I was asking her...

Interviewer: can't you work in Tesco, yeah.

Interviewee: Well she said Debenhams, because her friend's mum works in Debenhams and she says, she is the eldest one who is 16, who as a teenager is not allowed to show enthusiasm for anything and said, actually this is really interesting – well I think it's interesting, because I was making a PowerPoint to teach a lesson for the very first hour – a French lesson for the very first time and she was like, oh, wish you worked in Debenhams, oh, this is so not cool mummy and I had to submit a portfolio So I made her sit and cut pieces of yellow paper and write words in French on it and she was going, oh, and I said this is great we're bonding while we're doing this and she was just not impressed. So then it was the whole – oh, I wish you worked in Debenhams, but then she went to her college induction and had to – because she got A's for her – the subjects she wants to do French, Spanish, Geography and Geology, she got an A star for Spanish, A for French, A for Geography. She is capable of continuing these courses.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Interviewee: The teacher said to her, the French teacher, well, I'm wondering how you're going to possibly cope with the course as you only got a D for English and she turned around and said the woman, ask my mother as a Spanish and French teacher I think I will cope. So that was her showing me that actually it's quite cool that you're actually in education and sometimes that I used to teach her friends at school because she attended the school, so sometimes she didn't like it, but then other times when her friends needed help before an exam and I could actually talk them through it, then she actually – I could see she liked it.

Interviewer: Yeah. So there is some use in it for her...

Interviewee: Oh, there is some use in it, but just won't admit it, but my youngest one has seen me struggle and recently I have done a course where I feel like I'm not been able to be a parent for the last few months. And so the whole time I'm saying to them, look, you know mummy is doing this because I want us to have a better future and you know mummy struggled at school, so I'm having to do this as an adult. So that's why I want you to do so well, but I think I'm – so they will be like the positive benefits also the education can give you. So they're really, really, they are aware of that. They are aware of how hard I have worked and they are aware that obviously I respect education and I'm really in to education, because I talk about it all the time. And probably I've got a bit, not a chip on my shoulder, but I don't want my kids to – I realize that had I gone on, I might have not been kind of crippled with a lack of self confidence. And so I want them to do well, but my youngest one said to me recently she went, mummy, you're my role model in life and I said why is that, she said, because you work so hard and you study and you always try to do your best and she sees me sitting doing home works and they see me – and I think because we do, we discuss classes all the time, we discuss teachers and we always – she loves her school, she loves her teachers and she like loves coming home and tell me about the class and she is really aware, because she is seeing me at home.

She said I know that Mrs. Khan spends lots of time preparing her lessons how many 10 year olds come home and say that. I can tell that she really prepared a lesson, she even said that she practises them with her husband. Obviously ofsted were due to visit school, but I just think that in terms of the oldest one I think there is a lot going on, but she's just too cool for school to actually mention it now right now. I think in another couple of years I will probably find out more from her. But I do know that she does – I know she is proud of me. I know she is really proud of me for studying and then the youngest one, she said that it's – I'm really good role model for her. She thinks that is really positive.

And they suffer, but they suffer for that as well, because they realize and that's when I say that mummy is not with you today, not because I don't want to be, but because I can't, because I have to do this. But they understand, because I'm not out and kind of shopping or hanging out with friends or on holidays without them. They actually see me studying, but I think that's really good for them, because I think they've got to realize you don't get anything for nothing and I think nowadays sorry, I'm going on a bit, I think we live in a society in which you have this whole notion of – and that you can be famous for not actually having any talent and I think this work culture and I think lots of young girls are growing up thinking as long as I look good and the potential that I can just tap into this reality TV show culture. And I think that some of them are losing this work ethic, because they don't actually realize that there's a lot of merit in professions and working and I decided to think it's really, really important for them to have that.

Interviewer: Yeah. Okay, then great, brilliant. Okay. Is – I mean I've got no more questions to ask, but is there anything else that you would like to add or go back to or elaborate on?

Interviewee: In a way if I think if you could do right time and if I was this – I had gone and done really, really well at school and I would think I wouldn't change it right now, because I think I have learned so much about myself as a person. I have learned that as an adult you can still be like a child and you can still get in a class, you want to do well, you want positive feedback, you're 40 years old. What, you're 41 years old and when you get your homework

Interviewer: You still want that pat on the head.

Interviewee: Yes, I wanted an excellent for that one, I put 4 hours work in to that and I think that it makes you realize especially when you teach and I think that you should really have empathy and I think that it doesn't matter if you're an adult, when you're in that classroom you revert back to being a child in terms of wanting positive feedback thinking that if someone in the class, as my mum will say empty barrels make the most noise, but until you've got that confidence to think oh, that's just one of those empty barrels making the most noise, until you can actually see through that and think, oh my goodness, she is sounding so much more intelligent, they know more about the subject and then I think that's really, really good. I mean I'm not sure if children actually they really care as much, maybe they don't actually want to contribute all the time in class. But I think it's really good to go back and to realize it before an exam it doesn't matter if you're 14 or 40. You get yourself in the state. You sit down, you get nervous. I mean some people really like exams, but generally most people find them quite difficult and intimidating and get really nervous and I think that. And – so I think if I could go back, I wouldn't change anything there, because I think I've learned so much through the process and I think if I'd have just gone straight from Uni and then gone and got my degree, I wouldn't appreciate it as much.

I think I have got an appreciation for education, for the kind of pastoral care system that I had at my Uni for the individual like lecturers/mentors and I just think that that's been invaluable and also just been able to as an adult you do tend to self reflect and I think that's been invaluable and for the – maybe if I was going into a different profession I wouldn't need all those skills.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Interviewee: But I think particularly because with teaching, I now wouldn't change a thing and I think the reason that on my graduate training program that I'm going on, I look round and there are some of that have done the traditional route, you can tell by their age, but there are others they've gone through as mature students, they've gone for people in their 40s, they've gone for people in their 30s and 40s, there is one that looks about 50, why? Why if she is like another 15 years of work, why they have chosen to invest time in her and train her, because she must have something...

Interviewer: Kind of see the value, yeah.

Interviewee: They can see something in her that she will have skills, I'm not saying better, but she will have different kinds of skills and they'll compliment. They'll compliment with the other ones, so I think that's really important.

Interviewer: Okay then, great. Thank you...

Interviewee: All right...

Interviewer: Very much.