An exploration of teaching assistants' engagement with Foundation degree study

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Abstract

This thesis discusses an investigation into the understandings that school-based teaching assistants had of engaging with Foundation degree study at a new university. The general methodological approach adopted was qualitative. It was informed by aspects of the ethnographic perspective, but does not claim to be a traditional ethnography. The central issues that were explored were learners' views of their reasons for choosing their course of study, their thoughts on being a Foundation degree student and feelings as they reached the end of their studies.

This thesis offers a distinctive approach by addressing these three issues which are not examined holistically in existing research literature on teaching assistants and Foundation degree study. It also highlights the way that a range of circumstances and, crucially, identities inform Foundation degree students' views of their engagement with study. Specifically, the research underlines the importance that notions of studentship, domestic roles and workplace experiences play in structuring these students' understandings. This thesis also adds to the body of research that has explored the experiences of student-parents by documenting how learners from this group engage with a sub-degree level programme of vocationally-related higher education.

In common with many ethnographers, the investigation's ontological position was that individuals socially construct the world as they interpret it and act on these understandings. It was informed by the interpretivist perspective that has been developed by sociologists of education. This data was collected over four academic years and covered various points of the students' studies. Semi-structured interviews with first and second year students were the primary method of data collection. Interviewing was initially conducted in a group format, before a smaller number of individual interviews were undertaken were carried out to further explore emergent themes. Eight group interviews were carried out with 44 participants. These were followed up with 12 individual interviews. Participant observations and documentary analysis of course-related documents were also drawn upon as contextualising sources. This data was utilised to develop the interview schedules which produced the main findings that are reported in this thesis. Fourteen modules were observed to produce supporting contextualising data.

The overarching finding of this research was that for those whose views were captured, their engagement with Foundation degree study was often framed in terms of it being part of a complex and dynamic process of identity work. This cut across motives for study, experiences of being a Foundation degree student and the meanings ascribed to leaving their studies. Learners often defined their engagement across each of these in terms of identity transformation and preservation. Personal, occupational, learner and domestic identities were viewed as structuring this process. Employed student-mothers faced particular challenges due to having to manage inequitable experiences that accompanied their domestic, workplace and Foundation degree identities.

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Author's Declaration

I declare that the work in this thesis is my own and is not based on any previous research. It has not been submitted for a higher degree at any other institution.

INTRODUCTION

Focus and rationale

In the past two decades there has been a dramatic rise in the number of school-based teaching assistants in a range of international contexts (Devecchi, Dettori, Doveston, Sedgwick & Jament, 2012; Tent, 2014). For Edmond (2010), this trend has produced a large group of school-based workers who can be categorised as what she terms "associate professionals". OECD data in 2009 showed 30 countries as having education systems that included workers who fell into this category (Edmond & Hayler, 2013). In terms of direct involvement in teaching and learning in schools, this trend has included the establishment of large numbers of *assistant pedagogiques* in France, paraeducators in the United States, and teaching assistants in the United Kingdom. The creation of these posts has been part of a wider expansion of paraprofessional roles across public welfare services including health, social care and education (Webster, Blatchford, Bassett, Brown, Martin & Russell, 2010). OECD countries have experienced a 29% increase in such posts in educational contexts compared with 12% rise in teaching posts (Edmond & Hayler, 2013).

In England, the emergence of large numbers of teaching assistants has been exceptionally dramatic (Bedford, Goddard, Obadan & Mowat, 2006). According to the Department for Education's Annual School Workforce Census (DfE, 2014a; 2014b), 243,700 teaching assistants were employed in English state funded schools in 2013. This rise was a 4.9 % increase on the previous year. The number of full-time-equivalent teaching assistants increased by 220,000 between 2005 and 2013 (Coughlan, 2014). It has been claimed that this recent cycle of growth was partially set in motion by New Labour's desire to "remodel" the workforce in English state schools (see Ofsted, 2005); essentially driven by a desire to raise "standards" (Edmond, 2003) whilst also promoting greater inclusivity (Burgess, 2008; Burgess & Shelton Mayes, 2009).

In conjunction with the extensive numerical rise in teaching assistant posts in England, a significant reconfiguration of the workplace duties that this group are routinely required to undertake has occurred (Tucker, 2009). "Role stretch" and "role creep" has been documented in relation to teaching assistant roles (Warhurst, Nickson, Commander, & Gilbert, 2013, p. 159). Tasks including specialist intervention activity (Groom & Rose, 2005), pastoral duties (Calvert, 2009; Leach, 2009) and "supervised"

teaching (Graves, 2013) have been identified as being amongst the duties that teaching assistants are now expected to perform.

In England, as a response to teaching assistants' increasing demands for professional development, a large number of Foundation degree programmes have been established to meet the needs of these workers (Morris, 2010). These programmes have placed significant emphasis on the value of work-based learning for teaching assistants (Thurgate & MacGregor, 2008). This thesis provides an analysis of teaching assistants' understandings of their engagement with work-related Foundation degree study. Course choice, experiences of being a student and exit from Foundation degree are all analysed as part of this interrogation. The general approach that was adopted to investigate these issues was qualitative research that was, in some respects, ethnographic in style. The research does not, however, claim to be a traditional ethnographic study, but merely informed by the ethnographic perspective. The learners who agreed to be part of my study were enrolled on a Foundation degree at one post-1992 University in the North of England. They attended taught sessions on the higher education institution's main campus, and were employed or volunteered in schools in North, East and South Yorkshire.

The genesis for this research stemmed partially from my experiences as a teacher on one Foundation degree programme and observing the expansion of similar courses across the higher education sector in the United Kingdom. Whilst teaching on a Foundation degree, I had listened with interest as a number of students disclosed their thoughts about being a teaching assistant and a higher education student, especially in relation to the challenges that a dual identity and role presented. The need for further research in this area and the ways that these students experienced learning became evident as I prepared to teach a second year Foundation degree module on the changing roles and responsibilities of teaching assistants. It was apparent that although there was a small but emerging body of literature on workplace role modification, little substantial research existed at this point in 2008 on teaching assistants' views of Foundation degrees. The expanding number of teaching assistants and their increased influence on children's educational experiences (Butt & Lance, 2009) also made the issue of teaching assistants' education seem an important area that was worthy of further academic research. Capturing the views that teaching assistants had of their experiences of Foundation degree study was prioritised, at the expense of their

university lecturers and the qualified teachers that they worked alongside in schools, as their "voices are too often silenced in educational debates" (Barkham, 2008, 839).

Central aim of the study and research questions

The main aim of this investigation was to explore the understandings that school-based teaching assistants held about their engagement with a Foundation degree that was directly related to their workplace roles. In particular, it endeavoured to research the views that such learners held about why this form of higher education had been initially attractive, their experiences of being a Foundation degree student and the feelings that they experienced as they came to the end of their studies. Three key research questions were formulated to examine teaching assistants' experiences of Foundation degree study:

1) What motives and circumstances influence teaching assistants' decisions when they decide to undertake a work-related Foundation degree programme?

2) How do teaching assistants interpret their experiences of studying on a Foundation degree that is directly related to their workplace roles?

3) What meanings do teaching assistants who are nearing the end of their studies assign to their imminent move away from being a Foundation degree student?

An initial definition of some of the investigations key terms and concepts

To set the scene for this thesis, some of the central concepts that are used throughout it are briefly outlined. These are: teaching assistant, Foundation degree mature student and identity. Kerry (2005) explains how the role of being teaching assistant "suffers from a lack of precise definition" (p. 373). Certainly, it has vastly different meanings in higher education and school-based contexts. In Europe and the United States of America, teaching assistant is sometimes a term employed to describe post-graduates who support the teaching of undergraduate classes in universities (Park, 2004). Outside higher education, however, the term teaching assistant is commonly recognised as one that refers to individuals who are employed in schools to support teachers with their work. The UK Department for Education (2014a) classifies teaching assistants as:

> Those support staff based in the classroom for learning and pupil support, for example HLTAs [*Higher Level Teaching Assistants*], teaching assistants, special needs support staff, minority ethnic pupils support staff and bilingual assistants.

These workers are routinely non-graduates who work with children and young people between the ages of four and nineteen years of age (Vulliamy & Webb, 2006). This thesis focuses upon this group of educational workers and their experiences of higher education as Foundation degree students. Foundation degree is, therefore, also a central concept that requires an initial explanation. According to the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (2014a):

> A Foundation degree is a degree level qualification which combines academic study with workplace learning. Designed in association with employers, they are qualifications to equip people with the relevant skills, knowledge and understanding to achieve academic results as well as improve performance and productivity in the workplace.

They then proceed to explain:

> Foundation degrees focus on a particular job or profession. They are intended to increase the professional and technical skills of current or potential staff within a profession, or intending to go into that profession. A Foundation degree is the equivalent of two thirds of a full honours degree and is a fully flexible qualification allowing students to study part-time or full-time to fit their lifestyle.

These qualifications are distinct from the foundation courses that some English universities provide to United Kingdom, European Union and international students whose qualifications do not meet the requirements for entry into their undergraduate programmes (Bolam & Dodgson, 2003). The research outlined in this thesis draws upon previous generalist research into mature students' perspectives of entering and studying within higher education, to contextualise its findings. The term "mature student" is used to refer to learners who were 21 years of age or older when they entered higher education (Universities and Colleges Admissions Service, 2014b).

Identity is a contested concept that is defined in a variety of ways by scholars (Woodward, 2004). The notion of identity that is employed throughout this thesis includes both how individuals and others define who and what a person is. This crucially includes the characteristics that an individual is characterised as being in the possession of. Sociologists view identity as being socially produced as individuals interact with other social actors and a range of social institutions. Interestingly, it has been claimed that within contemporary societies paid work is no longer a major source

of identity due to the uncertainty of workplaces and the rise of individualism and consumerism (Bauman, 1998; Beck, 1992). This has however been disputed by a number of writers (Christiansen, 1999; Doogan, 2005; Green, 2006). In his investigation of a work and identity in a range of workplaces, Doherty (2009) sums up her main finding as work still "matters" (p. 97). In these circumstances it is suggested that job-related change has the potential to have a significant impact on identity modification. The views of the teaching assistants in this thesis suggested that at this was the case for them.

The theoretical framework adopted to analyse issues of identity throughout my research was one that Strets and Burke's (2003) have identified as a sociological approach. Individuals were viewed as having a capacity to reflect upon, alter and develop their identities but this process is structured by broader societal forces. In relation to school teachers Beauchamp and Thomas (2011) maintain, "a teacher's experience can be one of not only active construction of an identity, but also of an imposed identity stemming from societal or cultural conceptions of teachers" (p. 7). It is therefore suggested that identity construction must be understood within the limits that creative agency is subjected to and is an interplay between constraint and enablement" (Trent, 2014, p. 30). The accounts provided by those students sampled for my own research provide further support for the adoption of such a position. Strets and Burke (2003) suggest that:

> A sociological approach to self and identity begins with the assumption that there is a reciprocal relationship between the self and society. The self influences society through the actions of individuals thereby creating groups, organizations, networks, and institutions. And, reciprocally, society influences the self through its shared language and meanings that enable a person to take the role of the other, engage in social interaction, and reflect upon oneself as an object. The latter process of reflexivity constitutes the core of selfhood. (p. 128)

The post-modernist assertion that individuals possess fragmented and multiple identities (Butler, 1995) is however to some extent assimilated into a notion of self that is drawn upon in this thesis. Identity modification was therefore viewed as a multifaceted reflexive process that is framed by societal parameters (Stets & Burke, 2003; Stryker, 1980). The view of McCall and Simons (1978) that individuals have identities that are multiple and hierarchal which formed within a complex social structure was influential in framing the view of identity construction that is adopted in

this thesis. It is though suggested that these can combine to give an individual their overall sense of self.

Research strategy and data collection techniques

Qualitative research was employed to explore the investigation's central questions. Although not a traditional ethnographic format, it did draw upon some of the insights this research strategy offers. In particular, it embraced a prioritisation of actors' accounts and interpretations. Capturing the subjective constructions that the teaching assistants made of their Foundation degree experiences was central to the methodological strategy that the investigation utilised. In common with many ethnographers, the research's ontological position was that individuals socially construct the world as they interpret it and act on these understandings. It aspired to follow the tradition that was established by interpretivist sociologists of education that has argued that social actors within educational contexts subjectively construct the world (Becker, 1952; Cicourel & Kitsuse, 1971; Hargreaves, Hester & Mellor, 1975; Reihl, 2008).

The primary method of data collection was semi-structured interviews. Participant observations and documentary analysis of programme-related documents were drawn upon as subsidiary contextualising sources of information. Interviews were firstly conducted in a group format, before a smaller number of individual interviews were undertaken. Eight group and 12 individual interviews were carried out. This strategy enabled 56 Foundation degree learners to contribute to the research. Fourteen modules were observed over this period. Following the approach that Leach (2009) adopted in his study of teaching assistants who were Foundation degree students, thematic data analysis was utilised to make sense of the data that had been collected.

The study's participants were all employed or volunteering as either teaching assistants or Higher Level Teaching Assistants within state-funded primary and secondary schools, in three local authorities in the north of England. Participants worked in both rural and non-rural schools. Their school-based working experience ranged from two to 15 years. All of those sampled were enrolled on a specialist Foundation degree for school-based support staff. Two males and 54 females contributed to the research. All were between 23 and 50 years of age. Overwhelmingly, the majority of the sample defined themselves as working-class, although some were

reluctant to categorise themselves in terms of social class location. Most of the participants were also student-mothers.

Substantial and original contribution of the study

The ways that this thesis makes a substantial and original contribution to the field of education research resides in both its focus and the distinctive model that it provides to explain teaching assistants' understandings of their engagement with Foundation degree study. Even though there is a small and developing literature on teaching assistants' interpretations of their experiences of Foundation degree study (Dunne, Goddard & Woolhouse, 2008a, 2008b, 2009; Edmond, 2004; Morris, 2010; Penketh & Goddard, 2008), there is no published research that offers a synthesis of their conceptions of decisions to begin study, their experiences of being a Foundation degree student and feelings about their exit from such learning. The research discussed in this thesis provides such an analysis in order to address this omission. It also illustrates the importance that occupational, personal and domestic identities have on Foundation degree students' views about their engagement. Expressly, it highlights the importance that workplace and familial identities have on teaching assistants' understandings of their experiences of Foundation degree study.

This thesis draws attention to the ways that relatively recent modification to the roles of teaching assistants have the potential to influence how these workers view themselves and higher education. Little focus is given to this in the existing research literature that discusses their engagement with Foundation degrees. Furthermore, this thesis aims to add to the growing body of research that has been conducted into student-parents' experiences of higher education by providing an analysis of such students' experiences of a sub-degree programme that was vocationally-orientated.

Gendered norms about parenthood are highlighted as having an important influence on teaching assistants' views of Foundation degree study. It contended that while existing analysis of both Foundation degree and mature students is useful in offering insights into teaching assistants' interpretations of their involvement with higher education, this literature as it is presently configured does not provide an adequate model to fully explain how such students understand their experiences. This thesis argues that greater emphasis needs to be given to the ways that occupational position, enrolment on a Foundation degree programme, being a mature student, and gendered

notions of parenthood intertwine to produce a very distinctive subjective experience for such students. It presents a new model within which scholars can seek to analyse teaching assistants' understandings of their engagement with Foundation degree study. It is claimed that this highlights how conceptions of identity transformation and preservation are an important omission from existing research on the topic.

Chapter outline

Subsequent to this introduction, this thesis is divided into eight distinct chapters. Chapter one discusses the expansion of teaching assistants roles in England. This is the first of two literature review chapters. It concentrates on both the numerical and role expansion of teaching assistants in English state funded schools. Policy and research literature on these issues are reviewed. Global trends around the increasing use of intermediate or associate professional tier" (Edmond, 2010, p. 320) workers within schools and other areas of public welfare services are also considered to contextualise the position of teaching assistants within England state schools.

Chapter two provides a second literature review. It critically reviews literature that has examined the development of Foundation degrees generally and specifically those aimed at teaching assistants. It moves on to discuss the relatively small, but rapidly emerging research literature that has investigated learners' perceptions of Foundation degree study. The second chapter of this thesis closes by discussing more general research into mature students' experiences of higher education and specifically those of student-parents. This combined review was undertaken as each of these literatures has provided useful concepts and insights that inform the discussion of the research findings that are presented in the second part of my thesis.

Chapter three gives an outline of the methodology that my investigation embraced, including the research strategy and methods of data collection that were employed. As part of this discussion, the Foundation degree programme (or case that that the research concentrated upon) is documented. Sampling, ethical concerns and data analysis procedures are also outlined in detail. The decisions that led to these methodological choices are explained and reflected upon throughout this chapter.

Chapter four is the first chapter of three that offer a detailed critical analysis of the findings that were uncovered by my research. Each results chapter specifically focuses upon one of the three central research questions that were outlined at the start of this introduction. Chapter four provides analysis of the data that were generated when the

first of these was examined. This question concentrated upon the Foundation degree students' views about the circumstances and motives that influenced their decisions to enrol on a work-related Foundation degree programme.

Chapter five presents an examination of the sampled students' understandings of their experiences of undertaking Foundation degree study. It therefore provides an exploration of the second research question that was investigated.

Chapter six discusses the findings that were collected to examine the third and final research question that my investigation explored. An analysis of the conceptions that the Foundation degree students possessed as they prepared to finish their programme of study is consequently offered.

Chapter seven advances a critical discussion of the implications of the findings that emerged in relation to the investigation's central research questions. It synthesises the results that were gained from the investigation of each core research question to provide an overall explanation of the ways that those who were sampled understood their engagement with Foundation degree study. It is also suggested that those who have attempted to analyse teaching assistants' engagement with Foundation degrees need to develop models of understanding that allocate greater importance to students' conceptions of their personal, occupational, educational and domestic identities. As part of this discussion, it is claimed that research into mature students' experiences generally (Brooks 2012, 2014; Lynch, 2008) offers insights that allow a deeper understanding of teaching assistants' interpretations of Foundation study, but cannot by itself provide a framework within which these students' engagements can be wholly understood. Similarly, research that has argued that Foundation degree study can be viewed as a form of identity work (Fenge, 2011) is also valuable. It is though limited as it does not acknowledge the ways that governmental policy related to workplace roles can influences this process. Such work also underplays the ways that understandings of Foundation degree study are structured by gender and whether or not learners also have parental responsibilities. These issues emerged in the findings that are presented in the following thesis.

Chapter eight is the final and concluding chapter of this thesis. It begins by offering a closing synopsis of central findings to emerge from the exploratory research that has been outlined. The contribution that this research makes to knowledge and understanding is reiterated. The limitations of the investigation are subsequently

reviewed. Finally, the implications that my investigation could be viewed as having for future research, policy and practice are discussed in some detail.

1. THE GROWTH OF TEACHING ASSISTANT NUMBERS AND THEIR EXPANDING ROLES

1.1. Introduction

This chapter is the first of two literature review chapters. It concentrates on providing an examination of the policies, research and the theoretical frameworks which have informed writings about the changing situation of teaching assistants in English state-funded schools. It is contended that such a review is necessary in order to generate an understanding of the circumstances that led to the validation of the particular Foundation degree that is the subject of this thesis. It is also suggested that such a discussion offers useful contextual information that is informative in relation to the research findings that are discussed in the second part of this thesis.

The opening part of the chapter examines the ways that teaching assistant numbers have grown in England. In order to provide a broader context to the increase of teaching assistant numbers in English state-supported schools, wider international trends related to the increasing use of paraprofessionals in schools are also considered. The expansion of English teaching assistants' roles that has accompanied this change is then explored. Following on from this review, policy and research related to the changing situation of English teaching assistants is critically examined. Particular attention is given to literature that has explored the roles that social inclusion, globalisation and attempts to remodel the working practices of teachers have played in fundamentally changing the teaching assistant workforce in England. The chapter concludes by discussing the UK Coalition Government's attitude towards teaching assistants.

1.2. The expansion of teaching assistants' roles and numbers in English schools

Webb and Vulliamy (2006) outline how those who occupy learning support roles in schools have been, and continue to be, assigned a variety of titles; including special needs assistants, classroom assistants, non-teaching assistants and learning support assistants. However, they go on to explain how the term "teaching assistant" (TA) has generally been employed by governments since the end of the 1990s as "the generic term of reference for all those in paid employment who support teachers in primary,

special and secondary schools" (Webb & Vulliamy, 2006, p. 85; also see DfEE, 2000, p.4). Yet such a definition ignores the large numbers of individuals that assist teachers on a voluntary basis. It could perhaps be regarded as dismissing the contribution these people make to school life and perpetuates their invisibility. For the purpose of the research analysed in this thesis, both paid and unpaid classroom support workers are referred to as teaching assistants. However, the literature and statistics that are discussed in the rest of this chapter regrettably does not recognise the contribution of volunteer TAs and consequently only focuses upon those in paid employment.

Over the past couple of decades, the number of employed teaching assistants who work in English state-funded schools has increased considerably. This "unprecedented increase" (Webster, Blatchford & Russell, 2013, p. 78) has inevitably had a major impact on schools and how they structure children's learning. Paid teaching assistant numbers increased by 48% between 1995 and 2001 (Edmond, 2003). Yet, interestingly, this rise was only supplemented by a more modest increase in school teachers of just 1% (Slater & Dean, 2001). By 2007, there was one paid teaching assistant for every 2.5 teachers in maintained schools in England and Wales. This compares with one TA for every 6.6 teachers in 1997 (Edmond & Price, 2009). Morris (2010) further outlines how, according to the Department for Children, Schools and Families (2009) statistics, there was a tripling of employed teaching assistant numbers between 1997 and 2009 from 49,700 to 157,200. By 2010, this had increased further, with 190,400 teaching assistants (full-time equivalents) being employed in English state schools (DfE, 2010). By 2012, teaching assistants made up 32% of the English primary school workforce (Webster & Blatchford, 2014). Almost a quarter of the workforce in mainstream state schools in England, Wales and Scotland were teaching assistants in 2014 (Radford, Bosanquet, Webster, Blatchford & Rubie-Davies, 2014).

Figure 1.1: Full-time equivalent school staff in state-funded schools in England: 2005 to 2013
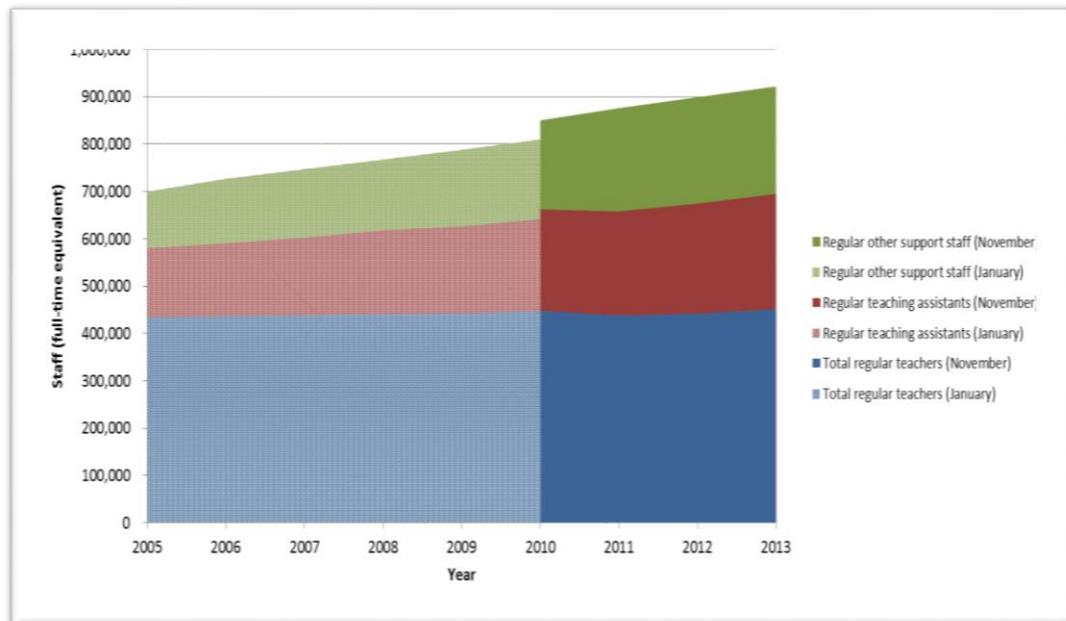
Source: Department of Education (2014)

The expansion in teaching assistant numbers, as briefly outlined earlier in this thesis, is part of a wider international trend of the increasing use of paraprofessionals in schools (Tent, 2014; Webster, 2010). These workers have been found to be part of a growing "intermediate or associate professional tier" (Edmond, 2010, p. 320) within public services generally, across a range of countries. The expansion of school-based paraprofessional roles is, therefore, not a unique feature of the UK education system or, indeed, this area of public welfare.

The trend of the increasing use of paraprofessionals in schools has been identified in a range of countries; including France, South Africa, Italy, Canada, Sweden, the USA, Germany, Malta, Iceland, Australia and Hong Kong all (Edmond & Hayler, 2013; Houssart, 2013; Radford et al., 2014; Trent, 2014). Yet a number of pieces of research into English TAs and their experiences of Foundation degrees do not acknowledge this wider international pattern. Failing to provide an international context for their studies perhaps constrains the level of analysis that they offer (Barkham, 2008; Dunne et al., 2008; Leach, 2009). Later research has begun to examine this issue and has added depth to the analysis that has been presented (Devecchi, Dettori, Doveston, Sedgwick & Jament, 2012; Tent, 2014).

Those who are employed in learning support roles in the UK are overwhelmingly female (Gunter & Rayner, 2005). It has been argued that this reflects the way that childcare occupations generally are highly gendered in the United Kingdom (Penn & McQuail, 1997). Research for the Department of Education and Skills (2002) found that nearly 98% of teaching assistants were female and just over 2% were male. More than a decade later, and with a much expanded pool of teaching assistants, a remarkably similar picture was reported in the Department for Education's School Workforce Survey (DfE, 2014a). Although much of the overall school workforce in England is comprised of women, teaching assistants are a particularly gendered segment. In 2013, 80% of the English state-funded school workforce was female compared with 98% of those employed as teaching assistants.

Figure 1.2: The gender split by role for full-time equivalent school staff in English state-funded schools: England
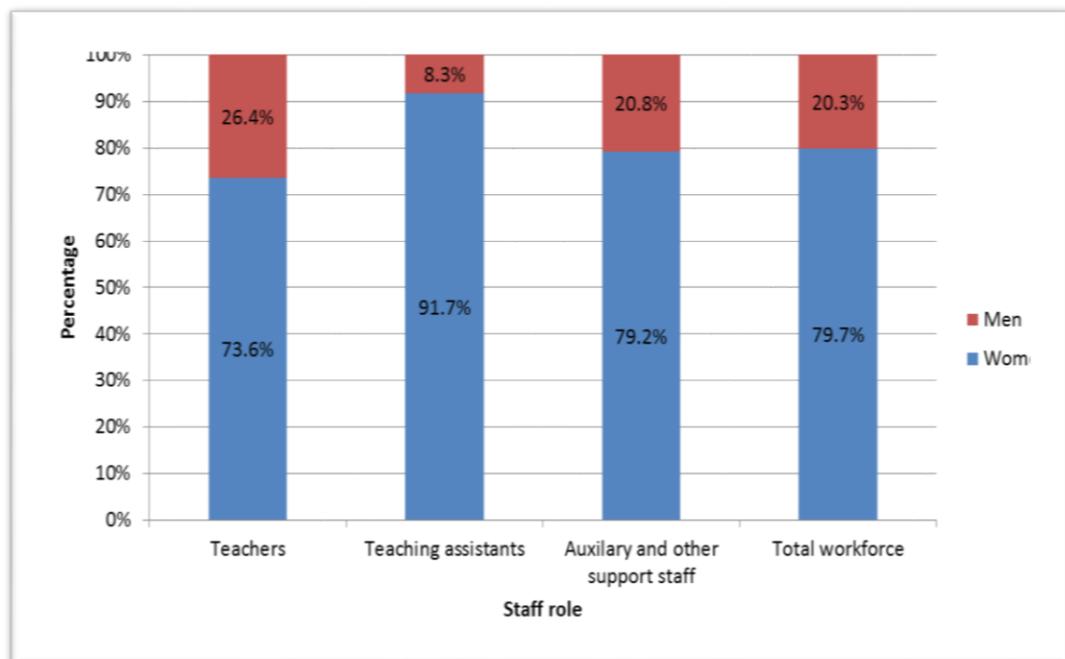
Source: Department of Education (2014)

Somewhat critically, Gunter (2006) has claimed that the remodelling of learning support roles has encompassed a significant expansion of a highly feminised workforce with a relatively low level of qualification. She cites evidence from a DfES funded pilot study into remodelling, entitled *Transforming the School Workforce Pathfinder Project* (Thomas et al., 2004), to illustrate the differential employment rates that the sexes have in school-based learning support roles. Questionnaire results from

this project revealed that 277 out of 292 respondents, who were employed in learning support roles, were female. Eighty two percent of these workers were non-graduates and only 3.6% possessed qualified teacher status (four men and six women).

The issue of whether assistants in schools are more likely to be female than others who hold "assistant" roles elsewhere in English public services has been usefully explored by scholars (Kessler, Heron & Bach, 2006). Their analysis of the general rise of assistant roles across the English public sector suggests that although such roles are generally occupied by women, teaching assistants are an extreme example of this. Ninety nine percent of teaching assistants were found to be female compared with 81% of social work assistants. Helpfully, this research has illustrated how the rise of the feminised TA workforce is part of a more general trend that has occurred where women have been disproportionally recruited to occupational positions that offer limited extrinsic rewards in terms of pay and other conditions of employment such as permanency of contract.

Research which has explored the views of primary school children towards teaching assistants has found that children have very gendered notions of the teaching assistant role and identity. The innovative and novel study of Fraser and Meadows (2008) into children's perceptions of teaching assistants, which involved over 400 primary and infant school children, found that they almost always referred to "she/her" when explaining their understanding of the word "TA". This suggests that from a very early age, children have been socialised to assume that teaching assistants are women and that their work is almost exclusively the preserve of females.

It has been claimed that this highly feminised workforce are exploited in terms of the remuneration that they receive for their work (Graves, 2014). It has also been argued that the high proportion of women in the teaching assistant workforce has resulted in such roles being assigned little professional status (Dunne, Goddard & Woolhouse, 2009). References to these workers as being "the classroom helper", "mum's army" and "dogsbody" are viewed as having aggravated this situation.

Other research has also described how within this growing and largely female workforce, distinct tiers of teaching assistants have been identified (Cajkler, Tennant, Tiknaz, Sage & Taylor, 2007) with varied levels of training. Many though have little or no training. Just a small percentage had acquired degree level qualifications. Strangely, the literature on teaching assistants' workplace experiences has paid little attention to the impact these social characteristics might have (Bailey, 2007; Calvert,

2009; Groom, 2006; Leach, 2009; Warhurst et al., 2014). Often such research documents the high proportion of women who have been sampled, but gender is subsequently ignored in data analysis and theorisation.

Research that has analysed the age profile has offered further insights into the form the feminisation of the TA workforce takes. For instance, it has outlined how the majority of those in full-time teaching assistant posts are women over 36 years of age (Blatchford, Bassett, Brown & Webster, 2009b). Researchers have highlighted how gendered notions of parenthood, and specifically motherhood, are linked to the inequitable position teaching assistants experience in terms of their employment. It is claimed that the work of teaching assistants "is seen as women's work" and in some respects can be regarded as "an extension of the historical roles of 'housewife' and 'mother'" (Barkham, 2008, p. 852).

The teaching assistant, and specifically the Higher Level Teaching Assistant role, has been identified as being a social construct that is related to the large-scale recruitment of mother-helpers into these roles. Here it is argued that the development of teaching assistant roles has been informed by a "discourse of maternality" that has led to a gendered expectation of "self-sacrifice and conscientiousness" (Graves, 2014, p. 255). However, in an interview based study, Dunne et al. (2008) found differences between teaching assistants who worked in different sectors of the English state school system. Whereas primary school teaching assistants primarily defined their role in terms of activities involving nurturing, caring and mothering; their secondary school counterparts did not define their roles in this way. This raises interesting questions about the difference in perceptions and experiences that teaching assistants in different sectors of education have and the ways that motherhood impacts on the employment experiences of the teaching assistant workforce.

Earlier research has also indicated that schools' recruitment practices for teaching assistant posts both reinforce and encourage a disproportionate number of mothers to enter the TA workforce (Moyles & Suschitzky, 1997; Hancock, Swann, Marr, Turner & Cable, 2002). It has been claimed that many paid teaching assistants are recruited from existing female parental helpers and volunteers who have offered their time for free whilst performing traditional maternal roles. According to Hancock et al. (2002) "this process, although safe and convenient for schools, is of concern in terms of equal employment opportunities" (p. 4). Morris (2010) was one of the first to specifically outline how commitments to and the pressures of motherhood are central to why large

numbers of women become teaching assistants and latterly enter Foundation degrees that are specifically aimed at such workers. In focus groups, many female learners claimed that being a teaching assistant had initially been attractive as they believed that it would fit in with their family obligations; primarily those connected to providing childcare. The above work is significant in that it highlights how distinct conceptions of gender and motherhood are sometimes intrinsically part of becoming and being a teaching assistant.

1.3. Role stretch and role creep amongst English teaching assistants in state support schools

Warhurst et al. (2014) have described how their large scale research into Scottish teaching assistants found that not only had their numbers increased radically, but the roles that they were expected to play had been substantially extended. They have deftly claimed that teaching assistants have experienced "role stretch" and "role creep" (p. 159). Their research established that teaching assistants were undertaking a vast range of tasks that sometimes blurred the lines between their roles and those of their qualified teacher colleagues. Although it has a distinct focus upon the Scottish education system, this study does offer interesting insights into the ways the expansion of teaching assistants' roles can be dramatic when certain sets of policy circumstances prevail. Various researchers have highlighted how teaching assistants in English state schools, in common with their Scottish counterparts, have also experienced a "rapid transformation" (Groom, 2006) of their role, including for some, formalised management responsibilities (Bailey, 2007). This change seems to provide evidence of considerable "role creep" and "role stretch" (Warhurst et al., 2014, p. 159).

In England, the teaching assistant role has been usefully identified as gradually moving from one of being a "domestic helper to assistant teacher" since the 1990s (Webb & Vulliamy, 2006, p. 85). Notably, it has been suggested that the TA role has shifted from "classroom housekeeping" including "putting up classroom displays, washing up paint pots, etc." to "direct pedagogical support to the teacher in the classroom" (Edmond 2003, p. 114). As a result of these developments, teaching assistant roles have also become increasingly varied and demanding. Research has shown how teaching assistants are increasingly engaging in diverse activities which are significantly beyond those traditionally associated with their roles (Tan, 2006).

Complex activities such as specialist intervention roles (Blatchford et al. 2009a; Webster, Blatchford & Russell, 2013) and pastoral supervision (Calvert, 2009; Leach, 2009) have been revealed as now being routinely undertaken by TAs, alongside activities such as photocopying, display making and playground supervision. Research has described how teaching assistants employed in mainstream state schools also often assist pupils that are identified as requiring specific learning and behavioural support (Webster, Blatchford, Bassett, Brow, Martin & Russell, 2010). Blatchford, Russell and Webster's (2012) extensive longitudinal study *Deployment and Impact of Support Staff (DISS)* project, found that many teaching assistants are engaged in pedagogical roles supporting pupils with low levels of educational attainment and those classified as having special educational needs.

The DISS project was a particularly valuable piece of research in that it captured the experiences of over 8,000 teaching assistants. Its sample size would seem to allow a degree of generalisation about the experiences of teaching assistants in England and is therefore a very important source of information. Such research has been productive in identifying the range and complexity of work that teaching assistants are often involved in. It also provides detail that enables a deeper understanding of the employment environment in which TAs on Foundation degrees are required to undertake work-based learning.

Rather unsurprisingly, research has also suggested that this role adjustment has impacted upon how teaching assistants view their workplace identities and the work that they undertake (Barkham, 2008). Research has perceptively suggested that for some of these workers, changing workplace roles had redefined their views of who they had the potential to become, and what educational qualifications they might need to achieve such an ambition (Edmond, 2010; Morris, 2010). Whilst such acknowledgement is valuable in highlighting the potential impact that workplace change can have on identities, this issue is only given a cursory attention in academic literature. Scholarship that has explored this issue is, therefore, relatively underdeveloped in existing discussions. The research that is discussed later in this thesis suggests that conceptions of identity and work are potentially very important in developing an understanding of teaching assistants' engagement with Foundation degree study. Greater recognition of this process is consequently highlighted. Various educational policies and social trends have been identified as being behind the

expansion in teaching assistant numbers and roles over the last three decades. It is academic debates about the nature of these policy drivers that is now examined.

1.4. Moves towards greater social inclusion, globalisation and the expansion of teaching assistant roles and numbers

Scholars have provided interesting and illuminative historical analysis that explains how a variety of educational policies and social trends have combined to produce changes to teaching assistants' roles and numbers. For instance, it has been argued that increases in TA numbers can be traced back to the 1980s: the Warnock Report and the 1981 Education Act (Department of Education and Science, 1981). This era generated educational policies which emphasised a desire to integrate children with special educational needs (SEN) into mainstream schools (Collins & Simco, 2006). Warnock (1981), in particular is considered to have fostered a movement for inclusive schools (Morris, 2010). Teaching assistants were vital in facilitating this task through the additional individualised support that they could offer to children.

Greater inclusion of SEN pupils within mainstream schools produced a need for large numbers of teaching assistants with extended roles (Radford, Bosanquet, Webster & Blatchford, 2015). Collins and Simco (2006) draw on the work of Lee (2002) to explain how the first Code of Practice on the Identification and Assessment of Children with Special Educational Needs also provided a significant impetus for this trend. This was because it led to the first official recognition that pupils who were viewed as having additional needs, but not at a sufficient level to allow statementing, had an entitlement to formal recognition and support in schools. However, the growth of TA numbers and role extension cannot be solely analysed in terms of UK centric policy analysis. This narrow analysis is, unfortunately, characteristic of some of the earlier research into teaching assistants work (Bach, Kessler & Heron, 2006; Calvert, 2009; Leach, 2009).

Collins and Simco (2006) link the expansion of teaching assistant numbers to the wider social trends that are viewed as being a product of globalisation. In particular, the ways that increased ease of travel has enlarged population movement and thus increased migration to the UK. Such population movement was viewed as creating a greater demand for additional learning support workers to meet the needs of large

numbers of children with English as an additional language (EAL). Collins and Simco
(2006) explain that:

> Although immigration is nothing new, UK society has become much more
> linguistically and culturally diverse in the last 50 years, largely owing to economic
> immigration, but also because of the arrival of significant numbers seeking asylum
> and to the increasing globalization of the economy. A significant number of
> students attending schools in England and Wales are bilingual. (p. 198)

Teaching assistants have been employed in relatively large numbers to meet this
demand. However, in common with other writers (Morris, 2010; Tucker, 2009),
Collins and Simco (2006) proceed to explain how the recent dramatic expansion of
teaching assistant numbers in England is mainly the result of a major policy shift that
occurred under New Labour's period of governance and the political discourse this
reflected. Here particularistic forms of social inclusion, academic attainment and
modernisation framed general government policy, though again these should perhaps
be viewed within broader international trends.

Groom and Rose (2005) identify Excellence for all Children (DfEE, 1997) and
Excellence in Cities (DfEE, 1999) as examples of key policies that were part of the
New Labour political agenda that helped stimulate a further growth of teaching
assistant numbers. In each of these policies, there was an emphasis on enhancing the
attainment of children without the need for a major expansion of the teaching
profession. Yet focusing exclusively on these policies is possibly unsatisfactory as
they only provide a partial explanation of teaching assistant numbers and roles.

Expanding teaching assistant numbers and their roles was also attractive to the Blair
and Brown governments as it offered the possibility of a prolonged school day and
services as part of the extended schools agenda (Cummings et al, 2005). The
enhancement of teaching assistant numbers and extension of roles for these workers,
through remodelling, enabled the expansion of before and after school care to be
provided, as teaching assistants could be used to staff this provision. It has been argued
that the restructuring of the roles and practices of TAs might therefore also be
understood in terms of New Labour's drive to achieve some of the principal outcomes
of the Every Child Matters agenda (Edmond & Price 2009), especially in relation to
providing wraparound care without increasing the workload of teachers. The Children
Act 2004 provided legislative encouragement for schools to extend the school day and
this has added impetus to this agenda. Every Child Matters' desire for improved social

inclusion and the personalisation of learning could also be facilitated by increasing teaching assistant numbers.

Yet for many writers in the field, New Labour's policy of School Workforce Remodelling (DfES, 2002) provided the greatest impetus for a rapid extension to teaching assistant numbers and roles (Butt & Lance, 2009; Leach, 2009; Morris, 2010; Tucker, 2009). Statistics related to growing TA numbers that were discussed earlier in this chapter seem to suggest that this analysis has some substance to it. As the most rapid growth in TA numbers occurred as School Workforce Remodelling was implemented it would seem to be reasonable to link these two issues together. It is to this policy that I will now turn to. The English School Workforce Remodelling policy is particularly important to my thesis as the Foundation degree that is explored within it primarily aimed to respond to this policy agenda

1.5. The National Agreement of 2003 and its impact on New Labour's attempt to remodel the School Workforce

New Labour's intention to reform the working practices of school-based employees was explicitly signalled in the October of 2002 in *Time for Standards: Reforming the School Workforce* (DfES, 2002). Teachers, head teachers and teaching assistants were all subsequently subjected to major changes as a result of these proposals. Three major drivers are generally viewed as behind New Labour's attempt to remodel the Schools' Workforce: increased inclusion of children from disadvantaged groups within mainstream schools (Burgess 2008; Burgess & Mayes, 2009); improving educational standards (Blatchford, Bassett, Brown & Webster, 2009; Edmond, 2003) and attempts to reduce the teacher shortages due to excessive workloads (Butt & Lance, 2005).

In 2003, teacher unions, with the exception of the National Union of Teachers, agreed to a government proposal to restructure (remodel) the state school workforce and signed what became known as the National Agreement (DfES, 2003). This agreement openly stated that all staff in school should enjoy a reasonable work/life balance and to achieve this, teachers' roles needed to be modified. Wilkinson (2005) therefore helpfully described how, on one level, remodelling can be viewed as a "laudable attempt to free teachers from the shackles of excessive and inappropriate workload" (p. 428). These plans were partially premised upon the idea that a further expansion of teaching assistant numbers and a belief that it was desirable that teaching

assistants should become involved in undertaking an expanded range of activities and tasks that would were commonly undertaken by the teaching profession (Easton, Wilson, & Sharp, 2005; Morris, 2010). This would facilitate a reduction in teachers' workloads. The Government of the day promised additional resources to appoint at least 50,000 additional members of support staff (DfES, 2003). However, as the agenda progressed, the expansion of these roles was far greater than was anticipated by policy makers (Tucker, 2009; Leach, 2009; Webster, Blatchford & Russell, 2013).

Expanding the role and responsibility of classroom support workers was viewed as an economically viable means through which teachers' workloads could be eased (Stevenson, Carter, & Passy, 2007), whilst facilitating greater support for those children who suffered social and educational disadvantage (Gerschel, 2005). The latter would have been impossible without a further extension of teaching assistant numbers and their roles. Yarker (2005) usefully notes how School Workforce Remodelling consequently attempted to "reconfigure school work to accommodate New Labour's spending-limits and to a dwindling number of people fully qualified for teaching" (p. 171).

The importance and significance that New Labour assigned to these plans, and their anticipated impact on standards and workloads, was clearly outlined on the very first page of the National Agreement:

> This document represents an historic national Agreement between Government, employers and school workforce unions to help schools, teachers and support staff meet the challenges that lie ahead. It promises joint action, designed to help every school across the country to raise standards and tackle workload issues. (DfES, 2003, p. 1)

The signatories to this document agreed to a seven point plan that would initiate the creation of time for teachers and head teachers to have *Time for Standards*:

> i. Progressive reductions in teachers' overall hours over the next four years. This objective will be promoted by all the partners and progress will be monitored and audited, including at school level;
>
> ii. Changes to teachers' contracts, to ensure all teachers, including head teachers:
>
> > • Do not routinely undertake administrative and clerical tasks;
> >
> > • Have a reasonable work/life balance;

• Have a reduced burden of providing cover for absent colleagues;

• Have guaranteed planning, preparation and assessment time within the school day, to support their teaching, individually and collaboratively;

• Have a reasonable allocation of time in support of their leadership and management responsibilities; and that head teachers have dedicated time which recognises their significant leadership responsibilities for their school.

iii. A concerted attack on unnecessary paperwork and bureaucratic processes for teachers and head teachers, including in England through the establishment of an Implementation Review Unit;

i.v. Reform of support staff roles to help teachers and support pupils. Personal administrative assistants for teachers, cover supervisors and high level teaching assistants will be introduced;

v. The recruitment of new managers, including business and personnel managers, and others with experience from outside education where they have the expertise to contribute effectively to schools' leadership teams;

vi. Additional resources and national "change management" programmes, to help school leaders achieve in their schools the necessary reforms of the teaching profession and restructuring of the school workforce; and

vii. Monitoring of progress on delivery by the Signatories to this Agreement. (DfES, 2003, p. 2)

The implementation of the National Agreement was subsequently overseen by the Workforce Agreement Monitoring Group (WAMG) which was made up of representatives of the groups that signed it. This group also offered guidance and support to schools and local authorities as they aimed to make the changes that the National Agreement required.

New Labour's attempts to remodel the state school workforce in England took place in three distinct phases (DfES, 2003). These reflected the National Agreement's assertion that transformation should be structured and gradual to enable the effective implementation of contractual modifications (Training and Development Agency for Schools, 2011). This process is illustrated in Table 1.1 from the National Agreement.

Table 1.1: Phasing of change

Phase one – 2003
• Promote reductions in overall excessive hours • Establish monitoring group • Establish new Implementation Review Unit • Routine delegation of 24 non-teaching tasks • Introduce new work/life balance clauses • Introduce leadership and management time • Undertake review of use of school closure days
Phase two – 2004
• Introduce new limits on covering for absent teachers
Phase three – 2005
• Introduce guaranteed professional time for planning,   preparation and assessment • Introduce dedicated headship time • Introduce new invigilation arrangements

Source: Raising Standards and Tackling Workload:
A national agreement (time for standards) (DfES, 2003)

Phase one of this plan officially commenced on 1 September 2003. At this point, there was an expectation that teachers would no longer be required to undertake routine clerical and administrative tasks; thus reducing teachers' workloads. Teachers with leadership and management responsibilities were also entitled to a reasonable amount of school time to carry out their managerial duties. Therefore, from its very first phase, workforce remodelling also heralded significant changes to teachers' conditions of service (Training and Development Agency for Schools, 2011).

Phase two commenced exactly a year after the first phase. Restrictions on the amount of time teachers could be expected to provide cover for absent colleagues were put in place at this point, with a medium term intention to reach a situation where teachers would rarely be involved in covering lessons for absent colleagues. The National Agreement (DfES, 2003) therefore proposed a number of "linked steps" in relation to minimising the impact that the need to cover would have on pupils and teachers. These were that:

• There should be limits on the extent to which teachers at a school can be asked unexpectedly to cover for an absent colleague, with progressive movement towards a position where this should only happen rarely;

• The relevant sections of the School Teachers' Pay and Conditions Document will therefore be changed so that no teacher may be required to provide cover for more than a set number of hours per year;

• Initially, the number of hours will be set at 38, but it should be unusual for most teachers to provide such a high amount of cover – schools should be providing downward pressure on the burden of cover;

• The contractual change will be promulgated in draft early in 2003, to take effect in every school from September 2004 at the latest, with schools working towards the change as far as possible prior to that;

• One of the first tasks for the Workforce Agreement Monitoring Group will be to establish the likely impact of this contractual limit and agree the process and timescale for achieving the shared objective that teachers at a school should only rarely cover for absent colleagues and interim targets towards achieving this. (DfES, 2003, pp. 6-7)

Those qualified teachers who were already contractually responsible for provision, and where their classroom contact hours already reflected these duties, were exempt from these general rules.

From 1 September 2005, there was a further guarantee of professional time for teachers to complete planning, preparation and assessment (PPA). PPA time was envisaged as constituting a 10% remission from teaching. The National Agreement (DfES, 2003) explicitly maintained the hope that this would militate against the excessive additional working hours that qualified teachers were undertaking on evenings and weekends. It went on to state: "While this cannot be changed overnight, the Agreement marks a turning point in carving out some guaranteed PPA time during the normal school day" (DfES, 2003, p. 8). To facilitate these changes, the School Teachers' Pay and Conditions Document was altered to reflect a number of formally stated principles. These were that:

• The purpose of guaranteed PPA time is to enable teachers to raise standards through a combination of individual and collaborative professional activity; within that context, and subject to a national framework to be set out in guidance, it is for the teacher to determine the particular priorities for each block of PPA time;

• Guaranteed PPA time must not be encroached upon, including by any obligation to cover for absent colleagues;

• Guaranteed PPA should be set at the equivalent of at least 10% of a teacher's normal timetabled teaching time, where only teaching time within a teacher's 1265 contracted hours would count for these purposes, not other forms of pupil contact time;

• Guaranteed PPA time would count towards a teacher's 1265 contractual hours. This contractual PPA would be distinct from any planning, preparation or assessment undertaken outside the 1265 hours, as part of a teacher's professional duties. The latter will be subject to the new work/life balance clause outlined above;

• Guaranteed PPA should be timetabled time, in blocks of no less than 30 minutes duration, as part of the teacher's normal weekly or fortnightly timetable - i.e. a teacher should have a clear expectation of when they will be receiving their guaranteed PPA. (DfES, 2003, p. 8)

Reduced invigilation of examinations was another important component of this final stage. As a result of these guarantees and promises, teaching assistants and learning support workers generally became responsible for 15 routine tasks that were viewed as placing unnecessary pressure on teachers. These tasks included bulk photocopying, producing class lists and chasing student absences. However, as discussed earlier in this chapter, research has suggested that TAs' roles have dramatically extended beyond the 15 tasks that the National Agreement initially envisaged (Blatchford et al., 2012; Graves, 2014; Tucker, 2009). Under the National Agreement, support staff would be rewarded for their increased contributions to school life:

Support staff will be increasingly recognised for the contribution they make to raising pupil standards. Bursars, administrative, technical and classroom support staff will all be important members of the school team. These support staff will have access to expanded roles and improved choices and career opportunities, including proper recognition for existing responsibilities. (DfES, 2003, p. 3)

Subsequently, it has been claimed that teaching assistants have not been rewarded in terms of pay, status and career progression opportunities (Dunne et al., 2008).

Higher Level Teaching Assistant (HLTA) roles were also created to undertake whole-class teaching. Classroom activity of this type was to only to be allowed if it took place under the supervision of a qualified teacher. By 2007, over 17,000 teaching assistants had achieved HLTA status in England which amounted to approximately 10% the teaching assistants (Wilson et al., 2007). Although the role of the HLTA differs between schools, it has been found that many of those in these positions undertake more managerial duties and lead formal whole class teaching on a regular

basis (Hammersley-Fletcher, Lowe & Pugh, 2006). This research is important as it illustrates the pressure experienced by teaching assistants in schools and the drift that has occurred in the HLTA role away from the stated aims of the 2003 Agreement. It also shows how the distinction between what is deemed to be the work of teachers and teaching assistants is increasingly distorted. More positively, Butt and Lance (2009) have argued that School Workforce Remodelling represented a deliberate policy shift: heralding the diversification and professionalisation of the roles and responsibilities of teaching assistants. Whether or not it has led to a professionalisation of the TA role is open to question and is discussed later in this chapter.

1.6. New Labour's discourse of the Third Way and Schools Workforce Reform

Much of the research that has explored TAs' experiences of Foundation degree which is discussed in the second chapter of this thesis can be criticised as it does not explore how these changes were patterned by the general political discourse within which New Labour's educational polices were founded. Without acknowledgement of this wider discursive framework, such analysis could be regarded as incomplete. Edmond (2010) explains how School Workforce Remodelling is a particular facet of New Labour's modernisation agenda. Similarly, Kessler, Heron & Bach (2005) have contended that the expansion of assistant roles generally, including those within school, is "neglected but central part of the New Labour public service 'modernisation project'" (p. 2).

New Labour's 1997 election victory brought with it a new ideology, or discourse, which stressed "the reconstruction of welfare as a major political task, seeing it as a means through which a distinctively 'modern' British people might be constructed" (Clarke, Gewirtz & McLaughlin, 2000, p. 1). "Modernisation" (Ozga, 2000, p. 21) of the welfare state generally and education specifically was framed by what has been referred to as New Labour's discourse of the "Third Way" (Giddens, 1998). Within this political discourse, New Labour policy makers attempted to reconfigure and "modernise" welfare services within a discursive frame that aspired to unite neo-liberalist marketisation and "old Labour" commitments to egalitarianism and civic values.

As part of this so-called "Third Way", it has been claimed that there was "a partial retreat from the ideological commitment to market mechanisms as the driver of public sector reform and a softening of the approach to competition" (Newman, 2001, pp. 1-

2). It has been asserted that in contrast to the small state free market liberalism of New Right and Thatcherism, the State was viewed as having a central role to play in creating a more inclusive and social just form of capitalism (Gewirtz, 2002). Centrally determined policy was seen as having a key role in creating large scale change across the public services and positive social change. New Labour's discourse of the "Third Way" also drew upon previously "submerged and marginalised" discourses such as collaboration, democracy, social inclusion, partnership, community and social justice; in some ways reflecting a return to the welfarism of pre-Thatcherite governments (Gertwitz, 2002; Newman, 2001).

State education provision was seen to be central to achieving this social transformation and this was exemplified by Tony Blair's much cited pronouncement that "education, education, education" would be a key governmental priority; something which became synonymous with the New Labour project (Vulliamy & Webb, 2006). Scholars have outlined how New Labour's general discursive reconfiguration of education's purpose rhetorically intertwined social justice and increased educational opportunities with accountability and competition. For Newman (2000), New Labour's discourse of modernisation also "relates a narrative of past failure and future possibility" (cited in Doyle, 2003, p. 276) to legitimate public sector reform. Unlike the previous Conservative inspired New Right discourse, which defined state school teachers as a barrier to improving school standards and inhibitors of change, New Labour's remodelling framed teachers as agents of change, even if this was eventually somewhat "short-lived" (Webb, 2006, p. 2). So-called "improvement" in state education provision was therefore at the heart of New Labour's attempts at social transformation.

New Labour's "Third way" did not produce a rejection of the belief that quasi-markets (Le Grand & Barlett, 1993) were effective drivers for change in the public sector. Policy research has informatively drawn attention to the hybrid nature of the discursive framework within which New Labour education policies were constructed (Newman, 2001). Competition between schools for scarce resources reflected this policy assumption. Its discursive framework stressed an expansion of social justice and individual opportunity through marketisation and an increased accountability of educational providers and professionals. In this discourse notions of "social justice" which stress enhanced equality of educational opportunities (Newman, 2001) and performativity (Ball, 1998) were intertwined. School Workforce Reform can therefore

be regarded as being constructed with this paradigm (Edmond, 2010). These circumstances are however rarely explored or acknowledged by scholars.

1.7. Criticism of New Labour's policy of School Workforce Remodelling

School Workforce Remodelling has been subjected to considerable criticism from a range of academic writers. This body of work has offered a valuable counter-position to the exclusive positivity of New Labour policy pronouncements about these changes. The blurring of established "professional boundaries" (Bach et al., 2006) and job roles has been accused of having the potential to undermine the "professional jurisdiction" of teachers (Wilkinson, 2005) which threatens the professionalism of teaching (Gunter & Rayner, 2005; Thompson 2006). Critics were fearful that teaching would be deskilled (Braverman, 1974) and weakened as a profession. Graves (2014) maintained that changing and an obscuring of roles in schools challenged the professional status of the teaching profession. She wrote:

> The growth of support staff in English schools to undertake roles previously assigned to teachers has had the effect of disaggregating and de-professionalising the teacher role and weakening the traditional job boundaries which defined the work of support staff. (p. 265)

It has been argued that considerable ambiguity around the nature of the modern teaching assistant role has presented teachers with a problem related to knowing how much responsibility is legitimate to give to teaching assistants (Webster, Russell & Blatchford, 2009). The DfES (2003) recognised this as an issue when they wrote that:

> There are now many more support staff employed in schools, working alongside qualified teachers in a wide variety of roles. For some time there has been uncertainty about what duties and activities these support staff may or may not undertake. (cited in Collins & Simco 2006, p. 199)

The advent of Higher Level Teaching Assistants (Teacher Training Agency, 2004) and "cover supervisors" have been identified as being particularly controversial roles in this respect (Graves, 2014; Webb & Vulliamy 2006). One possible reason that they identify for this, is that the role's ambiguity leaves it open to interpretation. It has been argued that the development of such roles had produced a particularly dangerous fragmentation of the dominant cultural and normative order of teacher/support staff relations (Butt & Gunter, 2005).

In this confusing situation, exploitation can occur (Graves, 2014). This research describes, how in a time of economic challenge, UK schools with constrained budgets have used HLTAs to cover for absent teachers. Adopting such an approach allows schools to make savings by not employing supply teachers. This analysis is productive in that it examines the potential exploitative consequences that teaching assistants have experienced as a result of School Workforce Reform. It is suggested later in this thesis that such analysis is beneficial and can inform an understanding of teaching assistants' experiences of Foundation degree study.

Criticism has also been made of the HLTA role and the limiting effect it has had upon providing a clear and distinct identity for those employed in such roles. They carry out whole class teaching, but they are not teachers. It has been argued that this can leave HLTAs with a sense of confusion (Graves, 2014). Those policy makers and academics who have championed the HLTA initiative, in terms of advancing the cause of teaching assistants, consequently seem to have underestimated the negative consequences it has subsequently generated for both TAs and teachers.

Mansaray (2006) adds to these debates by explaining how concerns about the extension of teaching assistants' roles has produced a specific policy discourse that has reinforced the limited status many teaching assistants experience in their workplaces. She argues that, against this milieu of uncertainty, suspicion and anxiety about the expansion of TAs' roles within schools; policy discourses have intended to offer reassurance to the teaching profession. In particular, the discourse has explicitly defined the teaching assistant role as "peripheral as to teaching and learning" (Mansaray, 2006, p. 171). Teaching assistants are consequently placed in an ambiguous position where they are not perceived to be of central importance to classroom learning, but are increasingly responsible for significant aspects of teaching and learning activities within the schools. For Mansaray (2006), this has placed teaching assistants in a situation of critical liminality where they are in a period of occupational transition and between two states: traditional classroom support worker and teacher. However, she does not take for granted that this is inevitably a negative and constraining state. In doing so, her work makes an important contribution to scholars' understandings of the possibilities that workplace change can have for teaching assistants.

According to Mansaray (2006), uncertainty around TA roles has generated an organisational space in which they can become "creative, open, ambiguous and

ambivalent" in nature. This situation has enabled some of these workers, and their managers, to resist negative aspects of School Workforce Remodelling. For example, challenge can potentially be offered to the notion that the TA role is only of secondary importance (Mansaray, 2006, p. 171). Unfortunately, this analysis could be viewed as underestimating the structural constraints that many teaching assistants' face connected to class and gendered related inequalities that are embedded in their employment experiences (Barkham, 2008; Dunne et al., 2009). Conceivably, it could be viewed as over-estimating teaching assistants' power of agency and under-playing structural constraints.

Research into the impact that modern teaching assistants have had on pupils' academic outcomes is also confusing and contradictory. Ofsted's (2010) relatively small-scale evaluation into the impact of workforce reform between 2003 and 2009 concluded that TAs generally had a very positive impact on pupils' learning. This was however, only the case when they were deployed effectively, had a clear professional status and experienced high levels of accountability (Ofsted, 2010). Specifically, it claimed that: "Members of the wider workforce who were well trained and deployed appropriately made a considerable difference to pupils' learning when they provided intervention for specific groups or individuals" (Ofsted, 2010, p. 15).

This research seems to contrast markedly with larger scale research (Webster et al., 2010) which has suggested that teaching assistants have a negative effect on academic progression, particularly for those students with special educational needs. These writers pose the question about the appropriateness of moves towards a situation where teaching assistants undertake roles as primary educators, as well as the educational value of increasing their numbers. Their research has claimed that the extension of teaching assistants' roles in schools might have a negative impact on children and their experiences. In doing so, they have profitably challenged assumptions that were at the centre of workforce reform; namely that children will educationally benefit from interaction with all types of people who work in classrooms irrespective of training and educational qualifications.

Hemmingson, Borell and Gustavsson (2003) also contest the notion that increases in TA time in the classroom is necessarily beneficial to children's learning. Their research found that it can actually decrease the quality and quantity of teacher/child interaction. Other research seems to provide further support for such critique. It has been suggested that learners can become overly dependent on teaching assistants and

this could inhibit their ability to undertake independent learning and ultimately reduce their levels of attainment (Moyles & Suschitsky, 1997).

Other researchers have established that children who experienced more support from teaching assistants had fewer contacts with qualified teachers (Blatchford et al., 2012; Webster et al., 2011). These authors draw upon data from the DISS study. As noted earlier in this chapter, this study is the largest to date that has explored teaching assistant roles by tracking 8,200 school pupils' experiences. These writers also claim to show how those supported by TAs often make smaller amounts of academic progress than their peers who do not have extensive contact with these workers.

Critics have further argued that the use of teaching assistants can be particularly damaging as it is socially reproductive in that pupils who are subjected to the greatest social disadvantages gain less access to qualified teachers' time (Giangreco, Yuan, Mackensie, Cameron, & Fialka, 2005; Webster et al, 2013). The introduction of the issue of social reproduction into these debates is an interesting and notable development that is largely ignored in academic discussions of the subject.

Effectively managing teaching assistants in classrooms has also been found to be a problematic area for teachers, particularly those with SENCO responsibilities (Gerschel, 2005). Research has claimed that a lack of effective joint planning between some teachers and their TAs constrains children's teaching and learning experiences (Blatchford, Russell, Brown & Martin, 2006). However, this may not always be a result of a lack of skill or desire on the part of qualified teachers. It has been suggested that, in part, such an outcome is a consequence of teachers' awareness of the poor levels of pay teaching assistants receive. In turn, they are likely to be reluctant to ask them to stay beyond their contracted hours to engage in planning (Barkham, 2008). Ironically, teaching assistants have been found to be irritated by not being included in planning activities (Maher, 2014). Anxieties have also been expressed about the impact that expanding workplace roles have had on teaching assistants (Chapman & Gunter, 2009). It has been claimed that increases in TAs' workloads may ironically lead to future problems in their recruitment and retention (Butt & Lance, 2009).

The above research does not always offer balanced accounts as they do not explore the positive outcomes that the extension of TA numbers and roles has produced. Blatchford et al.'s (2009) investigation of pupil behaviour in 49 primary schools, through extensive systematic observations, suggested that although the presence of support staff reduced pupil interaction with teachers, they did offer learners more

individualised levels of attention, improved pupil engagement and helped enhance classroom control. The DISS Project also revealed that teaching assistants can have a positive impact by undertaking classroom-based behaviour management which enables teachers to focus on teaching activity (Webster et al., 2011). Moreover, factors often outside the immediate control of teaching assistants have been identified as limiting teaching assistants' effectiveness (Blatchford et al., 2012). These include how schools utilised teaching assistants' time and the level of training that TAs had experienced.

Wilson et al. (2007) further outline how the development of the role of HLTA has been particularly important as it established professional standards for TAs. For some, the development of Teacher Training Agency standards for the awarding of HLTA status, which are similar to those required by trainee teachers to gain qualified teacher status, represent a significant move towards professionalising teaching assistants' roles (Collins & Simco, 2006). According to Edmond (2010), this is part of a more general trend towards "professionalisation" of teaching assistants that has accompanied the remodelling agenda.

Rose (2006) also claims that School Workforce Reform might be viewed as an official acknowledgement "that support staff can, and do, make an increasingly critical contribution to all aspects of the successful operation of schools" (p. 4). Yet, these accounts seem to be overly optimistic and research has subsequently shown that the TA role continues to provide low status work and relatively poor conditions of employment (Dunne et al., 2008a).

1.8. New Labour's final attempt at restructuring the TA workforce: Teaching assistant apprenticeships in English schools

Much of the research literature on the changing roles of teaching assistants has overlooked the final stage of New Labour's reform of teaching assistants' roles which involved the creation of teaching assistant apprenticeships. In the last eighteen months of office, the Brown administration made a series of policy pronouncements about its intention to recruit large numbers of "low-achieving" school leavers to school-based teaching assistant apprenticeship roles. This policy initiative was launched in the early part of 2009, when Ed Balls, then Secretary of State for Education, made a series of press announcements. These outlined New Labour's intention to offer 4,000 lower achieving school leavers the opportunity to train as apprentice teaching assistants in

schools and nurseries (see Lipsett, 2009). It was suggested that trainees might be occupied reading with younger children, working with small groups of pupils, lesson preparation and overseeing children who are involved in arts and crafts (Patton, 2009). Specifically, Balls called for providers to follow the Ministry of Defence's lead in providing work-based training for youngsters who were vulnerable to social exclusion.

He declared that this would be part of a sizeable expansion of public sector apprenticeships; with 20,000 of the 35,000 extra apprenticeships provided by pre-16 educational and childcare providers. Although ministers did not generally view this training route as a pathway to teaching, this was acknowledged as a possibility (see Frean, 2009). Schools were encouraged to support the scheme rather than being compelled to do so by State regulation.

A series of criticisms were made of the establishment of teaching assistant apprenticeships from a diverse range of interested parties. Unusually united in condemnation were teacher unions, such as the National Union of Teachers (NUT) and Association of Teachers and Lecturers (ATL), the Conservative Party and Campaign for Real Education. The Times Educational Supplement condemned it as yet another distraction for teachers and claimed that it would also be unenthusiastically received by many established teaching assistants (Vaughan, 2009) who may see it as an attack on the status of their work. This initiative could also be regarded as being reflective of the limited status that teaching assistants have claimed that their roles provide (Dunne et al., 2008).

1.9. UK Coalition policy and teaching assistants since 2010

Remarkably, even relatively recently published studies of teaching assistants do not usually provide an analysis of the UK Coalition Government's attitudes towards this group of workers. The extremely limited literature on this is reviewed in the final part of this chapter. After the relatively high profile New Labour policies that had brought radical changes to teaching assistants' numbers and work, the UK Coalition Government's period in office can be characterised as being one of general ambivalence to and at times, hostile towards TAs. Under Michael Gove's tenure as Secretary of Education, the work of teaching assistants was rarely acknowledged by policy makers.

There is, however, some evidence of a deterioration of teaching assistants' workplace positions. The abolition of the School Support Staff Negotiating Body (SSSNB) in 2010 can be viewed in this way. This body had been tasked with developing national levels of pay and other working conditions for support staff. It covered all support staff and not just teaching assistants. Its demise was part of the Coalition's "bonfire of quangos" policy (Tapsfield, 2012), which aimed to reduce state spending as part of an attempt to address a national budgetary deficit. One consequence of the removal of the SSSNB was that schools were free to individually set teaching assistants' pay, which potentially included reductions.

Furthermore, it has been suggested that the public sector pay freeze that has been imposed under the Coalition Government has hit teaching assistants particularly hard due to their low levels of pay (Webster, 2014). The same author, who was a principal investigator in the DISS Project, also argues that a partial interpretation of this research has undermined TAs. The right-wing think tank *Reform* (Bassett, Haldenby, Tanner & Trewhitt, 2010) drew upon DISS data to call for a large-scale reduction of TA numbers. They argued that the DISS project had showed that teaching assistants, per se, had an extremely limited impact on children's achievement. It was suggested that the 1.7 billion pounds that was spent annually on teaching assistants' salaries would be better deployed if it was reallocated to financing additional teachers. On publication of this report, it was rumoured that the Coalition Government was considering axing thousands of teaching assistant posts (Barker, 2014). However, Webster (2014) outlines how staff reductions of this scale have not become reality. The figures on TA numbers show that instead an increase has occurred (DfE, 2014a).

1.10. Chapter summary

This chapter has provided a critical review of the main policies and academic literature related to one of the central concepts that is at the heart of my thesis, namely; the teaching assistants' work. It has analysed policy literature related to the growth of teaching assistant numbers and the role expansion that has been identified as having accompanied this increase. As part of this discussion, the meaning that my research assigns to the term "teaching assistant" is reiterated and expanded upon. Policy and research literature is drawn upon to critically explore the drivers behind the trends that have been described, especially related to New Labour's educational policies. As part

of this review, School Workforce Remodelling was analysed in some detail. The final part of the chapter considered the UK Coalition Governments' attitudes towards teaching assistants. Here it is outlined how, although UK government policy since 2010 has been largely ambivalent and sometimes antagonistic towards TAs, their numbers have continued to grow in state-funded schools. Existing research is criticised for providing little detail of the UK Coalition Government's policy and attitudes towards teaching assistants. It is argued that an exploration of the issues that are discussed in this chapter provide a useful context within which the findings that are discussed in the second part of this thesis can be productively interpreted.

2. THE DEVELOPMENT OF WORK-RELATED FOUNDATION DEGREES AND RESEARCH INTO STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES

2.1. Introduction

The term Foundation degree, as it is employed within this thesis, refers to a particular form of vocationally orientated sub-Bachelor's degree that has emerged in the United Kingdom over the past fifteen years. This second literature review chapter aims to provide further detail of this concept by reviewing its development and distinct nature. It also discusses critical voices that have raised concerns about the emergence of this qualification. After reviewing these debates, the chapter explores research that has investigated students' experiences of a range of Foundation degrees that have not been explicitly targeted at teaching assistants. An assessment of research literature, expressly related to the engagement of teaching assistants on Foundation degrees, is then conducted. The final part of this chapter discusses research which has analysed the experiences of mature students undertaking non-vocational higher education courses. It is maintained that this literature is useful in that it illuminates how some of the experiences that have been documented amongst mature Foundation degree students are reflective of older students generally; particularly women from socially disadvantaged backgrounds. It is suggested that these commonalities are rarely noted by scholars who have analysed Foundation degree students' experiences. Throughout this literature review, a number of theoretical frameworks are considered.

2.2. The growth of Foundation degree numbers

In 2012-13, 3% of higher education qualifications in England were awarded at Foundation degree level (HESA, 2014). Foundation degree numbers have grown significantly over the last decade from 19,585 in 2004-05 to 35,700 in 2012-13 (Hansard, 2014). The same source has described how a significant part of this growth has involved an increasing number of students accessing Foundation degrees that are provided by further education colleges (FECs). Learners studying with English FECs accounted for 25% of the total number of Foundation degree (Fd) students in 2004-05, but by 2012-13 this had risen to 40%. However, the majority of students study directly with universities. The majority of Foundation degree places are offered by newer post

1992 universities. Between 2006-07 and 2008-09, half of all full-time Foundation

degree learners were over 20 years of age at the start of their courses. For part-time

students in the same period, the figure was 90% (HEFCE, 2010).

**Table 2.1: The number and proportion of UK-domiciled Foundation degree
entrants at higher education institutions and further education colleges in
England between 2004-05 and 2012-13, split by the type of registering institution**

Table 1: Number of Foundation degree entrants (UK-domiciled Foundation degree entrants at HEIs and FECs in England)					
Type of registering institution					
HEI			FEC		
Year of entry	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage	Total
2004-05	14,785	75	4,800	25	19,585
2005-06	20,750	77	6,180	23	26,930
2006-07	24,510	73	8,325	25	33,735
2007-08	31,370	77	9,400	23	40,770
2008-09	35,600	75	11,900	25	47,495
2009-10	38,865	71	14,200	26	54,950
2010-11	35,685	71	13,125	26	49,920
2011-12	33,845	70	13,770	28	48,350
2012-13	21,090	59	14,150	40	35,700

Source: Hansard (2014)

In 2012-13, there were 15,215 Foundation degree graduates who had undertaken full-

time study at English higher education institutions (HEIs) and 9,015 who had followed

a part-time route (HESA, 2014). Research has also revealed a highly gendered pattern

of subject choice at Foundation degree level (Nelson, 2006). The subject area of

education has consistently had the highest level of women and least number of men

undertaking Foundation degree study. Only 3% of students on these courses were male

(HEFCE, 2010). This pattern needs to be assessed in a context where just over half of

full-time students and around two thirds of part-time Foundation degree students are

female. Foundation degrees have also been found to recruit well amongst learners from

low participation neighbourhoods, where there are high levels of social disadvantage

(Fenge, 2011; HEFCE, 2010; Robinson, 2012).

Table 2.2: Full-time entrants by subject area of study, 2006-07 to 2008-09 (home Foundation degree entrants at HEIs and FECs in England) by subject area of study

Subject area of study	2006-07 Number	proportion	2007-08 Number	proportion	2008-09 Number	proportion
Medicine and dentistry	0	0	0	0	0	0
Subjects allied to medicine	1,770	9%	1,795	8%	2,265	8%
Biological sciences	1,330	7%	1,580	7%	2,020	7%
Veterinary science	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%
Agriculture and related subjects	1,440	7%	1,640	7%	1,770	6%
Physical sciences	245	1%	250	1%	305	1%
Mathematical sciences	0	0%	60	0%	0	0%
Computer sciences	1,595	8%	1,665	7%	1,910	7%
Engineering and technology	1,170	6%	1,455	6%	1,945	7%
Architecture, building and planning	275	1%	420	2%	565	2%
Social studies	1,475	7%	2,340	10%	2,935	10%
Law	85	0%	110	0%	165	1%
Business and administrative studies	2,530	13%	2,985	13%	3,585	13%
Mass communication and documentation	620	3%	830	3%	885	3%
Languages	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%
Historical and philosophical studies	45	0%	55	0%	105	0%
Creative arts and design	4,375	22%	5,360	22%	6,310	22%
Education	2,140	11%	2,670	11%	3,025	11%
Combined	615	3%	625	3%	755	3%
Total	19,720	100%	23,835	100%	28,545	100%

Source: HEFCE (2010)

By 2003-04, an impressive 427 Fds with around 21,000 student enrolments were in place (Greenbank, 2007; QAA, 2005). By 2010, up to 100,000 places were called for (DfES, 2004; Greenbank, 2007), while the number of Foundation degrees had increased to 1,700 with almost 900 more being planned (Ooms, Burke, Marks-Maran, Webb & Cooper, 2012). Statistical analysis of participation in Foundation degree study has also provided valuable information on the academic progression rates of learners on these courses. In 2012-13, the progression rate from Foundation degrees to Honours-level was 50% (Hansard, 2014).

2.3. The nature of Foundation degrees and the central policy drivers behind their development

Foundation degree qualifications are UK regulated sub-degree qualifications that involve studying 240 degree credits (half at level one and half at level two). They were launched in 2001 by the UK Labour Government. Their development occurred

alongside the expansion of the paraprofessional workforce of which the growth of school-based teaching assistants was a sizeable part. It has been suggested that these qualifications are comparable with the associate degrees that are taught in community colleges in the USA. Like Fds, these programmes aim to help similar categories of learner (Robinson, 2012; Wilson, Blewitt & Moody, 2005). This international context is valuable and is often absent from academic literature on Foundation degrees.

Educationalists have productively provided a high level of detail on the history and development of Foundation degrees. Their work has illustrated the complexity of the policy drivers that can be considered to have been related to the emergence of Foundation degrees. Commentators have outlined how New Labour portrayed the development of these qualifications as being part of an attempt to tackle skills shortages in the UK by providing a form of higher education that mixed academic and work-based learning (Chipperfield, 2013). The new Foundation degrees were therefore work-related and focused upon employer requests for the development of high quality intermediate skills (Tierney & Slack, 2005), especially amongst higher technicians/associate professionals (Foskett, 2005; Greenbank, 2007). Foundation degrees were expected to meet the economy's requirements "by equipping students with the combination of academic knowledge and technical and transferable skills demanded by employers while facilitating lifelong learning for the workforce" (Doyle, 2003, p. 276).

As part of this narrative, there was an uncontested assumption that social justice would be enhanced by expanding a "culture of enterprise". Doyle (2003) has criticised this policy position by suggesting that it included an uncritical acceptance of globalised economic determinism which ignores its inequitable consequences.

Proposals for a new sub-degree were presented by David Blunkett at the turn of the new millennium (Blunkett, 2000). Foundation degree was the title employed to describe a series of new vocationally-related qualifications. On an official level at least, they were not merely intended to address perceived deficiencies in National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) at Level 4, Higher National Certificates an Diplomas (HNC/Ds), Diplomas of Higher Education (DipHEs) and existing part-time work-based BAs (Edmond, Hillier & Price, 2007). It was suggested that they would target middle and "the most able learners" (Davies, 2005, p. 1) and provide a specific vocational knowledge base that would be under-pinned by more traditional academic learning. In an initial round of promotion for Foundation degrees, an integration of

work-based learning alongside traditional academic learning was also promoted as a novel feature of these qualifications (Beaney, 2006).

The latter would facilitate progression to honours level achievement. Explicit and effective progression routes that enable Foundation degree students to top-up their initial qualification to full BA (Hons) level therefore were and continue to be a key feature of such programmes (DfEE, 2000). Foundation degree providers were required to provide access to a top-up year of 120 honours level credits. Foundation degrees were also represented as being a form of education that would be attractive to the "hard-to-reach" (Foskett, 2005) and excluded social groups. They would enhance such individuals' employability and promote their participation in lifelong learning (Tierney & Slack, 2005).

The emphasis Foundation degrees placed upon work-based learning also brought with it a demand for flexible modes of study in order to allow potential students to "earn as they learned" (Smith & Betts, 2003). When Foundation degrees were initially proposed, such learning was perceived to be central to a wider aspiration of effective employer engagement which was viewed as central to the qualification's success. Those involved in designing Fd provision were encouraged to provide employers with a central role in deciding curriculum content. In this way Foundation degrees were portrayed as being likely to meet employers' requirements, particularly in terms of up-skilling their workers (Dodgson & Whitham, 2005). Thurgate and MacGregor (2008) explain how:

> Work Based Learning (WBL), learning through the experience of work, axiomatic to all Fd design, should enable employers to take more responsibility to articulate the needs of their employees and better support the strategic direction of their organisations. They understand their business and are vital to the collaborative arrangement at all stages of the project. (p. 27)

In this policy discourse, it was assumed that potential Foundation degree students possessed a skills deficit as they undertook some elements of workplace roles (Parry, 2006). New Labour's policy reforms were often legitimised by an unchallenged reiteration of the economic imperative to up-skill workers to meet heightened global competition (Doyle, 2003). It has been suggested that *modernisation* was employed as a metaphor for change and operates as a rhetorical device that simultaneously portrays progress and change as the same thing (Doyle, 2003). In this critique, it is argued that

New Labour's education reforms emphasised the deficiency of workers as a problem in the face of global competition for markets.

Scholars have also noted that policy discourse stressed that these qualifications would consequently meet the needs of learners who had not been adequately catered for by universities, particularly those which held this title before 1992 (Foskett, 2005). Interestingly, those who initially constructed this policy envisaged that further education colleges would deliver a significant proportion of this provision. Partnerships between colleges, universities and employers needed to be established to produce localised and workplace focused provision (Doyle, 2003). Foundation degree policy has however been condemned for its insistence on a collaboration and partnership between HEIs and industry. Such pronouncements were criticised as being typical of a wider discourse of modernisation which has promoted the importance of business interests in determining public service provision over those of learners (Foskett, 2005).

However, analysis which only focuses upon the development of Foundation degrees in terms of New Labour's wish to create a new high status vocational qualification that would produce economic benefits can be viewed as offering an incomplete explanation. Additionally, it has been claimed that the emergence of Foundation degrees needs to be understood in terms of New Labour's desire to expand higher education numbers, especially amongst those social groups who were under-represented (Dodgson & Whitham, 2005). The discourses surrounding, and embedded in, policy pronouncements about Foundation degrees also portrayed them as part of a "further democratisation of higher education" (Doyle, 2003, p. 275). Social inclusion through equal opportunities was very much to the fore in these arguments. In a white paper titled *the Future of Higher Education* (DfES, 2003a), Foundation degrees were cited as being one of the ways that a widening of participation in higher education would be achieved. Somewhat naively, it was assumed that accessing higher education, irrespective of its form and where it was delivered, would inevitably lead to enhanced life chances for students from socially disadvantaged backgrounds.

Academics have beneficially outlined how the policy ancestry of Foundation degrees can be partially found in the Dearing and the Kennedy Reports (Davies, 2005). The former strongly called for an increased rate of participation in higher education. New sub-degree level qualifications, similar to the Higher National Certificates (HNC) and Higher National Diplomas (HND), were considered to be part of a more general

expansion in student numbers at this level. Immediately lifting the cap on full-time sub-degree places was recommended, and within two to three years a similar relaxation should occur in relation to all full-time undergraduate numbers.

The Blair Government of the time accepted these recommendations and allowed a growth of student numbers, but was sceptical of HNC/HND's ability to produce the required increase in student numbers (Parry & Thompson, 2002). Dearing (1997) also called for further and higher education institutions to address the issue of the under-representation of socially disadvantaged groups via expanding student numbers and notably suggested that priority funding should be given to engage in widening participation (NCIHE, 1997). In a similar vein, the Kennedy Report (1997) stressed the need to make participation in non-compulsory education more socially inclusive (Davies, 2005). It would therefore seem that the emergence of Foundation degrees can be considered to have been to some extent influenced by such calls for an expansion of higher education numbers in the UK.

Another subsidiary, though not insignificant, policy driver that has been identified as being behind the impetus for Foundation degrees was New Labour's commitment to lifelong learning (Foskett, 2005; Lammy, 2009; Parry, 2006). This commitment was connected to its endorsement of the Fryer Report (1997). Widening educational participation and workplace learning were identified as important mechanisms through which lifelong learning could be stimulated. Economic development was portrayed as being one consequence that would flow from the increase in student numbers in higher education. It has been suggested that Foundation degrees were consequently promoted in terms of this policy narrative (Fenge, 2011).

Doyle (2003) makes an important input into debates about the development of Foundation degrees by noting how it can be regarded as being part of a distinctive political ideology that attempted to combine economic and democratic agendas within one discursive policy framework. Here an attempt was made to offer a *raison d'être* for policy initiatives that combine global economic competiveness with enhanced equality opportunity. As with much of the analysis that has been offered about the changing roles of teaching assistants, Foundation degree development has also been portrayed as being a product of a wider discourse of "modernisation" within which New Labour's social policies were formulated. In key respects, it has been argued that the development and growth of Foundation degrees might be regarded as being an exemplar of New Labour's *Third Way* and *modernisation*; in that it attempts to

"synthesize traditionally competing agendas, facilitating a neat discursive synchronisation of utilitarian and progressive objectives democratising access to higher education and empowering the individual, while tooling up 'UK PLC' to compete in a global economy" (Doyle, 2003, p. 275). Previously literature on teaching assistants' experiences of Foundation degrees has not documented how this discourse has framed learners' educational and workplace experiences.

Foundation degrees have continued to be a feature of the UK higher education landscape and have survived changes of government. The election of the UK Coalition Government in 2010 did not produce a change of policy in relation to widening participation in higher education. One consequence of this policy decision has been that Foundation degrees have continued to be supported by the State (Robinson, 2012).

2.3.1. Changes to teaching assistants' roles and the emergence of Foundation degrees targeted at this occupational group

Edmond (2003) outlines how school workforce reform and role modification produced a demand for enhanced professional development routes for teaching assistants. Distinctive programmes were developed at local and national levels including niche local level training, NVQs, advanced vocational levels, Higher Level Teaching Assistant Status and work-based Foundation degrees. In relation to the latter, their development has been viewed as "a timely response to the issues created by the ever-increasing duties required of teaching assistants" that School Workforce Remodelling had produced (Morris, 2010, p. 481-2). Significant numbers of HEIs, mainly newer teaching-led universities, validated a vast range of Foundation degrees aimed at teaching assistants (Beaney, 2006).

The importance of Foundation degrees in meeting the School Workforce Reform agenda was signalled in 1997 in a Green Paper entitled *Excellence for all Children* (DfEE, 1997). A clear national framework was offered; a framework that described the desirable training opportunities that should be on offer for teaching assistants. Foundation degrees were given particular prominence within this framework and were regarded as having the potential to provide teaching assistants "with an appropriate, respected and nationally recognised qualification" (Morris, 2010, p. 483).

2.4. Concerns about the promotion of Foundation degrees

Critics have expressed strong reservations about the development of Foundation degrees and have challenged the idea that they promote social equality. From the onset of official pronouncements about the arrival of Foundation degrees, critical academic voices (Gibbs, 2000; Doyle, 2003) have expressed disquiet about their potential to reproduce the class-based disadvantages. As part of this argument, Foundation degrees were condemned for being structured predominantly to meet employer needs rather than those of the learners who would study on them (Gibbs, 2002). In this critical narrative, such programmes have been accused of primarily providing employers with an enhanced pool of upskilled workers from which increased surplus-value could be generated (economic profit). Gibbs (2002) questions the worth of Foundation degrees for this reason when he states that:

> These degrees seem to be programmes that are constructed to transfer value from the university through the student to the employer. This is likely to be achieved with little respect for the individual as a person but as a unit of utility. (p. 202)

He further maintains that the policy discourses surrounding Foundation degrees have potentially dehumanising consequences for the learners who study on these programmes. It was suggested that this scenario is particularly detrimental as Foundation degrees are attractive to learners from groups who face considerable inequalities. Somewhat stereotypically, Gibbs (2000) suggested that Foundation degree students are less equipped to appreciate their unfavourable situation. It was further maintained that Foundation degrees' emphasis on the assessment through behavioural outcomes, and achievement of occupational benchmarks, have the potential of producing learner alienation. However, this argument seems to be based upon another unfounded caricature of Foundation degrees which ignores the requirement that students engage in criticality and the fact that a large number of students successfully progress to honours level study (Hansard, 2014).

Gibbs (2000) has also strongly argued that Foundation degree study, whilst potentially advancing its learners' credentials, may not fully develop their understanding in their fields of study. The generation of compliant learners is also stressed as another possible danger of such qualifications. Doubt is cast on whether the production of such learners would ultimately meet the real needs of modern employers. In relation to this, he contends that "perhaps in this case business is getting

what it deserves but not what it needs or desires" (Gibbs, 2000, p. 203). This critique of Foundation degrees also accuses them of being unlikely to offer decent recompense for students' exertions. Gibbs (2002, p. 203) asks:

> What employer will take a foundation degree student when similar skills are available from a degree student (with accredited employability skills) who may bring more potential at the same price?

Ironically, Gibbs (2000) himself also criticises these qualifications for producing uncritical and malleable workers that are likely to be highly attractive to business. There is, therefore, perhaps an inconsistency around whether or not Foundation degrees will improve or limit students' employability. Greenbank (2007) has further claimed that the practical emphasis of Foundation degree learning has the potential to produce a feeling amongst students that they are unequipped for the more academic study that honours level study brings. This is, however, disputed by others (Morgan, 2010).

Additionally, Gibbs (2000) has claimed that the autonomy of universities as "learning communities' might be undermined by Foundation Degree study as "its teaching body becomes peripatetic performers" (p. 202). In the context of such pressures, it has been argued that validating higher education institutions have an obligation to assure that the learning and knowledge transfer accredited on the programmes actually foster critical reflection and what is in the best interests of learners, "as well as the employer and 'UK PLC'" (Doyle, 2003, p. 286). Again, such argumentation seems to be based upon assumptions about Foundation degree students, their learning and those who tutor them that are not supported by other research findings. These are discussed in the next part of this chapter.

2.5. Research into students' experiences of Foundation degree

The next part of this chapter firstly discusses the need for research into Foundation degrees. It also explores investigations that have explored learners' experiences of Foundation degree study. Firstly, studies which have examined whether or not Foundation degrees have successfully encouraged a widening of participation in higher education are surveyed. Following this analysis, the chapter examines research that has investigated students' engagement with Foundation degrees that were not specifically targeted at teaching assistants. An appraisal of research that has focused

upon the engagement of teaching assistants with Foundation degrees is then undertaken.

2.5.1. The need for research into Foundation degrees

It has been contended that Foundation degree provision has been comparatively under-researched (Tierney & Slack, 2005) and that student experiences in particular is a significantly under-developed area of academic work. Beaney (2006) claimed that:

> Given the centrality of innovative forms of learning (work based, flexible, blended and reflective learning) to Foundation degrees it is confounding to find that the learner's experience of engaging with the new qualification is so under examined. (p. 3)

However, there is in fact an emergent body of research that has been produced on student experiences of Foundation degrees (Bowers-Brown, 2006; Chipperfield, 2012, 2013; Fenge, 2011; Greenbank, 2009; Ooms, et al., 2012; Robinson, 2012; Tierney & Slack, 2005) and those aimed specifically at teaching assistants (Dunne, Goddard & Woolhouse, 2008; Edmond, 2003, 2004; Graves & Jones, 2008; Penketh & Goddard, 2008; Morris, 2010; Woolhouse, Dunne & Goddard, 2009; Taylor, 2014). Research into Foundation degree students' understandings of their experiences has offered insights into such learners' initial motivations for study, conceptions of their on-course experiences and their transitions to level 6 (the final top-up year to gain a full Bachelor's degree). Within this body of research, a small number of writers (Edmond 2009, 2010; Fenge 2011) have begun to explore the sense (Weick, 1995) that Foundation degree learners make of their studies in terms of identity construction. However, such work rarely draws insights that have been provided by researchers who have specifically examined the mature student experience by drawing upon the concepts of social inequality, identity and social reproduction. Existing Foundation degree research often fails to differentiate between the aspects of the Foundation degree experience that are specific to the programmes of the students involved and the experiences that can be seen as a general reflection of mature students as a whole.

2.5.2. Increasing access to higher education

Initial enrolment trends and evaluative research into the value of Foundation degrees (York Consulting, 2004) found that they had been successful at widening participation, especially for mature students from working class backgrounds. Later larger scale

research has similarly found that Foundation degrees provide pathways to higher education for disadvantaged groups, especially those from lower income backgrounds (Craig, 2009; Harvey, 2009; Nelson, 2006).

The percentage of black and ethnic minority students who access Foundation degrees has also been found to be relatively high. Research by HEFCE (2010) described how these students comprised of 17% of full-time entrants between 2006-07 and 2008-09. Fenge (2011) argues that HEFCE data further revealed that large numbers of mature Foundation degree students would not have gained access to higher education if this route had not been established. For many, their level of qualification on entry would not have met traditional university entry criteria. Moreover, it is claimed that the flexible ways that these qualifications have been delivered has opened access to groups of women whose lifestyle obligations have made it difficult to attend traditional undergraduate programmes, particularly student-mothers (HEFCE, 2010). Large-scale survey research suggested that these learners are generally very satisfied with their experiences of Foundation degree study and the opportunities to learn that it had offered (Dodgson & Witham, 2005).

The above research is extremely helpful in that it illustrates how Foundation degrees seem to have met one of their central aims, in that they have engaged large numbers of socially disadvantaged learners. It has also provided valuable data on the exact social groups that are most likely to participate in this form of study. Studies of research into the interpretations of non-teaching assistants on Foundation degrees, as well as those specifically targeted at teaching assistants, have also provided important understandings that can inform explanations of teaching assistants' engagements with higher education. This thesis now proceeds to examine such academic analysis.

2.5.3. Research into students' experiences of Foundation degrees not explicitly targeted at teaching assistants

Much of the research that has aimed to investigate Foundation degrees, and has focused upon students' experiences of their studies, has been qualitative and has been carried out by academics working in post-1992 universities. One of the main advantages of these investigations is that they allow students' voices to be captured in some detail. This research has also productively analysed learners' views around degree choice, being a Foundation degree student and transition to honours level study.

However, as I pointed out earlier in this thesis, these different elements of Foundation degree engagement are generally analysed in isolation from each other.

One of the earliest pieces of published research to examine learners' engagement with Foundation degree study was conducted by Bainbridge (2005). Informatively, he offers a discussion of motives for study and students' experiences of learning. Some discussion of the gender, motherhood and studentship is also provided. The study conducted case study research into a group of mature female Foundation degree students. All of the students involved had recently achieved a Foundation degree in the subject area of education. Questionnaire research was undertaken to gain qualitative data to capture the participants' views. Open-ended questions were employed for this purpose and to meet the author's stated commitment to an interpretive research paradigm.

In terms of motivations for study, both the "process and outcome of higher education" (Bainbridge, 2005, p. 23) were discovered as being important. Outcome factors were seen as employment-related, especially around career enhancement. This included increased earning power that would improve the life chances of their immediate families. Giving their children greater opportunities was stressed and linked to perceptions around being a good parent. Included in the desire for career change was an ambition of some change of identity; that was how others and the students themselves defined who they were. Even though little development or illustration is provided on this issue, Bainbridge (2005) unusually raises awareness of the role that identity change can have on the experiences of Foundation degree students. Improvements to self-esteem and strong internal levels of motivation were also highlighted.

Uniquely in the literature on Foundation degrees, his research also documented feelings of guilt about aspiring to social mobility and consequent rejection of their existing social networks. There was also some guilt evident as a result of studying whilst being mothers. This finding reflects that of others who have investigated the perspectives of student-mothers (Blaxter & Tight, 1994; Brooks, 2014; White, 2008). Others have further pointed out that for those who study on work-related programmes of study, conflicting conceptions of workplace and student identities can produce significant emotional disturbance (Askham, 2008). Students also claimed to have been attracted by the relatively local delivery location of their programme. Other researchers have similarly found practical issues such as the proximity to students' home

residences sometimes inform what and where Foundation degree students study (Simm, Marvell, Schaaf & Winlow, 2012). Elsewhere, it has been found that student-mothers specifically often decide to learn locally as it allows them to manage risks to existing patterns of life (Lloyd-Parry, 2010).

Bainbridge's (2005) analysis has provided a significant piece of research, but can be regarded as limited in some respects. Firstly, it is one of a number of pieces of such research that ignores work-based experiences as motivating and constructing Foundation degree students' experiences. As these degrees are predicated upon learners undertaking a high proportion of work-based learning, this seems to be a serious weakness. Secondly, the pressures that conceptions of motherhood can have on student experiences are underdeveloped even though they are mentioned in relation to the production of guilt. Finally, Bainbridge's (2005) methodology is unclear. The sample size and its key characteristics are not outlined. The study's claim that its findings were generated from the deployment of an interpretive methodology is open to some debate due to its use of a one off survey; even if open-ended questions were utilised. Traditionally, interpretivism seeks to gain more in-depth data from a variety of sources, usually through interviewing and observation (Guba & Lincoln, 1994).

The decision-making processes that Foundation degree students undertake when choosing this study option has been the subject of small-scale research via semi-structured interviewing (Greenbank, 2009). Learners have been described as only drawing upon limited sources of information when making their decisions. Often they applied for their programmes in the summer immediately before they commenced. There was little evidence of extensive consideration of alternative pathways or students having accessed specialist advice. Intuition and informal information have been identified as the dominant influences (Greenbank, 2009). From these findings, constructive recommendations have been made about the need for improved careers advice for such students. Greenbank (2009) calls for "hot sources" of easy to access advice to be established. Space has also been requested for comprehensive decision-making to occur, which would allow alternatives to be reflected upon.

Research into Foundation degree hairdressers has found that even if their decision-making had been constrained, these learners believed that their studies had provided a range of social benefits. These notably included increased personal confidence, particularly in relation to their ability to undertake their workplace roles (Smoothy, 2006). Improved information technology skills were also cited as an advantage of

study. Enhanced confidence was also found among amongst students on a geography-related Foundation degree (Simm et al., 2012). Such research has been fruitful in that it shows that Foundation degree students had gained a range of benefits outside those envisaged by policy makers.

Ooms et al. (2012) have offered a more detailed analysis of Foundation degree students' experiences. Extensive research was carried out by undertaking a mixed-methods evaluation. Students from a range of different subject areas were sampled to capture their experiences. Questionnaire research and focus groups were employed within this overall approach. Through conducting a detailed literature review of material related to Foundation degree study, ten main elements related to students' experiences were identified and learners' perceptions of these were subsequently captured (see Table 2.3).

Table 2.3: Ooms et al.'s (2012) questionnaire elements

1) **Accessibility**
2) **Progression**
3) **Flexibility of course delivery**
4) **Work-based learning**
5) **Assessment**
6) **Recognition of prior learning**
7) **Teaching methods**
8) **Learning resources**
9) **Student support**
10) **Professional/personal impact (e.g. self-confidence; life skills development; juggling multiple demands**)

From these elements, 15 Likert and 18 open-ended questions were developed. Questionnaires were completed by 152 students. Eight focus groups with final year students were also conducted. These involved 114 students and again addressed the 10 elements outlined above. Overwhelmingly, students offered positive responses in relation to their learner experiences. Very high levels of positivity were uncovered around the accessibility of Foundation degrees, their flexibility, work-based learning, opportunities for progression and work-based relatedness of assessments. For the other elements, a more mixed picture emerged, and these varied with subject area. However, challenges around being subjected to multiple demands on time and finances were highlighted as a significant pressure that such students' experienced. Seventy per cent

of questionnaire responses claimed that these had posed difficulties. Focus group data also provided similar results.

Two thirds of students isolated the existence of very good progression routes as being an advantageous aspect of their present programme of study. A similar number reported positivity about the focus that their programme had upon work-based learning. Some learners identified a need for more time and opportunity to undertake such learning. On the other hand, on a personal level, nearly two thirds of respondents reported increased self-confidence. Morgan (2015) has equally outlined how universities are locations where identity change can take place.

More negatively, Ooms et al. (2012) describe how employers were not perceived as valuing Foundation degrees. Wareing's (2008) research into health care assistants who were also studying for a Foundation degree found a similar result. This lack of recognition by employers was viewed as being linked to the disappointment that their studies had not helped them achieve a pay rise. These studies pose important questions about employer engagement, qualification hierarchies within higher education and conceptions of studentship.

While such findings are therefore indeed informative, they could be viewed s restricted in that they offer minimal theorisation in relation to their findings. However, there are a small number of studies that have produced similar results but offer more theoretical depth by drawing upon the concepts of social reproduction, identity work and risk.

Adopting a critical hermeneutics approach, Robinson (2012) describes how Foundation degree students who study with further education colleges are acutely aware of a number of limitations that their qualifications possess. This research critiques the policy assumption that increasing the percentage of students from socially disadvantaged backgrounds in higher education will enhance social mobility. Focus groups and individual interviews were conducted with students on a range of Foundation degree programmes. This strategy allowed 53 students to participate in the investigation. One of the central findings to be derived from this investigation was that the Foundation degree students recognised the relatively lowly place that they inhabited in the "hierarchical and differentiated HE structure" (Robinson, 2012, p. 456). One consequence of this positioning was that many learners believed that Foundation study, especially as it had been provided by a further education college, was viewed as "second-best". One of the merits of such research is that it demonstrates

how such students are able to reflect on the limitations of their qualifications. This finding challenges Gibbs' (2000) contention that such students would be unable to engage in such critical reflexivity.

Similarly, Brooks and Everett's (2008) relatively large-scale in-depth interview study of post-graduate experiences suggested that students who had previously attended post-1992 universities and colleges of HE sometimes had decided to pursue post-graduate study at higher status research intensive universities. This decision was partly a result of the relative lack of esteem that their previous undergraduate study had bestowed. Robinson (2012) argues that Foundation degrees, which are mainly offered by lower status providers, can be criticised for "maintain[ing] social divisions rather than enhancing social mobility" (p. 465).

Robinson's (2012) work can also be viewed as adding to the literature on Foundation degrees as it explored how age can influence engagement with this form of learning. Students of different age groups were found to have diverse opinions when asked about their motives for study. Younger students in their twenties claimed that their course choice had been partly influenced by a wish to gain some protection and advantage in a challenging future jobs-market. A number of younger and relatively well qualified learners had chosen their Foundation degree as they believed that it would increase their future chances of entering paid employment. Equivalent results have been uncovered from focus group research with students on a geography-focused Foundation degree (Simm, et al., 2012).

In Robinson's (2012) study of mature students discovered that whilst they were motivated by the opportunity of future career development, they did not always expect such advancement. Some were openly sceptical of the idea that an increased level of qualification would lead to an improvement in employment opportunities and salaries. Older female part-time students did however believe that their studies might offer occupational change. For some older female students, the opportunity to move beyond some of the perceived limitations of their mothering roles was also valued. In common with other research, mature Foundation degree students were also motivated by a desire to access educational opportunities that they believed they had previously missed out on. The author consequently suggested that this finding can be understood in terms of students trying to gain an improved sense of self. However, the study generally claimed to show that whilst this may occur and individual agency might

secure economic advancement for the minority of students, for the majority structural inequalities limited positive identity revision and social mobility.

This research is also productive in that it indicates that students are not unconscious victims of this process, as they are often aware of the material constraints that they are subjected to. Robinson (2012) has consequently meaningfully added to the literature on Foundation degrees by offering an analysis that further challenges the determinism of writers such as Gibbs (2000) who have portrayed Foundation degree students as passive victims of employer manipulation.

Fenge (2011) has also provided a number of perceptive findings and offers worthwhile theorisation on students' engagement with Foundation degrees. She undertook a qualitative investigation into the sense-making that health and social care Foundation degree students made of their experiences. Her small-scale interview study with a group of learners studying at a further education college suggested that their accounts could be understood as being structured by complex processes of identity construction. How these students made sense of their learner identities was represented as being central to understanding their viewpoints. Importantly, the concept of "identity work" (Young, 2006, p. 6) was utilised to inform this analysis. Bourdieu's (1973, 1984, 1997) concepts of habitus, field and capital were also employed as a theoretical lens through which to evaluate interviewees' responses. Expressly, it was argued that students and the institutional habitus they encounter at higher education institutions frame their understanding of the Foundation degree experience.

Fenge's (2011) principal research finding was that Foundation degree learners frequently adopted the identity of "second chance learners" who were undertaking study that was "not quite higher education" (p. 379). These notions of self were interpreted as being informed by previous participation in educational activities, students' world views and the institutional habitus they experienced as higher education students in a further education college. Return to study was a means by which previously poor educational experiences could be addressed. It allowed negative self-concepts associated with educational "failure" to be challenged and reconstituted. Motivations for study included a wish to show that they could succeed academically and redefine this aspect of identity. Yet, it is interesting to note that many of these students did not regard their studentship as an authentic higher education experience. Surprisingly, this conception had opened up access to higher education. Fenge (2011) explained:

Most students saw FEs as a route to getting a taste of HE, rather than realising that it actually was an HE qualification in its own right. By denying that the Fd is an HE qualification, students appear to be able to consider it as something open to them. (p. 383)

Students also expressed the belief that studying would give them an accessible way to achieve career enhancement and change. The Foundation degree was described as being a practical way of allowing future career development, as the way it was delivered allowed the accommodation of a range of demands their present lifestyles included. Learners were found to have a world view where their studentship was a secondary concern once they had met their domestic and workplace identities.

One weakness of Fenge's (2011) research is that it only sampled students who had studied in one further education college. Moreover, surprisingly, both Fenge (2011) and Young (2006) also fail to provide an explicit or concrete definition of what activities constitute identity work. Others have been more productive in respect of this and outline how identity work encompasses "the range of activities individuals engage in to create, present, and sustain personal identities that are congruent with and supportive of the self-concept" (Snow & Anderson, 1987, p. 1348). In essence, identity work is viewed as the process that individuals utilise when subjectively constructing who they believe they are. This process involves both the development and maintenance of identities. As part of this process, what Goffman (1963) has identified as identity management needs to be carried out. It is seen as setting constraints as well as generating possibilities. The research that is discussed in the second part of this thesis suggests that understanding teaching assistants' engagement with Foundation degrees can be partly viewed in terms of identity work which involves maintenance and challenge to students' conceptions of self.

The importance of identity construction has been emphasised in exploratory research that has investigated the experiences of university-based Foundation degree students (Chipperfield, 2012, 2013). Here, small-scale qualitative research using semi-structured interviews was carried out. Self-preservation was found to be a dominant theme in students' views of their experiences. Risks related to limited free time, existing identities, relationship change and fear of failure were described (Chipperfield, 2013). For some, their learning had also produced conflict with partners. Motherhood and the identity that this bestowed was also revealed as being a constraint for female students with children. Anxiety about failing to pass the course was an

additional risk and concern. Although risks were found to be individualised, the Foundation degree students suggested that they had a strong collective group identity which produced a high level of peer support and camaraderie as they attempted to manage these (Chipperfield, 2012, 2013). The importance of peer support is also well documented by other researchers (Taylor, 2014; Thomas, 2002; Tierney & Stack, 2005; Wintrup et al., 2012).

Academics have also outlined that Foundation degree students at further education colleges can in particular face a number of difficulties when moving on to honours level study at university (Greenbanks, 2007). Questionnaire and focus group research discovered that such transitions are sometimes extremely stressful and problematic. Variations in approaches to teaching and learning in these different contexts were identified as producing difficulties. The requirement of universities for a form of academic study that required a greater degree of independent learning was portrayed as presenting serious challenges for ex-further education students. This finding has been confirmed by later research which also described how some ex-further education students experienced problems when trying to cope with a more traditional academic culture with its emphasis upon learner autonomy (Winter & Dismore, 2010).

Greenbank (2007) also found that Foundation degree students encountered challenges when the individualised "culture of support" (p. 96) that their previous Foundation degree teachers offered was not available when they progressed to studying at a university. It was argued that the attractiveness of the perceived higher levels of support within the habitus of further education fitted with these students' diminished academic self-concepts. There was also evidence that the students' lack of traditional academic study skills were problematic.

Larger-scale research into student and staff experiences of progression to an honours level year has described how transition from study at a further education college to university can be an extremely emotional process; one that includes identity challenges (Morgan, 2015). Here, a number of themes were identified in data from an online questionnaire with 156 students and staff from nine further education colleges. Twenty follow-up interviews were also conducted. Participants in this research were exclusively mature female students who had studied a Foundation degree in the early years. One key theme was that many of these female students found the transition to honours level study had posed few difficulties. However, for others it had been more

problematic. This situation was linked to uncertainties of entering "a new transitional space" (Morgan, 2015, p. 123) in which new and old identities needed to be managed.

Learners sometimes defined their progression in relation to "potential failure", "not being good enough" and "being out of place". Increased stress related to competing demands for their time was also documented. Employment, learning and domestic obligations were all viewed as challenging for students' attention. The lack of support from family and friends was regarded as having added to the emotional intensity that progression had presented.

The dangers and exclusionary consequences of providing such higher education in further education colleges have been stressed in other literature (Creasy, 2013). This work is highly critical of the delivery of higher education courses in further education colleges. Creasy (2013) has for instance argued that such contexts are "HE-lite" (p. 38) and consequently do not enable learners to experience genuine higher education as they are unlikely to be taught by research active academics. Rapley (2014) described how Foundation degree students at a land-based further education college were concerned about not having accessed an authentic higher education experience. The same research has also claimed that off-site college based students do not have a coherent student identity and institutional association. The above research is valuable in that it demonstrates the dangers of generalising about Foundation degree students' engagement irrespective of the type of higher education institutions (HEIs) that they have studied at. Those in further education colleges, post-1992 universities and Russell Group universities are likely to have distinct experiences.

2.5.4. Research with an exclusive focus on teaching assistants' engagement with work-related Foundation degrees

Over the past decade, a small body of research literature has been produced on the experience of teaching assistants on Foundation degrees. Although this literature has produced a series of fascinating findings, it does suffer from overwhelmingly focusing on students' learning experiences in higher education institutions. As a result of this emphasis, work-based learning is given little attention. The specific pressures that teaching assistants can experience as a consequence of their relatively complex workplace roles are therefore underexplored. Such work can also be criticised for not providing a detailed analysis of the how the Foundation degree experience might be influenced by gender and, in particular, gendered expectations of parenthood. It can

be further regarded as generally offering under-theorised accounts when compared to others that have explored non-teaching assistants' experiences of Foundation degrees and those who have more generally examined the mature student experience. The literature on teaching assistants' engagement with Foundation degrees also frequently speculates from very small samples of learners.

Tierney and Slack (2005) provided an early piece of interpretivist research that studied the participation of teaching assistants in Foundation degree study. Seven students were interviewed via the phone (four school-based teaching assistants and three early years support workers). The wish to gain professional development was discovered to be a major motivator for study. As students had pursued this aim, they claimed to have experienced financial pressure due to having to pay tuition fees and other economic costs associated with studying, such as buying relevant texts. Coping with academic work was also an anxiety. A range of people were identified as being supportive of their efforts, including partners, children, peers and their Foundation degree tutors. In contrast, employers were regarded as being less accommodating and helpful. Workplace colleagues were, however, viewed as an important source of encouragement. Despite a number of challenges, the interviewees were found to be highly motivated individuals who not only wished to complete their present studies, but indeed, undertake further study.

A number of social benefits were considered to have been gained from undertaking Foundation degree study. These included being seen in a more positive light by offspring, increased self-confidence and an awareness of future life possibilities. However, there was a feeling amongst some students that their learning did not easily translate into informing their work as teaching assistants. For some, theoretical explanations were sometimes viewed as being especially limited in this respect.

This study, although based on a very small sample, can also be considered to be important in that it draws attention to the significance that coping strategies play in terms of structuring teaching assistants' engagement with Foundation degree study. Three major coping strategies were identified by the students who took part in Tierney and Slack's (2005) research: 1) sacrificing limited free time; 2) drawing on family support and 3) trying to renegotiate arrangements with families and employers. Interestingly, this final coping strategy was suggested as being more difficult to achieve with employers rather than family members. It is revealing that, for some of

these learners, there had been a successful renegotiation of the amount of labour that they routinely undertook within their homes.

Some of the students described a strong feeling of frustration about the lack of status that others assigned to their studies. One consequence of this perception was that many of the teaching assistants had become disillusioned with their Foundation degrees. Tierney and Slack (2005) explained that low levels of support from employers was a recurring concern. This pattern of workplace support contradicted the high level of employer engagement that has been promoted to learners as a distinctive and beneficial feature of their qualifications. Increased levels of workplace frustration were also identified as being an unexpected by-product of Foundation degree study which flowed from a lack of opportunities to utilise their newly acquired knowledge and skills.

Tierney and Slack's (2005) research can, however, be viewed as having a number of drawbacks that reduce its value. For example, their research is based upon a very small sample which inevitably limits its generalisability. Like much of the literature on Foundation degree students, it does not provide an international context within which their findings might be located. Again, and in key respects reflecting large swathes of previous academic work on the subject, they also do not explore the impact of that School Workforce Reform might have on students' experiences. There is also no attempt to examine and theorise on how wider structural inequalities might have potentially structured the accounts that they captured.

Morris' (2010) focus group research with teaching assistants has produced a series of findings that partially support Tierney and Slack's (2005) analysis. She also adds to these by providing additional and novel results. Similar to Tierney and Slack (2005), she found that students had gained increased self-esteem from study and gained valuable support from their student peers and tutors. This is consistent with other research into vocational-related higher education (Wintrup et al., 2012). Notably, it illustrated how learning can be supported through non-hierarchical peer relationships.

Morris' (2010) research also described how the teaching assistants that she studied (who had undertaken Foundation degrees) had gained extra workplace responsibilities. These were not usually accompanied by increased pay or status. Moreover, in a similar vein to Tierney and Slack (2005) and other writers previously discussed in this chapter, Morris claimed that the women involved in her study often felt guilty about the negative consequences that their children and partners had experienced as a

consequence of their decision to undertake Foundation degree study. Guilt was related to disruption to existing routines around motherhood and being a "good" wife. Again balancing family life, employment and study was identified as a challenge which had produced emotional pressures.

More constructively, many of the learners believed that they had gained a greater understanding of the teaching and learning processes that they were involved in whilst carrying out their teaching assistant duties. Their new knowledge was regarded as having informed their working practices. This finding challenges Tierney and Slack's (2005) assertion that such Foundation degree students find it difficult to transpose their classroom learning into their workplaces. Improved personal self-confidence was found across the focus groups. For a number of students, an aspiration of continuing study in order to eventually achieve Qualified Teacher Status (QTS) was also disclosed. Increased knowledge about their work was, interestingly identified as the factor that had produced an improved self-concept.

Morris' (2010) study can however be viewed as unsatisfactory in certain respects. It can be considered to encompass recurrent weaknesses in the literature on teaching assistants' participation in Foundation degree study. Whilst it outlines useful detail of teaching assistants' views of Foundation degree study, it does not provide substantive theorisation about their potential meaning. Argumentation is provided that focuses solely on the practical implications. Again, wider structural constraints and inequalities are not acknowledged or reviewed. For example, gender is raised in relation to motherhood and the pressures this brings without any dissection of this issue on a structural and political level. Conceptions of appropriate mothering and teaching assistant roles are described, but left uncontested. Only gaining data from four relatively small focus groups is also perhaps problematic, although not untypical of research in this area of study.

One of the most recent pieces of research to be published on teaching assistants' experiences of Foundation degree study also suffers from similar problems, but it does offer a theoretically informed understanding of their participation in this form of learning (Taylor, 2014). Here, Lave and Wenger's (1991) concepts of situated learning and communities of practice are drawn upon as a theoretical lens through which to explore learners' workplace experiences. Data from three case study students was gathered longitudinally from interviews and digital video recordings.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF WORK-RELATED FOUNDATION DEGREES AND RESEARCH INTO STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES

This study considered Lave and Wenger's (1991) argument that workplace learning encompasses legitimate peripheral participation; beginning with gradual engagement in a community of practice and ending with full participation. It was claimed that whilst the students recognised being part of a community of practice, they had already engaged in the process of legitimate participation as part of their teaching assistant roles. Foundation degree study produced a situation where students could consider and validate their practice rather than provide community legitimation. New knowledge from their studies had empowered the teaching assistants to play a prominent role in the school-based communities of practice that they inhabited.

Those who were questioned claimed that they had not received adequate mentor or employer support. As was documented previously in this chapter, the lack of such assistance has been detailed in other research. Lave and Wenger's (1991) model of a supportive experienced community member nurturing an apprentice did not therefore apply. Nevertheless, support was accessed from workplace peers, and it subsequently was claimed that this constituted "a parallel community of practice" (Taylor, 2014, p. 216). Therefore, it was concluded that although the work of Lave and Wenger (1991) was a useful framework within which teaching assistants' engagement with Foundation degrees could be partially understood, this approach was not a perfect fit. The notion of schools as communities of practice where teaching assistants who have achieved Foundation degree qualifications, become respected members of the community is not substantiated by other research (Morris, 2010; Woolhouse et al., 2009). To theorise from a sample of three, and often one student's views, is also challenging. However, despite a small sample, the research does offer some useful understandings of peer support, teaching assistants and Foundation degree learning.

Researchers at Edgehill University have provided research that has drawn upon a larger sample of teaching assistants and has also attempted some theorisation. They have published an important series of research papers from their three year longitudinal study of a group of teaching assistants who had undertaken Foundation degree study (Dunne et al., 2008, 2008a; Penketh & Goddard, 2008; Woolhouse et al., 2009). Their research primarily focused upon students' personal experiences of Foundation degree study and its impact on their careers. Multiple methods of data collection were undertaken, including questionnaires, case studies and focus groups. Both secondary and primary school-based teaching assistants participated in this research. The researchers had taught the Foundation degree students that they sampled. The views

of 73 teaching assistants who had studied on a Foundation degree in teaching and learning were obtained. Bourdieu's (1997) theory of capital was drawn upon in an attempt to offer a theoretical frame in one paper (Woolhouse et al., 2009). Here it is maintained that Foundation degrees students gain limited amounts of cultural, economic and social capital from studying.

The Edgehill based research is informative in that it provides analysis of students' accounts of their higher education and workplace experiences. It also questions the official rhetoric that has been offered to promote Foundation degrees which emphasised their worth in terms of being a high status qualification that would increase students' future employment opportunities. Around two thirds of the teaching assistants' questionnaire responses indicated that their studies had not resulted in workplace promotion (Dunne et al., 2008b). The Edgehill study found that only 31% of the 73 respondents who returned had been promoted after completing their Foundation degree (Dunne et al., 2008b). However, some indicated that they had been asked to complete additional workplace tasks, but that they had usually not received any extra payment for this activity.

It is interesting to observe that this work uniquely isolated age as being a factor that is related to whether or not students gained promotion, and thus an associated increase in pay or economic capital (Dunne et al., 2008b; Woolhouse et al., 2009). It described how teaching assistants with a Foundation degree who were in the 26-40 age range were most likely to receive improved conditions of employment. Those in the 56-65 age range claimed that they had not experienced any changes in pay or responsibility. The research also identified some differences between primary and secondary teaching assistants. It was indicated that the latter had less opportunity to gain progression than their secondary counterparts.

Positively, the Edge Hill researchers found that Foundation degree students generally believe that their studies had provided them with a range of other advantages. In common with other research that I have previously discussed in this chapter, improved self-confidence and esteem were acknowledged as being an important outcome of their studies (Dunne et al., 2008a; 2008b).

Many of the teaching assistants who took part in the Edge Hill based research were also found to have welcomed the opportunity that Foundation degree study provided in counteracting previous educational underachievement and contesting the undesirable labelling that had resulted from such classification (Woolhouse et al.,

2009). The Edgehill researchers did, however, acknowledge that course failure had the potential to severely damage students' level of self-esteem. A number of students also revealed that they had encountered difficulties in terms of defining themselves as successful learners (Dunne et al., 2008a, 2008b; Woolhouse et al., 2009)

Students felt well supported in their workplaces, which diverged with other researchers' findings. Some also felt more included and valued within their schools (Dunne et al., 2008a). School-based colleagues were cited as viewing and treating the students more positively. Earlier research with teaching assistants seemed to confirm these findings (Bedford et al., 2006). For some students, there was also a belief that their studies had improved how they dispatched their teaching assistant duties (Dunne et al., 2008a). Furthermore, social capital was viewed as being gained through the peer support that other learners offered (Woolhouse et al., 2009). Gaining the capacity to critically assess and challenge taken for granted assumptions in their workplaces and domestic lives was viewed to have been revelatory. Again, this finding suggests that Gibb's (2002) critique that Foundation degrees would produce passive and uncritical workers is unfounded.

More negatively, many students believed that Foundation degrees were not "real degrees" (Dunne et al., 2008a, p. 239). They were not generally considered to be standalone qualifications. One outcome of this perception was that students had low expectations for the workplace rewards that they might gain from their present studies (Woolhouse et al., 2009). In common with other investigations, frustration was also found to exist about being denied the workplace opportunities to utilise newly acquired knowledge and skills. This outcome was connected to the lack of value that they believed others assigned to Foundation degrees (Dunne et al., 2008a).

Dunne et al. (2008b) also claimed to have found that some teaching assistants felt a "sense of betrayal and disappointment" (p. 550). This sentiment was related to having placed themselves, and sometimes their families, under extreme pressure and having subsequently found that Foundation degree study did not led to career enhancement and increased pay. It is maintained that the official rhetoric of widening access to higher education is wholly positive and ignores the personal costs of such study (Dunne et al., 2008b).

Workload issues were also found to be a particular problem for student-mothers who were undertaking Foundation degree study alongside their employment as teaching assistants. Half of those involved in the study believed that their studies had

been detrimental to their family lives, including placing pressure on relationships and finances (Dunne et al., 2008b). In highlighting this, they draw attention to how perceptions of family roles can have a significant influence on teaching assistants' understandings of being a Foundation degree student.

Findings from the Edge Hill study also claimed to show that the female students' Foundation degree experience often involved managing a series of contradictory roles related to motherhood, being a teaching assistant and a higher education student. Stress resulted from such negotiations and intensive juggling was required to succeed (Dunne et al., 2008b). This research was also helpful as it outlined the ways that teaching assistants who were also student-mothers can be particularly vulnerable to the "hidden costs" of Foundation degree study (Woolhouse et al., 2009). Motherhood was identified as negatively influencing a number of aspects of their learner experiences.

Firstly, their mothering role was prioritised over their studentship which had to be a secondary and peripheral activity. For some, being a successful student was defined as not having let their learning interfere with being a good mother. This outlook led to them to believe that being a successful learner had involved effectively fitting their studies into "absent spaces that are outside of work and family life" (Woolhouse et al., 2009, p. 771). Study was distinguished as being justified only when their families' needs had been fulfilled. This may have led them to them favouring courses that did not require a traditional pattern of full-time study. Male learners did not seem to be subjected to the same parental pressures. Such a scenario reflects what has been established by scholars who have investigated mature higher education students (Arskey, Marchant & Simmill, 1994; Baxter & Britton, 2001).

As students progressed through their studies, many of them were described as having altered their career aspirations away from becoming a teacher. The rejection of teaching as a career was connected to disillusionment with the standards agenda that teachers were required to work within. Resistance to standardisation of curriculum delivery was described as being part of the elimination of teaching as a possible career. This finding contrasts with Morris' (2010) research which I discussed earlier in this chapter, where Foundation degree study continued to be linked to the achievement of Qualified Teacher Status.

The Edgehill research cluster offered a further contribution to scholarship on teaching assistants' experiences of Foundation degree study by providing details of the difficulties that transition to honours level study can pose for such learners (Penketh

& Goddard, 2008). Journals and diaries were completed by 12 students to capture learners' thoughts. Five themes emerged from their data analysis: "the aspirational story, the assessment chart, a narrative 'beset by trials', the vocational narrative and the virtual transition to physical learning" (p. 320).

The *aspirational story* stressed a wish for life improvement. This narrative included a strong belief that the students were participating in a level of education that was beyond what they themselves, and others, expected of them. Anxiety about their ability to cope successfully with the challenges of honours level study was associated with these thoughts. However, previous success at Foundation degree level had boosted students' confidence in their abilities to succeed. The narrative of the *assessment chart* was also uncovered in students' accounts. Here learning was principally described in terms of needing to complete assignments whilst meeting demands that were not connected to university commitments. Reading was found to be largely instrumental and almost exclusively related to assignment work. Producing written work was discovered to be the main preoccupation. The narrative of *beset by trials* stressed the pressures of rival demands for their time, especially from their university and homes. Pressure upon their time was a key product of these pressures. This finding reflects those found by other Foundation degree researchers (Tierney & Slack, 2005; York & Longden, 2010).

In the *vocational narrative*, students continued to relate their studies to their workplaces and draw upon them to change their school-based practices. Some had experienced role change in their workplaces as a result of others perceptions of their improved competence, but this had not produced increases in pay. There was a glass ceiling in their present workplaces and honours level study was viewed as allowing access to an alternative career that would enable them to avoid these restrictions.

Edmond's (2009, 2010) in-depth interview study of 19 teaching assistants (TAs) on a Foundation degree offers detail of the way that they can provide teaching assistants with a valuable identity boost. It was found to offer access to a positive "intermediate identity" that suggested greater professionalism. This in turn led to them being defined as a teaching assistant who could complete more complex workplace activities. Her research suggests that Foundation degree students drew upon their studies to gain access to, and indeed participate in, activities traditionally defined as exclusively the professional practice of a teacher. Such practice was viewed by some to be a learning opportunity.

The final narrative that Penketh & Goddard (2008) claim to have uncovered is labelled *virtual transition to physical learning*. Here, students who had previously experienced significant amounts of online tuition at Foundation degree level found the transition to tuition via formal class inputs taxing. One problem that this change had produced concerned accommodating new demands related to fitting their studies into already full lives. In keeping with previous investigations, some students were found to have experienced difficulties when they had moved from learning in a further education college to university based study (Greenbank, 2007; Morgan, 2015).

Whilst offering a number of new insights into teaching assistants' transition from Foundation to honours level degree study the above research can be regarded as lacking in certain respects. For example, notwithstanding it being the first piece of research to draw attention to the importance of concepts such as emotion, identity and motherhood; these are not analysed in any depth. Moreover, connections between these are not explored or theorised about.

Research that has explored the experiences of female mature students who were undertaking more traditionally academic degrees has provided more detail of this connection. Furthermore, such research is valuable as it underlines how some of what has been reported about Foundation degree students' engagement might be viewed as being reflective of female mature students' experiences in general. It is argued therefore that review of this literature is also important. Most of those who took part in the research that is outlined in this thesis were indeed mature female students. The final part this chapter examines some of the key pieces of research in this field of research.

2.6. Important insights from investigations into female mature students on traditional academic degrees

Research into mature female students' experiences of traditional undergraduate studies has been undertaken in a number of countries (see Brooks, 2012, 2014; Shafi & Rose, 2014; O'Shea & Stone, 2011; Walters, 2000). Stone's (2008) investigation of a group of Australian female mature students provided a series of thought-provoking findings. Interviews were conducted with 20 female mature students in their second year of undergraduate study. All the students had entered higher education through a non-traditional pathway. One of her key findings was that degree level study had produced

a new sense of self and life outlook. This is important; suggesting, as others have claimed, that the enhancement of the self is a major reason why students decide to enter higher education (Shafi & Rose, 2014; Walters, 2000).

This work not only added to the debate by stressing how conceptions of identity are important in the analysis of how mature students make sense of their studies, but also that it is an emotional process, especially around feelings of guilt. O'Shea and Stone (2011) described how studying was an emotional experience. This work supports Christie's (2009) assertion that students from non-traditional backgrounds find participating in higher education a highly emotional process.

Students who were mothers expressed guilt about the negative impact their studies had for members of their families. These findings are similar to those noted in a number of other studies of mature learners and those discussed earlier which identify this as being part of the Foundation degree experience of student-mothers. Stone and O'Shea (2011) added to academic debates on this issue by underlining how student-mothers encounter feelings of guilt and a sense of selfishness when their studies threatened their identities as primary caregivers. Consequently, one of the strengths of this analysis is that it draws attention to the emotional and "gendered challenges" (p.112) that female mature students have to deal with. Elsewhere, student-mothers have been found to encounter severe guilt (Shanahan, 2000). Poulson (2003) makes a further contribution to the analysis of learning and emotions when she documented how this can include "sadness, loss and fear" (p. 66) when their courses come to an end.

In a later piece of work, O'Shea and Stone (2011) provided details of findings that they had gained from in-depth interviews with 18 mature female university students, many of whom were the first in their families to enter higher education. One of the positive aspects of this investigation was that it specifically explored motivations for study. For many students at the beginning of their studies, their motivation for study was similar to that which has been documented amongst Foundation degree learners; in that gaining access to future employment opportunities was a key theme. Improving their lives and, crucially, those of their families, were connected to career development. Such findings are well documented in the research literature on the subject (Kay & Sundaraj, 2004; Merrill, 2014).

However, for a number of students who took part in O'Shea and Stone's (2011) research, their motivation moved beyond purely instrumental career development, and

encompassed personal accomplishments. The research fruitfully isolated married women's views of non-instrumental motivation. Often these learners suggested that liberation from their roles as wives and mothers was a related reason for their return to study. Learning in higher education was identified as providing them with something that was independent from family life that was a source of personal satisfaction. One particular point of interest that is raised in this research is that learning can be linked to a wish to escape established familial identities and roles. For some of these learners, marital breakdown was connected to their studies. Interestingly, this finding is substantiated in earlier research (Wilson, 1997; Baxter & Britton, 2001).

In a similar vein to their research into mature female students on traditional higher education programmes and more vocationally orientated degrees, university study was found to have often produced a positive self-concept and personal identity. The transformation of women's "inner selves" were claimed to have been achieved. Increased self-confidence and the repair to damaged self-concepts were uncovered (Rodriguez, 2009). Student-mothers in particular believed that university level study had allowed them to address previously lost opportunities that parenthood had produced.

More recently, Merrill (2014) has comparably revealed that mature female students commonly wished to address the negativity that they had felt about having previously been labelled as non-academic. Such perceptions perhaps suggest that changing notions of academic self-concepts are often part of the mature student experience, which Foundation degree students who also fit into this category may be subjected to. Revision of the academic self was part of a wider process that emphasised a manufacturing of a "new biographical beginning" (Merrill, 2014, p. 8). Literature from a range of studies on mature students has documented similar motives and outcomes (Michie, Glachan & Bray, 2001; Shafi & Rose, 2014; Waller, 2005; Walters, 2000).

Merrill's (2014) investigation uncovered little evidence that student-mothers believed that male partners had offered support that had enabled them to be successful learners. Being "supportive" was aligned with partners who did not actively oppose their university participation. However, there was some evidence of these female students questioning existing familial hierarchies, though they generally continued to prioritise their male partners' needs and feelings. Role modelling for children and having knowledge of education was regarded as another way that their studies had

produced a transformational effect. It was claimed that the advantages of being a university student more than compensated for the challenges that their studies had created. By underlining the gendered nature of the mature student experience O'Shea and Stone (2011) have usefully highlighted how wider structural forces related to gender and power should not be ignored when mature studentship is examined. Yet as I outlined earlier, such forces are unfortunately under-explored in the literature on mature female learners' engagement with Foundation degrees.

In a subsequent article, O'Shea and Stone (2013) highlight in greater detail how wider societal relationships around gender had informed their sample's views. Data was gained from in-depth semi-structured interviews undertaken with 37 Australian female university students who had entered higher education via access programmes of study. Productively interpretivist and feminist frameworks were employed to present a discerning and theoretically informed analysis that outlined how gendered expectations of motherhood and time produced a distinctive student experience. Common features in interviewees' accounts included the need to overcome a series of challenges and struggles around who their time should be dedicated to, some of which they argued were gender specific. Mixing the demands of being a student with parenthood, part-time employment and relationships, was cited as a dominant pressure, resembling the work of other academics that have analysed older female higher education students.

Financial and personal compromise was cited as having allowed students to mediate these trials. Students claimed to be time poor as they had to meet the needs of others, before prioritising their own study needs. However, this work adds novel understandings to debates when it suggests that this reflects how time is constructed in terms of the societal inequalities that women experience in Western societies compared with their male counterparts. They explain:

> Gendered expectations place a different value on "men's time" and "women's time", with women's time being given up to the demands and needs of others while men's time is regarded as more valuable and productive. (p. 100)

They maintain that these cultural expectations partially explain why student-mothers feel pressurised to undertake study related activities in time that is left over after the needs of others have been fulfilled. The female students defined themselves as the primary care givers within their families and study time had to be secondary to these

responsibilities related to this role. In such circumstances, time for learning was not prioritised. Some of these interviewees espoused stereotypical notions of men as "breadwinners" and women as "homemakers" (p. 103). Women with children struggled to balance everything and they claimed to have virtually no leisure time. The pressures such students experience as they try to juggle competing demands is well documented in literature on the subject (Arskey et al., 1994; Baxter & Britton, 2001; Dewart, 1996; Leder & Forgasz, 2004; Lynch, 2008; Merrill, 2014; Quinn, 2003; Steel et al., 2005). As noted previously, literature on mature female Foundation degree learners has also revealed equivalent results without noting the possible importance that the gendered nature of time contributes to this position.

Merrill's (2014) analysis could be viewed as being beneficial in that it suggests that there are some advantages to recognising that conceptions of self, agency and social structures beyond individuals, can potentially inform mature students' experiences. Yet, whilst espousing what might be regarded as a sociological approach (Mills, 1959), in that individual motives and experiences are understood within a wider social context, this is not acknowledged and fully developed.

In contrast to this, a number of influential scholars have, fruitfully and explicitly, adopted a sociological approach. In doing so, they have generated notable theories about mature students' engagement with higher education. Reay, Ball and David (2002) have provided such a study. Their research illustrated the importance that power differentials and the meanings that flow from these can have on structuring mature students' higher education decision-making processes. Constructively, its findings were derived from a relatively large-scale Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) study higher education choices. Interviews with 23 mature students on ACCESS courses at one of six London further education colleges were conducted as part of this investigation. In addition to this data collection, 97 sixth-form students were interviewed at state and private schools. Reay et al.'s (2002) work, however, primarily focused upon the views of the 23 mature interviews and gives particular prominence to the accounts of seven students who did not progress to university study. The students who had not successfully made the transition to higher education defined this in terms of individualised personal failure. There was, however, a secondary view that some of these were beyond their control. Financial problems and the challenges of finding childcare were identified as issues that had made going to university difficult.

Individualisation was evident in "an ethos of personal responsibility for failure" (p. 306). Beck's (1995) view of the individualised nature of modern society where the prioritisation of personal self is always dominant is disputed. It is suggested that defining the pursuit of a more educated self, as beneficial to others, offered the possibility of guilt to be reconciled and the preservation of a commitment to a working class identity. Students also wished to develop skills that would allow them to make a larger contribution to society. Moreover, accessing learning that offered a sense of community was also described as being significant. Younger students were not found to display such an altruistic attitude to their studies. Similar to other scholars, Reay et al. (2002) also offered an analysis that questioned official and academic accounts which ignore social constraints that socially disadvantaged students are subjected to.

Life circumstances, especially around family responsibilities, were described as limiting working class mature learners' course choices to just one accessible option. Family responsibilities and the commitments of paid work were viewed as resulting in the geographical location of a higher education provider being highly important. Beck's (1995) view that individualism has produced increased geographical mobility and choice amongst all social groups was challenged. The women's domestic and employment commitments reduced their educational choices to a relatively small locality. Reay et al. (2002) summarised the ways gender, caring and domesticity combine to specifically constrain working class women's time:

> The gendered processes of caring for others and undertaking domestic responsibilities which run through all of the mature women students' accounts are exemplified in the complex contradictions of "a capital" which is all about investment in others rather than self. (p. 17)

Working class mature students, irrespective of whether or not they were parents, were found to be "caught up in a constant balancing act between wanting to study, meeting domestic responsibilities and needing to earn money" (p. 10). The costs of study were cited as being both financial and social. Their work can be deemed to have raised consciousness of the dual burden employed female students often face when participating in lifelong learning activities. Not having space for leisure was a particular price that a number of students claimed to have paid to continue with their studies. This leisure time poverty is reminiscent of O'Shea and Stone's (2008) findings.

Reay et al.'s (2002) investigation further added to academic understanding of mature students' experiences as they not only suggest that gender and societal notions of parental roles are vital to analysis of this issue, but also that whether or not student-mothers lived with a partner was a "compounding" factor. Lone mothers took longer to complete their studies than those without children and mothers who lived in family units that included partners. Familial arrangements were subsequently described as an important element that informed mature students' encounters with higher education.

Unusually, Reay et al. (2002) also explored how ethnicity can intersect with class and gender to influence learners' choice of university campus. It was revealed that the notion of "otherness" amongst some students had led to them to reject entry to universities that they perceived to be too white and middle class. It was subsequently maintained that student choices were not only class-based and gendered, but also racialised. Class was viewed as intersecting with gender, ethnicity, marital status and student agency to inform students' choices and subsequent experiences of education. There was, for example, evidence of strong allegiances to class identities which made them reluctant to step outside traditional class boundaries and consequently, more likely to attend a post-1992 university. Reay et al. (2002) concluded that attempts to widen participation in higher education amongst disadvantaged groups are likely to be restricted by "constraints, material, practical and psychological" (p. 17).

In an article in 2003, Reay provided enhanced theorisation of how working-class women experience Access to higher education. Here, data from in-depth interviews with working-class women were analysed. As with her earlier work, Reay (2003) outlined how the students had "an inability to totally immerse themselves in their studies until all their domestic and childcare responsibilities had been discharged" (p. 310). However, importantly, Reay's (2003) proceeded to develop her analysis by applying Beck's (1995) theory of individualisation in greater depth. She argued that whilst those who were sampled had experienced individualisation to a certain extent, their social positioning in terms of social class and gender led to it being experienced in a distinct way. This study also beneficially suggested that mature female students from working class backgrounds can experience a complex process of individual self-realisation and self-actualisation which involved risks.

Whilst the above study offers interesting theoretical analysis that has been very influential, it can be criticised, in common with most of the literature on mature students' experiences, as providing a very UK-centric account. Usefully, and

unusually, Brooks (2012, 2014) has successfully provided such analysis. Brooks' (2012) comparative study of student-mothers studying at UK and Danish universities illustrated how variations in societal norms about gender can have an important influence on how student-mothers experiences of being a higher education student; especially around issues connected to the establishment of time and space to undertake study. One of this research's important findings was that a combination of gender norms and crucially, state policy related gender equality have the potential to generate international differences in student-mothers' experiences of higher education and "familial negotiation" (p. 447) as they participate in this activity. This research collected data from 68 interviews with student-parents in both countries. Two older and newer universities in each country were focused upon.

Reflecting the findings of Reay's (2003) investigation of Access students, learners at "UK Newer University" generally stressed a need to give precedence to family responsibilities, especially childcare. This focus had led them to opt for a university relatively close to their homes. Students also habitually claimed that they had continued to undertake the vast majority of family-based childcare. "Familial negotiation" was not found to be prevalent amongst these learners. A range of strategies were adopted as a consequence of managing childcare responsibilities whilst studying. Frequently, these included relying on informal support from friends, other parents, and sometimes older offspring. In common with a number of studies that have been reviewed earlier in this chapter, mothering identities were revealed as taking precedence over being a student. In many respects, these results reflect the research findings that have been evidenced earlier in this chapter (Merrill, 1999; Thomas, 2002; Winthrup et al., 2012).

Students at "UK Older University" did not have the same experiences. Firstly, geographical factors were not generally found to have limited students' choices of university. Interestingly, there were differences between male and female students. Males could dedicate themselves more easily to studying. Such divergence was linked to men having partners who took on the majority of childcare. One consequence of this situation was that few males were found to be concerned about pressures related to being a parent. Student-fathers often claimed that they had undertaken much of their scholarship on campus rather than at home.

Female students at "UK Older University" provided accounts of familial arrangements that were distinct from both their male "UK Older University" and

female "UK Newer University" counterparts. Unlike their female peers at "Newer UK University", they did not express concern about having to fit their studies around domestic responsibilities to the same extent. Whilst they did not have partners who had taken over some of their childcare responsibilities, they were in a position to spend much of their week studying. Being in a position to finance additional childcare often facilitated this choice. However, these students repeatedly decided to conduct their learning in the home to allow them to be on hand to provide their children with care, if this was required, for example due to illness.

Both genders at "Older University" seemed to possess a stronger student identity than their peers at the "New UK University". In contrast to previous research, student-mothers at both institutions (Quinn, 2003) did not express a desire to isolate their university and domestic lives from each other. Their maternal identities were not divorced from studentship. Reay (2002) also found that ACCESS students often made their children aware of their studies, as this enabled them to be a positive educational role model. Dependent offspring were both a reason for study, and a pressure on such students' ability to study. It is noteworthy that research on Foundation degree students' engagement with higher education has offered comparable results (Bainbridge, 2005).

Accounts provided by students at the two Danish universities that Brooks (2012) studied were found to be less influenced by gendered narratives about childcare. In these explanations, students cited "turn-taking" as a strong feature. This idea was often related to their partners having previously being students. Learners from both institutions had accessed state-funded childcare for their children. As result of such provision, study was not viewed as needing to fit in with childcare responsibilities. Brooks' (2012) work is therefore illuminative in that it illustrates how societal discourses about parenting and state childcare policies, can have an important impact on mature students' experiences of being a higher education student. Interestingly, Brooks (2012) also argues that one element in producing differential attitudes in Denmark and the UK is variations in what each society emphasises in terms of "good mothering" (p. 447).

UK studies have documented how female students with dependent children need to draw upon an extensive range of strategies to cope with the pressures that they experience, especially as they try to meet traditional expectations of motherhood (Blaxter & Tight, 1994; Merrill, 1999). Studying at times when childcare responsibilities were not required was another strategy employed. This pattern of

studying reduced the hours that they spent on scholarship. Academics have noted the particular significance that peer networks and friendship groups play as support mechanisms for mature female higher education students (Merrill, 2014; Thomas, 2002; Wintrup et al., 2012). Conrad's (2008) small scale investigation into a group of Canadian mature learners who were enrolled on an online post-secondary work-related health course, has outlined how this assistance can be provided virtually through the creation of study-focused social networks. Recent research has productively documented how students frequently use Facebook as a space where academic experiences and dilemmas are discussed (Vivian, Barnes, Geer & Wood, 2014). This analysis illustrates the way peer support has been influenced by technological change.

2.7. Chapter summary

This chapter has provided a review of literature that has offered an analysis of the nature and development of Foundation degrees. It has also critically explored scholarship that provides assistance in understanding students' engagement with these qualifications. The chapter opened by examining how Foundation degree numbers have developed in the past decade before evaluating academic literature that has discussed the policy drivers behind the development of these vocationally-orientated qualifications. Subsequent to this examination, literature that has considered students' engagement with Foundation degrees was reviewed. Investigations that have explored learners' experiences of Foundation degrees which did not specifically target teaching assistants were then evaluated before those which have explicitly focused upon this group were appraised.

The final part of this chapter discussed some of the research that has been undertaken into female mature students studying for traditional academic degrees, especially student-mothers who fall into this category. It is suggested that this material is valuable in that it can afford perceptive insights into how some of what has been documented in relation to Foundation degree experience is also evident in mature students on other types of higher education programmes. Although this discussion was undertaken in some detail, it is inevitably selective due to the vast body of academic work that exists in this area.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Introduction

This chapter outlines how the research discussed in this thesis was undertaken and explains why certain methodological decisions were made. It commences by restating the research's aim and central research questions, and discusses the order in which latter were developed. The chapter then proceeds to document how this investigation adopted a qualitative approach that was informed by the interpretivist paradigm generally and, more specifically insights provided by the ethnographic perspective (Burgess, 1984). Sampling, ethical procedures and the method of data analysis that were adopted are also subsequently examined. The chapter ends by addressing the issues related to trustworthiness.

3.2. A discussion of the study's central aim and research questions

As outlined in the introductory chapter of this thesis, the investigation's aim was to explore the understandings that school-based teaching assistants held about their engagement with a Foundation degree that was directly related to their workplace roles. This focus was developed from an initial research interest in both the changing workplace roles of teaching assistants and Foundation degrees. Analysis of the programme's initial validation documents also clearly outlined how its development had partially been in response to New Labour's policy of School Workforce Remodelling (DfES, 2002) and the anticipated impact on school-based learning support workers. Three research questions were developed which were influenced by the research's focus:

- What motives and circumstances influence teaching assistants' decisions when they decide to undertake a work-related Foundation degree programme?

- How do teaching assistants interpret their experiences of studying on a Foundation degree that is directly related to their workplace roles?

- What meanings do teaching assistants who are nearing the end of their studies assign to their imminent move away from being a Foundation student?

The emergence of these questions is examined in some detail at the start of each my results chapters. This discussion outlines how my first two research questions were constructed after undertaking some initial classroom observations of Foundation degree classes. The third of my research questions was a response to comments made by students who participated in group interviews. Wolcott (1992) notes the inevitability of and desirability of idea modification in the research processes. He explains how: "To conduct an inquiry of any sort, somebody must have an idea. As inquiry proceeds, the idea that is prompted should become both better formed and better informed" (p. 7). Similarly, it has been suggested that qualitative research questions can be usefully generated at different parts of the research process and be reformulated as researchers engage in data collection (Miles, Huberman & Saldaña, 2014). This was certainly the case for the research that is discussed in this thesis. The chronological development of my research question and focus is illustrated in Figure 3.1.

Figure 3.1: Refinement of my research questions and focus

October 2008 to December 2008
Narrowing of the research focus. Initial analysis of documentation related to the Foundation degree

January 2009 - February 2009
Research questions 1 and 2 were developed and refined from initial contextualising observations

June 2010 to July 2010
Analysis of group interview data led to the development of a third research question related to feelings about moving away from being a Foundation degree student

The development of my investigation's research questions and its overall aim to some extent reflected a general commitment to a research design that was exploratory in nature. They also signalled an emphasis on examining students' subjective experiences of Foundation degree study. There was no intention to establish statistically significant correlations between variables. This stance was adopted for practical and ontological

reasons. On a practical level, the study was exploratory in nature and did not have a firm hypothesis regarding the factors that might influence the engagement of teaching assistants with Foundation degrees. At the start of my research there was an extremely limited body of academic literature on students' experiences of Foundation degrees, and that which had specifically interrogated teaching assistants' experiences of these was particularly scarce. Therefore limited research existed from which a hypothesis could be derived. More significantly, an ontological interpretivist position was adopted for this study which led to a focus on capturing students' understandings.

3.3. Overview of the form of qualitative research employed and ontological influences

As I noted earlier in this thesis, qualitative research was primarily undertaken to access students' understandings of their engagement with Foundation degree study. Punch and Oancea (2014) highlight how "qualitative research" is a problematic term as it has been applied to a variety of concepts and frameworks. It has therefore been claimed that it can be regarded as an "umbrella term" (Punch & Oancea, 2014) that covers a diversity of research traditions, methodologies and methods of data collection. However, this form of investigation is commonly viewed as encompassing research which "involves collecting and/or working with text, images, or sounds" (Guest, Namey & Mitchell, 2013, p. 35).

Such a definition is inclusive in that it can be applied to a broad range of research strategies and forms of data collection which use a variety of forms of data analysis. Miles et al. (2014) outline how a variety of qualitative traditions within social research seek to "describe the ways that people in particular settings come to understand, account for, take action, and otherwise manage their day-to-day activity" (p. 9). This form of inquiry fitted with a central research aim of exploring the understandings that school-based teaching assistants held about their engagement with a Foundation degree. The adoption of such a strategy was also influenced by previous qualitative research which has offered insights into students' experiences of Foundation degrees (Dunne et al., 2008a, 2008b; Tierney & Slack, 2005; Morris, 2010; Woolhouse et al., 2009) and mature students on other types of programme (Brooks & Everett, 2008; Brooks, 2012; Stone, 2008; O'Shea & Stone, 2010; Reay, 2003).

The ontological position that was embraced for my study also informed my decision

to adopt a qualitative methodology and techniques of data collection. Waring (2012) has explained how assumptions about ontology (views of the form and nature of the world) influence suppositions and decisions relating to epistemology, methodology and methods. These he portrays as encompassing four connected questions which are outlined below (Figure. 3.2).

Figure 3.2: The relationship between ontology, epistemology, methodology and methods (Waring, 2012, p. 16)

.

ONTOLOGY
What is the form and nature of the social world?

EPISTEMOLOGY
How can what is assumed to exist be known?

METHODOLOGY
What procedure or logic should be followed?

METHODS
What techniques of data collection should
be used?
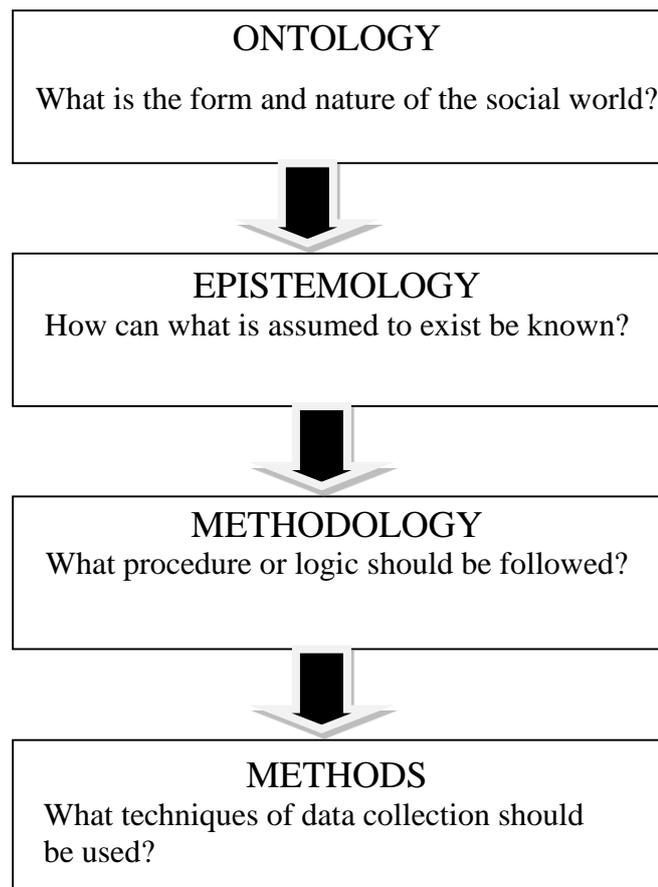
The ontological position of this investigation was that human beings socially construct their worlds through interpreting and acting upon the understandings that they have. Although it has been claimed that tendencies to categorise all educational research into a simplistic dichotomy of interpretivism (social constructivism) and positivism (realism) are inappropriate (Creswell, 2014), many qualitative researchers have claimed that their research designs have been influenced by "interpretivism or constructivism" (Punch & Oancea, 2014). Behind such theoretical pronouncements is a relatively distinctive ontological and epistemological position. This theoretical position informed a number of the methodological decisions that I decided upon.

Social actors are viewed as actively constructing the world through the subjectivity that they bring to it. Humans reflect on the world and themselves which in turn influences their actions. It is this that structures their actions (Onwuegbuzie, 2000). Researchers who can be classified under the interpretivist heading are also likely to subscribe to a view that the subject matter of the natural sciences and social sciences fundamentally differ. Humans have the ability to reflect on and alter their interactions with the world. Capturing subjects' understandings and interpretations are therefore essential. Sociologists of education and other educational researchers who adopt an interpretivist paradigm view the collection of social actors' meanings as an essential component when making sense of human's actions. This has led them to prioritise qualitative research (Becker, 1952; Cicourel & Kitsuse, 1971; Hargreaves, Hester & Mellor, 1975).

3.4. The influence of the ethnographic perspective

One particular strand of interpretivist research that influenced the design of my study was the ethnographic perspective. Although this investigation does not claim to have adopted an ethnographic format (Aggleton, 1987; Ball, 1981; Bhatti, 2012; Griffin, 1985; Willis, 1977), it did draw upon some aspects of the research design that this approach offers.

Exact definitions of what constitutes ethnography vary and this concept "is wide ranging, with different associations and traditions within different disciplines" (Taylor, 2002, p. 5). As a result of this, there is "diversification and disagreement" (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995, p. 20) about what should and should not be classified as ethnographic research. Ethnographic research now encompasses a variety of forms, including traditional (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007), critical (Carspecken, 1996), post-modern (Mutman, 2006) and feminist (Griffin, 1985) ethnographies. Each of these sub-traditions offers a particular view of the ethnographer's core task and method.

Trowman (2006) has attempted to document the salient characteristics of the ethnographic perspective. This typology stresses the importance of the documentation of cultural life through empathy and a number of other distinctive methodological features. He has insightfully identified eight features that are common to research that is classified as ethnographic (see Figure 3.3).

Figure 3.3: Trowman's (2006) eight methodological features of ethnography

> **Focus on the study of cultural formation and maintenance.**
>
> **Use of multiple methods and thus the generation of rich and diverse forms of data.**
>
> **Direct involvement and long-term engagement of the researcher.**
>
> **Recognition that the researcher is the main research instrument.**
>
> **High status given to the accounts of participants' perspectives and understandings.**
>
> **Engagement in a spiral of data collection.**
>
> **Hypothesis building and theory testing – leading to further data collection.**
>
> **Focus on a particular case in depth, but providing the basis for theoretical generalisation.**

Trowman (2006, pp.1-2)

Although not aspiring to meet the central ethnographic tenant of describing a culture, I did intend to undertake research that incorporated all but one element of the features that Trowman (2006) identifies. Ethnographic perspectives were therefore influential when making decisions about the research design especially in relation to type of data collected, choice of methods, data analysis and the length of time the data collection would span. For example, it was considered beneficial to conduct data collection over several years. Data collection, analysis and theorisation began in 2008 and finished in 2015.

Alongside a relatively long period of data collection, multiple methods were employed (interviews, observations and analysis of documents) to generate largely qualitative data. A small amount of quantitative data was gained from analysis of programme-related documentation such as the National Student Survey results and Head of Programme's interview sheets. Trowman (2006) outlines how those informed by the ethnographic perspective do not solely categorise it as a technique that draws exclusively upon qualitative data. Some have also utilised quantitative data from such structured and time-sampled observation (Barley, 1986; Walford, 2008). Quantitative

research activity was nevertheless very minor and generally my methods of data collection fell firmly within the qualitative and interpretivist tradition of educational research. Priority was given to teaching assistants' understandings of their engagement with Foundation degree study. Theory was developed, tested and refined as data collection proceeded. The focus of the research was also a particular case; that was a Foundation degree aimed at teaching assistants who were studying at one post-1992 university. Consequently, the ethnographic perspective influenced the research design that was constructed to study those who were the focus of my investigation.

3.5. The research setting

The Foundation degree programme that had been studied by the participants who are discussed in the research presented here was delivered by a post-1992 English university in a North of England city. The University had a relatively small population of approximately 6,500 students who were overwhelmingly studying at undergraduate level. It ran two Foundation degrees - one aimed at teaching assistants and the other focused upon those who were part of the Wider Children's Workforce. The university had not previously been a polytechnic, unlike many newer UK universities. Instead it had been a higher education college that was overseen by a Russell Group University and whose degrees it had awarded before being granted its own degree awarding powers.

Foundation degree classes were taught in modern teaching rooms that were also used to teach other non-work related programmes. Students studied six modules per year, which were delivered consecutively one after another. Most of the programme's formal teaching sessions were delivered on an evening between 5pm and 8pm. Each module typically required attendance at six or seven evening classes. Alongside this one daytime class was offered per module. These sessions took place between 10am and 4pm, usually on a Thursday. Evening classes were very well attended, but some students found daytime attendance difficult at times. The programme's teaching rooms accommodated a maximum of 30 students. Teaching rooms were set up with clusters of tables to promote group work and peer focused discussions. All students were asked to identify a workplace mentor who would assist them with their studies.

Cohort sizes ranged from 17 to 27 at enrolment over the period when data was collected. Retention rates were high relative to the national average for Foundation

degrees; over 80 percent of students completed their programmes of study. Very few other classes took place on the evenings when the Foundation degree students were taught, and most undergraduate teaching finished at 6pm. University services, outside library provision and canteen facilities, were generally not open after 5pm. Meals were however available in the canteen up until 6.30 pm. This facility however only existed in the weeks when students who were on traditional undergraduate programmes were in attendance and did not continue throughout the full extended year that the Foundation degree students followed.

The Foundation degree that the students were studying for had specifically been designed to meet the needs of teaching assistants and their employers. A mixture of academic and work-based learning was completed for each module. The programme aimed to help teaching assistants' cope with changing workplace roles. The programme was also framed in terms of a university commitment to increase participation rates in higher education amongst groups of learners who are often disadvantaged. Therefore the programme needs to be viewed in the context of New Labour's attempts to remodel the English school workforce and its desire to widen participation in higher education through the advent of vocationally orientated qualifications. The titles of Foundation degrees modules to some extent reflected this policy agenda (see Table 3.1).

Table 3.1: Foundation degree module titles

Year one module titles	Year two module titles
Developing and learning (20 credits)	Leading and managing (20 credits)
Effective teaching and learning (20 credits)	Promoting inclusion (20 credits)
Communication and literacy (20 credits)	Creating an environment for learning (20 credits)
Supporting learners with SEN (20 credits)	Changing contexts, roles and responsibilities (20 credits)
Managing behaviour (20 credits)	Independent research (20 credits)
Every child matters (20 credits)	Developing literacy (20 credits)

Students were required to complete all modules

The programme's stated learning strategy stressed a learning experience that drew upon Schön's (1983) notion of the reflective practitioner. In particular, students were encouraged to reflect on their workplace experiences. All end of module assignments required students to connect their academic learning to their workplace practice. In

addition to these activities, a number of "work-based tasks" were required to be completed to pass a module. These included gaining access to school policies, observing and reflecting workplace colleagues' practices, interviewing teachers and head teachers. This work was assessed simply in terms of a pass or fail. Assignments were marked out of 100. At the end of their studies students were awarded a classification of pass, merit or distinction. This grade was based on the average mark that a student achieved from their six second year modules.

The programme offered a flexible entry procedure for mature students and many of those who are enrolled on the programme did not have qualifications beyond 'O' and GCSE level. Students who were over 21 years of age with relevant experience could be granted entry if they had GCSE English or its equivalent and passed an interview with the course's Head of Programme. Students who successfully achieved the Foundation degree were guaranteed progression to either the honours year of a BA (Hons) Educational Studies or a BA (Hons) Children, Young People and Families. These qualifications did not require students to relate their studies to their workplace experiences or require specific workplace roles to be held (see Figure 3.2).

Table 3.2: Honours year modules by degree

BA (Hons) Education Studies	BA (Hons) Children, Young People and Families
Investigating learning (semester one – compulsory for award - 20 credits)	Crime, deviance and youth justice (semester one – compulsory - 20 credits)
Education and values (semester one – optional - 20 credits)	Children, young people, families and the state (semester one – compulsory - 20 credits)
Education and policy 2 (semester one – optional - 20 credits)	Leading and managing in the wider children's workforce (semester two - optional - 20 credits)
Education and contemporary ethical issues (semester two – optional- 20 credits)	Gender and sexualisation (semester two - optional - 20 credits)
Education and society (semester two – optional - 20 credits)	Research study (year long - compulsory for award - 20 credits could be taken at 40 credits)
Whose values? Whose voice? (semester two – optional - 20 credits)	Research study (year long – compulsory for award – This module could be taken at 20 credits 40)*
Education, health and well-Being (semester two – optional - 20 credits)	
Special study (year long – compulsory for award - 20 or 40 credits option)	

*Students were required to select a programme where they studied for 120 credits after Foundation degree to gain a full BA (Honours) degree

3.6. Insider research

The academic programme that was focused on in this study was part of a portfolio of work-related courses that was offered at the university where I was employed. Therefore the investigation that was undertaken was what is sometimes referred to as insider research (Coghlan & Brannick, 2014; Wellington, 2015). I was a tutor on the Foundation programme that the teaching assistants were studying. I had taught all of the students who were interviewed and observed. For part of the data collection I also held the post of Head of Programme for Foundation degrees. This period covered data collection when group interviews were conducted. Consequently, throughout my research I reflected upon issues related to workplace positionality and the particular power differentials between myself and those I aimed to study.

Stern's (2014) discussion of the issues that he faced as a Dean, when investigating the academics that he managed offers some insight into the dilemmas that hierarchal power relationships can produce. He collected data from academics that he managed. The potential that his position, and the power that he held over his interviewees, had to generate inaccurate accounts was highlighted as a concern. Two potential sources of bias were identified in respect to the way that power differentials could have played out in his interviews. Firstly, there is the possibility that biased accounts could be presented in an attempt to mirror his own views. Secondly, he argues that in such situations there is the potential that respondents will offer narratives that they believe their manager expects.

Mercer (2006) also notes that specific problems of bias accompany insider research, especially where the investigator's own workplace is the subject of study. He argues that the insider researcher as a known (or thought to be known) member of the scene may elicit accounts that reflect research participants' presumptions about their opinions. Mercer (2006) cites Schulz's (1971, p. 34) assertion that the outsider researcher is "without a history" in the research context, before outlining how "the insider cannot escape his or her past" (p. 8).

The social position that I had in relation to the research's participants both as a Head of Programme and module tutor generated a number of challenges and dilemmas. Like Stern (2014), I was concerned that my positionality to interviewees could have influenced their responses. When discussing programme related issues, would students limit their comments to positive ones? Although it was recognised that such potential

bias could not be fully eliminated, a number of strategies were undertaken to mitigate against it.

I overtly outlined to all of the students who were involved my research that I hoped to gain a full and critical account of their experiences and that their honesty would be appreciated. This desire was stressed in briefing sheets, letters of consent and preambles that I undertook before commencing interviews. Wherever possible when responses were suspected as potentially being a related to the occupational position that I held, other sources of information were sought. Contextualising data from documentary analysis and observations were drawn upon in some instances. For example when a number of students claimed that their Foundation degree studies had been a worthwhile experience, National Student Survey data was also analysed to see if this data refuted or supported these claims (see chapter six).

Students were also informed that my research findings would be anonymously presented. While this strategy did not offer the possibility of minimising students' reactions to the position that I occupied as tutor and Head of Programme, it was estimated that it may have reduced reluctance to offer critical insights of others that students had encountered in their time as learners. Moreover, at the start of interviews participants were informed that I would not be sharing the research's findings directly with their workplace mentors. This strategy was also informed by the ethical stance that was adopted throughout this investigation. Further details of ways that "identity, power and positionality" (Brooks, Kitty te Riele & Maguire, 2014, p. 112) influenced the ethical design of my research will be provided later in this chapter when ethical issues are explored in greater depth. It could however be argued that an existing history in the scene is not inevitably disadvantageous.

Although accepting Mercer's (2006) contention that an insider researcher cannot evade their history and identity, this was also viewed as positively impacting on my research activities. I believed that one advantage of being a known individual, who was part of the social scene that my participants also inhabited was in some respects likely to generate richer data than if the research had been undertaken by a stranger. I believed that my research activity did not significantly alter the social situation of the classrooms that I was observing. Students were also aware of my wider biography which included having previously been a mature student and teaching assistant. It was hoped that this would in some respects mitigate the workplace status that I held.

The positive relationship that I had with many students also seemed to allow trust to be developed and seemed to result in students being more comfortable when research data was being collected. The lengthy and detailed interview responses provided by the vast majority of the students seemed to support this supposition. Being on site for large amounts of time also resulted in a greater flexibility in relation to when students were interviewed and allowed slots to be offered at a variety of times in order to fit students' requests. Furthermore, insider research eased the amount of time it took to gain access to contextualising information such as recruitment and progression data. As an insider, I also had the advantage of knowing the scene and some of its cultural nuances (Hockey, 1993). This situation may have been beneficial as it could have led to an earlier refinement of my research's focus and initial questions.

There was however an awareness that as an insider researcher there was a possibility of taking certain aspects of the Foundation degree world for granted and not challenging established assumptions that I may have had (Brooks, 2014). Insider research has been viewed as constraining detachment and this is a potential source of bias (Kanuha, 2000). Inevitably there may be an enhanced danger of interpreting data within an existing cultural framework. This is a particular problem for insider researchers where "the territory, the characters, the body languages, and tacit understandings are known over a long period of time and form a familiar texture for the researcher" (Edwards, 2002, p. 77). Its finest asset is hence also possibly insider research's most significant limitation.

To counter the dangers of over familiarity, throughout the research process I endeavoured to be as open-minded as possible. Furthermore, I sought out others to provide an external critique of my developing thoughts. Dialogue with other research active academics, who I worked alongside as part of my employment, was used to stimulate reflection on tentative theories and findings. They became valued "critical friends" (Cebrián, Grace & Humphris, 2015). Challenging conversations with my PhD supervisor was also productive in this respect.

Others who were less familiar to me and the research I was conducting were also engaged with to gain outsider perspectives. Emerging findings were also presented at the University of York's Educational Research Group and an international conference on the influence of values in research (Smith, 2012). These events allowed feedback to be gained from other doctoral students and academics from outside my own university. At the conference in particular, supportive and challenging questioning

from a number of academic colleagues encouraged further reflection on alternative explanations that should be considered. Notably this included whether notions of parenthood and gender needed to be considered in greater depth. Interestingly elsewhere it has been claimed that researchers do not view such events as being research opportunities. Instead they are commonly defined as space where finalised research findings can be disseminated (Stern, 2014).

However, the distinct social relationships that can be produced by insider researchers' histories are not disputed. These issues were contemplated when I initially considered the desirability of undertaking doctoral research within my own workplace. Moreover, they were an on-going concern throughout the research process.

3.7. Sampling and participants

Decisions about which students should be selected as potential interviewees were partly influenced by a desire to gain data from a variety of learners and practicality. Participants for group and individual interviews were gained using what is commonly termed purposive sampling (Coe, 2012; Denzin, 2009; Richie et.al., 2014). Cohen et al. (2011) explain how:

> In purposive sampling, often (but by no means exclusively) a feature of qualitative research, researchers hand-pick the cases to be included in the sample on the basis of their judgement of their typically or possession of particular characteristics being sought. In this way, they build up a sample that is satisfactory to their specific needs. (p. 156)

The same technique was utilised to select classes for contextualising observations. Within this general framework, the ways that samples were generated differed slightly depending on the form of data collection technique that was going to be employed. As I outlined at the start of this thesis, interviewing was the primary method undertaken to collect data. Group and individual interviewing was planned and subsequently undertaken to achieve this objective. Gaining participants for group interviews involved targeting different year groups to ensure that both first and second year students were sampled. This decision was the result of wishing to be in a position of having a sample which included students who had started their programmes in different academic years and were at different points in their studies.

At the end of several first and second year classes requests were made for volunteers to take part in group interviews. Willing students were asked to sign up to various time

slots before classes and in half-term holidays. Those who were unsure of their availability or their willingness to take part were asked to reply via email if they wished to be interviewed. An email was sent out one week after the initial request for participants as a reminder to students of the opportunity to participate in group interviews. This process led to 46 students agreeing to take part in group interviews and 44 students were actually interviewed. Fortunately those who offered their time included learners who had a variety of workplace roles, ages, familial circumstances and year groups. Male and female students also volunteered to participate in group interviews. Moreover, General Teaching Assistants (GTAs) and Higher Level Teaching Assistants (HLTAs) positively responded to my request. The variety of characteristics among these volunteers meant that further targeting and selection was viewed as not being required. One consequence of this outcome was that all those who offered their time in my first call for participants were invited to take part in group interviews. The following tables provide details of the characteristics of those sampled to take part in group interviews.

Table 3.3: Participants who took part in group interview one

Pseudonym	Work role	Ethnicity	Year of study	Sector	Age	Parent
Emily	GTA	White British	First	Primary (state)	41	Yes
Katie	GTA	White British	First	Primary (state)	30	Yes
Petra	GTA	White British	First	Primary (private)	28	No
Jamie	HTLA	White British	First	Primary (state)	37	Yes
Nicola	HLTA	White British	First	Primary (state)	29	Yes

Table 3.4: Participants who took part in group interview two

Pseudonym	Work role	Ethnicity	Year of study	Sector	Age	Parent
Sara	GTA	White British	Second	Primary (state)	30	No
Cara	GTA	White British	Second	Primary (state)	27	Yes
Mel	GTA	White British	Second	Primary (state)	29	No
Jean	HTLA	White British	Second	Primary (state)	30	Yes
Julie	GTA	White British	Second	Primary (state)	34	Yes
Erin	HLTA	White British	Second	Primary (state)	33	Yes

Table 3.5: Participants who took part in group interview three

Pseudonym	Work role	Ethnicity	Year of study	Sector	Age	Parent
Anna	GTA	White British	First	Primary (state)	40	Yes
Gill	GTA	White British	First	Primary (state)	37	Yes
Jayne	HLTA	White British	Second	Primary (state)	39	Yes
Rosie	GTA	White British	First	Primary (state)	28	Yes
Joan	GTA	White British	First	Primary (state)	36	No

Table 3.6: Participants who took part in group interview four

Pseudonym	Work role	Ethnicity	Year of study	Sector	Age	Parent
Georgie	GTA	White British	Second	Primary (state)	27	No
Gillian	GTA	White British	Second	Primary (state)	37	Yes
Ruth	HLTA	White British	Second	Secondary (state)	38	Yes
Kerry	GTA	White British	Second	Primary (state)	33	Yes
Jennifer	GTA	White British	Second	Primary (state)	33	Yes
Sam	GTA	White British	Second	Primary (state)	23	No

Table 3.7: Participants who took part in group interview five

Pseudonym	Work role	Ethnicity	Year of study	Sector	Age	Parent
Mary	GTA	White British	First	Primary (state)	38	Yes
Jenny	GTA and HLTA	White British	First	Primary (state)	38	Yes
Debs	Volunteer	White British	First	Primary (state)	32	Yes
Nadia	GTA	White British	First	Primary (state)	34	Yes
Sonia	GTA	White British	First	Secondary (state)	27	Yes

Table 3.8: Participants who took part in group interview six

Pseudonym	Work role	Ethnicity	Year of study	Sector	Age	Parent
Cheryl	GTA	White British	First	Primary (state)	44	Yes
Claire	GTA	White British	First	Primary (state)	32	Yes
Janice	GTA	White British	First	Primary (state)	26	No
Angela	GTA	White British	First	Primary (state)	49	Yes
Susan	GTA	White British	First	Primary (state)	42	Yes

Table 3.9: Participants who took part in group interview seven

Pseudonym	Work role	Ethnicity	Year of study	Sector	Age	Parent
Abigail	GTA	White British	Second	Primary (state)	26	Yes
Sammy	GTA	White British	Second	Primary (state)	37	Yes
Debbie	GTA	White British	Second	Primary (state)	25	No
Karen	HLTA	White British	Second	Primary (state)	31	Yes
Jo	HLTA	White British	Second	Primary (state)	36	Yes
Jenna	HLTA	White British	Second	Primary (state)	34	Yes

Table 3.10: Participants who took part in group interview eight

Pseudonym	Work role	Ethnicity	Year of study	Sector	Age	Parent
Liz	Volunteer	White British	Second	Primary (state)	35	Yes
Rachel	GTA	White British	Second	Primary (state)	28	Yes
Ian	GTA	White British	Second	Primary (state)	33	Yes
Ashleigh	GTA	White British	Second	Secondary (state)	50	Yes
Jasmin	HLTA	White British	Second	Primary (state)	36	Yes

In contrast to group interview samples, volunteers for individual interviews were recruited by only explicitly targeting individuals in the second year of their studies who had not previously offered their opinion. This was because although the stage of data collection aimed to gain further detail on the main themes to emerge from initial analysis of data from group interviews, I also wished to gather information that addressed the third research question that I had identified. This question focused on moving away from Foundation degree study and was constructed after interesting issues related to it emerged during one group interview with second year students (see Table 3.11 for details of the participants who took part in individual interviews).

Table 3.11: Participants who took part in individual interviews

Pseudonym	Work role	Ethnicity	Year of study	Sector	Age	Parent
Kirsten	GTA	White British	Second	Secondary (state)	24	No
Davina	HLTA	White British	Second	Primary (state)	38	Yes
Betty	GTA	White British	Second	Primary (state)	48	Yes
Christina	HLTA	White British	Second	Primary (state)	37	Yes
Debra	Volunteer	White British	Second	Primary (state)	29	Yes
Eleanor	GTA	White British	Second	Primary (state)	49	Yes
Tom	GTA	White British	Second	Primary (state)	34	Yes
Dawn	HLTA	White British	Second	Primary (state)	36	Yes
Georgina	GTA	Nigerian	Second	Primary (state)	37	Yes
Jan	GTA	White British	Second	Primary (state)	38	Yes
Julia	GTA	White British	Second	Primary (state)	35	Yes
Jess	GTA	White British	Second	Primary (state)	24	No

Even though the participants who were selected for group and individual semi-structured interviews were selected purposely, for ethical reasons volunteers within target groups were sought. This strategy was implemented as informed consent was a key ethical commitment that was adhered to throughout the research (see the discussion on ethics that is provided later in this chapter for more detailed reflections on this issue).

Contextualising classroom observations were also selected purposively with both first and second year modules explicitly targeted. Classes who were identified as offering potential observation opportunities were asked prior to the modules commencing whether they were happy for me to undertake data collection. Students could express a desire to withdraw from this activity to me personally or via a confidential email. No student formally objected to being observed. Observations were undertaken in 14 modules over a four year period. Course-related documentation was also selected purposively to help refine the research's focus and to explore findings which emerged from analysis of interview data. Further details of the methods of data collection that were employed are now provided.The university where data was collected was selected for practical and pragmatic reasons. As outlined previously in

this chapter, I collected data from teaching assistants who were studying on a Foundation degree programme at the university where I was employed as an academic member of staff. The advantage of studying students in this setting included the ease with which access to a suitable sample could be gained. The decision to focus upon provision at the university where I was employed was also a product of an early recognition of the challenges that I would face as a part-time student who was endeavouring to balance full-time paid work and part-time PhD study. Practically I believed that I would experience significant difficulties in taking time out of my employment to study Foundation degree students at another university.

I was also concerned that I may have been denied access to other geographically accessible HEIs due to the competitive nature of Foundation degree recruitment. Selecting an institution where I had an existing role also facilitated access to a greater range of course-related documents and allowed the collection of in-depth accounts as I was a familiar person in the scene. However, there was an awareness that the generalisability of the findings produced was limited as a result of my decision to focus on one university context. Yet, as will be outlined in the final part of this methodology chapter, it was hoped that the findings generated would be transferable (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) by providing thick description and a model of understanding that can potentially be tested out in other contexts.

3.8. Methods of data collection

For the study presented here multiple methods of data collection were undertaken with the aspiration of generating "rich" (Trowman, 2006, p. 1) qualitative data. Individual interviews, group interviews, participant observations and analysis of programme-related "documentary materials" (Gobo, 2008, p. 5) were carried out. Individual and group interviews were however the primary source of data. This element of my research design was influenced by a desire to give primacy to the Foundation degree students' accounts and provide a voice to these learners. Observations and analysis of useful programme documentation were viewed as being subsidiary and contextualising sources of information. They did however offer an opportunity to confirm or dispute emerging findings and theories. Data collection took place over a number of years which was also followed by a relatively long period of theorisation (see Figure 3.4).

Figure 3.4: Chronology of data collection activities, theorisation and writing up

NOVEMBER 2008 - JULY 2009 (PHASE ONE)
Contextualising observations and documentary analysis
First pilot and group interviews

SEPTEMBER 2009 - JULY 2010 (PHASE TWO)
Group interviews and first level analysis
Contextualising observations

SEPTEMBER 2010 - JULY 2011 (PHASE THREE)
Individual interviews and first level analysis
Contextualising observations
Review programme-related documents

SEPTEMBER 2011 - JULY 2012 (PHASE FOUR)
Further analysis of programme-related documents
Contextualising observations
Review course related documents

SEPTEMBER 2013 - DECEMBER 2013 (PHASE FIVE)
Writing up and theorisation

JANUARY 2014 – MARCH 2015 (PHASE SIX)

Writing up and final theorisation

The part-time nature of my PhD registration and the research design that I adopted allowed a relatively long period of data collection and analysis to be engaged in. This time period inevitably led to a significant time delay between data being collected and

formally reported, but it was believed that adopting such a design would facilitate greater depth of analysis and richer research findings.

3.8.1. Semi-structured interviewing as the primary method of data collection

All of the interviews that I conducted for this study were semi-structured. Mears (2012) highlights how interviewing is often employed by those wishing to undertake qualitative research. Cohen et al. (2012) specifically explain how qualitative interviewing is carried out when researchers wish to investigate "issues, personal biographies, and what is meaningful to, or valued by, participants, how they feel about particular issues, their attitudes, opinions and emotions" (p. 439). Semi-structured interviews are identified as one of the key methods that qualitative researchers typically draw upon. This form of interviewing does have pre-determined questions and prompts, but can be modified within the interview situation based upon what is appropriate and conducive to producing a constructive experience for all those involved (Punch & Oancea, 2014). The non-rigid format of semi-structured interviews enabled me to follow-up emerging themes whilst maintaining a focus on my key research questions (Wragg, 2002).

The capacity that this technique offers in terms of allowing a re-ordering of questions to fit the natural flow of conversations was found to be a particular advantage when conducting interviews with the Foundation degree students. Students often provided answers in their responses to questions that I had provisionally planned to ask later in interviews. Semi-structured interviewing allowed for this situation and did not lead to students being asked to limit their responses until an appropriate question was being addressed. One outcome of this seemed to be that interviewees provided in-depth responses; useful elaboration and connection between issues could be more easily presented.

Moreover, semi-structured interviewing was productive in that the wording of questions could be altered if students' verbal and non-verbal communication suggested that they had not fully understood the nature of my questioning. Furthermore, the flexibility of this technique also allowed responses to be probed and the clarification of meanings and motives to be sought (Bell & Waters, 2014; May, 2001). Their relatively open-ended nature enabled informants to expand on their thoughts and offer more detailed commentary on issues (Denscombe, 2014).

Both structured and unstructured interviews were considered for primary data collection. Structured interviews involve a series of set questions being asked by a researcher to interviewees (Cohen et al., 2011). There is a set order of questioning that researchers should not divert from. All respondents are therefore notionally viewed responding to uniform stimulus. The opportunity that this research method facilitated to make direct comparisons between interviews` responses was initially attractive, but its lack of flexibility to follow up responses that were unexpected was viewed as a significant drawback. Moreover, whilst some element of structure was desirable to ensure that key research questions were addressed there was a wish to enable interviewees to set the agenda of the conversations that took place. It was hoped that such space would allow new issues to be highlighted and offer the potential for assumptions to be contested. Structured interviews are also relatively short-lived encounters which can be viewed as limiting opportunities to build trust and rapport with interviewees. For these reasons semi-structured interviews were viewed as preferable.

Unstructured interviews were also considered as a possible method of data collection. Punch and Oancea (2014) outline how in this form of interviewing:

> interview questions are not preplanned and standardised, but instead there are general questions to get the interview going and to keep it moving. Specific follow-up questions will then emerge as the unfolds, and the wording of those questions will depend upon directions the interview takes. There are no pre-established categories for responding. (p. 183-4)

Positively this form of interviewing offers greater potential for interviews to set the agenda that dialogue follows. This ability offers the possibility of reducing the impact of interviewer bias. However whilst an unstructured approach was somewhat appealing, semi-structured interviewing ensured that key research questions were addressed.

All the interviews that were conducted were face-to-face. This was perceived to be beneficial as it allowed non-verbal as well as verbal communication to be monitored. Adopting such an approach facilitated an ability to react to learners' confusion and uncertainties about questions. It also permitted the possibility of observing non-verbal cues that might suggest that interviewees were uncomfortable with a line of questioning.

Every semi-structured interview was audio recorded with the use of a flip camera. However, the camera lens was not focused upon the interviewees. Students were made aware that their image would not be recorded. Although permanently capturing interviewees facial expressions and body posture had the potential to add some context to responses, it was felt that students would be more comfortable if they knew that only their voice was being recorded. It was anticipated that this strategy would also encourage students to be more relaxed within the interview room. In turn this outcome would lead richer data to be gained.

3.8.2. The decision to undertake group followed by individual interviews

Group and individual semi-structured interviews were employed as primary methods of data collection. The first phase of interviewing involved eight group interviews (Spradley, 1979; Sherman Hyle, 2007) being conducted with first and second year Foundation degree students. Punch and Oancea (2014) have outlined how there is a trend amongst educational researchers where the terms group interviews and focus groups are "used interchangeably" (p. 186). Whilst focus groups are a form of group interviewing, it could be argued that not all group interviews adopt a focus group format. It has been suggested that the difference between these methods is that focus groups are more interactive and place a greater significance on documenting group as well as individual opinions:

> Group interviews are a way to gather many opinions from individuals within a group setting but are largely didactic between interviewer and each individual in the group. The distinguisher of focus groups is that they are interactive, the group opinion is at least as important as the individual opinion, and the group itself may take on a life of its own not anticipated or initiated by the researcher. (Gibbs, 2012, p. 186)

Drawing upon Gibbs' (2012) definition, the group interviews that were carried out for study could be classified as focus groups. Questioning was generally intended to capture both group and individual responses. This aspiration was reflected in data analysis and subsequent presentation of the findings. Patterns of similarities between groups and individuals were identified and subsequently discussed. Lewis (1992) signals the advantages group interviewing offers in this respect and explains how: "Many research topics in education can be understood more comprehensively if both individual and consensus views are assessed" (p. 114). Yet, focus group is a contested

concept and Cohen et al. (2011) present a definition that does not easily fit the type of interview that I undertook. Here it is claimed that:

> Focus groups are form of group interview, though not in a sense of backwards and forwards between interviewer and group. Rather, the reliance is on the interaction within the group who discuss a topic supplied by the researcher, yielding a collective view rather than an individual one. Hence participants interact with each other rather than the interviewer. (p. 436)

This delineation does not describe the interviews that were conducted for the research. Interviewing involved "backwards and forwards" questioning and answering. The collection of individual, as well collective responses, was also an intended consequence of this process. Gibbs (1997) has further provided a useful clarification of how focus groups and group interviews can be differentiated. She has claimed that it is important that researcher differentiate between the two methods and she subsequently explained that:

> Group interviewing involves interviewing a number of people at the same time, the emphasis being on questions and responses between the researcher and participants. Focus groups however rely on interaction within the group based on topics that are supplied by the researcher. (p. 1)

As a result of these definitional debates and the limited use of the term focus group by sociologists of education (and ethnographers more generally), the first stage of primary data collection is described as having taken the form of group interviewing. Group interviews which involved bringing several students together to be questioned were viewed to be advantageous as they allowed a relatively large amount of qualitative data from a range of Foundation degree learners to be collected within a relatively short period of time, whilst gaining detailed responses. As other scholars have outlined, they also allow participants to "trigger off ideas from others" (Lewis, 1992, p. 414). Additionally, this technique was viewed as being beneficial in that it advanced the possibility that some students would be more comfortable with an interview situation which included their peers (see Figure 3.5 for the key questions used in group interviews).

Figure 3.5: Final group interview questions

Main questions

Can you describe the role you undertake when you are at school? Has this changed over the years?

Can you summarise your reasons for deciding to study on the Foundation degree?

Can you tell me about your experiences of being a Foundation degree student?

Additional questions for probing and encouraging expansion of responses

Can you expand on this?

Is there anything further that you like to add to this answer?

Does that reflect other people's opinions?

Would anyone else like to express an opinion on that point?

Does anybody have a different view?

Where there any other advantages that you have found about being a Foundation degree student?

Can you tell me if there were any other challenges that you have found about being a Foundation degree student?

Have your studies had an impact on other areas of your life?

Did anyone else encourage you to study?

Ideally, where do you want to be in five years' time?

I was, however, aware of the potential constraints of group interviewing. For example, I was concerned that some students may have been intimidated by others in their group and restrict their responses. Whilst appreciating that this issue could not be fully eradicated, attempts were made to reduce its likelihood. Ground rules were set in the oral preamble that I undertook at the start of interviews. Here it was stressed how everyone's views were equally valued and that it was hoped that respect would be given to others' opinions, even if these were disagreed with (see Appendix A).

In interviews I also tried to create space for all students to be in a position offer their opinions. To try to achieve this outcome additional questions were drawn upon

such as "does that reflect other people's opinions?"; "would anyone else like to express opinions on that point?" and "does anybody have a different view?" Additionally I attempted not to fill silences too quickly.

After an initial analysis of the focus group data was undertaken, a series of individual semi-structured interviews were conducted with a further 12 second year Foundation degree students. Individual interviews were carried between September 2010 and July 2011. These were conducted with students who had not previously been interviewed. This decision was undertaken as I wished to expand my sample size to explore how typical the emerging themes from group interviews were whilst also being in a position to perhaps gain extended accounts. Lewis (1992) has suggested that moving from group to individual interviews can be useful in that emerging ideas can be clarified and verified. The two main questions that were focused upon in group interviews were also asked to individual interviewees. However, a number of additional questions were also asked to gain their opinions about emergent themes that had been identified amongst group interviewees (see Appendix K). As outlined earlier in this chapter, this second phase of interviewing allowed a third research question to be explored. It had been constructed as I reflected on the students' responses in group interviews (see chapter six).

Individual interviews were also attractive as they offered the possibility of reducing peer influence which group interviews can be prone to. Those who were individually interviewed interestingly often confirmed themes that emerged in focus groups. This could perhaps indicate that those who had participated in group interviews had not been unduly influenced by peer pressure.

In constrast, other scholars have combined individual and group interviews by reversing this process by carrying out a large number of the former initially before following-up with a smaller number of the latter (Brooks & Everett, 2008). Time constraints and a wish to gain access to a relatively large range of perspectives in the first phase of primary data collection led to group interviews being adopted for the initial phase of interviewing for my own study.

3.8.3. Piloting

To enhance the potential validity of my research, my initial group interview schedule was trialled (piloted) and refined to enhance its effectiveness. A pilot group interview was undertaken with second year students at the beginning of February 2009. An individual interview was similarly carried out with a second year student at the beginning of September 2010. The pilot group interview was particularly problematic for a number of reasons. Firstly, the questions asked did not generate the extended responses that I had anticipated. Subsequently, more open ended questions were included in the ensuing group interviews that were carried out. Extra additional probing questions were also included for the next series of group interviews. Furthermore, on reflection undertaking interviews in the room where the students were due to be taught later in the evening seemed to be a mistake. The final part of the pilot group interview was disrupted when another student entered the room. This interruption and an awareness that other students were queuing outside the classroom was off-putting for the interviewees and myself. My own questioning was rushed and responses were relatively brief. Consequent group interviews were conducted in a room slightly away from the students' teaching room or in my office at the University.

Figure 3.6: Interview schedule for pilot group interview

Can you give me details of your role in school?

Why did you decide to do the Foundation degree?

Has School Workforce Remodelling changed your role at school in any way?

What benefits (if any) do you feel that you have gained from your present studies?

Have your studies produced challenges?

Did anyone encourage you to do the Foundation degree?

Have your studies changed your workplace experiences?

Are there any things that you like to say about your experiences of being a Foundation degree student?

The individual interview pilot was less eventful. This outcome may have been influenced by the way that previous group interviews were drawn upon when these were designed. Pilot questions were retained for final individual interviews (see Appendix J for final interview schedule). The only significant post-pilot change involved attempting to put interviewees at greater ease at the start of interviews by asking questions about their journeys and reinforcing the relaxed form of dialogue I hoped to engage in. Although students` journeys in a small number of instances had been less than ideal, this was typical of the type of conversation that I usually engaged in them when they arrived at the university. To ensure that I addressed the key issues that had been raised group interviews, an extensive list of optional additional questions was included my individual interview schedule.

3.8.4. Participant observations as a source of contextualising data and mechanism to refine focus

As briefly outlined above, observation was a contextualising method of data collection for my study. Observations were undertaken at the university where I was employed as a tutor and Head of Programme. They were participatory in nature. Some of the classes that I taught on the Foundation degree, which was the central focus of my research, were observed over a four year period. This involved observation of students' classroom activities. As I played a significant role in facilitating these learning experiences, I cannot claim that my presence was non-participatory. However, this participatory activity might be said to be limited in that I did not adopt the role of those I sought to gain an understanding of; that was, a Foundation degree student. This was not possible due to my existing role in the scene which involved contractual commitments with my employer; and even if possible would have raised ethical issues around adopting such a role, especially if this was part of a covert process.

The participatory element of observations was however less constrained than that many ethnographies of education. Powell (2006) for example notes how such researchers frequently only gain participation in the scene through undertaking "activities such as interviews, informal conversations, and limited interactions with those involved in a study" (p. 34). Positively, it was believed that as I had an established role within the scene that I observed this would be likely to reduce what is often labelled the Hawthorne Effect (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007), where

subjects modify their actions and accounts when they become aware that they are being researched.

The initial period of observations in 2008 concentrated upon documenting potential issues that might be focused upon in subsequent group interviews. I also refined the initial two research questions that were to be focused upon. Later observations were carried out to produce supplementary contextualising information that was utilised to review support for, and challenge to, themes that emerged from group and individual interviews.

Table 3.12: Observation schedule

Start and end dates of module	Module title	Class size	Start and end dates of module	Module title	Class size
3 November – 8 December 2008	Managing Behaviour	26	1 November – 6 December 2010	Every Child Matters	23
5 January – 9 February 2009	Every Child Matters	23	1 November – 6 December 2011	Managing Behaviour	21
23 April – 21 May 2009	Changing Roles, Contexts and Responsibilities	27	2 May – 23 May 2011	Developing and Learning	21
4 June – 9 July 2009	Independent Research	27	13 September – 17 October 2011	Changing Roles, Contexts and Responsibilities	20
22 February – 29 March 2010	Changing Roles, Contexts and Responsibilities	21	7 November – 12 December 2012	Managing Behaviour	23
19 April – 24 May 2010	Independent Research	21	23 April – 28 May 2012	Developing and Learning	22
7 June – 12 July 2010	Every Child Matters	23	11 June – 16 July 2012	Independent Research	20

Observations were recorded briefly during suitable gaps in classes and written up in greater detail after they had finished. This activity was routinely undertaken when I travelled home on the train which involved a journey in excess of one hour. These notations were inevitably selective and based on memory recall. One outcome of this was that the findings that were recorded were particularly prone to bias. Being conscious of this potential problem and the practicality of undertaking detailed

observation whilst teaching; partially led to the decision to employ observation as a contextualising source of information.

3.9. Course documents

Undertaking a research in my existing workplace also allowed me to gain access to a range of documentation that may have been denied to an outsider. In common with the observational findings that were generated, analysis of programme-related documents was not used as a primary method of data collection. Instead, as with observational data it was intended to be a supporting and contextualising source of information that could boost the research's "trustworthiness" (Shenton, 2004). This documentation included:

Class lists;
Reports on National Student Survey data;
Records of Head of Programme's interviews with Foundation degree students;
Programme validation documents;
Timetable information.

Information from these sources provided valuable information on the research setting and students' qualifications on entry to their programme. The decision to use this information as supporting rather than a primary source of data was largely due to the prioritisation that I wished to give to students' accounts and the focus of the investigation's central research questions.

3.10. Data Analysis

Patton (1980) defines data analysis as "the process of bringing order to the data, organising what is there into patterns, categories and basic descriptive units" (p. 268). Specifically, it has been claimed that qualitative data analysis "involves organizing, accounting for and explaining the data; in short, making sense of data in terms of the participants' definitions of the situation, noting patterns, themes, categories and regularities" (Cohen et al., 2011, p. 537). Making sense of data that was collected from primary and contextualising sources was an on-going procedure that occurred from the beginning of data collection and involved a process of constant critical reflection.

In line with other qualitative studies of teaching assistants, thematic analysis (Leach, 2009; Morris, 2010) was adopted to investigate the existence of patterns within the qualitative data that had been collected. Thematic analysis was viewed as a

practical way to allow both individual and group understanding to be uncovered. It also facilitated a commitment to a process of data analysis where comparison could be captured. Moreover, it is a form of analysis that begins with accounts and allows theorisation to be built from these. This characteristic corresponded with the commitment I had to conduct research that reflected the interpretivist position.

Boyatzis (1978) has classically outlined how those using thematic analysis create codes as they seek to understand their research data. Here key words and phrases are assigned to different parts of recorded data. Sets of codes are then bought together to produce broader themes and ultimately theory. Boyatzis (1978) highlights how researchers' codes are generated in different ways. Some employ theory-driven coding, developed from their own pre-research hypothesis or others' theories. In contrast to this, some qualitative researchers choose to develop inductive codes, which emerge purely from an analysis of data where existing theory is not drawn upon. This diversity of practice seems to support Cohen et al.'s (2011) argument that: "There is no one single or correct way to analyse and present qualitative data; how one does it should abide by the issue of fitness for purpose" (p. 537). Inductive coding was the initial strategy adopted for data analysis as there was limited theorisation of teaching assistants' engagement with Foundation degree study and more importantly I aspired to avoid making assumptions about their engagement.

Data analysis was carried out throughout the period of this study. It involved a relatively complex process of shifting between description and analysis; alongside induction and deductive reasoning. This allowed the generation and refinement of codes, themes and theories. Throughout data analysis I adopted what Miles and Huberman (1994) term a "fairly classic set of analytic moves" (p. 9). Robson (2002) summarises these in the following way:

> giving codes to the initial set of materials obtained from observation, interviews, documentary analysis, etc.;
>
> adding comments, reflections, etc. (commonly referred to as memos);
>
> going through the materials trying to identify similar phrases, patterns, themes, relationships, sequences, differences between sub-groups, etc.;
>
> taking these patterns, themes, etc. out to the field to help focus the next wave of data collection;

gradually elaborating a small set of generalizations that cover the consistencies you discern in the data;

linking these generalizations to a formalize body of knowledge in the form of constructs and theories. (p. 459)

Whilst each of the components of Robson's (2002) model were incorporated into the process that was adopted for analysis additional phases supplemented this process. Group interview data analysis followed six stages: beginning with listening to all the group interviews in order to gain familiarisation and ending with overarching theorisation across data that addressed each of my research questions. Figure 3.7 illustrates the different stages that were undertaken.

Figure 3.7: Stages in data analysis of group interview data
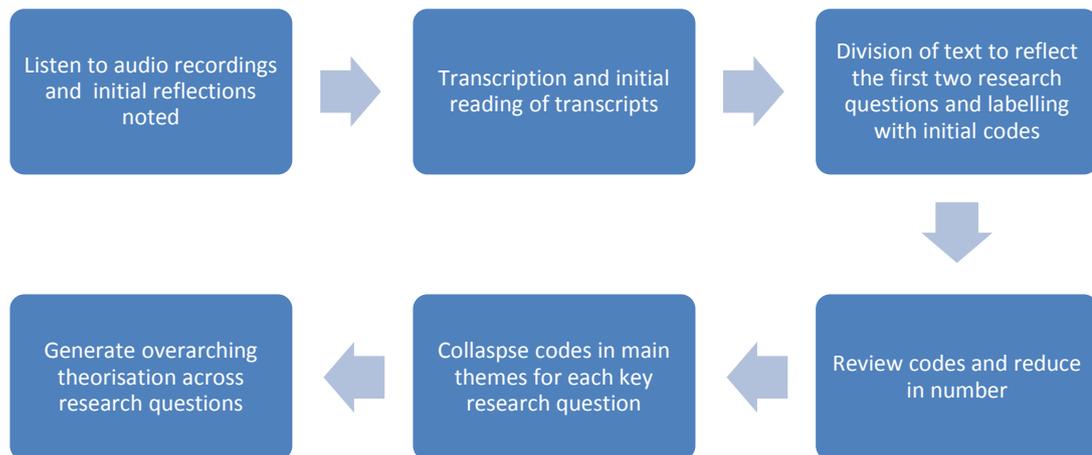
This initial stage of listening to audio recording was found to be a valuable stage that helped reduce the challenges that I encountered when initial coding was attempted. Transcription and first readings of these also allowed beneficial reflection to be undertaken to identify potentially useful codes. The first formal stage of coding involved dividing interview text into parts that addressed research questions one and two. For data related to each research question, a long list of potential codes was then noted. After initial coding and a reduction of these, themes were identified in students' accounts. In relation to my first research question the initial list of codes was reduced to a final list of 10 from which four themes were identified (see to Figure 3.8 for a screenshot of coded interview transcript).

Figure 3.8: Screenshot of a coded page from a group interview transcript

Theme	Interview transcript	Code
Transformation of future occupational role and identity	Paul: So anybody have a similar or different set of reasons? Gill D: I've got more involved in teaching and I've loved it. I now teach one day a week already and really enjoy it and erm I can do it as well as some of the teachers and it started me thinking more about teaching. I applied for the primary course, but didn't get an interview. They have loads of applicants and I didn't have the right qualifications and then my mum saw this and said why don't you do this. It seemed ideal and now I think it was a better route for me at least. As it's worked out its been a much better choice. (PNO)	(PNO)
Transformation of future occupational role and identity	Julie: Well I'd done NVQ3 and it was too easy and it wasn't challenging me enough. I was a bit stale and I needed to push myself a little bit more so we had someone coming doing the GTP at school and one of the teachers said oh why don't you have a go at it [teaching]. I did a lot of investigation and they wouldn't accept the course that I'd already done because it was too long ago and not the right level so I decided to come to this. She really encouraged me and said I know what you can do in the classroom. You'd should try it. You'd be a great teacher. Go for it.	(ESS)
Positive modification of personal self not directly related to occupational position	Jenny E: To be proud of what I'm capable of. I did it for myself really. Erm, I don't really know. I suppose, I think that it was sort of a little project for myself really. For me, to make me feel better about myself. Something so erm, I can be proud of myself. It was just like a little project for me, for my myself like an evening a week. Not outside my house because I quite like my house and my children, but it's just something for yourself to achieve something and to have a bit of input into work and to believe in yourself and maybe do better in the future. It was quite selfish really just to say it was for me. It's not as if I want to do anything at the end of the two years as I don't know. I can't believe how quick it's gone. I can't believe it.	(PPC)
Positive modification of personal self not directly related to occupational position	C: Well I did it for a few reasons really. I went for a job and all the other girls had Foundation degrees and it gave them. It came down to that something extra and I though I'm missing out here and my sister and sister in law are teachers and I started being an ATA and I got qualified and everything and Penny my sister said look I think that you should go for your Foundation degree. You should do it and I kinda just fell into it really, but also I wanted to	(PPC)

Clustering similar codes together was utilised to produce themes. In relation to my second research question data analysis produced 12 codes after reduction and four themes. Counting the frequency of codes and themes was therefore a key part of data analysis. Although appearing to be at odds with the qualitative research tradition, counting is frequently used by qualitative researchers. Miles et al. (2014) have underlined the extent to which counting is an integral part of qualitative data analysis that is often left unacknowledged. They have outlined:

In qualitative research, numbers tend to get ignored. After all, the hallmark of qualitative research is that it goes beyond how much there is something to tell us about its essential qualities. However, there is a lot of counting goes on in the background when judgments of qualities are being made. When we identify a theme or a pattern, we're isolating something that (a) happens a number of times and (b) consistently happens in a specific way. (p. 282)

The rationale for adopting this approach was that it allowed codes and themes to be reduced more easily. Moreover, it enabled findings to be presented in a way where the strength of themes could be illuminated to readers. It has also been suggested that such analysis can help counter researcher bias (Miles et al., 2014). In my research it was hoped that identifying strong and weaker patterns of analysis numerically would help counter an interpretation that did not reflect the students' view. Brooks et al. (2014) further claim that "charting the frequency" (p. 127) can add to the rigor and validity of data analysis. Table 3.13 provide a sample of the way that themes were counted to allow comparison between them and offer a sense of the strength of these.

Table 3.13: Illustration of how themes connected to the motives and circumstances related students' decisions to undertake study were numerically summarised

	Theme one: Transformation of future occupational role and identity	Theme two: Positive modification of personal self not directly related to occupational position	Three: Maintenance of established roles and identities	Theme four: Flexibility around entry requirements
Number of groups where it emerged	8	4	3	2

Subsequent data analysis of individual interviews broadly reflected this process but codes and themes that had emerged from group interviews were focused upon to establish if individual interview data reflected or challenged these. Subsequent to this process material was identified that addressed my third research question. This data was then thematically analysed. New codes and themes were also looked for at this point (see Figures 3.9 and 3.10 to see the way that individual interview data was analysed).

Figure 3.9: Stages in data analysis of individual interview data for research questions one and two

Listen to audio recordings to familialise myself with data

Transcribe interviews and division of text to identify material related to first two research questions

Review transcripts to establish if there was a constitsency with codes/themes that emerged from group interviews

Review transcripts to establish if codes/themes exist that differ from those identified in group interviews

Review data for new codes and themes
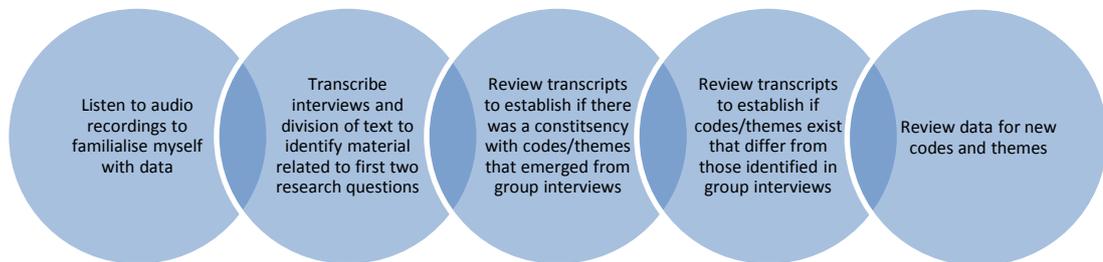
Figure 3.10: Stages in data analysis of individual interview data for research question three

Listen to audio recordings to familialise myself with data → Identify text relevant to third research question and label with initial codes → Review codes and reduce in number → Collaspse codes into main themes → Generate overarching theorisation across research questions
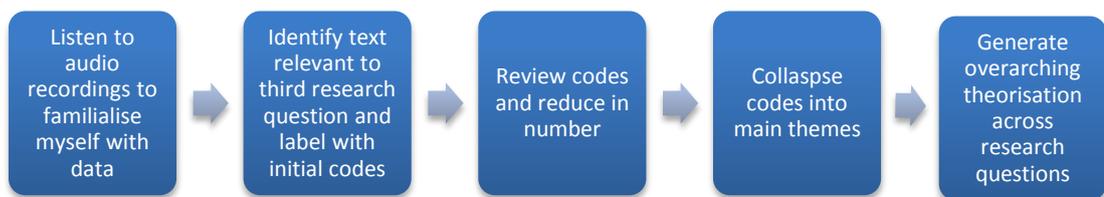
Constant comparisons between accounts were a feature of this process. Similarities, differences and exceptions were looked for. Themes across research questions were reflected upon and isolated. As part of this process, academic literature related to my research topic was compared to my findings so that readers could view how my findings and analysis reflected and diverged from previous research. From this stage of analysis models of students' understandings were constructed. Transcripts were subsequently reread to see if emerging models were appropriate. A substantial number of illustrated quotes from my interviewees were also presented as part of this analysis. Quotations were also extensively cited to provide the Foundation degree students a potent voice.

In both the analysis of individual and group interview data transcription of audio materials was undertaken as it was believed that it would produce extended interaction with the data that had been collected. Being a part-time research student led to transcription being undertaken over several months. Although this was a frustrating

time-scale, it did facilitate an extensive period where reflection on potential codes could be carried out.

Contextual data from participant observations and analysis of programme-related documentary materials was also analysed thematically. This minor source of supporting data was utilised to cross check emerging themes and codes. It was also reflected upon to identify appropriate research questions and to inform the first draft of interview schedules.

Further analysis of the data was undertaken as the text for the findings chapters (chapters four, five and six) and discussion chapter (chapter seven) were constructed. This involved moving between the findings that emerged as a result of data analysis of all the information collected from the variety of methods that had been employed.

Data analysis was carried out manually without the use of Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software (CAQDAS), such as NVivo. This decision was partially determined by a desire to achieve consistency as initial attempts at data analysis had not been conducted in this way. Although such software is undoubtedly useful, my method of data analysis was also influenced by qualitative researchers who have claimed that the generation of categories and themes is a creative intellectual and human process (Mason, 1994).My insider status within the university where I undertook my research posed challenges as I attempted to undertake data analysis. My familiarity with the scene and those sampled may have potentially generated assumptions that structured the sense that was made of collected data. Such bias is a particular risk when insider research is carried out. Another researcher without such a closeness to the situation and qualification studied might have been less likely to experience this potential source of bias. On one occasion a student within a group interview highlighted one such assumption that I may have held as I commenced my research. She reminded me "I remember you saying to me that you will change" and modification was a subsequent key theme in my theorisation. However, stability and change were found to be equally important.

To attempt to mitigate against insider bias, I discussed emerging analysis and theorisation with academic colleagues beyond the Foundation degree teaching team. I also presented lengthy extracts from my interviewees at an international conference where other academics were engaged in dialogue about my findings and the sense I made of them. Moreover, on numerous occasions I was surprised by my findings and they challenged a number of assumptions that I had at the beginning of my studies.

One example of this was that at the start of my study I had assumed that many of the students had decided to undertake Foundation degree study to improve their performance as teaching assistants. Interviewees suggested this was not a valid point of view.

3.11. Ethics

The research presented in this thesis adhered to University of York's ethical guidelines for educational research. An ethical audit was carried out before the commencement of data collection to establish the initial ethicality of the proposed research. The British Educational Research Association's *Revised Guidelines for educational Research* (BERA, 2004) were drawn upon as the study was designed, executed and written up. The research's aim and procedures were made clear to all the investigation's participants. All phases of data collection were overt and the study's intended audiences were clearly outlined to all of those who were involved in it. Invited participants were reassured that there was no compulsion to take part in the research and that they should do so freely. Students were also given full details of the nature of the research project, its projected outputs and the extent of the activity that they were being asked to commit to. This process was undertaken as part of a commitment to the principle of informed consent which as Angrosino (2012) outlines is one of the "most fundamental principles of ethical research" (p. 167).

Participants were offered the opportunity to request the study's final findings and had the right to veto any information that they are uncomfortable with. All the audio recordings that were generated for the study will also be destroyed after the completion of my thesis. Moreover, participants were periodically offered the right to withdraw from the research. Briefing sheets that were given to students before data collection activities commenced (Appendix B), letters of consent (Appendix C) and interview preambles (Appendices A and D) also reinforced the ethical principles of my investigation. Details of the research were also submitted to the Dean of Faculty where the research was undertaken. He reviewed the ethical implications of my research plans. The host university's ethics group also reviewed my request to conduct research with the Foundation degree students.

The methodological procedures adopted for this research raised specific ethical issues related to being an insider researcher (Bell, 2005; Kanuha, 2000). For insider

teacher researchers assuring informed consent is a particular issue. Can a university teacher ever be sure that all their student subjects have freely agreed to take part in the research without feeling duress due to their inequitable position in the learning hierarchy? Students may feel pressurised to take part for fear of upsetting their teacher and likely assessor. This was of particular concern as I commenced my research and was something that I contemplated throughout the research process. In relation to teacher-led research with children it has been suggested that because of the hierarchal relationship between the two "it may make it harder for children and school/students to decline to participate" (Brooks et al., 2014, p. 156). Whilst all of the participants in my own studies were adults, there was still a hierarchal teacher/student relationship in place. The positionality which flowed from teacher and student identities was therefore perceived to be a potential constraint on informed consent.

To counter such concerns, I strongly emphasised that students were not required to be involved in my research and as the investigation progressed I tried to monitor if any students looked uncomfortable with participation. This included monitoring for verbal and non-verbal behaviours that suggested that involvement in the research was not a welcomed activity. In an attempt to eradicate distortion that may have been a consequence of differing amounts of power that might be viewed to have existed between me and those that were studied, I also adopted Carspecken's (1996) suggestion that researchers should "establish supportive, non-authoritarian relationships with participants" (p. 37).

In defence of the research that I conducted, I would also suggest that through completion of this study the future learning experiences of students might be enhanced as a consequence of research informed teaching. No student expressed the view that they were uncomfortable with the study and many students expressed a keen interest in it. All the interviewees willingly offered their time outside sessions. Insider research was also a way of allowing me to conduct a piece of research with a group of learners and workers who are often ignored by policy makers and the academic community. Beneficence (Punch & Oancea, 2014) was therefore drawn upon as I rationalised my research focus and design. In a conference paper that I presented, I discussed some of the ethical dilemmas that I had reflected upon when undertaking research on students who I also taught (Smith, 2012). Reassuringly, a number of senior academics suggested that the potential benefits that future Foundation degree students might gain

from it could be used to justify my research activities. It was also suggested that I was helping a disempowered group to have a public voice.

No criminal or civil laws were transcended and consideration of interviewees' wellbeing was prioritised. Maleficence (Punch & Oancea, 2014) or the mitigation potential risks to participants' psychological health was also a continuing feature of my research. All participants were guaranteed confidentiality and that pseudonyms would be employed as I reported research findings. Specific issues of how to assure confidentiality for those who agreed to contribute to group interviews were also considered and addressed. Clear ground rules were set in briefings to students when they were called to take part in interviews. Preambles to interviews also stressed the need to respect the rights of others to confidentiality (see Appendices A and D). These procedures were undertaken to protect interviewees' privacy. "Ongoing ethical reflexivity" (Brooks et al., 2014, p. 3) was aspired to throughout my investigation.

3.12. Qualitative research, trustworthiness and assurance

Shenton (2004) has pointed out how qualitative research has sometimes been accused of facing greater difficulties than quantitative investigations in terms of assuring validity and reliability. Such arguments have led to questions about its trustworthiness. Shenton (2004) outlines how whilst some writers have attempted to address these issues of validity and reliability when offering a justification for the value of qualitative research (Silverman, 2001), increasingly qualitative researchers have employed an alternative set of concepts to assure the trustworthiness of their research. Guba's (1981) development of a set of conceptual labels is highlighted as having been widely adopted by qualitative researchers. Here it is suggested that trustworthiness should be assessed in terms of credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability.

Latterly Lincoln and Guba (1985) offered an expanded insight into the meaning of these concepts and suggested a number of strategies that qualitative researchers can employ as they strive to achieve them. The research that is discussed in this thesis adopted a number of these to enhance its credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability.

Credibility is defined in terms of whether others can have confidence in a piece of research, that is, its plausibility. Lincoln and Guba (1985) have suggested a number of

strategies to improve this aspect of qualitative research. I implemented four of these: prolonged engagement, triangulation, peer debriefing and member-checking. As outlined earlier in this chapter, data collection took place over several years and this was perceived to be a significant benefit of being a part-time student.

Triangulation was achieved by undertaking a variety of data collection techniques. Although individual and group interviews were primary sources used to collect data, observation and analysis of programme-related documentation as supplementary contextualising data were drawn upon in an attempt to confirm and challenge emerging themes and theories. Peer debriefing was also undertaken when I presented a paper for discussion at an international conference which was largely attended by action researchers. Here I received useful and challenging feedback on the tentative analysis that I had developed at this point. The methodology I had employed was also the subject of some useful discussion. Lincoln and Guba (1985) maintain that peer briefing:

> is a process of exposing oneself to a disinterested peer in a manner paralleling an analytical sessions and for the purpose of exploring aspects of the inquiry that might otherwise remain only implicit within the inquirer's mind. (p. 30)

A form of member-checking was attempted by conducting individual interviews after group ones had been conducted. These focused upon gaining further data from Foundation degree students to confirm and contest findings.

Transferability is the notion that the research can potentially be applied to other contexts and groups. Lincoln and Guba (1985) have claimed that detailed analysis and description is central to achieving this quality. Thick description is viewed as a way that can allow others to establish if a researcher's explanations can be applied at other points in time, in different contexts and with differing research participants. The research presented here aimed to provide such description through its collection of detailed accounts over a relatively long period of time. Expansive quotes from students' interviews have been presented in chapters four, five and six to provide thick description. It is also maintained that the model outlined in chapter eight might be useful to other researchers who are undertaking investigations with mature students on non-Foundation degree programmes in a range of contexts.

At the heart of Lincoln and Guba's (1985) concept of dependability is the notion that others should be in a position to follow a similar research design. To generate such a status it is recommended that a clear audit trail of the processes involved in a piece

of research is presented. This audit should include issues related to research design, data collection, sampling, theoretical influences, data analysis, presentation of findings and the rationale for each of these. This chapter specifically, but also the justifications that are discussed throughout this thesis, is provided to improve the dependability of my study. Such discussion has aspired to provide an account that could potentially be followed by others.

Confirmability involves illustrating how a study reflects participants' concerns and has not been constructed in terms of the researcher's biases and preferences. It is maintained that the audit trail and discussions that have been presented in this chapter seek to illustrate the primacy that was given to allowing the research to be shaped by those it studied. This included adopting semi-structured interviewing that allowed space for participants to set the research agenda. Reviewing some of the interview findings against programme-related documentation such as National Student Survey findings was also undertaken as a means to check for bias. There was also a commitment to reflexivity throughout the research process and a high level of awareness the impact that a researcher's presumptions and biases can have on a study. Academic colleagues at the university where I worked also offered opinions on emerging analysis and presented challenging questions. Questioning from other academic colleagues at the international conference I presented at also encouraged further reflexivity. However in line with the interpretivist tradition there was a recognition that research is a co-construction between participants and researchers, and that full objectivity could not be obtained. Minimising bias was nevertheless viewed as being possible.

3.13. Chapter summary

This chapter has provided a discussion of the methodology that was adopted for the study that is presented in this thesis. It has discussed the theoretical position adopted, research strategy employed and methods of data collection undertaken. The way that participants were selected and ethical issues are also examined. Moreover, data analysis procedures and attempts to assure trustworthiness are documented. The reasons for the choices that I made are also provided.

4. DECIDING TO BECOME A STUDENT: MOTIVES AND CIRCUMSTANCES

4.1. Introduction

The decisions about the form of higher education that students choose to undertake can have a significant impact on their experiences and opportunities (Greenback, 2007). This is the case both in relation to their immediate learning journey (Tierney & Slack, 2005), and beyond their involvement in formal academic study. The opening results chapter of this thesis explores the factors and circumstances that students' identified as having informed their decision to undertake Foundation degree study. It therefore addresses the first of my three central research questions: What motives and circumstances influence teaching assistants' decisions when they decide to undertake a work-related Foundation degree programme?

Academic literature that provides a detailed explanation of teaching assistants' reasons for deciding to become a Foundation degree student is absent from the published research. De Oliveira Pires (2009) identified a lack of research more generally into why adults decide to access education and training. She explains that the reasons why adults decide to participate in formal learning are multifaceted and open to modification, but ". . . seldom known in depth" (p. 131). In this context, it is not surprising that there is equally limited research on why students choose to enrol for Foundation degree study; and that no detailed explorations have been widely published on the motivations teaching assistants have for undertaking such programmes of study. Careful consideration of this issue in this chapter should consequently add to academic understanding of students' experiences of Foundation degree study and teaching assistants' experiences of it.

The data outlined in this chapter was primarily gained from 12 individual and eight group interviews that were conducted. It also draws upon small amounts of data that were gained from the participant observations. Smaller amounts of supporting documentary material were also drawn upon.

4.2. An initial focus on motives and circumstances

The importance of gathering data on the motives and circumstances that had led the Foundation degree students to enrol for their present studies surfaced in my first phase of formal data collection, when a number of Foundation degree classes were observed. Here I became increasingly aware of the substantial hardship that some students faced as they endeavoured to complete their studies. I was struck by the Foundation degree students' resilience as they tried to balance the often competing demands that flowed from their present employment, their studies and often their roles within the family. Comprehending why this group of students would actively choose to place themselves in a situation where they would often experience a set of challenging, and sometimes contradictory, commitments therefore became one of this investigation's central concerns. Why would a group of students who were presented with numerous and rival calls for their time, choose to increase the complexity of their lives further by opting to undertake a work-related programme of higher education? The decision to explore this issue was further strengthened as a result of a student comment:

> I haven't met anyone on this course doing it for the right reason, to be a better TA. I always wanted to do a degree you know and wanted to improve my life and this was the quickest, fastest and only way of getting a degree. I think it's the same for most of us. We all have an ulterior motive. (Brenda, a primary school Higher Level Teaching Assistant and second year student in one evening class)

This I found to be an extremely interesting remark, and in some ways, an unexpected one. It challenged a core assumption that the designers of the Foundation degree had articulated in the programme's validation documentation, which on reflection, I had tacitly accepted; that teaching assistants would be attracted by a Foundation degree connected to their employment as it would enable them to undertake increasingly complex roles in schools. In validation documents, New Labour's policy of School Workforce Remodelling was identified as producing a market for a programme of study that would that would meet the needs of schools to up-skill the teaching assistant workforce. Only two interviewees overtly identified skill acquisition as a primary reason for Foundation degree study. Eleanor explained:

> To be honest with you, at the beginning it was just to be a really well qualified TA. Yes that was just to be a well-qualified teaching assistant that was good at her job. Erm to be a better TA and get more skills. (Individual interview response)

Ashleigh outlined:

> My vision is to carry on with being a TA and being better. If things change around at school and if my head goes and should my role diminish then I might, but this is not the plan at the moment. It was not about career. For me coming here was not a career journey for me. As I said earlier, I am really happy with what I do and it fits nicely with other things and the hours suit me ideal and fit in with my family. (Individual interview response)

These accounts were, however, very much a minority point of view. Students' accounts concerning their initial decisions to access Foundation degree study did not prioritise a perceived need to remedy a work-related skills deficit. This finding challenged Tierney and Slack's (2005) claim that such students are often "pushed" towards Foundation degrees by a need for professional development and a sense of increased professionalism in their present occupational roles. Other "ulterior motives" were more commonly cited as being the key motivation for participation. These often focussed upon accessing an opportunity to move away from a present occupational position of being a teaching assistant, as well as issues related to personal conceptions of self and practicality. Many students offered more than one reason for study when probed about their motives for Foundation degree study.

4.3. General overview of the reasons for deciding to enrol on a work-related Foundation degree

The data analysis of the Foundation degree students' accounts of their reasons for beginning study uncovered four major themes: (1) future transformation of occupational role and identity; (2) positive modification of personal self not directly related to occupational position; (3) maintenance of established roles and identities and (4) flexibility around entry requirements. Each of these themes seemed to be influenced by shared and differentiated notions of past, present and anticipated future identities.

There was a sense that most of the learners primarily defined their rationale for study in terms of establishing an opportunity for role and identity revision, in a way that seemed achievable. Foundation degree study was often viewed as being the accessible space where "identity work" (Young, 2006, p. 3) could be undertaken. This supports Britton and Baxter's (1999) general finding that: "Becoming a mature student can . . . be understood as part of the continuous process of identity construction" (p.

180). For student-mothers who made up the vast majority of the Foundation degree cohorts, this however did not generally include major alteration in the domestic sphere.

The opening results chapter of this thesis therefore begins to illustrate the ways that students' experiences of Foundation degree study might be viewed as being structured by their attempts to maintain existing roles and identities, whist they sought a future change of these. Students' accounts suggested that they were aware that this process occurs within what Harris and Brooks (1998) have identified as "situational constraints" (p. 226) related to occupational position, gender and differential notions of parenthood. Students' rationales for study were, therefore framed within the particular social circumstances, and the roles that they were expected to play beyond being a student. One key finding of my research was that teaching assistants who apply for Foundation degrees should not necessarily be viewed as a homogeneous group and their engagement with such programmes structures their reflections. There were however similarities in a number of students' accounts. These were inevitably nuanced by social location and related conceptions of self.

4.4. Theme one: Transformation of future occupational role and identity

Moving away from present occupational position was a theme that dominated individual and group interviews. Ten students mentioned this in their individual interviews and it was a feature in all of the group interviews that were conducted. Career switching was frequently linked to both role and identity modification. In individual and group interviews, potential future career change was often the first reason that students discussed when articulating their motivation for study. The students described a range of "pull" and "push" factors (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002) that had encouraged them to seek a change of career. Students frequently highlighted the "pull" of the expected benefits that a new career would offer terms of status (social identity) and other extrinsic rewards; such as enhanced pay and conditions. Alongside, this there was a strong motivation amongst the vast majority of the students to avoid the occupational disadvantages that they associated with being a teaching assistant.

4.4.1. The pull of a new occupational role

The vast majority of the Foundation degree students, at least at the start of the programme defined their motivation to undertake Foundation degree study in terms of a "journey" towards a career as a qualified teacher within a primary school setting. Nine of the investigation's individual interviewees cited this reason. It was also a dominant theme in discussions in all of the group interviews. For example, Claire stated that she had decided to take up her studies as they would ultimately allow her to become a "proper teacher". Rosie expressed this in the following way:

> I am hoping in five years' time I will have achieved what I set out to do and be teaching in a primary setting. This is what I have been aiming for since starting my studying. (Group interview response)

Describing how acquiring the status of being a teacher was a critical end goal, Jennifer also outlined:

> I've worked with children on a voluntary basis for years and years and we decided to relocate back to Old City last September well August/September time and got a TA job after helping out a bit. Erm which prompted a bit of a change for me erm career wise erm I'd always wanted to be a teacher and erm yes so this is part of a course to become a teacher and this is why erm I'm on the course. I want my name on the door. The dream is to get there. (Group interview response)

Similarly, Jo outlined: "I hope to be in a better paid teacher's job making a difference to other people's lives" (group interview response). Rachel also outlined: "Coming to the Fd was mainly about getting stable teaching job which I could enjoy and which will help me to give my children things, material things, holidays and quality time" (group interview response).

The discovery that the vast majority of students had decided to access a Foundation degree in order to eventually become a qualified primary school teacher was also apparent in programme documents that recorded the Head of Programmes' interviews with potential students. All potential students were required to attend an interview with the Head of Programme after submitting a formal application form. This was viewed as an opportunity to assess potential students' suitability for the programme. Reasons why they had decided to apply for the Foundation degree as recorded by the Head of Programme on interview record sheets (see Table 4.1).

Table 4.1: Recorded reasons for deciding to undertake the Foundation degree by year of admission

Year	Number citing a desire to become a qualified primary school teacher	Percentage of cohort
2008-2009	19 out of 26	73%
2009-2010	18 out of 27	67%
2010-2011	10 out of 23	43%
2011-2012	17 out of 23	74%

(Source: Statistics taken from interview sheets completed by the Head of Programme at students' "readiness for study" interview - all enrolled students in each year group are included)

For those students with an ambition to enter the teaching profession, this goal seemed to be largely derived from a number of extrinsic rewards that "being" a teacher was viewed to convey. "We [*teaching* assistants] get paid peanuts and a teachers' salary is very attractive compared to what we get", was Jan's response when she was asked about why she aspired to become a teacher, disclosed in an individual interview. When ambitions to become a qualified teacher were discussed by some students, salary levels were sometimes linked to esteem. In her individual interview, Davina outlined:

> don't obviously get the same pay and respect from children, parents and society in general. (Individual interview response)

Dawn likewise outlined:

> I hope in five years' time I will be a fully qualified class teacher inspiring many children to learn. As you know, I am planning lessons now and teaching regularly so I look forward to being paid more and also having the respect that qualified teachers get. (Individual interview response)

The possibilities that Foundation degree study offered in terms of providing an accessible pathway to a career in primary school teaching was evident in many of the accounts that were captured from both female and male students. Yet, the small number of male teaching assistants who were enrolled on the programme (two in total) outlined that this they saw this as a starting point and that their ultimate career goal was school headship. These students claimed that they had previously enjoyed successful careers outside education in sports related occupations. In relation to my questioning about why he had come on the Foundation degree Tom explained:

A couple of reasons really. Firstly I was released from my job which I wasn't enjoying. I was in window film. You see it everywhere, but you don't know what it is. I did that for seven or eight years after being a pro cricketer for ten, but I'd done a lot of coaching with kids and my father's partner is a retired primary school head teacher and she was the one who said have you thought about while you're looking for a job volunteering in school and erm I jumped at the chance because it's always appealed to me and it was the kind of thing I wondered about and I wondered about it more because I'd coached kids here and New Zealand for years. I get on with them and they get on with me so let's have a go. I went straight into a school in Farforth and there was a young lad in his late twenties now who'd gone the same route as me. So he basically spoke to me, about this route into teaching and that gave me a desire to come on the course. To be honest I hadn't spoken to him prior to it, especially a male, I think and might have thought twice and think what is all this HE lark all about.

Teaching was definitely the ambition, yeah I couldn't see myself as just being support staff. It wouldn't fit with my ideal. My ideal is to lead the class. I even enjoy it now. At the moment we've had a term without an intervention programme and it kills me just supporting in class. Go do that display. Go do that photocopy. Go do that. It's not me really that. It's something I know I've got to do to get into it [teaching] and I'm sure that displays are something that will do me good but I just want to lead and mould the kids. To be the teacher as I can do it, it's sort of more than that as I see myself as being a head. It's something I feel I could really do and motivated by. (Individual interview response)

Tom's account reflects those documented in the work of others, which have led to the suggestion that males are more likely to view primary school teaching as a means to gain eventual access to higher status managerial roles (Skelton, 2003). Future headship was absent from interviews with female Foundation degree students. This difference could indicate that imagined notions of future identity change were, to some extent, structured by gendered notions of future self.

The Foundation degree students' ambitions of occupational change were also reflective of what has been found amongst mature students as a whole. In their investigation of eighteen female mature students at an Australian university, O'Shea and Stone (2011) found that these students' initial motivations to study were dominated by a hope of accessing future career progression. Irrespective of their employment status, these students anticipated that their studies would provide improved future employment-related opportunities. Specifically, she asserted that those in intermediate level roles, such as assistant nurses, return to study for occupational advancement.

4.4.2. The push of expanding roles and responsibilities

For those in paid employment, the decision to seek career and identity transition was frequently described as having been augmented by their experiences of role expansion within their workplaces. Two thirds of individual interviewees suggested that their desire for career change and their Foundation degree enrolment was to some extent related to changes to their teaching assistant roles. A number claimed that that they had encountered significant role modification throughout their time as teaching assistants. There was a strongly held belief amongst many learners, that they had experienced what others have described as a process of "role stretch" and "role creep" (Warhurst, Nickson, Commander & Gilbert, 2014, p. 159). Cheryl's thoughts on this provided an account that typified this viewpoint:

> Well, I am responsible for a lot more that I was when I started. I would say it has changed a lot. I was doing little jobs for quite a while and now I feel like I taken on so many different responsibilities. (Group interview response)

Eleanor's account of the workplace change that she had experienced provided another example of this narrative:

> It's completely different now, I used to be more of a teachers' support, getting resources ready in the classroom, doing displays and doing admin duties. I used to support a small group in numeracy, but now it's far more involved and I'm a lot more involved in the children's learning. The young children think of me as just another teacher, which I'm not surprised as it's confusing for them who is who. The younger ones just don't know. (Individual interview response)

As part of their teaching assistant roles, interviewees claimed that they were involved in whole class teaching, lesson preparation, behaviour management (especially in relation to emotional literacy), parental communications, pastoral work, interventions and one to one support with children who were defined as having a special or additional need. Within a majority of the explanations provided in individual interviews, there was a powerful view that when the students were performing their workplace roles, they were co-educators as opposed to support workers. This notion was also regularly articulated by students in group interviews. The following explanations were typical of a co-educator narrative:

> It [*being a teaching assistant*] has changed. When I started, we only got involved in supporting teachers through doing photocopying, mounting and reading. It then started that we were supporting the lower ability children outside class. Nowadays,

we are sort of mini teachers. You have to assess, teach and you are assessed on whether you are achieving your goals. In comparison to when I started twelve years ago being a teaching assistant has changed a lot. (Gill's group interview response)

Things have changed massively in my time. We used to not to be able to go in the staffroom. We had our own little room. I'm being serious. All that's changed now as we've took on a lot more. You now do all sorts of things that really only teachers used to do. (Angela's group interview response)

It's changed. I've gone from photocopying and displays and now it's a lot more hands on learning with the children. I'm more accountable for learning than I was and I have to carry out assessments of the children who I care for, which before the teachers would have done. We're now more like a team. (Rosie's group interview response)

This finding was consistent with Webb and Vulliamy's (2006) claim that English teaching assistants are routinely expected to act as "assistant teachers" (p. 85). Yet the impact that these changes can have on how such workers view themselves is not explored in their investigation or that of many others (Bailey, 2007; Edmond, 2003; Groom, 2006). Edmond (2010) has claimed that teaching assistants on Foundation degrees who have experienced role extension have a notion of being associate professionals (Edmond, 2010; Edmond & Hayler, 2013). Whether this role and identity change has any impact on initial decisions about Foundation degree participation is not, unfortunately, assessed in detail in published academic work on Foundation degree study.

For a number of students who were interviewed, the role and identity changes that they had experienced within their workplaces was regarded as having had an influence on their decision to enter Foundation degree study. Five students in their interviews claimed the role modification that they had experienced in their work had been intrinsically satisfying in that it had offered increased direct involvement in teaching, learning and pastorally related activities. This experience had encouraged some of them to pursue further study as a way of gaining access to a career in teaching or obtain access to other higher status school-based roles; such as behaviour managers or learning mentors.

I've got more involved in teaching and I've loved it. I now teach one day a week already and really enjoy it and erm I can do it as well as some of the teachers and it started me thinking more about teaching. I applied for the primary course, but didn't get an interview. They have loads of applicants and I didn't have the right qualifications and then my mum saw this and said why don't you do this. It seemed

ideal and now I think it was a better route for me at least. (Mel's group interview response)

This emphasis was equally evident in the following account:

Jess: I don't know, I just want to be a teacher. I got the job that I'm doing as a teaching assistant which is great, but don't want to do it forever. I want to move on. I want to keep progressing. I love my school and the teaching and interventions I do and have found something that I want to do.

Paul: What is that?

Jess: Teaching. I really like taking a group and helping the children learn. I just love it really and more and you can't take on more things as a TA you're not allowed. I have seen a range of behaviours on supply in secondary and behaviour units and the more mainstream and would like to work with challenging kids and make a difference. It has motivated me to go on to teach, which is the right place for me and my future career. (Individual interview response)

Georgina made a similar point in response to a question about her motivations for Foundation degree study and provided an equivalent response that also illustrated her commitment to becoming a qualified teacher.

Paul: Why did you enrol for the Foundation degree?

Georgina: Lots of reasons to be honest. Do you want me to be honest with you?

Paul: That would be good.

Georgina: They've been lots of changes at my school and in my role in the last few years that have made me want a bigger classroom role.

Paul: Such as?

Georgina: Getting into teaching if I'm honest. I have really enjoyed working with the children on literacy and phonics. I know it will take me years and I need my maths. I've being sitting in with the sixth-formers [*in her local secondary school where her daughter was a pupil*].

Paul: Brave.

Georgina: It was quite strange at first. Georgina's mum in the class. Can't believe how they behave and treat the teacher. (Individual interview response)

There were, however, a number of other negative consequences that were viewed to have accompanied the modification of teaching assistants' roles that had motivated career change and consequently Foundation degree study. This issue was identified by

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a third of those individually interviewed, even if they had found their involvement in more complex workplace activities intrinsically motivating. It was also mentioned in five group interviews. One consequence of this has been that some teaching assistants have been propelled to seek career change which was linked to their decision to access Foundation degree provision. Joan's account provided an example of this:

> I feel really valued by the class teacher, who I work with, but not those at the top of the school. I do far more than my hours continually as they don't give anything for planning, to do your resource preparation or feedback in what you've seen. They believe you'll just do it outside. I don't see being a teaching assistant moving. I think that we'll just get more and more to do but remain the same. That's why I'm doing this. So yes the changes did have an influence on why I came to university. (Group interview response)

Relatedly, Sonia offered the following response:

> I intended to use my return to study to help me advance my career. I enjoyed doing the job [*being a teaching assistant*] but I didn't think it would get me anywhere if I continued as I was. I feel like a little hamster running as quick as I can and not achieving that much. (Group interview response)

In group interview based discussions, Sara and Cara also correspondingly emphasised that changes to their roles had been accompanied with an increased workload.

> Sarah: I've been taken advantage of for the amount of extra work that I've taken on.

> Cara: I'm pretty similar. I guess that's just how it goes. I'm part-time but I must admit on the days that I'm due to finish at lunch time I always end up working later.

Jennifer offered a comparable account when she explained:

> I'm just a general teaching assistant. Yeah though I seem to, because we're in a real small setting erm like today I've taken the Foundation Stage children all day today and I've got them tomorrow and Tuesday, so I'm to be honest cheap cover most of the time. It's very annoying sometimes. I've just got to live with it until I get to where else I want to be. It does make you fed up when you actually think about what you do. You do sometimes think it's not long-term. Coming on the course was my tunnel. (Group interview response)

In a class where students were required to reflect on School Workforce Remodelling, there was a general agreement when one student suggested that while this process had reduced pressures on teachers, it had increased theirs and reduced their ability to achieve a positive work-life balance. This was greeted with almost universal agreement. In a group interview, Liz supported this when she explained:

I also supervise children in the breaks. I am responsible for making sure the children play safely. I feel confident with my responsibilities and I believe that because everyone feels confident that I can do the job they more easily rely on me to do things and it frees the teachers up so they can get on with other responsibilities that they have. It relieves them and makes their job achievable. It's been bad for us as we're now expected to do all sorts of thing which is a challenge to say the least, but we do it to the best of our abilities. (Group interview response)

Group interviews and class discussions about the impact of School Workforce Remodelling highlighted how teaching assistants were now routinely taking work home and working through their breaks and lunches. Jenny explained:

When I started [*as a teaching assistant*] you didn't have that much responsibility. You could just leave and forget about school. Now there always seems something to think about and do. It is really difficult to switch off from it. (Group interview response)

In one student's explanation of her motivations to access study, the Foundation degree was viewed as a way that she could manage what she believed was an inequitable and exploitative workload. Jean explained, to my surprise, how her enrolment on to the Foundation degree was a creative way of handling the undesirable expectations from her employer:

It was a good excuse for me to stop taking work home. I said to my supervisor look I'm sorry I'm doing this course, I won't be able to do all the things I've done on a night and she was OK with that and because I stopped doing that so have my colleagues so it was a good excuse for not taking home all the extra work that we used to do on a night and at weekends. (Group interview response)

The lack of extrinsic rewards that had been conveyed for extended workloads was a feature of most individual and group interviews. It was also documented in classroom observation when students' were observed reflecting on their workplace roles. Low levels of pay, a lack of permanency in contracts of employment and low status levels were regularly cited as a source of substantial irritation and a partial impetus for the career switching that Foundation degree study presented. This issue was also mentioned in just under half of individual and five group interviews. Nadia in one interview outlined:

My job has changed dramatically since I started in 2003. I used to work with children by listening to their reading. During lessons I would sit with the lower ability groups and drift from table to table to support and copied teachers' planning

and resources. My role has certainly developed since those days, although my job description and my pay has certainly hasn't. You might as well try to teach, as you are sort of doing it anyway. I don't think the wages will ever improve. The only way is to move on. (Group interview response which produced vigorous nodding in agreement from other students)

Karen's and Sammy's explanations also emphasised how the perceived inadequacies of their workplace experiences had been a factor in "pushing" them towards their entry to university study.

> Karen: I guess that's what I was looking for, a chance to move on to higher jobs which can offer me more than being a TA.
>
> Sammy: I enjoy my role but I don't always feel satisfied. I would like to get my degree and to be qualified. I feel like I am not being challenged and I would definitely like to try something that has more of challenge and greater rewards.
>
> Paul: Was this linked to deciding to do the Fd?
>
> Sammy: Yes in a way. As a TA there are a lot of expectations, but not as many rewards other than doing it for the children. Coming here was I suppose about change and getting some options for the future. (Group interview response)

In another group interview, Mel and Erin responded to my questioning about the changing roles and expectations around the teaching assistant role by not only expressing concern about levels of teaching assistant pay, but also the lack of social prestige and positive occupational identity that they perceived to have accompanied this. This viewpoint was portrayed as being in stark contrast to the relative esteem that a qualified teaching role offered.

> Mel: It has been a good thing for us [*role extension*]. Yeah I've been given more opportunity to go down the SEN route. I've been involved in case meetings and things like that so it's opened that route up. I think that it's been a good thing for us, but it's still not highly thought of as it should be and the pay is still very poor for what you do. You do it for the kids. You wouldn't do it for the money. Tesco erm pays more [*laughs*].
>
> Erin: I think that it's more than it was.
>
> Mel: Yeah I agree definitely, but I still think that people who aren't involved in school life don't appreciate how much a TA does. They think you are just a helper really a nobody.

Erin: Yeah a mum's helper. People who aren't in education think that's what only what we do. Senior managers see us as ten a penny and someone will always do it. (Group interview response)

In another group interview, Mary likewise, explained:

I wanted to do something for me and that's it really and I've fallen into a job [teaching] that I love and I want to continue and support myself and have a career more than a TA. Not being snobbish or anything and no disrespect to anyone on the course but I think I can do more than that. (First year student and general teaching assistant)

The near universal negative reaction that was evident in a couple of observed classes, when New Labour's drive to recruit "low achieving" students to become teaching assistant apprentices was debated, also offered evidence of a belief that being a teaching assistant was viewed as offering a negative social identity (Ashworth & Mael, 1989). This was discussed in a module entitled *Changing Contexts, Roles and Responsibilities*. Christina summed up these feelings in a later individual interview when suggesting that the Government's proposals gave the impression that "anybody could do the job, even a kid. It really devalues the role in my eyes. TAs always seems to be looked down on. It's something undesirable". This type of account echoed Walters' (2000) finding that one of the prompts for mature students' entry into higher education is dissatisfaction with existing career status and a related lack of positive self-concept. Certainly, many of the accounts captured during my investigation stressed a sense of frustration with the role, status and identity that being a teaching assistant provided. The importance of occupation in defining identity has been noted by Christiansen (1999) who explained how:

. . . occupations are key not just to being a person, but to being a *particular* person, and thus creating and maintaining an identity. Occupations come together within the contexts of our relationships with others to provide us with a sense of purpose and structure in our day-to-day activities, as well as over time. When we build our identities through occupations, we provide ourselves with the contexts for creating meaningful lives. (p. 547)

For a number of the experienced salaried teaching assistants who participated in this study, the expansion of their workplace roles had generated what they viewed as a paradoxical situation. This was because, although role modification or "creep" (Warhurst et al., 2014) had been appreciated in terms of the increased intrinsic job satisfaction it had produced, it was also a source of frustration and resentment for

many. Although they had received enhanced intrinsic satisfaction from being involved in work traditionally undertaken by teachers, the lack of extrinsic rewards that had accompanied this had produced a rejection of their present role.

For many of the learners in paid employment as teaching assistants, these circumstances seemed to be producing a heightened feeling that their present occupational roles/identities were temporary, and ones that they aspired to transcend. These students' decision to seek entry to Foundation degree study consequently needs to be partially comprehended within the context of their workplace experiences as teaching assistants.

Merrill (2014) has similarly found that amongst female adult students with working class backgrounds, the wish to modify existing aspects of their working lives was a strong "pull" factor in influencing their decision to seek entry to higher education. It has also been argued that one of the reasons teaching assistants seek Foundation degree study is to access a career in teaching having experienced "the dramatic evolution of paraprofessional roles" and an accompanying "artificial glass ceiling" on their salaries (Penketh & Goddard, 2008, p. 324). In this scenario, teaching can be an attractive option and higher education is a route to this goal. Some of those who participated in my research echoed this position, but suggested that entry to teaching was about identity change, as well as salary increase.

4.4.3. Volunteers and secondary school-based teaching assistants

Amongst the interviewees sampled for my research, there were a very small number of students who were not in paid employment as teaching assistants in a primary school. These fell into two distinct categories: 1) unpaid volunteer teaching assistants who carried out these duties in their children's primary schools and 2) teaching assistants in paid employment secondary schools (see Table 4.2. All the volunteer students and their secondary peers self-funded their tuition fees, in common with their paid primary school colleagues. A very small number of the latter had received financial support from their employers to buy books, but not tuition fees.

Table 4.2: Employment status of students who were sampled for both individual and group interviews

Paid employment as a Higher Level Teaching Assistant in primary	14
Paid employment as a teaching assistant in primary	36
Paid employment as a teaching assistant in secondary	3
Unpaid volunteer teaching assistant in primary	3

Students who were volunteers in primary school settings or in paid roles in secondary schools offered slightly differing accounts of the ways that their school-based experiences had influenced their employment-related motivations for study. For those students who did not presently hold a paid post as a teaching assistant but who were engaged as unpaid volunteers in schools, teaching was generally a slightly longer-term career goal unlike many of their paid primary peers. This was the case for two of the three volunteers who took part in interviews. All of those who were questioned from this small group of students indicated that their immediate ambitions revolved around securing paid employment as a teaching assistant. Debra in her individual interview explained: **"**I had really enjoyed being a parent helper and I thought this would help if a job opportunity was on offer erm so I could snatch it".

In contrast to volunteer and paid primary school-based teaching assistants that I encountered, students who were employed in secondary schools did not generally link their enrolment to an eventual acquisition of Qualified Teacher Status and the perceived economic and social returns this might facilitate. The small number of secondary school-based teaching assistants who were interviewed did however, stress that they intended to use their studies to move away from being a teaching assistant. For this group of students, there was also a sense that being a teaching assistant was a temporary state and not a long-term role/identity that they should aspire to.

The secondary school teaching assistants were generally aware of the restrictions that the programme presented in terms of gaining access to secondary school teaching. The Foundation degree was not a route to secondary teaching as it did not provide the

subject specialism that the Department of Education required for entry to study for a secondary school focused Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE). Only one of the secondary school-based students claimed that she was aiming to become a qualified teacher. She recognised that her aspiration would be likely to involve her moving to a job in a primary school.

> I want to be a language teacher, teaching French ideally in secondary. I am doing an OU degree but it will take years. I have thought about college [*post-sixteen teaching*] but I'll probably have to do primary as I want to teach in a school. People have said it's possible to get into secondary later. (Kirsten, individual interview response)

Secondary school-based students were a small minority of those enrolled on the Foundation degree (see Table 4.3).

Table 4.3: Total number of students enrolled on the start of Foundation degree by school sector

Year of enrolment	Primary	Secondary
2008-2009	24 (92%)	2 (8%)
2009-2010	25 (93%)	2 (7%)
2010-2011	21 (91%)	2 (9%)
2011-2012	22 (96%)	1 (4%)

(Source: Central university data on Foundation degree enrolment statistics)

When I asked a couple of students about the lack of secondary school teaching assistants on the Foundation degree, they suggested the programme was not appealing to many of their colleagues. This lack of enthusiasm was partly because their fellow teaching assistants believed that "it didn't lead anywhere", as it did not facilitate a career in teaching and the benefits this could provide.

Both paid secondary school teaching assistants and unpaid primary based volunteers' motivations for study, like their paid primary school counterparts, offered accounts that were in line with Kay and Sundaraj's (2004) earlier finding that career change is a major motivator for older higher education students. The findings presented here, however, develop this analysis by illuminating how for some of these students, motivation is also defined in terms of the identity modification that occupational change might potentially provide. In certain respects, Foundation degree

study might be regarded as often being a pitch for identity modification through occupational change as well as material improvement.

4.4.4. The influence of significant others in the workplace

All those who were individually interviewed revealed how individuals, both inside and outside their workplaces, had to some extent encouraged them to return to study. This influence was also mentioned in the majority of group interviews. Head teachers, Special Educational Needs Co-ordinators (SENCOs), classroom teachers and teaching assistants were identified as having counselled students to strive for a higher status career pathway, such as entry to teaching. Foundation degree study had been the route adopted to accomplish this. These accounts indicated that the interventions of these significant others (Mead & Mind, 1934) had provided a significant stimulus for a return to study.

Individuals within their workplaces were more frequently cited as offering sources of encouragement, rather than partners and non-school based friends. Only three students mentioned people outside work as having prompted them to return to study. Head teachers were cited, in five individual and four group interviews, as encouraging students to undertake Foundation degree study. In an individual interview that I conducted with Jess, she explained the way that this had occurred:

> Jess: Basically because my head teacher came to me with a leaflet and said this looks good and I think you should do it and I was like oh OK it's a way into teaching. Because when I started where I'm working now I did supply work as a teaching assistant and built up and it because appeared. And because we'd had two students from here erm so we started getting that information from here and so she said that I think it would be a good route in, so I applied and erm here I am.

> Paul: How did it make you feel?

> Jess: I felt like a door had been opened, to be honest. Because it was a bit because I'd got to a certain point and I didn't know where to go next.

> Paul: How old were you then?

> Jess: Twenty one, cause as far as I knew to go to university you had to have your A levels and then go and do a three year degree. I wouldn't, I mean I wouldn't have known unless had brought the leaflet to me, but this is like a perfect route for me because I can keep working and do the thing that I want to do. She's a very experienced head teacher and knows her way round things.

Ruth also confirmed this influence in another interview.

Paul: Why did you initially enrol?

Jenna: Right. I was told about it by my head teacher when it had been posted to school. She knew that I wanted to expand my career and I was working as an HLTA [*Higher Level Teaching Assistant*]. I'd spoken about doing degrees in the past and she gave me her full support. She is really good with me and to be fair has been while I've been here giving me time off to get here. I am really lucky she gives me PPA [*Planning, Preparation and Assessment*] time to do my assignments. She seems to think I can make it as a teacher. I know I'm lucky as some of the other girls' heads aren't interested and don't even know what they're doing and don't give them any time off. (Group interview response)

Three students (all based in primary schools) had been informed by their heads that once they had gained a full degree their schools would train them to become teachers via a Graduate Teacher programme. Debbie and first year student outlined:

My head encouraged me to do it. She said that once I'm qualified she will get me through a GTP [*Graduate Teacher Programme*]. She's been very supportive and said that if I do it she will find me a job at the school. Which will be great if I can do it that way. We are going to look at GTP. The teacher that I work with who is an Associate Head is really encouraging. She says that we nearly do the same job in the classroom, but I get paid at HLTA [*Higher Level Teaching* Assistant] rate and she an Associate Head. It's annoying. It will be good to get the same salary eventually. I don't really want to do PGCE and give up my job. (Group interview response)

Head teachers' suggestions that a student should undertake the programme were not always initially perceived positively; at least when they originally recommended it. One student informed me how she had reluctantly enrolled for the programme under pressure from her head teacher. Kerry in one group interview outlined how she had reluctantly applied for the programme after her head teacher had "strongly encouraged" her to do so, but how this had ultimately been beneficial. She outlined:

I was sort of pushed into a Foundation degree by my head. The head showed me the leaflet when it came to school and said I think you should consider this. It would help you and us, especially the literacy.

Two students in their individual interviews outlined how their head teachers' support had been connected to their school's commitment to common professional development and external assessment of this. These interviewees claimed that an emphasis on improved performance was behind their head's motivations. In an individual interview, Julia highlighted how her head had encouraged her to do the

programme when she raised it, because it helped towards the school meeting its current action plan.

> Paul: Did anyone encourage you to start the course?
>
> Julia: Well I looked at it when my head spoke to me and he said and I said would he'd back it and he said yeah of course he would as it ticks the boxes for CPD and for the school action plan. So he was quite chuffed about that and was very supportive.

Although the majority of students did not identify their head teachers as a significant source of encouragement, to a certain extent, all of the students' entry to the programme was partially determined by sponsorship from head teachers. All the students were required to submit letters of support from their heads with their application to join the Foundation degree. In part, this requirement had been implemented as a way of securing a guarantee from the students' heads that they would provide access to opportunities where students could undertake a series of work-based tasks. These were a core part of the Foundation degree programme. Hence head teachers were, in key respects gatekeepers (Homan, 2001) to accessing the Foundation degree, and they had the power to enable or obstruct the students' ambitions.

Other professionals who the students worked alongside in schools, notably classroom teachers and Special Educational Needs Co-ordinators (SENCOs), were also identified as being a source of inspiration that had emboldened them to pursue their academic hopes. These were highlighted in a third of individual interviews, and three out of the eight group interviews also made reference to such individuals. In one group interview, this influence was clear.

> Julie: Well I'd done NVQ3 and it was too easy and it wasn't challenging me enough. I was a bit stale and I needed to push myself a little bit more so we had someone coming doing the GTP at school and one of the teachers said oh why don't you have a go at it [*teaching*]. I did a lot of investigation and they wouldn't accept the course that I'd already done because it was too long ago and not the right level so I decided to come to this. She really encouraged me and said I know what you can do in the classroom. You'd should try it. You'd be a great teacher. Go for it.

The prompt that existing workplaces, and others within these, can have on mature students' participation in higher education has not however been substantially explored in previous research. The findings documented in this thesis indicate that certainly for work-related programmes of study, the ways that this occurs is worthy of

investigation. However, work colleagues were not the only individuals that learners identified as having influenced decisions to enrol for their Foundation degree studies. For a small number of students, friends and relatives also offered encouragement. Interestingly, these individuals were also often teachers. Two student interviewees made this claim. Kirsten outlined:

> One of my parents' friends has done this course and she is a teacher at a primary school and SENCO. This was my inspiration for doing the Foundation degree. I'd seen someone that it actually worked for so I followed that route. (Individual interview response)

Christina relatedly outlined: "A friend of mine who's a teacher said I don't know what you're worried out. You should do it" (individual interview response).

4.5. Theme two: Positive modification of personal self not explicitly related to occupational position

When students were questioned about the reasons behind their decision to join the programme, the theme of needing to improve their sense of personal self that was not directly related to occupational position, dominated many of the accounts that female students provided in both individual and group interviews. This was the case irrespective of age group and whether or not they were student-mothers. Although never recorded on application forms as a reason for accessing Foundation degree provision, this was the second most common reason cited in individual interviews, behind an ambition to secure career change, and consequently an active modification of occupational identity.

Merrill's (2014) exploration of female adult students who had entered a "prestigious" UK university generated a comparable finding. She outlined how the opportunity to reconstruct self-identities not related to occupation was very important to these students. Returning to study was found to be "an opportunity to create a new biographical beginning" (Merrill, 2014, p. 8). According to Snow and Anderson (1987) "a sense of self-worth" or "personal significance" is a basic human need but access to it is "differentially distributed throughout the social structure" (p. 1339). Perhaps this might explain why this emphasis was such a strong feature of explanations of their motives for study amongst female students.

Seven of the students who were individually interviewed partly linked their reasons for returning to study to an ambition to improve their sense of personal self which was

not framed in terms of occupational change. It was also mentioned by students in four of the eight group interviews that data was generated from. Often such transformations were viewed as producing a number of positive consequences for both the students themselves, and for student-mothers and their immediate families. Interviewees regularly claimed that their enrolment was inspired by an ambition to enhance their levels of self-pride/confidence. A number of accounts also identified their motivations to enrol as a way of specifically countering previous negative definitions of their academic abilities. These arguments indicate the worth of Rodriguez's (2009) assertion that "academic self-concept" is an important analytical tool that can be employed to understand differential patterns of participation in higher education. This he defines as "a student's perceptions and self-evaluations of his/her overall academic abilities in achievement situations" (p. 524).

4.5.1. Enhancement of personal pride and confidence

Susan summed up a key aspect of this issue in one group interview when she explained: "I think the proud thing is a big thing isn't it? To be proud of yourself". Responses of this type seemed to be connected to a wish to boost a sense of their own self-worth or esteem. Enrichment of the personal self (identity) was often central to accounts which stressed the improvement in pride and confidence.

> I wanted to show that I could be somebody more than what I am now. I always thought that I could get somewhere and did a bit in the past. Also it was a bit about proving my old teachers wrong. I feel like going back and seeing them and saying I'm doing this. (Ian's group interview response)

Bainbridge's (2005) research has likewise found that a wish to improve levels of self-esteem was a key feature of female students' motives for Foundation degree study. This self-improvement focus echoed previous research into mature students' motivations for entering higher education via traditional undergraduate routes (Shafi & Rose, 2014; Walters, 2000). Cara defined her decision to enrol for the programme in terms of gaining a sense of increased self-worth through the acquisition of greater self "pride". However, she also expressed a feeling of "selfishness" about having such a motive:

> I did it for myself really. Erm I don't really know. I suppose, I think that it was sort of a little project for myself really. For me, to make me feel better about myself. Something so erm I can be proud of myself. It was just like a little project for me,

for my myself like an evening a week. Not outside my house because I quite like my house and my children, but it's just something for yourself to achieve something and to have a bit of input into work and to believe in yourself and maybe do better in the future. It was quite selfish really just to say it was for me. (Group interview response)

This finding was also in keeping with Bainbridge's (2005) discovery that female Foundation degree students with children were informed by the emotion of guilt related to a personal motivation for returning to study. In particular, he found that students who fell into this category were predominantly concerned about prioritising their own needs over those of their children. Insightfully, others have outlined how such selflessness is often a gendered response that is prevalent amongst British student-mothers who attend post-1992 universities (Brooks, 2014). Such emotions are viewed as being a by-product of highly gendered cultural assumptions about parenting and childcare responsibilities. In my own investigation, a number of students with children outlined how this emotion had influenced when they had decided to commence their studies, as well as the form that these needed to take. The issue of guilt is discussed in further detail in chapter five of this thesis.

4.5.2. Resisting previous definitions of educational abilities

In some accounts where students described an ambition to increase their sense of self-worth by returning to study, previous unfavourable experiences of education were highlighted as having had an influence on this aspiration. This was a relatively frequent sub-theme amongst female learners; whatever their age, domestic status or level of on-entry qualification. Others have recently also helpfully noted how the need to demonstrate a capacity to undertake academic study when this has previously not been recognised, can be a motivator for participation in higher education (Merrill, 2014). Intriguingly, this research has suggested that reflection about prior experiences inevitably involved notions of what students aspired to become; that is, wished for imagined future identities.

Half of those who took part in individual interviews discussed their previous educational experiences and dissatisfaction with their levels of achievement. Students also raised this issue in three of the eight group interviews that were conducted. For many of these students, the Foundation degree study had been attractive as it provided an opportunity to counter previous definitions of their educational capabilities and levels of intellect. For Georgie, recommencing study was a way to confront her

"educational demons". Jayne, in a group interview, informed me how her return to formal education, in some ways, symbolised an attempt to improve her educational self-concept:

> I left school as soon as I could because I didn't have a very good experience of school life and I did go to college and subsequently life before children I did have a relatively good job and erm but I just wanted to do it for me. I knew I was bright even if all the teachers were telling me I was a lazy idle loafer and I sort of took it on board. But it is years later as you can probably realise and so I'm just doing it for me to prove that I can, prove something. (Group interview response)

The wish to gain improved self-esteem and a related belief in her educational abilities, following previous adverse encounters with further education a few years earlier was also underlined by Jess. She explained this in the following way:

> It was also for me. Not being funny, but I sort of felt I had done a lot for everything else and this was for me. The others in the group have kids, but I had also done things like supporting my gran and helping out. This was for me something positive. I started sixth-form and hated it. I would sign in and go home. By the end of AS I only had two subjects and hated it. After finishing it I was in a real low. Deciding to do this was about getting my confidence back. (Individual interview response)

Christina believed that such feeling about previous educational underachievement was widespread amongst her peer group.

> Paul: Do you feel that your reasons are doing the course are the same as other people in your group?

> Christina: I think generally speaking yeah would say so. When we talk to one another we all seem to have the same sort of thing. We are generally a group of women who have underachieved [*educationally*] earlier in life erm who haven't had the opportunity to, but are capable of doing it and are maybe a bit frustrated in that way and want to make the most of ourselves and who've had this opportunity later in life like it does for a lot of people and erm and this is our chance to show what we're capable of. I definitely know that the people who are in my immediate group who you know definitely feel like that. (Individual interview response)

This finding resonates with Michie, Glachan and Bray's (2001) much larger quantitative evaluation of the factors influencing the entry of mature students into university. Here, it was suggested that challenging previous negative educational experiences and labels was partly behind their decision to return to education. Woolhouse et al. (2009) specifically found that for female mature teaching assistants, Foundation degree study offered an opportunity to redefine themselves as "successful

learners" (p. 774) after previous negative interactions with the school system. Fenge's (2011) qualitative exploration of the "sensemaking" (p. 379) amongst a group of Foundation degree students who were health and social care workers, also offered comparable results. She similarly found that Foundation degree study was "a way of getting a second bite at the apple" (p. 381) to make up for lost educational opportunities and success. Motivation to apply for study was connected to the wish to demonstrate that they could successfully undertake it and, in doing so, challenge earlier definitions of their educational abilities.

The small number of students who had "good" A level and GCSE passes sometimes linked their enrolment to past educational experiences and the sense of failure this had left them with. This small group of students had either started traditional university programmes for a short period and had "dropped out" due to them finding it unsuitable, or had declined an offer of an undergraduate place post-academic A level study. This was a very small minority in each full year group from which the interviewees were sampled.

Kirsten was typical of this small group of students. In an individual interview she explain that she had previously completed the first year of an undergraduate degree in social science, but had left the course at the end of first year. She informed me that this was due to her feeling that the programme was "lacking relevance to the real world" and as a result of the "loneliness" that she felt living away from home in a large city. In an individual interview, she explained how the Foundation degree had given her another opportunity to "show she was capable of getting a degree", whilst gaining what she believed was "valuable work" experience and without acquiring the levels of debt that her peers on traditional programmes of study had acquired. She explained that after "dropping out" of her previous university course, her self-confidence had diminished. A family friend, a teacher, who had previously observed other students who had enrolled on Foundation degree study had suggested the Foundation degree. She had thought it would help Kirsten recover her confidence and self-esteem.

Rubie-Davies and Lee (2013) outline research into how self-concepts influence the educational experiences of school aged children (Chiu & Klassen, 2010), but that comparably little research has been undertaken with regards to mature students. The findings presented here indicated that, at least in terms of choice, academic self-concept can add to an understanding of teaching assistants' interpretations of their

motivations for Foundation degree study. Interestingly, this issue cut across age groups for female students and was mentioned by one male interviewee.

4.6. Theme Three: Maintenance of established roles and identities

Alongside the view that there were a number of forces compelling them to seek a forum where desirable role and identity change could eventually be achieved was the notion that Foundation degree study would also facilitate the maintenance of important established roles and personas. Notably, these commonly included being a teaching assistant and mother. Georgina's account of why she had found the Foundation degree an attractive option illustrated this theme:

> Five years ago I worked in B&Q in the cash office and I started working voluntarily at a school and I just loved it. The day passes so quickly so I just love it. It pushed me on to try and teach one day really. This course fit with my life and was suited to matures like us. I was looking for something and then I saw it. I couldn't believe it. It was perfect and you could start right away. It works with being a mum and school work. (Individual interview response)

The need to prioritise motherhood, sustain being a teaching assistant and the importance of practicality were all strong sub-themes within the general theme of sustaining existing roles and identities. Each of these will now be explored in some further detail.

4.6.1. Prioritisation of motherhood

For those who were mothers, decisions related to their choices of learning were sometimes depicted as being significantly structured by a need to maintain and give primacy to this aspect of their lives. The issue of requiring a programme of study that "fitted" with childcare responsibilities was stressed by a number of the female interviewees who had younger children. Julie explained how her own mother was looking after her children while she attended university. The Foundation degree's general requirement of attendance once a week had enabled her to put childcare in place whilst she attended university-based classes.

Julie: My mum looks after my kids when I come here. It is only three hours on a night.

Paul: Did this influence you deciding to enrol?

> Julie: Erm I would say so. My mum's a wee bit older now. She can do a night looking after them while I am here. It's good that we don't have to be here in the school holidays. It's a struggle for me but how it works is good. For me it made things possible, to follow my dream of teaching. (Group interview response)

Julie was a single mother who had a child under the age of two. When considering her return to study her account of giving pre-eminence to her mothering identity was also reflected in the views of other female students with children. Two of those who took part in individual interviews described how they had wanted to enter higher education for a number of years, but had deferred this until they felt it would be less detrimental to their dependent children. Christina explained how her childcare responsibilities had structured the timing of her return to study and a chance to gain self-development.

> Christina: I'd been thinking about it for a long time and putting it off because the kids were older and at primary school. So erm what made me make the jump erm I'd had enough really and I just wanted to do something for myself. I think it's that sort of and I don't like to say it, but it's sort of the Shirley Valentine effect you know what I mean and you think hang on I need to do something for me. When you've done so much for other people for so long haven't you and you erm suddenly think erm hang on I need to do something for me and another friend of mine who's a teacher said I don't know what you're worrying about the kids will be fine. I don't know what you're worrying about.

> Paul: What were you worrying about?

> Christina: The workload and the thing is you got to put your family first really. I mean you don't have your kids for long do you and I wouldn't have wanted to take it on and take on too much. I'm the sort of person that likes to be busy naturally, but I didn't want to over commit myself and put my family at risk and fail at it. I didn't understand what would be involved in university and I was worried about that really. As a mum, I waited until they were the right age. (Individual interview response)

For students such as Christina, "studenthood" (Field & Morgan-Klein, 2010) was seen as something that should be secondary to mothering. This supports Brooks' (2012) argument that student-mothers who attend new universities are prone to having their experiences structured by gendered normative assumptions about satisfactory motherhood.

4.6.2. Sustaining being a teaching assistant

When questioned in group and individual interviews about why they had enrolled on the Foundation degree, over half of those individually interviewed stated that the provision's pattern of delivery was important, as it not only fitted in with their existing working hours but also their workplace commitments. In group interviews, three out of the eight highlighted the attraction that the largely evening class format of the programme provided.

For the majority of those in paid employment, the programme had often been an attractive option as it had fitted with their existing employment, particularly as it did not require extensive time away from their workplaces. It had therefore not required them to give up their present employment and needed salary. This situation was the case for those with and without children. It was also said to have allowed a small number of students to gain employer support. Dawn explained:

> I was told about it by my Headteacher. It had been posted through school and my Headteacher knew that I wanted to expand my career and I was working as a HTLA. I'd spoken about doing degrees in the past but couldn't afford to give up my job so this was perfect as it was all work-based and I only needed to come out once every half-term and on evenings so she give gave me full support. (Individual interview response)

Anna also revealed this concern in her group interview comment:

> I couldn't have quit work and do a degree. I just couldn't have afforded to do it, especially with kids. Coming here on a just on a Monday night is ideal, just brilliant for me. I can fit things in. It's difficult, but it's brilliant.

Fenge's (2011) investigation into health and social care focused Foundation degree students also documents how for these learners ". . . a mode of study, that 'fits' with the demands of a busy lifestyle can be viewed as a key motivating factor for these students and mature students more widely" (p. 381). Reay (2002) creatively draws upon the work of Beck (1992) to argue that risk management is central to understanding mature female students' experiences of, and motivations for, returning to study. Congruently, a number of students who were interviewed as part of the investigation documented in this thesis also emphasised the need to manage risks to existing roles and identities. For some, reducing risks to their employment and the income that their work generated was a concern. This apprehension cut across gender and whether or not students had dependent children. Sustaining occupational position

was also documented by Tierney and Slack (2005) when they investigated early years' practitioners and teaching assistants who were on a Foundation degree. However, the desire to access a form of higher education provision that reduced risk and threat to existing domestic roles was not highlighted.

There were also a small number of teaching assistant interviewees who suggested that their decisions to opt for Foundation degree study was partly determined by a belief that it would help them successfully safeguard their present employment, at a time of economic uncertainty. This protection was viewed as desirable while they were in a position to move on from their current posts. Three student interviewees claimed that their enrolment had been partly driven by a need to protect their existing employment, as their school underwent reorganisation as a result of budget cuts, merger and managerial changes. The following exchange, which was gained from one group interview, provided an example of this point of view:

Paul: Why did you initially enrol on the course?

Debs: If I don't complete my degree, I could be out of a job next year I won't have a job. It will no longer exist as we are restructuring. I need more pieces of paper.

Paul: That is some motivation.

Debs: Yeah and the salary. The stress is not good for it, but it will be worth it if I can complete this.

Paul: Anyone else in that situation?

Mary: I am. My school is looking to make people redundant. I am hoping that this will help me, as this is level four and they are saying people need at least level three [*this was the equivalent of Advanced level study on local authority qualification scales*].

The attraction that Foundation degrees have in terms of safeguarding employment opportunities have also been documented by Robinson (2012). Yet interestingly, she describes this conception as being prevalent amongst younger Foundation degree students, rather than those who fell into the mature student category. Protectionism was linked to the future "uncertainties and vagaries of jobs market now and in the future" (p. 459). Simm et al.'s (2012) study of Foundation degree students on a geography-focused programme similarly established that some younger learners who were academically well qualified had opted for this route; hoping to improve their employability and reduce the risk of future unemployment. For a small number of

mature students who participated in my research, protection was, however, conceptualised in terms of the present, rather than the future.

4.6.3. Location and identity conservation

A number of students also underlined the perceived importance of the geographical accessibility of the university's campus when discussing their need to accommodate studying around their existing lives. Five students identified this in individual and group interviews:

> Being in the centre certainly made it possible. It's easy to get in. You've to think about the practicalities when you're us. Old City is easy to get to. It stops the panic when you are trying to get here. It's the parking that a problem. I park over the road, but it is expensive. (Jan's individual interview response)

As chapter two outlined, logistical concerns, such as the closeness of the physical location of an educational provider to a student's permanent home residence, have also been recognised elsewhere as determining where Foundation degree students choose to access this form of higher education (Simm et al., 2012). This factor was found to be a major influence that had informed students' decisions to undertake their studies at a local further education college when on-site university located provision was also available.

Lloyd-Parry (2010) has further described how the chance to learn locally was valued by Foundation degree students studying care as it reduced concerns (risks) that were perceived as accompanying life as a student. Specifically, it has been argued that local study is attractive to student-mothers. For a very small number of those who took part in my research, distance was not viewed as a key issue, although the accessibility of travel links was a concern. The university's central location and suitable travel links were also cited by two students as being important in their initial considerations about what, and where, they could study. For these students, this had enabled them to preclude Foundation degree study at their local further education college, which they viewed as being less attractive than a university setting. These students' journeys to attend classes involved relatively long distances and an accessible road network had enabled them to make the choice of studying at the university. This point was stressed in one group interview, Georgie.

Paul: How was the journey?

Georgie: Not too bad. It's a long way, but you get into a routine. I travel down with Karen. We get chance to chat and talk about assignments. It's OK as long as the weather isn't snowy. It took us three hours to get back once last year.

Paul: Is it worth all the hassle?

Georgie: Yeah its better here than Gregory College. I heard rubbish things about what goes on there from people and this has a good reputation with people. One of the HiLTAs [*Higher Level Teaching Assistants*] had done it here and she loved it. When I saw what she did compared to what one of the other TAs was doing at Castle College there was no comparison. I had a word with her and she told how much hard work it was and how great it was. University is definitely a better place to do it and you get more credibility for what you're doing. The roads here isn't that bad. You nearly always can get here unless its snow. Last year we took hours [*laughs*].

Within this comment was a well-formed view that being a university student was something to value in terms of enhanced status in the eyes of others. Accessibility, in terms of travel links, had made access to this type of higher education possible.

4.7. Theme four: Flexibility around the course's entry requirements

The minimal entry requirements that the Foundation degree required was identified as a factor that had influenced a number of students' enrolments. University statistics on students' on entry qualification levels indicated that this policy had allowed a large number of students to gain entry to the university, despite not being in the possession of the qualifications that were customarily required.

4.7.1. Flexible entry requirements for mature students

A repeated and positive theme that occurred in many of the teaching assistants' explanations of why they had chosen to access a Foundation degree was the relatively open access that it offered to students who lacked the traditional A level qualifications for undergraduate study. Half of those who contributed to individual interviews acknowledged this when questioned directly about the programme's flexible entry criteria for mature students. Students could obtain a place to study for their Foundation degree's first module with C grades in GCSE English and Mathematics (or alternatively, level two literacy and numeracy qualifications) and without A levels or

their equivalents. As a result of this entry policy, students without A level qualifications could commence undergraduate study relatively quickly. Erin in one group interview explained:

> Not having to do another course to do first was really good and so I applied. It made me think I could get to where I want to be [teaching]. I didn't leave with much.

In her individual interview, Christina also stated that the Foundation degree had been attractive, if not the only feasible option that allowed her to overcome the barriers of not possessing A level qualifications:

> Yes, I suppose in one way it was the only way that I could do it, if I'm being straight with you. I didn't want to do other things first at my age. I mean I will already be quite old when I start teaching.

Betty provided another example of the attractiveness of the programme's flexibility around qualifications on entry when she commented:

> Being practical I did need to find a course that didn't need much. At first, I did think that I wouldn't have what was needed to come to university. That was my understanding from school and watching my own children. One of my colleagues Ruth Sweet was doing this I told me about it and it seemed a way to do it. When Rab interviewed me he said I had what I needed to start. (Individual interview response)

Programme statistics on students' level of qualifications on entry clearly showed that high numbers of students had accessed Foundation degree study without the traditional qualifications that were ordinarily required for admission to the university.

Table 4.4: Students' level of qualification on entry to their Foundation degree by year of admission

Year of enrolment	No A level qualifications	Two or more traditional A levels	Qualifications the equivalent to two or more traditional A levels	One or more traditional A level or equivalent
2008-2009	17 (65%)	3 (12%)	6 (23%)	0 (0%)
2009-2010	14 (52%)	4 (15%)	8 (30%)	1 (3%)
2010-2011	13 (57%)	3 (13%)	6 (26%)	1 (4%)
2011-2012	15 (65%)	1 (4.5%)	6 (26%)	1 (4.5%)

(*Source: University records for all those in each Foundation degree cohort*)

These figures indicate that the Foundation degree had been a useful way to encourage participation in higher education amongst a group of students who might otherwise have been excluded from it. Nelson (2006) has outlined how this was a principal ambition that was stated when Foundation degrees were originally instigated. Her large scale quantitative investigation usefully identified how these programmes had indeed been very successful in terms of opening up access to higher education to students from groups who experienced socio-economic disadvantage; especially women with children.

4.8. Unexpected omissions?

There were some potential sources of motivation for Foundation degree study that on reflection were surprisingly absent from the students' accounts of their reasons for choosing to access their Foundation degree. The general absence of a desire to up-skill in order to meet the expanding demands being placed on teaching assistants in schools has already been highlighted at the start of this chapter. Alongside this, students did not commonly mention the intrinsic satisfaction of being a higher education student and the subsidised cost of study that the Foundation degree provided.

4.8.1. Intrinsic satisfaction of learning

Murphy and Roopchand (2003) explain how extrinsic motivation is focused upon ". . . external reward that is unrelated to the task itself, i.e. a prize or the approval of others" whereas intrinsic motivators prioritise ". . . the importance of processes within the person when curiosity and interest pushes the individual to pursue novel, exciting and challenging activities" (p. 244). The dominance of extrinsic motivators is an interesting and surprising finding to arise from my data. It contradicts previous research by Taylor and House (2010) and Murphy and Roopchand (2003) which found that, as a group, mature female students have the highest intrinsic motivation scores when their reasons for studying were subjected to analysis. No student mentioned being motivated by the intrinsic satisfaction that university level learning might provide.

4.8.2. Cost

None of the students who were in their thirties or above openly expressed the view that the subsidised cost of the Foundation degree was a reason for deciding to access this form of provision. As the tuition fee for this provision had been deliberately set at significantly below the fees charged for traditional BA programmes, in order to encourage mature widening participation students, this was particularly unexpected. The Foundation degree's host university had decided to adopt a reduced fee strategy, as it believed that many potential Foundation degree students would be extremely "sensitive" to "price" (see Table 4.5). This assumption was largely premised upon a linkage between the low salary levels that the teaching assistants received and a need for low tuition fees. It also suggests that Morgan's (2015) insinuation that increasing tuition fees may lead to a greater number of Foundation degree students choosing to study at general further education colleges, who often charge less expensive tuition fees, is perhaps not inevitable.

Table 4.5: Foundation degree annual tuition fees compared with traditional BA degree

Year of enrolment	Foundation degree	Bachelors' degree
2008-2009	£1,250	£3,125
2009-2010	£1,285	£3,225
2010-2011	£1,310	£3,290
2011-2012	£1,345	£3,375

(*Source: University records on the fee structure for Foundation and Bachelor's degrees*)

However, the small number of younger students did seem to explicitly evaluate their studies in terms of price when deciding to opt for Foundation degree study. Even though this was not stated as their main reason for enrolment on their Foundation degree programme, it was pinpointed as a contributory factor:

> This was a good way to do it as I could afford it with a bit of help from my parents. People from my old school have all got loans. I can pay for it from my TA salary and savings. Many of them have big debts and I don't have a loan doing it this way, even though it takes longer. I don't see why more people don't do an Fd. You just don't know about it. (Kirsten's individual interview)

Jess also noted this as a supplementary factor on her choice of study: "I suppose the cost. It's cheap, but not on the TA wage but it is still cheap compared to many degrees you can do" (individual interview response).

4.9. Chapter summary

This chapter of my thesis has provided details of the reasons for entering Foundation degree study that were primarily provided by the students who participated in individual and group interviews. This analysis was supported by drawing upon a small amount of data from observational data and university documentation. The students offered rationales that often cited several factors as motivating them to access their Foundation degree studies, when this issue was raised. A number of connected factors were frequently cited by many of the students in their interviews. The research findings that are described in this opening results chapter reveal that the teaching assistants who accessed Foundation degrees were not a homogeneous group, and although significant commonalities existed in their accounts, these were nuanced in terms of the specific

social situations and identities that they occupied. Whether or not students were employed mothers with dependent children was the most significant of these. However, there were a number of shared understandings in these accounts and the following themes emerged from data analysis:

(1) transformation of future occupational role and identity;

(2) positive modification of personal self not explicitly related to occupation;

(3) maintenance of existing roles and identities;

(4) flexibility around entry requirements.

The opportunity for a change of occupational role and identity in the future was a reason that was almost universally cited. For many, this involved accessing a career in teaching. Other students continued to wish to work with children in educational settings, such as in pastoral support roles. This aspiration was related to a range of extrinsic rewards that the students believed such career switching would offer; especially in relation to pay, working conditions and social prestige. In individual and group interviews, several students linked the latter to the positive social identity that they would acquire from achieving access to what they believed was a high status career. It was suggested that this identity enhancement was a significant pull factor. Various individuals with whom the students interacted within their schools, as workplace colleagues, had encouraged many of the learners to apply for their Foundation degree. Heads, classroom teachers and SENCOs were all identified as encouraging them to return to study. These school-based influences have not been widely documented in the limited existing academic literature on the subject of why some students choose Foundation degrees.

Most of those who were questioned as part of my investigation indicated that they were dissatisfied with their teaching assistant roles and the social identity this granted. Pay, workloads and social prestige were identified as being problematic and unsatisfactory. Their experiences of being a teaching assistant were viewed as being a key push factor to access career change and Foundation degree study. For many, Foundation degree study offered an eventual escape from being a teaching assistant. "Role stretch" and "role creep" (Warhurst et al., 2013, p. 159) were stressed as the students expressed their frustrations with their present role.

DECIDING TO BECOME A STUDENT: MOTIVES AND CIRCUMSTANCES

No indication existed that there was any widespread motivation to enhance their skill levels as teaching assistants or a wish to retain this occupational role in the long-term. The vast majority of the students did not define entry to study in terms of a skill-deficit connected to undertaking their teaching assistant roles. The students' decisions about enrolment had therefore not been influenced by their workplace experiences in ways that had been anticipated when the Foundation degree was initially proposed for validation. A number of life experiences within their workplaces were therefore identified as a major influence on decisions to apply to study on the Foundation degree. Career constraints, feelings of exploitation and the encouragement of significant others to transcend being a teaching assistant were important elements which informed such decisions. Strangely, workplace experiences have not been examined in the academic work that has analysed teaching assistants' reasons for undertaking Foundation degree study.

Consequently decisions to undertake Foundation degree study were not couched in terms of self-improvement as a teaching assistant, but as part of a long-term strategy to achieve career change. However, one group were an exception to this: volunteer teaching assistants who were hoping to gain employment as paid teaching assistants by improving how others viewed their skill levels. Yet even this grouping eventually aspired to become qualified teachers.

Adjacent to the theme of transformation of occupational role and self, was a related theme that emphasised Foundation degree study as a mechanism to gain a positive modification of the personal self not explicitly related to occupational change. This theme was powerfully expressed by those who mentioned it, although it was not discussed as frequently as career switching. Building a positive self-concept and redefining previous definitions of educational abilities were strong sub-themes in students' accounts. Learners' explanations for entering Foundation degree study were portrayed as being underpinned by a need to remedy deficiencies in their personal, educational and occupational identities. These findings are consistent with research that has been undertaken into mature female experiences (Merrill, 2014; Stone, 2008).

There was also a strong theme amongst the students that their studies had needed to fit in with their established lifestyles. The preservation of existing employment was an anxiety for both genders; while maintenance of domestic roles was a further concern for many of those who were mothers with dependent children. There was a commitment to retaining some aspects of the identities that these included. Short-term

maintenance of their employment as teaching assistants was often required for financial stability. Mothers and those with partners frequently stated that they wished to sustain their present domestic roles. For some students, there was an expression of a strong desire to preserve a traditional mothering identity (Brook, 2014; Johnston & Swanson, 2006). Disturbance to domestic circumstances and identities was often portrayed as undesirable. Foundation degree study was seen as attractive in this respect, due to its formal taught sessions being largely delivered on an evening. Choosing the Foundation degree could thus be viewed as an initial strategy that some students had employed to create "time and space to study" (Brooks, 2012, p. 443). The need to have time to fulfil work commitments existed in the accounts of both genders and amongst those with and without children. However, the need to fit studying around domestic lives and identities was a specific issue for student-mothers who made up the majority of those interviewed.

This chapter therefore illustrates how the Foundation degree students' understandings of their motives for study seemed to be strongly influenced by what Reay (2003) has termed "reinventing the self", while reducing risk to existing roles and identities. Gender and traditional patriarchal conceptions of mothering were portrayed as having mediated the form that this process took. For a number of students, flexibility around the entry qualifications required to commence the programme's first module was also cited as being appealing. The next chapter of this thesis documents the Foundation degree students' understandings of their experiences of being a Foundation degree student. Whilst reflecting some of the previous research findings that have explored mature students on non-Foundation degree programmes, the analysis provided here suggests that teaching assistants' specific workplace experiences were also important in terms of informing their decisions to enter higher education.

5. TEACHING ASSISTANTS' INTERPRETATIONS OF BEING A FOUNDATION DEGREE STUDENT

5.1. Introduction

This chapter outlines the findings that were generated on learners' interpretations or "constructions" (Leathwood & O'Connell, 2003, p. 597) of their experiences of being a Foundation degree student. In doing so, it addresses the second research question that my investigation aimed to explore: How do teaching assistants interpret their experiences of studying on a Foundation degree that is directly related to their workplace roles? In a similar vein to the data that was documented in the previous chapter of this thesis, the findings outlined in this chapter were also primarily generated from individual and group interviews. Emerging themes were also cross checked by a very small amount of observations.

As was the case with the motivations for entering Foundation degrees, there is a relative scarcity of research into higher education students' experiences of Foundation degrees generally (Ooms et al., 2012). The paucity of research on university-based programmes, as opposed to those in further education colleges, has been identified as a particular concern by others (Chipperfield, 2012, 2013). However, as outlined in chapter two of this thesis, there is a small body of research into the learning experiences of teaching assistants who are studying the academic aspect of Foundation degrees (Bainbridge, 2005; Dunne et al., 2008a; Morris, 2010; Taylor, 2014; Tierney & Slack, 2005; Woolhouse et al., 2009). This work and other research into non-teaching assistants' experiences of Foundation degrees is drawn upon throughout this chapter to offer an initial critical understanding of the findings that are presented. Investigations that have explored mature students' involvement of higher education are also discussed in order to further contextualise my research findings and illustrate the contribution that they make.

Four major themes emerged from analysing data on the Foundation degree students' interpretations: 1) Foundation degree as an initiator of enhanced self-belief and realisation; 2) status deficit as a constraint on self-realisation; 3) space, study and the challenges of established roles and identities; and 4) the importance of coping strategies in managing competing demands. Reflecting their views on course choice, the ways that students claimed to understand their experiences of being a Foundation

degree student seemed to be nuanced in terms of a number self-identities (Giddens, 1991) they seemed to possess. Markedly, normative expectations about gender and parenthood seemed to have produced different understandings of the experiences of teaching assistants as a Foundation degree students.

This chapter begins by outlining students' beliefs about the ways that Foundation degree study had allowed them to improve how they viewed their personal self (identity). It then continues to document the feelings of reduced status and marginalisation that many of the Foundation degree students claimed to have experienced and which were a potential check on the development of positive self-identities. It goes on to outline the multiple demands that students generally believed that they had been compelled to manage. Students' accounts of such balancing indicated that, to a greater or lesser extent, many of the Foundation degree students were inevitably in the position of having to adopt a learner role and identity that was restricted and often of secondary importance. This outcome was exclusively an issue for mothers with dependent children. For some of the students, this in turn seemed to reduce their sense of being in a position to achieve their full academic potential. The final part of this chapter documents the strategies that student-mothers identified as having employed as they aimed to deal with identity and role disjuncture (Woolhouse et al., 2009), as they attempted to balance rival expectations from their participation in the fields of academia, work and the home.

5.2. Theme one: Foundation degree as an initiator of enhanced self-belief and realisation

A dominant theme to emerge from interview data was that Foundation degree study had provided a space where students could to a degree achieve what Reay (2003) categorises as "self-realisation" (p. 314). In her analysis of mature working class ACCESS to higher education students, she describes the process of "self-realisation" as involving the fulfilment of personal identity transitions. This form of transition was contrasted with collective "self-actualisation" which involves the transformation of "community commitments and the prioritising of others" (p. 314). The Foundation degree students' claims of increased self-realisation notably included a constructive readjustment of both their personal and occupational identities. These findings therefore supported Dunne et al.'s (2008c) contention that Foundation degrees have

the potential to positively restructure conceptions of self. All categories of student claimed to have undergone these forms of identity reconstruction.

5.2.1. Enhanced personal confidence and self-belief

For a large majority of individual interviewees, Foundation degree study was viewed as having produced an increased level of personal confidence and self-esteem. This was one of the strongest outcomes in student descriptions of their experiences. Ten of those who were individually interviewed signified that this had been the case and it was also regularly cited in group interviews. In an individual interview, Jess outlined how: "This course has built my confidence in myself". Davina likewise commented: "I've got confidence out of it. It's kinda given me that self-belief back that I think I'd lost a little bit" (individual interview response). Anna also linked an increased level of self-confidence to enhanced self-esteem.

> Anna: It's boosted my confidence so much as well. I'm such a different person now than I was even a year and a half ago just for doing this. Like a year and a half ago I would have never gone into a room of adults and had the courage to stand there and speak and actually feel OK about it. I'd have done it but would have been a bit of a nervous wreck about it.
>
> Paul: How did that make you feel?
>
> Anna: Proud, like I can do things that I wouldn't have previously.
> (Group interview response)

According to Debra, this increased personal confidence and self-belief would not have been achieved elsewhere.

> The confidence and joy I have gained from taking this course has given me a status in life that I couldn't have attained anywhere else either from home or work. The degree opens your eyes and brain to a higher level of thinking and knowledge that brings intrinsic confidence that can't be fulfilled elsewhere. I don't feel like I am in no man's land anymore. The degree lets the genie out of the bottle. I have more respect for what I'm capable of. (Individual interview response)

For a small number of students, four in total, modified perceptions amongst family and friends had also produced an improvement in their sense of self.

> The course has allowed me to feel like I am making my family and friends proud which makes me feel better about myself. I know my mum and sister are proud of me. They're very supportive. (Individual interview response)

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> Doing an Fd was my only chance to achieve my goals. It has enabled me to link where I was with where I'm going, by bridging the academic gap. I don't feel I would have wanted to remain a TA in a primary school, even though I love my job, if there had not been such an opportunity for career progression as in place on the Fd. My kids and friends thought I was just good at sport and not academic. When I first applied I believed there was a good chance that I wouldn't have enough of an academic background to secure a place, but was so proud of myself to just get on the course, never mind complete it. The course has given me the personal confidence I need to go and do what I want to do. I have gained more credibility from my family and friends. I don't think they think I'm as thick as they used to. (Tom's individual interview response)

Coping effectively with the demands of academic study was also connected to the acquisition of these feelings of improved levels of confidence by Christina:

> Oh yeah it's for me and self-satisfaction and prove to myself that I was good enough and bright enough to get a degree and also because I've become more ambitious I'd like to become a teacher, a good teacher and see if I can progress and see how far I can get now in this second half of your career really. (Individual interview response)

The finding that Foundation degree study can generate a feeling of increased personal confidence and self-belief is in keeping with previous investigations into teaching assistants' interpretations of their experiences of such programmes of study. For instance, previous research has also claimed that these learners gain "improved 'self' orientated norms" (Dunne at al., 2008a, p. 242), particularly around growing self-assurance and esteem (Bainbridge, 2005; Morris, 2010; Ooms et al., 2012; Tierney & Slack, 2005; Simm et at., 2012; York & Longden, 2010). Waller (2005) has described how a "shifting notion of self" (p. 54) is typical amongst mature students more generally, as they modify their outlooks and develop positivity about their academic abilities. Walters (2000) also found that mature students per se frequently utilised participation in higher education to gain a positive transformation of personal identities, which included more faith in their own abilities. Consequently, as O'Shea and Stone (2011) have found for many mature students, once they commence their studies, higher education can become: "more than just the opportunity to obtain better employment or earn more money" and crucially offers "a means by which self-confidence and esteem can be improved" (p. 281).

5.2.2. Learning, self-assurance and increased belief in workplace abilities

Although at the start of their studies, Foundation degree study was overwhelmingly viewed by students as a means to achieve a future transformation of occupational identity, there was a relatively common belief that it had strengthened their workplace confidence and improved how they viewed their current occupational self. Over three quarters of those who were individually interviewed claimed that new knowledge had provided them with different ways of thinking that had in turn led them to make changes to their school-based practice. Morris' (2010) research on teaching assistants who were studying for a Foundation degree presented a similar finding. Her focus group research found that many students believed that their studies had improved their grasp of issues related to teaching and learning. This understanding had subsequently informed the ways that they claimed to have carried out their teaching assistant duties and the confidence they had about doing so. In another context, Smoothy (2006) has usefully discovered increased job-related confidence amongst a group of hairdressers who had undertaken Foundation degree study.

The accounts provided by my participants support Morris' (2010) and Smoothy's (2006) research findings that enhancements in work-related knowledge can lead to an improved notion of workplace self.

> It's been fascinating to understand the reasons behind aspects of teaching and learning and erm I have to say something that I very much enjoyed and got a lot from. It's boosted my classroom confidence. I feel more competent with the children. I've changed all sorts of things I do on a daily basis. You know what to do in most situations and you might not have done before. (Julia' individual interview response)

> The Foundation degree has been hard work, but worth it. Initially I did not appreciate how completing the degree would help me become a better teacher. I have learned an awful lot about how children learn and which has been very enjoyable to do the reading round things. I have learnt how to write much more effectively [*laughs*]. All of this has had made me a better TA. Someone who knows more what she's doing. (Dawn's individual interview response)

The above accounts indicate that, for some students at least, their original enrolment goal of acquiring an enriched sense of occupational identity in the long-term had been partially and unexpectedly achieved more immediately. Formal learning from academic inputs was cited as having assisted this modification. Three group interviews

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highlighted the importance of this. It was acknowledged by just under half of individual interviewees.

> Kerry: For me it's had a positive impact from starting the course to now because you get a lot of practical tips. I mean I thought the managing behaviour one [a first year module] was really good. We got tips from each other, but Ralph brought in things that I'd not thought of before. And I just think that that directly impacted the way I deal with the children because I get all the naughty ones. And er it is really good and you can turn a bad situation into a positive thing. That's really helped me.
>
> Paul: How does that make you feel?
>
> Kerry: Like you can do something. It adds to feeling that you know what you are doing and know your ground.
>
> Paul: Has that given you more confidence at work?
>
> Kerry: I would say so. I'm still learning, but I do feel more able to do things on my own initiative at times, but you do have more confidence in what you're capable of.
>
> Ashleigh: I sort of agree with that. (Group interview response)

In one classroom discussion, Tom explained how he had recently experimented with a form of restorative justice and that he had found this to be effective when dealing with a bullying issue. This idea was something the students had been asked to explore in a previous module on managing children's behaviour. Again, he stressed that such experimentation not only reflected a growing sense of self-confidence that he could successfully undertake complex school-based tasks, but that this had consequently improved how he viewed his workplace abilities and self. For Jan, a strengthened belief in her workplace abilities had produced a feeling of empowerment.

> Jan: I think it makes you more confident to be able to handle [things] because you are able to reflect on your practice all the time so er certainly after probably like the behaviour management module you come away and think I could change that, I could change that. I could handle that a lot better. There are certain individuals who push the buttons so to speak and I find that I'm handling them better and also it's dealing with the higher achievers by just coming at things from a different angle even from the teacher.
>
> Paul: How does it make you feel when you feel that you could change that?
>
> Jan: It's empowering. You know that you can't go back and change things but you know next time something like that happens, if some individual is playing up you'll just go at it from a different angle which is something that I might not have done

before. I feel more in control and happier that I know how to improve things erm for the better. (Individual interview response)

One student explained how her increased self-confidence had led her to seek advice from an academic outside the university, as she contemplated how she might effectively support a child with special educational needs. Subsequently, she also commented that she had experienced a sense of increased belief in her capacities as she performed her teaching assistant role.

> My studies have helped my workplace role oh tremendously. I can give you an example of now currently of what's happening. I am working with a child who I have not previously worked with in the school as a teaching assistant, and he has a lot of complex difficulties. He has coordination difficulties. He has problems with short-term memory and he has like dyspraxia and problems with fine motor skills and things like that and er if I'm being really honest, because it's confidential, he hasn't been given the best support in school because also in his class there are two other children with statements, one with Down's Syndrome and another one with really complex needs. So he's sort of been lost a bit in all of that because if he had a statement you'd end up with a situation of having three TAs in the classroom and funding issues and all that, but now because he's my case study I've been able to investigate those issues. I've been able to research working memory at the library. I've even emailed the Head of Psychology at Park University because he's a specialist on it. You know things I would have never have done before and I've had the confidence to say, look I'm working with this child and say can you advise me and he's emailed me back and I don't think anything of that, whereas before emailing a lecturer. You know you'd never do that would you? It's just I wouldn't have had the confidence or even known how to do that and so this child is directly benefitting in his work and in his progress because I'm able to support him better because I've got a better understanding of his condition and things. So there's lots of examples like that where my practice has improved and my ability to overcome all kinds of problems you face as a teaching assistant. (Christina' individual interview response)

The importance of peer learning in creating occupational confidence was also identified as a strong theme in a number of students' interview responses. It was revealed in just under half of group interviews and recognised by nine individual interviewees. When discussing the key benefits of Foundation degree study in an individual interview, Eleanor claimed: "This course has given me the opportunity to share and gain ideas with practitioners from every phase of education. That's been invaluable for me and my confidence at school." Similarly, the following extract from a group interview also highlighted this consequence.

Paul: What have you gained from doing the Foundation degree?

Jean: I think that hearing things from other colleagues that are here on the course has been really really interesting and some of their ideas that you can put into place the next day and not hanging on waiting. It's putting it into action. Thinking it's a really good idea.

Paul: How much learning do you feel you gain from others in the group?

Sara: Lots.

Jean: Lots. Yeah from their experiences. Yeah.

Erin: Some of the problems you are facing other people have too. You don't feel like you're on your own. You're up against the same brick wall all the time and it's nice to know that it's not just you and it's not just your school.

Julie: We have shared things that aren't necessary to do with the module we are doing. Say I say I've got a problem with this, someone will bring in some literature from a course they been to. So I would say we have worked quite closely together.

Jean: It's also good to find other people that you have stuff in common with each other, than the staff you are working with because they don't always want to progress or have the same outlook as you and other people in here do and I think that's been good.

Julie: It's been good to share things as well. Like we weren't very keen on that the very first. We were very protective.

Sara: Yeah.

Julie: We do it to kids all the time and it's amazing what you do learn from each other. We encourage each other and build everyone up.

Paul: How does that make you feel?

Sara: Like you can make a difference and that you can do things that you wouldn't do if you were just a TA not doing this [*course*]. You can believe more in your abilities as a TA. (Group interview response)

In common with Morris' (2010) research, my own findings therefore challenged those who have argued that teaching assistants on Foundation degrees find it difficult to transpose what they learn from academic study into their work-based contexts (Tierney & Slack, 2005). Additionally, the accounts provided by my research participants revealed that such knowledge can provide a positive influence on how such learners' conceive their teaching assistant self, even if they continued to be dismissive of retaining this identity and role in the longer-term. The extent however to which

Foundation degrees have the capacity to positively reconfigure occupational identities, rather than their skill bases is underdeveloped in published academic literature.

The increased levels of self-belief from gaining a "deeper" (Race & Pickford, 2007) understanding of issues related to teaching, learning and child development was also sometimes regarded as having led to inclusion in planning related discussions about these. This growth of involvement was identified as resulting from an increased number of invitations to take part in such discussions and students' improved levels of self-confidence. A third of those who were individually interviewed confirmed that they felt more included in school-based discussions and planning. Additionally, this issue emerged in two group interviews.

> Paul: What have you gained from doing the Foundation degree?
>
> Karen: Confidence. Yeah definitely confidence in yourself and the job.
>
> Jenna: And I feel able to speak with the teaching staff and senior management about things now. Whereas before I was unsure. Now I feel on some subjects I feel I know more than some of the teachers.
>
> Jo: Yeah respect.
>
> Sammy: Feeling like you know something is I think really important and people do treat you like you know what you're talking about.
>
> Karen: And now my opinion is asked about things now or thoughts and ideas on how to support in various ways are sought whereas before it probably wouldn't have been. (Group interview response)

For Julia, her new knowledge had also provided her with a level of self-belief to play an active part in workplace discussions: "This course has made me feel like I am able to contribute to certain discussions/meetings in my job" (individual interview response). Jenny also outlined how, on one occasion, her level of self-assurance about her possession of appropriate knowledge and language to contribute to important in-school discussion had led to positive reinforcement by one of her teachers.

> You are then part of the conversation in a way that you weren't before. We were recently moderated and the moderator was asking questions. The teacher went into a complete blank and I jumped in and filled in. It is what she does in her job role and I just support her. But I could mention exactly what she does using the right words and when we came out she said thank you so much because you just told her the exact things she wanted that we do. But how did you know to do that, I was at

such a blank. And it is from doing this. Before I would have been just silent. (Jenny's response in a group interview)

Dunne et al. (2008a) have also found that teaching assistants who engaged in Foundation degrees believed that they were more included in school life, and consequently felt positive about themselves as a result. Teachers were seen as offering higher levels of regard and recognition to this group of support workers. Such recognition was linked to "a transformation of confidence and self-worth" (p. 243). Moreover, Bedford et al. (2006) has suggested that one of the major benefits that teaching assistants gain from additional professional development is feeling that their opinions are more valued by others in schools. Less positively, Dunne et al. (2008a) have speculated that this epitomises a broader position of deficit ". . . in terms of status and respect, and the power resides with teachers to change that relationship" (p. 243).

For a small number of students in one of my group interviews, an increased self- and occupational assurance had also improved their level of self-belief when applying for new employment opportunities.

> Jamie: It's made me realise how competent I am. Erm I mean I recently went for a job interview and you know you could just tell that you had some really great things to offer because I already did have them but it kinda brings that confidence out in you and I got the job because I was really confident. When they were asking about the different things that I'd done uni work came into that and the experience that it gave me.

> Emily: I think you also know what to talk about. That's a massive difference. I've just applied for a job and on my personal statement and actually I now know that I have loads to write about and it's literally from doing this degree. All personalised learning and everything like that.

> Petra: It's all the buzz words isn't it that everyone wants to hear, but as a teaching assistant you're just in the classroom and you don't get to hear in the same way

> Paul: And does that make you feel different?

> Emily: Yeah massively.

> Katie: You're in the club.

The view that engagement with Foundation degree study had led to increased levels of personal confidence was found in the accounts of both genders, irrespective of whether a student had dependent offspring.

5.3. Theme two: Status deficit as a constraint on self-realisation

The relatively low levels of external prestige (social status) that the combination of being a Foundation degree student and teaching assistant conveyed was frequently cited as restricting students' levels of self-realisation. Limited social status (Coie & Dodge, 1988) was frequently portrayed as having produced adverse experiences as the learners had interacted with their university and school workplaces. This in turn was viewed as having diminished a positive development of personal and occupational identities.

5.3.1. The negativity of others, stigmatisation and being a Foundation degree student

In all the individual interviews, the Foundation degree students were explicitly asked to provide their opinions on whether they believed that they had undertaken the same level of study as traditional BA students. In response to this, it was universally stated that their studies were equivalent to those being undertaken by other undergraduates. Therefore, the participants who took part in this research offered interpretations of the academic standard of their awards which contrasted with Dunne et al.'s (2008a) finding that Foundation degrees are not generally perceived as "real degrees" by the learners who embark on them. There was no evidence to support Woolhouse et al. (2009) contention that many Foundation degree students also do not view their degree as a "qualification itself" with the consequence that these students have limited expectations of enhanced economic capital (Bourdieu, 1986). Woolhouse et al.'s (2009) analysis contrasts strikingly with the dominant view of the students who participated in my research. They frequently indicated that, although being categorised as a Foundation degree student encompassed a "second rate" academic status in the eyes of others, they did not themselves view it in this way. Predictably, such a lack of appreciation was deemed to be unhelpful and for a small number of students, a source of irritation.

> Ruth: My dad unbeknown to me actually said to my son, you do know that it's not a real degree that your mum's doing. If it was a real one it would take her years and years at night school. Mi dad is eighty two mind you. [*Rest of the group laugh*]

> Paul: How do comments like that make people feel?

Sam: I think people say negative things because people are insecure about themselves.

Gillian: I think deep down we know that it is a degree as we are doing it. We are doing it for us and does it matter what other people think. There is no point fighting it because that's what they think.

Georgie: My friends keep saying it oh it can't take you all this time. What do you mean you're doing your work, assignment tonight and can't come out. They don't believe it is the amount of work that it is.

Gillian: It's because it's a Foundation degree. It's because erm it's not like a the first year of a proper degree.

Sam: I would say so yeah.

Kerry: People don't see it as the same.

Gillian: If you say year one of BA Education degree that's different.

Sam: It does, it doesn't have a status.

Ruth: Foundation implies that it's easy and it's not.

Gillian: It implies it's on the same level of an NVQ or something like that.

Paul: That's interesting.

Sam: I think people see them as a return to learn. You know when you do a return to learn. You know when you do a return to maths course. In some people's eyes that's what a foundation is. It comes across as this. I get quite upset about it, when you have to do what we do. It's no walk in the park. (Group interview response)

Dawn's thoughts on this issue likewise provided an illustration of accounts that suggested that others often assumed that Foundation degrees were not academically the equivalent of other undergraduate programmes. Significantly, she outlined how this was the case even for someone who had gained a deep understanding of her course's content and assessment processes:

Everyone at school's quite supportive of it [*the Foundation* degree] because it's quite apparent the route I want to take, but it was interesting because about nine months into doing it I spoke to my mentor at work who's also one of the class teachers, well the class teacher that I work with when I'm supporting the classroom and erm I said, we were just talking about the course and I said to her I don't think people realise that it's the equivalent of doing the first two years of a degree and I said I think some people think doing a Foundation degree is a bit of an easy route in and she said, is it the equivalent of doing the first two years and she actually

didn't realise herself even though she's my mentor and she knows everything, nearly as much as I know about it. She didn't actually realise it's the same as doing the first two years of a degree and I think then she realised how much work I do put into it and how much time it takes and it's not just an easy route in. I try not to talk about Foundation degree. It doesn't have the same credibility as the BA. You often get the feeling that people don't see it in the same way as a degree. (Individual interview response)

Christina drew explicitly on the idea of "stigma" when describing the negativity that she believed the label Foundation degree student encompassed. In her individual interview, she explained:

I do feel a little bit of a stigma about saying you're doing a Foundation degree. I do think it's the polytechnic/university thing that they had when they changed everything to universities and it got rid of the stigma of whether you went to a poly. I think that Foundation degree has that same stigma and people don't understand what you're doing when you say it.

Potentially it could be argued that the relatively low status that education courses have in the hierarchy of academic disciplines that exists in higher education specifically, and society in general, may have also influenced the stigmatisation that some students felt. Young (1988) has argued that what counts as educational knowledge is stratified and hierarchal. Possibly students on an engineering Foundation degree might not experience stigmatisation. Yet, whilst the status related to studying the subject area of education was possibly an influence on students' understandings of their experiences this was not cited in student accounts of their engagement with their Foundation degree.

Robinson (2012) equally found that students on such programmes offer accounts of their experiences which emphasise the "stigma associated with less valued Fd" (p. 454). Negativity of this type might reflect the continuing "low status and negative societal sentiments" that countries such as the United Kingdom generally construct around vocational education (Billett, 2014, p. 2). Students therefore had often experienced a heightened awareness of "HE as a stratified sector" where Foundation degree is "regarded as 'second-best' and not just in the context of HE" (Robinson, 2012, p. 460). Brooks (2012) draws upon the work of Reay et al. (2010) to show how being a university student, and the rewards it can bequeath, are unequally distributed and can influence the pre-eminence that learners give to their student identity.

During one observed class where the professional development of teaching assistants was considered, Ros coupled the need to study in a university context with

the lack of prestige she felt that studying for a Foundation degree provided in the eyes of others. She then progressed to further relate this to the lack of social standing that being a teaching assistant also conveyed. Ros outlined how she felt that "doing a Foundation degree" was consistent with "being a TA" in the sense that "people look down on it". Many of the class vigorously nodded their heads in agreement with this statement. Dunne et al. (2008a) likewise remarked that:

> There are parallels between the teaching assistant role in school and in their positioning within the staff hierarchy, and the way a Foundation degree is perceived. The implication is that a Foundation degree is not a 'real' degree and the TA is not a 'real' educator. (p. 245)

The status deficit which being a Foundation degree student and teaching assistant offered was characterised as producing negative experiences for some interviewees as they participated in university and school life. In a small number of accounts, their limited status in each of these settings was represented as a source of double disadvantage. Combined, they were portrayed as producing a feeling of exclusion and marginalisation.

5.3.2. Foundation degree status, invisibility and securing access to university services

According to some students, the relative lack of status that others routinely assigned to their studies had manufactured an inequitable experience when they had attempted to access some of the university's centrally-based support services. This situation was linked to their need to access these outside semesters and the traditional university day, and this issue was raised in a number of individual and group interviews. For a small number of students this was interpreted as producing additional marginalisation.

Three students in their individual interviews claimed that obtaining support for writing development, financial advice and careers guidance had been arduous. They also mentioned how the opening times of the university's catering services had produced annoyance and a feeling of being undervalued. Opening times for these services did not usually encompass the evenings or weekends, when the Foundation degree students often wanted to access them. This was also a strong theme in three of the eight group interviews that were conducted, when the disadvantages of Foundation degree study were discussed.

Cheryl: I feel part of this group but I don't necessarily feel part of the university because at various points in the year you can't get a coffee because everywhere is shut and then six weeks before we finish you can't get books because they've shut the library. I bet they haven't started any work on it.

Angela: They haven't thought that some of us might be still here. It just feels a bit mean.

Claire: But we can get a car parking space.

Paul: How does that make you feel?

Angela: Unwanted. Just like we're not worth anything cause of the way that we are doing it [*the Foundation degree*]. (Group interview response)

For one student, this had led her to believe that Foundation degree students were "invisible" to the central university services:

We are almost like invisible to them. It was the same as last year. People forget we are here doing things. Everything was shut. We couldn't even borrow books we need for assignments. It was really disappointing and we had to complain for anyone to do anything. We only got something to eat when Dean sent coffee and biscuits. Don't think they even think about us at times. (Jan's individual interview response)

In observations of students in their Foundation degree classes, frustration with the lack of access to a full range of university services was also noted on a number of occasions. The most regular and strongly expressed complaint about reduced access to amenities concerned the closure of the canteen on evenings that were outside the semesters, when the traditional undergraduates were largely absent from the university's campus. As I described earlier in this thesis, the termly format of the Foundation degrees required attendance at university classes in these periods.

5.3.3. Status constraints and continuing frustrations around occupational self

In a number of interviews, students claimed that their studies had not resulted in an improvement in their salary level or a change to their job title. For a quarter of those who were individually interviewed (three students), the lack of career advancement and the accompanying rewards of this progression were connected to the limited value that employers placed on Foundation degree study. In over half of individual and two group interviews, there was, however, an indication that their Head teachers and

classroom teachers had recognised their increased skills and knowledge, although this was not always viewed as having been productive. This acknowledgement was linked to requests for them to take on higher level responsibilities. This role extension, without additional payment, had led to a feeling of disappointment. Dawn's account illustrated this outcome.

Dawn: They do use me differently to other TAs in the school.

Paul: In what ways?

Dawn: They give me more of a teaching role. We are all paid at level two, but I'm given a child and they say this is what the problem is can you sort it out. People rely on me. It's nice because we work well together and collaborate well, but you don't get paid for it do you. I can get frustrated, but then I think that's how the world works, if you're not qualified for something you don't get paid for it. Fd isn't appreciated at our school and it's certainly not going to help you achieve a high payscale.

Paul: How does being asked to do more make you feel?

Dawn: I would say it make me feel good in some ways, not in others. TAing [*being a teaching assistant*] will always be like that erm goes with the territory. You do it for the children.

Paul: Has being asked to get involved in new things influenced your future career plans?

Dawn: I'm not really sure, but I would say so. It is definitely not to be a TA, but I need to do the top-up [*an additional year that was required to gain a full BA*]. I've applied for jobs while doing this, but got nowhere. They all want BA and there's so much competition from people already with degrees. We are now getting them for TA jobs at our school. It's frightening. (Individual interview response)

Rachel also explained how since starting her course, her head teacher had expanded the range of tasks that she was expected her to carry out. Once more, "role stretch" (Warhurst et al., 2014) had not led to an increased level of salary.

She [*her Head teacher*] does sometimes ask me do things which I don't think she would have before I started the Fd. If she's away on a course I might supervise the class on my own. I don't mean teach as it's planned. There's loads of instances like that. So in some ways this makes me feel pleased. Mind you don't get any more when your salary comes out. You're still a GTA [General Teaching Assistant] at the end of the day. This course doesn't give you much in that respect. I didn't really expect it would, genuinely. (Group interview response)

As outlined in the previous chapter of this thesis, many students had decided to commence their studies due to unhappiness with their experiences as a teaching assistant. For a couple of students, the reaction of their employers to their studies had reinforced this feeling.

> The Fd doesn't really get you anywhere at work. There isn't anywhere to go at my school unless you're a teacher. I'm still a level three, but they now expect more as they think I know a bit more now. I have really enjoyed all the reading and research that you have to do. I've become more critical of what you're expected to do as a teaching assistant. Our pay is rubbish for what's expected of us. This [*the Foundation degree*] in a strange way keeps me going. School makes me more determined to achieve my dream [*becoming a qualified primary school teacher*]. (Jan's individual interview response]

In their investigation of learners on a Foundation degree for learning support workers, Dunne at al. (2008b) found that just over two thirds of those sampled had not been promoted as a result of their studies. Larger scale survey research into the perceptions of Foundation degree students' experiences has similarly documented a general lack of status that employers assigned to Foundation degree study and their consequent propensity not to reward those who had participated within such learning (Ooms et al., 2012). Wareing's (2008) study of health care assistants who were studying for a Foundation degree mirrored this finding to an extent, in that a modification of their pay grades was found to be unconnected to students' involvement with study. Yet in contrast to some of the teaching assistants that I interviewed, these learners were, in some respects, fortunate in that they had not been asked to take on extra workplace duties without additional payment.

Research by Woolhouse et al. (2009) indicated that acquiring extra responsibilities is one outcome of Foundation degree study for teaching assistants, but this is rarely accompanied with increased levels of economic capital. They have argued that: "Until foundation degrees are more widely recognised and consequently more valued as higher education degrees in their own right, those who undertake them may find they are subject to exploitation" (p. 769). Their analysis claimed that one consequence of this situation was that many students become disillusioned with their Foundation degrees. As I outlined earlier in this chapter, such disenchantment was not emphasised as an issue by any of those who took part in my research. Instead, for a small number of students, a lack of change in their present conditions of service led to increased levels of disappointment with being a teaching assistant.

5.4. Theme three: Space, study and the challenges of established roles and identities

Although many students had partially decided to access the Foundation degree because they viewed it as providing a format that would allow them to meet a series of claims on their time; once they had commenced their studies, the issue of competing demands was still a concern. Pressures on students' time as a result of domestic and workplace responsibilities were frequently seen as having acted as a curb on how they had conducted their learning. Managing a series of often competing roles and identities was cited as having been problematic by both first and second year students. This issue was cited in nine individual and six group interviews. However, as with circumstances that informed course choice, the students did not claim a homogeneous experience irrespective of gender and whether or not they were parents with dependent children. Specifically, employed student-mothers suggested that they had suffered greater levels of complexity with regards to managing rival demands. Domestic obligations were cited as being an additional pressure by many of those who were mothers with children (see Figure 5.1).

Figure 5.1: Key fields viewed by employed student-mothers as generating competing time demands and pressures
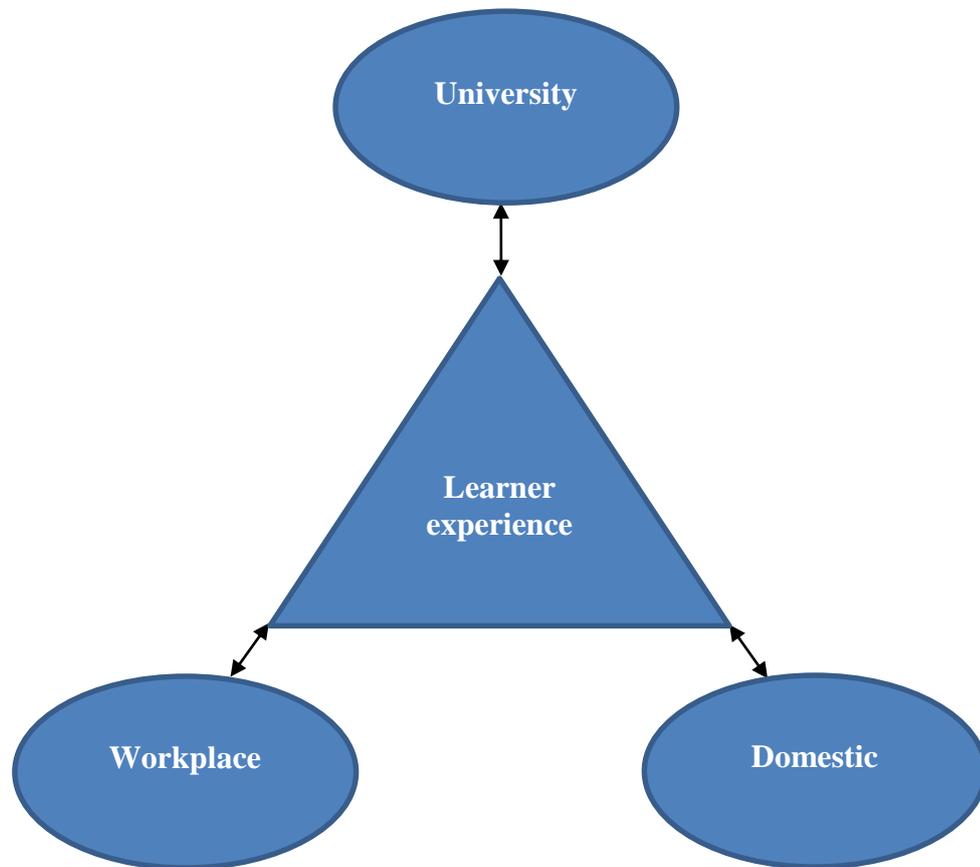
For the vast majority of those whose opinions were captured, the established roles and identities that they inhabited in their domestic and working lives were portrayed as having constrained their ability to undertake academic study in a way that they had wished to. For most of the learners, being a student had to be fitted in around existing domestic and workplace obligations. At times, this position was regarded as having resulted in their studentship having been sacrificed. The following dialogue, from a group interview, typified many students' views about the pressures that roles, which had generally pre-existed their entry to higher education, had placed on their studies. The ability to balance learning alongside these was cited as a major challenge.

Paul: What are the biggest challenges of the course?

Debs: Time management.

Nadia: Yeah
Sonia: Organising yourself between work, yeah family, uni.

Nadia: Everything that you have to commit to.

Mary: Not having enough time to fit things in. What you need to give your head, partner, husband and kids. You have to help with the homework and keep things going. You know. (Group interview response)

Similarly, Davina's account underlined the time pressures that were presented by needing to perform a multitude of roles and identities, which flowed from the home, the workplace and studentship:

It has been really challenging to manage the course alongside a job and the home and work. There have been times when you wonder if it's worth it. Fitting it all in has been a logistical challenge with the boys and Dave's work which he moves around and is not at home all the time. I know that the Fd won't give me immediate increase in finance and job prospects which makes things more of an issue. It's just the first step on what seems like a very long journey. (Individual interview response)

For those in relationships, and those who had children, study needed to co-exist and was often necessarily subsidiary to the domestic responsibilities that their roles as mothers and partners conferred. One key consequence of the competing pressures was a feeling amongst some of these students that they had experienced having insufficient amounts of "time and space" to complete their studies to a level that they were content with. For four of those who were individually interviewed, a lack of time had produced such a frustration. A degree of fatalism and inevitability about this was evident in the accounts of three individual and two group interviewees.

I always have a sense of not doing any of the assignments justice because there is never enough time. But then you have to live, don't you? (Christina's individual interview response)

Not having the time is always an issue when you have little ones. I only have short spaces where I can do my work. It's not ideal and erm I don't always do it in a way that I would like. You just have to get on with it and do the best you can. (Debra's individual interview response)

Morris' (2010) study into the experiences of a comparable group of students found that the obligations of study, family life and employment, combined to produce a series of obstacles for these learners. It has also been discovered that mature students generally encounter this situation (Arskey et al., 1994; Baxter & Britton, 2001). Difficulties in managing conflicting claims on the time of Foundation degree students and the complementary narrative of needing to engage in "juggling" has also been detailed by researchers (Tierney & Slack, 2005; York & Longden, 2010). However, they do not

explicitly highlight how these are, to some extent, not just a consequence of role expectations but are the result of conceptions of the identities these learners should prioritise.

Interestingly, comparative research has found that both gender norms and state policy about gender equity can combine to produce national differences in the experiences of student-mothers (Brooks, 2012). This research has indicated that identity construction around studentship can be informed by gendered norms which are embedded in national cultures and social welfare policies. These social forces have the potential to structure parent-students' experiences differentially. Dunne et al. (2008a) have also drawn attention to the need to consider identity when trying to make sense of this process. They have remarked how teaching assistants who study for Foundation degrees are continually involved in "negotiating the conflicting identities of mother, worker and learner" (Dunne, 2008a, p. 5). The findings outlined in the next part of this chapter reveal that gendered notions of parenthood seem to have informed experiences of Foundation degree study. However, workplace position and the need to undertake work-based learning added to the pressures that students faced.

5.4.1. The difficulties of attempting to harmonise motherhood and study

Just under two thirds of those who were individually interviewed isolated motherhood as being important in structuring their experiences of Foundation degree study. The majority of female students who participated in my research described a feeling of being under pressure and indeed a wish to fit their studies around their existing commitments as mothers.

> Mine [*her husband*] is fine as long as it doesn't interfere with the kids or him. It is fine as long as I do it when it doesn't. I just have to fit it in when I can and make sure that the other things come first. That is only right as a mum. Mine are still quite young and you have to put them first. Studying for the assignment can make it difficult sometimes and it is one of the worst things for me about it all. Don't get me wrong, I love it but for me it's difficult. I look at those in their twenties and sometimes get jealous of the time they have. (Jamie's group interview response)

> I won't let it [*Foundation degree studies*]. I won't miss anything what my children do. This is because they will always be the most important thing. I will always work and always do this, but I always want to make sure I won't miss any of their events or activities. That's always got to be my priority. (Jan's individual interview response)

Interestingly, this pressure was also identified by one childless student, who was in her mid-twenties.

> Paul: Do you think that your experience is different from the others?
>
> Kirsten: Yeah. I would say it's different. They're mums all the others. I don't know how they do it. Fitting it all in. I respect them for it. I couldn't erm I would like kids one day. The best option is to get this done first. That's my ambition. (Individual interview response)

However, for Jess, who was also childless and in her twenties, needing to balance a multiplicity of demands and roles was not the exclusive preserve of those with children.

> I think we are different in the sense that obviously we are in a different position in that we don't have families and children and erm but then we have other things going on. Kirsten has her degree [*this was an Open University French degree she was also studying*] and I'm teaching full-time and at the minute. Whereas the people who have children some of them are only working part-time or they're only volunteering a few mornings, so actually they have the days free, I know there are housework and things, but they have more time. Also I help with my gran. (Individual interview response)

Dewart (1996) comparably found that mature students who were also mothers faced particular challenges around fitting their studies with the expectations of family members. As part of his analysis of mature female students who were studying for a Foundation degree, Bainbridge (2005) outlined how many of these learners prioritised "being Mum" in their life outlook. He proceeds to claim that ". . . the notion of distracting from the role of mother/care-giver may not be immediately part of their familial habitus" (p. 25). The accounts collected for my research indicated that this is not just a transitional state, but can be a powerful on-going belief throughout their time in study. It was a regular feature of interviews that were conducted at the end of the students' second year of study, when the problems of the Foundation degree had been considered. Pressures of childcare were also a feature in observed classes, which included discussion of the pressures of teaching assistants undertaking professional development. Elsewhere, mother-students at newer post-1992 UK universities have been found to experience a high level of pressure to prioritise their mothering identities over being a student (Brooks 2012, 2014).

Although a number of student-mothers stated that they had tried to avoid disruption to their family members' lives and that their desire to minimise this was partially behind their decision to opt for Foundation degree study, this was not always considered to have been successfully achieved. For many of those with younger children, there was a strong view that their learning had produced short-term negative consequences for their dependent offspring.

> I tried to work at home in the holidays when the children were in, but it doesn't work. But you need to do that but end up shouting at them when they want the computer and you want the computer. You can end up not letting your children do the things that they should. (Ruth's group interview response)

Dunne et al.'s (2008b) research into a group of teaching assistants, who were also mothers with dependent children, similarly found that Foundation degree study was sometimes viewed as having had a detrimental effect on some aspects of family life. According to a small number of those who participated in my research, disruption at its most acute had involved children leaving the family home for a short period to be cared for by relatives whilst their mothers completed assignments.

> Kerry: For my main assignment my general thing is that my kids are shipped off for two full days. They come back at five o clock at tea time.

> Jennifer: That's what I do.

> Kerry: They are shipped out for two full days. They are shipped out to somebody for two full days. I just sit for two full days.

> Paul: How does that make you feel?

> Kerry: Awful. I hate it. Yeah we'll see if our kids still know us at the end of it.

> Jennifer: Awful. (Group interview response)

Existing research has documented how guilt and familial pressure are central components of the female mature student experience, particularly if they have children at home (Brooks, 2012; Stone, 2008). In the context of teaching assistants who were following a Foundation degree programme, Morris (2010) has linked family pressures and guilt to these students' experiences. Others have gone so far as to claim that mature female students can experience "extreme guilt" if they believe that their studies are impacting negatively on family life (Shanahan, 2000). Guilt, allied to the negative

influence that their studies had produced on their children's lives, was explicitly discussed in three individual and one group interview.

> I feel frustrated and sometimes guilty about it but I expect them to understand as I'm doing this for the family. You don't always control things the way you should and they [*children*] lose out. It's regrettable. (Dawn' individual interview response)

Although small in number, none of the student-fathers who contributed to my research expressed the view that domestic pressures or familial guilt had informed their interactions with study. Woolhouse et al.'s (2009) investigation of female Foundation degree students, who had dependent children, also found that this group prioritised their family lives over studying, unlike those who were fathers. Brooks (2012, 2014) described a similar situation in her comparative research of student-parents in the United Kingdom and Denmark. She argues that one explanation of such differences is that it reflects wider discourses about what constitutes "good" parenting and specifically "good mothering" (Brooks, 2012, p. 7) that dominates life in the UK.

Individual interviewees were asked whether they believed that the pressures of balancing study and family obligations was in some ways a gendered experience. Surprisingly, only four students signified that such pressures were different for male and female students who were parents:

> As a mum you've to prioritise them. My husband did a Foundation degree through the RAF in my first year. I didn't do any work while the children were up, he did. I still bathed the children and put the children to bed while he was sat in the living room. So, I think it's different in that respect. (Julia's individual interview response)

> It wouldn't have crossed my mind, but in some respects yes. There aren't many males in the profession. Tom's the first one I've met in our area. When we've done networking meetings, which don't happen anymore, we've never had male TAs on. I'm thinking about Tom's situation and it's his wife that is having to see more of the children, so I suppose it's different in that way. (Davina's individual interview response)

5.4.2. Being a partner, time constraints and relationship pressure

A number of female students noted that they had experienced relationship tensions with their partners, as their studies had progressed. Strain on relationships with partners was highlighted as an added pressure that some students experienced as they tried to manage family life and study. Most often, relationship tensions were linked to male partners' unhappiness with the students studying in time that traditionally had been spent together. Students in three individual and three group interviews outlined how, when they had been required to prioritise study related activities over relationship ones, it had created conflict with their partners.

> Gillian: I think it will be an achievement if after three years we are still with our original partners [*laughs*].
>
> Paul: Why do you think that?
>
> Gillian: We all seem to have had tensions. It puts a lot of pressure on partners as much as us. We're not always there as we were before. I'm happier in the library on a Sunday and we never go out with each other. There's no time. They now have to do more by themselves, even though you try to keep it from interfering as much as you can. (Group interview response)

This comment was accompanied by vigorous nodding by all the students who were present in the room. The following interview extract between myself and Jan also exemplified how studying had manufactured conflict with partners.

> Paul: Apart from your Head teacher, did anyone else encourage you to do the course?
>
> Jan: Yeah my husband encouraged me, but I think that he regrets that now.
>
> Paul: Why would he regret that now?
>
> Jan: Basically, because he never sees me and is getting a bit fed up about it. Speaking to other people actually, I know that doesn't answer your question, but there are quite a few of us having fall outs with partners because we are at the computer or with our nose in a book all the time. You have to compromise and cut things down. I know others feel the same. (Individual interview response)

Interestingly, the small number of non-married female students who did not have children outlined how stress on relationships was not just restricted to older students. For these learners, there was a comparable view that the time they needed to allocate

to their studies had put a strain on their ability to maintain romantic relationships. For Kirsten, there was no time for such relationships in her life.

> I have no life outside this. There is no room. I'm a geek. I want to have kids one day, but this has to come first. I want to be teaching by the time I'm thirty. I'm cynical when they say they understand. Sadly in my experience it is that they don't. (Individual interview response)

Jess, who was in a long-term relationship, claimed that her studies had produced arguments with her fiancé due to the time that she needed to devote to them.

> My boyfriend who was my fiancé when we started didn't take to it. We've rowed about the time I spend on it. I'm really committed to doing this, it's my future. It has to be for me at this point of my career. (Individual interview response)

Morris (2010) and Wilson (1997) have noted that relationship conflict is a possible consequence for students who enter higher education at an age later than is the societal norm. Research on mature female students' experiences has further detailed how one of the "risks" of undertaking higher education is that tacit assumptions about established domestic workloads will be uncovered and deemed to be unsatisfactory. One consequence of this can be strain on relationships (Baxter & Britton, 2001). Only two of the female students with dependent children claimed that they had experienced modification of previously established conjugal roles as they tried to balance studying, family responsibilities and work.

> This course has been great. I haven't cleaned up for two years. It's been a great excuse. My husband has been really good, he's learned how to iron. Mine's taken on all sorts of things that I used to do, to help out. (Julie's group interview response)

> My husband's been fantastic for me. If it's his day off he will do my washing and my ironing for me [*gasps from most of the other students who were present*]. He's brilliant. (Susan's group interview response)

Absence of "familial negotiation" around established patterns of domestic responsibilities has also been found by others who have investigated student-mothers at newer universities (Brooks, 2012, p. 488). The above interview extracts also illustrate how even those who had claimed to have experienced an alteration of conjugal roles defined such change in terms of male spouses "helping out" more, with the implication that they had continued to undertake the majority of domestic labour.

There was no discernible belief that increased expectations around partners' contributions to domestic labour had produced relationship tensions.

Stone (2008) has previously outlined how marital breakdown amongst mature students is connected to a modification of mature female learners' identities that accompanies their participation in higher education. This outcome had only been the case for one of my interviewees. Nicola, who had deferred her studies for a year when her marriage broke down, explained:

> I'm now finally divorced which is good. I remember you saying to me that you will change. I now think differently and use different words. Some of them I didn't know previously existed. It has really changed me about what I want. I am so glad that I did it. I'm now looking forwards. (Nicola's group interview response)

Most of the second year students who were married or involved in long-term relationships, did not describe such a terminal breakdown of their relationships. Nevertheless, the vast majority of female individual interviewees viewed their studies as having placed considerable strain on their domestic lives and relationships.

5.4.3. Time, problems around work-based learning and workplace identities

Academic investigations into mature students on a range of undergraduate programmes, across a variety of international contexts, have shown that this group of students routinely have to balance employment obligations and their studies (Moore, 2006; Moreau & Leathwood, 2006; Stone, 2008). It should be noted that this situation is not exclusively confined to mature students (Callender, 2008). For instance, recent research in both the UK and United States has shown that younger students are increasingly facing a comparable balancing act (Curtis & Shani, 2002; Martinez, Sher, Krull, & Wood, 2009; Moreau & Leathwood, 2006). Somewhat predictably, the need to engage in this balancing act was evident in the overwhelming majority of individual interviews. However, the need to undertake substantial work-based learning was considered to have generated particular dilemmas related to balancing their commitments to both work and study. In this situation, their student identity needed to be subordinate to workplace roles and identities. This experience cut across gender, parental roles and age group.

Students regularly cited limited opportunities, or spaces, to undertake work-based learning when outlining the drawbacks of Foundation degree study. Being released

from workplace duties to undertake course related learning activities was said to be unusual. Most of those who were individually questioned claimed that they were expected to complete their studies with the minimum of disruption to their workplaces. Typically, work-based learning activities were viewed as being squeezed into lunch times, at the start or after the end of school day. This pressure was clearly outlined in Nadia's and Christina's account of their experiences of balancing their studies with her work commitments.

> I have to do it in my own time. I can't be going through the policy documents or anything during the day so I have to do it at lunchtime or before work. That sort of thing which I suppose is fairly normal. (Nadia's group interview response)

> Because it's work-based it creates a really good bridge. I have to congratulate you on that, but work-based tasks cause problems. When you do work-based tasks is when everything is done, if you're lucky. (Christina's individual interview response)

The lack of workplace time to participate in learning was also outlined during another group interview, but it was indicated that for a small number of students that their employers had recognised and responded to this barrier to learning. Two students claimed that they had received allocated study time where they had not been expected to undertake their regular workplace duties. This time was referred to as "PPA time". These arrangements were nevertheless uncommon and most students were required to fit work-based learning around their duties as teaching assistants. Taylor's (2014) contention that "work-based learning is situationally and socially shaped" (p. 2) seems to be pertinent here. She asserts that Lave and Wenger (1991) were correct in this respect. The mixed picture the students claimed to have experienced in terms of support for work-based learning was illustrated in the following group interview exchange.

> Jennifer: I think you need to be assertive with your school. Just as an example, my timetable next year has totally changed and I've got PPA [*planning, preparation and assessment* time] so I can access this and have some personal time and do this [*Foundation degree*].

> Paul: Is this a similar situation for other people?

> Georgie: I've asked. I've said this term, I need some time and they've wanted me to do the course so I have asked and I thought they could say no.

> Kerry: And did they?

Ruth: No they didn't. I got PPA time.

Kerry: Really. I would never get that.

Jennifer: I think TAs who are on the course should have PPA time and I know a lot of the girls would support this. No not for planning it's for work overload.

Sam: I don't get PPA time.

Paul: Is that to do with your jobs?

Georgie: The day job has to come first. You are always a TA when at school. Work-based tasks are always an issue for me. I struggle with them.

Sam: We never get a minute and they rely on you to do so much, more than they should for the hours.

Edmond (2003) has explained how teaching assistants' experiences of vocationally orientated higher education included role conflict, as they attempt to perform the roles of "learner and worker" (p. 122). Those who were involved in my study generally described prioritising not only their own official workplace roles, but also those of their colleagues. As a result of this, work-based learning that relied on school-based colleagues to offer their time was regarded as being particularly problematic. Capturing teachers and managers' thoughts on established school practices and policies was identified as being demanding as a consequence of this form of learning. Soliciting the views of head teachers was portrayed as a particularly difficult process. This situation appeared to be the case irrespective of whether or not they had been granted PPA time. In interviews, four students indicated that they had experienced problems when endeavouring to involve head teachers in their learning. Pressure on their heads' time, rather than a deliberate denial of support, was viewed as producing a lack of access.

Mary: My head is fantastic, but has no time.

Nadia: To say I was pushed into it by the head, she never asks me about it. I don't get time to speak with her about what I need for the course or tell her what module I'm doing. She doesn't have a clue and is far too busy.

Sonia: It's a time issue. They [*Head teachers*] are so so busy these days.

Paul: Would people say this is just a problem for people in small schools?

Nadia: No not in mine. I wouldn't say so. It's she's so busy and so much on with Ofsted and all the other demands like our SATs week. As a TA you don't always think you can ask. It's not your place, but I'm sure they want to help. (Group interview response)

Davina made a similar point in an individual interview. Here again the time constraints that head teachers experienced was highlighted as limiting students' engagement with them and consequently learning.

Davina: It's my head that's my mentor, but I haven't had a conversation since I started which was not the idea. I'd hoped to have meetings with her.

Paul: Why do you think that is?

Davina: She's just too busy. Here there and everywhere and I would feel awkward asking for special time to talk to her so I'm managing on my own.

In common with head teachers, most classroom teachers were seen as sympathetic to the students' learning needs yet appropriating time from them was depicted as often equally trying. Two major factors were represented as being linked to this problem. Firstly, it was claimed that students found it challenging to find mutually convenient times when they and teaching staff were available due to the work commitments of both groups. Secondly, for a number of students there was a reluctance to draw upon teachers' time after school, which they viewed as being extremely limited; accessing it brought a feeling of guilt for some. These constraints were exemplified in the following group interview exchange:

Paul: Do you experience any problems when you're asked to do work-based tasks? You know the work-based learning?

Jamie: Time.

Petra: Time yeah. Time to sit down if you need to talk to any of the teachers. It's time and you feel so guilty asking them to give up their time because it is so precious. And er it is a guilt thing. I always feel so horrible when I have to say please can I have a bit of time to go through it and they will go through it, but it's always snatched time.

Emily: You see I struggled with the SEN module in that our head teacher is the SENCO so catching her was a nightmare. Actually I did put in my assignment that all of this is just my thoughts, as I couldn't get to our SENCO. I just didn't get chance to sit down with her and say I need this, and this and can you talk to me about this cause catching her was just a nightmare.

Petra: I think maybe do yeah know when we start the course and the letter goes out to school it might be useful in that saying. They will require time to talk to you.

Emily: It does say that they will support you. It just needs a bit more say what support you need but it wouldn't stop you feeling guilty, like people have said.

In four individual interviews, students highlighted the issue of guilt when asking teachers to give up their time. It was also discussed in two group interviews. Two students explained how this had been the case even when a member of teaching staff had formally agreed to be the students' mentor and source of workplace support.

When trying to get time with my mentor [classroom teacher] who is now only working two days a week, I feel really bad trying to talk to her. God are you here again? Sit down. Semi-joking but it's difficult. (Susan's group interview response)

I feel guilty. The fact that she [*the* teacher] is working until seven or eight o'clock at night and you're saying can you please help me say to do an interview. I feel so guilty, so if I'm honest I sometimes make up some of the work-based tasks. If you want me to be brutally honest work-based tasks can be a waste of time. (Debbie's group interview response)

Workplace guilt was therefore a surprising sub-theme that arose in accounts, which in some respects might be seen as reflecting the reluctance of students to ask others to give precedence to their learning needs. It was also interesting to note how this matter was not mentioned in male student accounts.

The above findings illustrate that guilt has the potential to structure female Foundation degree students' interpretations of their learning. This result is in accordance with those provided by other researchers. They have documented how "guilt" is deeply rooted within mature students' experiences of higher education (Blaxter & Tight, 1994; Reay, 2003; White, 2008). The feelings of familial guilt outlined earlier in this chapter, have been found to be prevalent amongst mature female Foundation degree students (Bainbridge, 2005; Brooks 2012, 2014; Woolhouse et al., 2009). However, these discussions only emphasise guilt in relation to the adverse effect of study on the families of students. For some of those who took part in my investigation, guilt was additionally experienced in their school workplaces. Being a teaching assistant and Foundation degree student, with a perceived self-identity that their needs should not take precedence over those of others, seemed to be reflected in such expressions of self-reproach. One result of this was limited opportunities for work-based learning and consequently a fulfilment of their potential as students.

5.5. Theme four: The importance of coping strategies in managing competing demands

During eight individual and five group interviews, students discussed a number of "coping strategies" (Blaxter & Tight, 1994) that they had employed in an attempt to manage the competing pressures that stemmed from their positions of learner and teaching assistant, as well as their domestic circumstances. These strategies were viewed at least in part as facilitating the continuance of their journey towards "self-realisation" (Reay, 2003, p. 314) through studentship. Copi

g strategies were identified as having taken physical and psychological forms. These tactics included "social and emotional adjustment" (Penketh & Goddard, 2008, p. 323).

The ways that mature students, and specifically those who are mothers, draw upon a number of coping strategies has long been documented (Merrill, 1999). In the interviews conducted as part of my research, coping strategies were also identified by student-fathers and non-mother female students. However, these were more limited in scope than those documented by student-mothers with dependent children. Once more for Foundation degree students, this aspect of engagement seemed to be mediated by gendered notions of motherhood. The accounts outlined in this chapter also suggest that being a mature student undertaking a Foundation degree sometimes required additional strategies that mature students on traditional academic programmes have no need to call upon. These additions were portrayed as stemming from the need to deal with a number of challenges that traditional academic degree students rarely encounter. The most frequently discussed coping strategies are summarised in Figure. 5.2.

Figure 5.2: Main coping strategies based on analysis of interview data
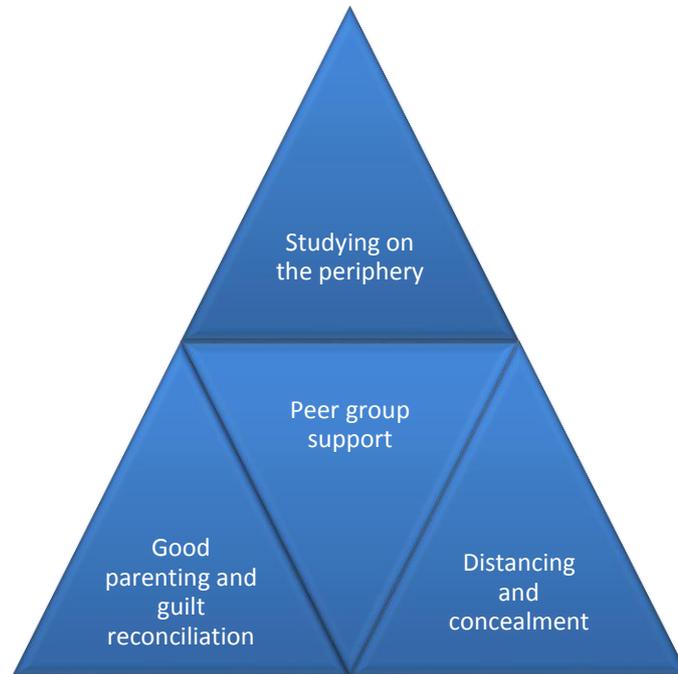
5.5.1. Peer group support

In over half of individual interviews and in just under a third of group interviews, peer group support from other Foundation degree students was identified as being a positive feature of their experiences of study. Peer assistance was often pinpointed as having been drawn upon to manage the pressures of being a Foundation degree student whilst endeavouring to execute a number of other roles and forms of self. There was often a sense that the Foundation degree students had a number of shared experiences and identities which had induced an exceptionally strong peer support network. Peer support was viewed as being something that was available from the start of the students' studies. It was sometimes highlighted as having helped a significant number of students to successfully manoeuvre their way through their initial transition into higher education. Encouragement was a central way that peer support was regarded as having been conveyed. When I asked about why the students seemed to have settled quickly into university life, this issue was emphasised in a number of students' accounts.

Paul: People have said to me that they settled into the course really quickly. I was a bit surprised by this, why do people think that this was the case?

Jo: I think because we bonded really quickly. We hit it off straight away. We all just got on and we've all got a lot in common and really want to do this. I think that's why people settled.

Karen: Yeah this is a good group. We all get on. It's lucky and it's been like that from the start. We try to help each other out and keep an eye on each other. If someone misses a hand-out or is struggling we try to keep them going. You always know there will be one of the girls to help you if you need it. It was like this from the start when we were all new to this and scared to death. We all have so many things on and the friendship and advice you get is invaluable in so many ways. (Group interview response)

Joan also related powerful levels of peer assistance to the Foundation degree students' relatively communal demographic and aspirations. She commented:

We are all in similar situations and we are all aiming for the same goal. We are all TAs in early years, primary and secondary and we've mostly all got young children or teenagers. We've got a lot in common. We socialise well together and you can get support and discuss problems that you have. We really work well as a group and really support each other as we are in the same boat. (Group interview response)

Christina claimed that shared domestic and workplace circumstances produced a strong group identity and generated a desire to support each other from early on in the students' programme of study She outlined how in common with most of her peers outside university, she was in a situation of relative isolation and loneliness which her involvement in study countered:

That's a big part of it for me, the social aspect because sometimes being a mum can be quite a lonely job and even at work primary schools can still be quite lonely places because everybody is working on their own. It's quite an isolated job role really and you never have time to socialise as it's so intense and erm whereas university gives you that and it's like minded people in the same situation and you have a lot in common straight away even before you walk through the door. You're about the same age, you all have kids and it's perfect, it ticks so many boxes with me. It means you can click straight away as you share so much really. Everybody erm just sort of helps out with assignments and personal problems and the challenges we all face. That is just how we are. (Individual interview response)

Dawn also emphasised the importance of shared social identities in producing a strong network of peer support. She claimed that one consequence of shared social circumstances was common problems which in turn promoted peer assistance:

> Dawn: I think the thing is that because we're all working in school and a lot of us have families, and some people have got quite young families. We've all got the mortgage and whatever else going on so I think it's about nobody wants to see anyone fail and want everyone to get to the very end. We are all sort of friends.
>
> Paul: What is this make you feel?
>
> Dawn: Good. Relieved. You always know that there is someone there for you, not that they don't have their own pressures. All of us have things on. It is that makes people help out the others. It can be a great reassurance knowing people are there for you and facing the same issues who will help out if you need it. (Individual interview response)

The power of peer engagement in sustaining Foundation degree students as they encounter the ongoing trials of engaging with higher education is also underlined in other places by vocational educationalists (Wintrup et al., 2012). Specialised research into the experiences of Foundation degree students who are employed in schools, has emphasised how classmates are often identified as a valuable and constant resource; in terms of ongoing "motivational" support (Tierney & Stack, 2005). Taylor's (2014) utilisation of Lave and Wenger's (1991) concept of learning and communities of practice to explore teaching assistants experiences of Foundation degree study also offers interesting insights into the importance of peer support. She has written "it is clear that the support of the peer group is vital and could be construed that a parallel community of practice, or 'tangential and overlapping communities of practice' (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 98) exists alongside each of the student's workplaces" (p.11). This situation reflects that which has been found amongst other non-Foundation degree mature students. Merrill (2014) and Thomas (2002) have further highlighted how engagement with peer networks and friendship groups is an important factor in whether mature female students successfully complete their studies.

The students whose views are discussed in this thesis outlined how the maintenance and existence of supportive peer groups did not solely only exist within the confines of the university setting. The existence of valuable shared supportive learning spaces beyond this context was a relatively strong feature in accounts of their experiences. One of the cohorts that I studied in the second year of data collection outlined that they had developed a "study group" outside the class. I was informed that this met at various students' houses. When I asked about how this had come to fruition, I was told: "Rebecca set it up" and that it offered encouragement, advice and learning

opportunities. Common concerns about assignments were also said to be discussed. Personal problems, such as stress, were also sometimes dealt with by group members. Interestingly, I became aware, from students' accounts about these study nights, that first and second year students were involved in the activities together. Learning was cross-cohort and had developed informally. This result was something that countered my taken-for-granted beliefs about what students' experiences of peer group learning involved. I had assumed it would be confined within year groups.

Participation in study group meetings in other students' homes was not, however, a commonly cited feature across the cohorts that I studied. It was only discussed by one year group in interviews, although they claimed that others from the year group below had participated. Moreover, where it did occur, involvement was regarded as having declined by the middle of its second year. When this was enquired into, the main organiser of the study group indicated that it was a result of the students living some distance apart and the difficulties of establishing a mutual time when everybody was free to meet. The pressure of needing to balance study with other responsibilities was once more in evidence. However, this situation did not mean that peer support and learning outside the university was not a dominant feature of the students' experiences. Peer support and learning was also routinely said to have been accessed through internet based resources; such as global student emails and social network sites, primarily Facebook. In each year of my data collection, a number of students highlighted the existence of self-created web-based support groups or communities. Like university-based peer support, these groupings were routinely connected to strong friendship bonds amongst the Foundation degree students. Angela explained:

> Friendship is a really big part of the course. To be honest it's surprised me how well we got on. The girls are really supportive. You can always get advice. People will email and you always get two or three quite quickly responding with an answer. (Group interview response)

Betty comparably outlined:

> There's a lot of support, a lot of camaraderie. You know if you've forgotten something, lost something or can't download something. Well there's always help and people get geed up. Some people just send a general email round for help or put on Facebook. If you're desperate you can say please help and it's been quite supportive. There's always someone to spur you on. (Individual interview response)

In another group interview, Jennifer described how she had used the Facebook group to ask questions about an educational theory and whether anyone had information on where she could find relevant articles. However, she did acknowledge some of the limitations of this form of informal learning:

> Facebook has been great. If you're stuck you can always get an answer. People are always willing to help you out if you can't get an article. It's been a nightmare sometimes I think to download the material you might need. Facebook comes in handy. I really rely on it, but you can get mixed messages and wrong information. Rab says this and Pete says that about referencing. It is good though. You can also see people have similar problems, which is nice. It's reassuring.

Conrad's (2008) small scale qualitative investigation into a group of Canadian learners who were enrolled on an online post-secondary work-related health course, relatedly described how some of the adult learners used online forums to provide and gain emotional support. This included guidance on issues related to their personal lives as well as anxieties about assessed pieces of work that their tutors had set. The results presented here are in keeping with this research. They also reflect the results of recent research which has specifically underlined the way that Facebook is being used as a space to discuss students' academic experiences, where they are "leaving traces of their academic journey" (Vivian, Barnes, Geer & Wood, 2014, p. 443). Having access to peer support was most commonly highlighted by female students with children, but was not exclusive to this group.

5.5.2. Studying on the periphery

Reay's (2003) seminal analysis of English female mature students on an ACCESS course identified how such students coped with the multiple challenges that their studies presented to their existing patterns of family life by confining learning-related activities to times where they would have limited impact on children and partners. This finding was also prevalent in the individual interviews that I conducted with Foundation degree students who were mothers of dependent younger children. Practical strategies that attempted to restrict the impact that their studies had on their children and partners were principally said to be constructed around restricting study to times of the day when family responsibilities had been completed. Whilst a smaller number of those who were individually interviewed claimed to have employed such a strategy to reduce potential effect on their partners' lives, more frequently it was

claimed that such tactics were primarily derived from a wish to limit the negative imprint that their learning made on their children's lives. The most common form that this strategy took was undertaking academic work late at night and sometimes in the early hours of the morning.

> Abigail: I get up at five o' clock so they don't see me doing it.

> Karen: I stay up until four in the morning so I'm there to do things for the kids. I refuse to do it in the day. (Group interview response)

Correspondingly, Nadia explained in another group interview that she had aspired to reduce the effect that her studies had on family life by completing assignment work while her children and partner were asleep:

> You do it when you can. I am that one on Moodle at two o'clock. Don't think I'm sad. It is just the best time, when I can do things without it making waves with the children or husband.

Fitting assignment related work into spaces which reduced disruption to family life was cited in five individual interviews and half of the group interviews. Baxter and Britton (2001) and Edwards (1993) provide corresponding empirical evidence that studying on the periphery is a routine experience for female mature students. This outcome is also in line with Woolhouse et al.'s (2009) research into female teaching assistants involved in Foundation degree study. They found that for those with children, Foundation degree study ". . . was 'allowed' once the needs of their families had been met and was relegated to marginal spaces such as 'the attic'" (p. 770). They further claimed that these learners were "multi-tasking" (p. 770) figures who undertook learning in these peripheral spaces. Reay's (2003) study of female students on an ACCESS to Higher Education Course, in a similar vein, found that these learners suffered from "an inability to totally immerse themselves in their studies until all their domestic and childcare responsibilities had been discharged" (p. 310).

The two male students who were interviewed, both of whom were also fathers, did not mention such patterns of study. In contrast to many of their female peers, they claimed that they had established periods of "ring-fenced" time for their studies on weekends and in evenings. Tom, in his individual interview, explained this in terms of his partner understanding of the priority he needed to give to his studies:

> The way I deal with it is quite straight forward. We had a conversation at home before I started this and I said I needed time to do this. It was about doing something that was good for the family in the long-term. She's [*his wife*] great at making sure the kids are kept busy, to be fair when I need space for assignments and other things. I need my ring-fenced time where I can get on with things. It's the way I have to work in that way. It's just the way I have to work. I can't do short bursts and then stop and then start again. It's not me. (Individual interview response)

As previously discussed earlier in this chapter, for a sizeable number of students who participated in my research, their experience of studying on the periphery also occurred as they undertook work-based learning. Such learning was said to have been carried out in lunch breaks, before the school had commenced and after the end of the working day. Here again, learning on the periphery was evident in many students' accounts. This element of Foundation degree experience is underexplored in academic research. Learner roles and identities were consequently squeezed into spaces when other aspects of the students' lives had been addressed.

Attempts to confine studying to the peripheries of family life seemed to provide a contrasting finding to that of Brooks (2012) who found little evidence of student-mothers trying to separate studying and family life. In some respects, some of those who were sampled reflected Quinn's (2003) finding that female students with children consciously aimed to divorce home and student identities from each other. However this issue, for some students, was more complex and separation was not total. In some circumstances, students actively sought to link their studies to positive changes to their children's lives. Reactions to feelings of guilt seemed to be connected to this narrative.

5.5.3. Good parenting, studying and the reconciliation of guilt

There was a strong view in a number of accounts that were gained from students who were also mothers that when disruption to family life occurred, the emotional distress that accompanied this was partially resolved by reflecting on the benefits that their families had, and would eventually accrue from their studies. Intriguingly, this feeling of guilt was represented as being similar to that which some had experienced in their workplaces. For some students, defining their Foundation degree studies in such terms seemed to alleviate a sense of selfishness and guilt. In a group interview discussion about coping with guilt, Liz informed me: "I think it's about not seeing it as being something for yourself. It helps you justify it to yourself in some ways as being for your family and children".

Liz's rationalisation reflects a parallel trend that was established in Reay's (2003) investigation of mature working class women's access to higher education and Bainbridge's (2005) exploration of female Foundation degree students. For some, guilt about the disruption that their studies presented to their existing family lives seemed to be managed by explaining their studies as "giving" rather than selflessly taking. For two of the female students who took part in group interviews, such coping strategies were also said to have encompassed providing detailed explanations to their children about why they were studying. One Higher Level Teaching Assistant explained for example:

> I have sat mine [*her children*] down and explained it to them, that mummy is doing this to make it better for all of us in the future. They seemed to understand, but I still feel guilty. (Ruth's group interview response)

Kerry explained how she had also been involved in adopting this approach:

> I spoke to my children about it and explained to them what I was doing. And I think they are old enough to understand that conversation. Yours aren't. Yours are a lot smaller but mine understand that I am doing it to be better for us as a family and we are sacrificing, but in the end it will be worth it. (Kerry's group interview response)

A relatively small number of student-mother interviewees who expressed guilt about having reduced quantities of time for their children, indicated that they partially eased their guilt by stressing the positive role modelling that their studies had provided for their dependent offspring. Notably, this focused upon the influence their studies had on raising their children's future educational ambitions:

> My expectations of myself are rubbing off on my children. In fact, my son Matt came to uni the other week because he was ill. I had to take him to A&E because he'd been ill at school and Suzi let him sit in the afternoon [*Christina's scheduled Foundation degree* class] and he was colouring at the back and but he goes you know when I go to university so you know he's already got that expectation that's what he'll do. And that's what I didn't have you see as a child and for me that's a really important step for me to move my family on as well as for myself erm and that they see that I'm doing that and they see that I'll be able to do that if my mum's doing that. So, that's now become a big motivation for me and it helps. It helps in your mind knowing you are doing your best for them when you don't always have the time that they want. (Christina's individual interview response)

The merits of such modelling were also clearly outlined by Liz in a group interview. She informed me that:

> I think it's good for your children to see you studying and if they get to come to the Cathedral ceremony I think it's good for your kids. It's good for them to see you have to work hard to achieve something.

Her studies consequently seemed to be justified, in part, in terms of providing positive parenting. Julia relatedly offered a similar point of view in her individual interview:

> Julia: My kids are so proud of me. We do our homework together round the table. They tell everyone "mum's doing a degree". It's embarrassing sometimes but I get a feeling that they are proud of me. It's good for them to see this [*university level study*], as a future choice. Something they can do when they're older.

> Paul: Does that help you when you have to take time out for study?

> Julia: I suppose it helps you come to terms with not always taking them out to say the park or some other activities, even though I try not to let it interfere.

Justifications of this type were an interesting comparison to those which stressed limiting study to the periphery and may have been employed where the latter could not be achieved. Research that has focused upon teaching assistants' perceptions of the impact of Foundation degree learning upon parenting has described how students on such programmes believed that their children had directly benefitted as they had new educational skills. These had been utilised to support sons and daughters as they completed homework tasks (Tierney & Stack, 2005, p. 382). For some of the students who participated in my investigation, "support" was portrayed as being extended beyond educational support and had involved being a progressive role model that had stimulated higher levels of educational aspiration for their children.

The student accounts, provided by those who were also mothers with dependent children, perhaps endorse previous research which asserted that this group of learners persistently involved in "(re)constructing themselves as 'good mothers' . . . as a strategy to assuage their guilt because they felt they were 'indulging' in learning for their own benefit" (Woolhouse, 2009, p. 771). Merrill's (2014) small-scale study into female adult returners to higher education study also established that such students characterise their experiences in terms of providing social and economic advantages for their offspring. It is suggested that "being a student per se was not seen as necessarily in tension with a 'good parent' role" (Brooks, 2012, p. 453).

5.5.4. Distancing and the concealment of Foundation degree status

Just over half of the students who took part in individual interviews revealed that they had tried to mitigate the stigmatisation of being a Foundation degree student by concealing that they were enrolled on such a programme. It was also mentioned in two group interviews. Sometimes this involved concealing the exact title of the award that they were studying for. These students commonly claimed that they omitted any reference to the "Foundation" aspect when conversing about their studies with individuals who were not part of the university. Dawn highlighted this in the following way:

Dawn: Well I don't you know say Foundation degree. I say it's going to be three years so it's going to be an honours degree.

Paul: Why do you say that?

Dawn: Well because the Foundation degree doesn't sound as important and because I'm putting my heart and soul into it, I want people to realise that it's a big jobbie. (Individual interview response)

A similar tendency towards concealment was apparent in Davina's response to a question on whether she used the term Foundation degree when discussing her studies with other people:

Honestly I don't tend to I don't tend to. I tend to say I'm doing a degree because I don't know. I think that although there shouldn't be there is a bit of it that sounds like you're doing something lesser than a degree which it's not. It's just the same. (Individual interview response)

This identity management (Goffman, 1963) seemed to be informed by an awareness of the "second-class" status others allotted to Foundation degree study, which is explored in greater detail at the start of this chapter (Dunne et al., 2008; Robinson, 2012; Woolhouse et al., 2009). A comparatively large number of students seemed to be aware of the position in the hierarchy of higher education (Brooks, 2012; Robinson, 2012) in which Foundation degrees have a relatively low status. This state of affairs seemed to be an additional disadvantage that Foundation degree students suffered, which for some had led to the development of a distinct coping strategy. Mature students enrolled onto more traditional honours degrees are less likely to experience such stigmatisation, particularly if they study an established academic subject at a

research intensive university. Identity practices (Lynch, 2008) around distancing were identified by both genders, younger and older students and amongst parents and non-parents.

5.6. Chapter summary

This chapter has discussed students' subjective constructions of their Foundation degree experiences. In doing so, it concentrated on the second major research question that this thesis explores: How do teaching assistants interpret their experiences of studying on a Foundation degree that is directly related to their workplace roles? Four major themes that emerged from analysis of data connected to this are outlined. These were: 1) Foundation degree as an initiator of enhanced self-belief and realisation; 2) status deficit as a constraint on self-realisation; 3) space, study and the challenges of established roles and identities; and 4) the importance of coping strategies in managing competing demands.

Figure 5.3: Main themes to emerge from data analysis on the Foundation degree students' views of their experiences
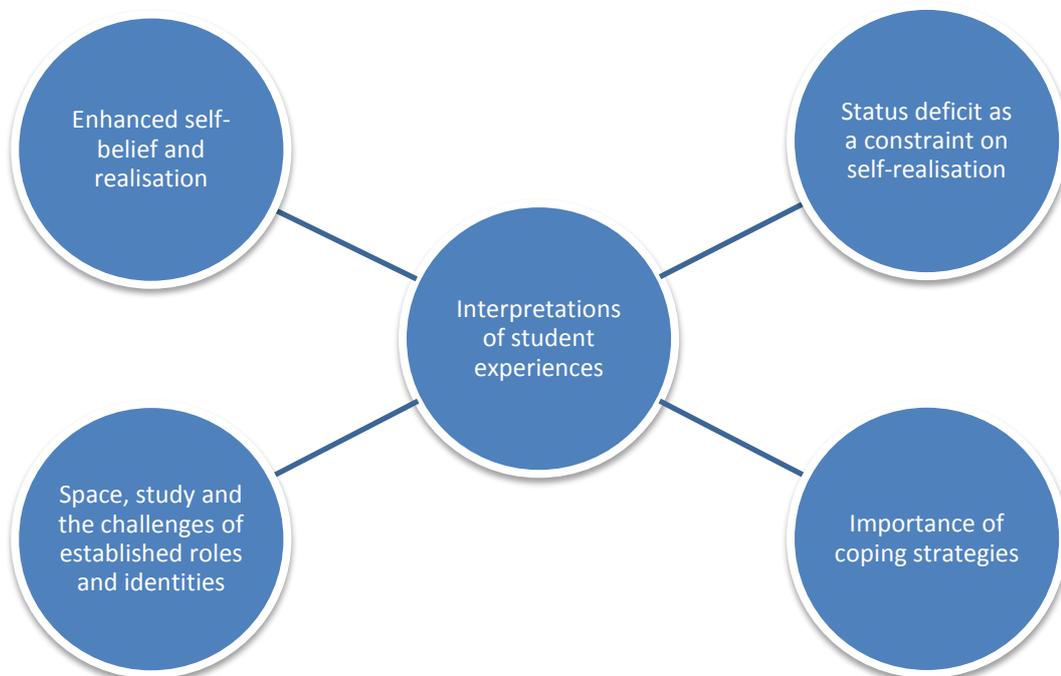
Participation in Foundation degree study frequently seemed to be defined as having offered a valuable space where positive identity work (Young, 2006, p. 3) and what Reay (2003) terms "projects of the self" (p. 309) could be achieved. Participation in study was viewed as having produced an enhanced sense of self-worth. Hence, for a majority of learners, this seemed to some extent to have been obtained. However, for some students there were constraints which had diminished the development of this positive sense of personal identity, such as the stigmatisation that they believed Foundation degree status had in the eyes of others. Concealing the title of their award was one way that students claimed to have responded to this situation.

Existing domestic and workplace identities and roles were frequently viewed as acting as a further restraint upon many students' attempts to achieve realisation through study. However, these views however seemed to be nuanced in distinct notions of parenthood, age and occupational situations. University study was "a transitional space where new identities" could be "forged" (Morgan, 2015, p. 60), but the ways that the Foundation degree students subjectively experienced this process was represented as being informed by differing domestic, gender and working circumstances.

Motherhood, being a partner and their teaching assistant roles were emphasised as generating specific restrictions in relation to Foundation degree study. For all categories of student, balancing being a teaching assistant with study had been challenging; even though many students had initially been attracted to Foundation degree study as they had believed that it would enable this task to be accomplished. Student-mothers also often emphasised the added difficulties they faced as they attempted to perform their domestic roles. This situation had left some feeling time poor and guilty. The existence of workplace guilt, in addition to previously well documented familial guilt, was also an interesting discovery. To manage the psychological and physical dilemmas that Foundation study presented, a number of strategies were identified as being drawn upon. The extent and form these took partially seemed to be dependent on whether or not learners were mothers with dependent children.

In many respects, many of the accounts described in this chapter were akin with those that have been documented amongst mature students generally, and female learners specifically, in a number of Western societies (Blaxter & Tight, 1994; Brooks, 2012, 2014; Leder & Forgasz, 2004; Lynch, 2008; Merrill, 1999; Quinn, 2003; Steel

et al., 2005; Stone, 2008). Yet the findings discussed in this chapter suggested that the social identities and accompanying roles of being a teaching assistant and Foundation degree student can create a feeling of specific hardships. Markedly their occupational position, Foundation degree status and a requirement to undertake learning in the workplace produced an experience that was distinct and one which had produced added complexity.

6. CONTEMPLATING THE END OF FOUNDATION DEGREE STUDY

6.1. Introduction

This final results chapter outlines the views held by students about their feelings as they approached the end of their Foundation degree studies and the consequent meanings that they assigned to their impending departure from them. This chapter addresses the third and final research question that I sought to explore: What meanings do teaching assistants, who are at the end of their Foundation degree studies, assign to their imminent move away from being a Foundation degree student?

This third research question emerged in response to comments that were offered by two students made in a final group interview. In this interview, they spoke for a considerable amount of time on their hopes and anxieties about their departure from Foundation degree study. These learners offered interesting insights into a component of Foundation degree experience that I had not explicitly set out to investigate in other group interviews; how students felt about exiting Foundation degree study. The emergence of this issue led to the development of my third research question.

As I outlined in chapter two, a small amount of research has been beneficially conducted into the progression of Foundation degree students to BA honours degree study without exploring the anticipations of the students about this transition (Greenbank, 2007; Penketh & Goddard, 2008; Pike & Harrison, 2011; Morgan, 2015). Yet little has been written on students' anticipations of such transitions and what views they possess as they approach the end of Foundation degree study.

Data on these issues were explicitly collected in the 12 individual interviews that were completed with second year students. This information was complemented by a very small amount of data from my earlier classroom observations and supporting documentary material. Two major themes were identified from data analysis: 1) positivity around imminent completion of Foundation study and 2) frustrations and anxieties about transition to honours level study.

This chapter begins by discussing the positivity that the Foundation degree students assigned to the impending completion of their course of study. It then considers the second theme to emerge from the learners' accounts around the irritation and worries that a transition to honours level study created. Strong emotions were expressed by

interviewees as they contemplated the end of their present studies. Positive and negative meanings permeated many of the accounts.

6.2. Theme one: Positivity around imminent completion

A very strong theme to emerge in students' interview accounts was an overall sense of positivity as they approached the final part of their studies. Unanimously, interviewees claimed that their Foundation degree had been worthwhile; this was framed in terms of having provided them with the skills required to complete an honours level year study and the space to acquire an informed view of what career path they should aspire to. However, as I outlined in chapter three of this thesis, such responses were treated with caution, as my position of being the students' programme leader could have produced positive accounts. Additional data was gained from the National Student Survey to confirm satisfaction, and students were encouraged to expand and reflect on their answers.

6.2.1. Foundation degree had been a worthwhile experience

When interviewees were asked to consider if their involvement in Foundation degree study had been "worth it", all the students stated that overall it had been; with words such as definitely" (Julia), "absolutely" (Jan) and "very much so" (Jess) being frequently used to describe students' feelings. Kirsten's response seemed to sum up many their feelings when she stated:

> Absolutely, one hundred percent worth it. As demanding as it has been in terms of time and workload as well as the effect it has had on my all important work-life balance, predominantly work and very little social life in my case, it has been completely worth it. I always knew an Fd would be intense and stressful because of its very nature and that I would have to sacrifice certain things but I was willing to do that from day one. For me it is about the long haul and this is short-term pain for long-term gain. Despite the rigours of studying and working full time, in the future and particularly in terms of my career, hopefully all my hard work will pay off. I went into this knowing I want to be a teacher and this course is very much the starting point for me. Despite all of the pressure and it being intense, it's been absolutely worth it. I have gained so much from doing it, including getting a new best friend. (Individual interview response)

This sense that Foundation degree had, on balance, provided a productive experience existed in the views of all types of students and was not confined to one social category.

Results from the National Students Survey data on the Foundation degree provision that the teaching assistants had experienced similarly suggested a high degree of satisfaction (see Table 6.1).

Table 6.1: National Students Survey statistics on level of students' overall satisfaction for the course

Year of exit from the Foundation degree	Percentage of students satisfied with their course	Overall university satisfaction rates
2012	88%	86%
2011	91%	84%
2010	95%	81%
2009	93%	80%

Data from question 22 of the National Student Survey

These sentiments resonate with those documented by Morris' (2010) in her investigation of an equivalent cohort of students. Moreover, a larger scale survey of five hundred Foundation degree students also found a high level of satisfaction as they approached the end of their studies (Dodgson & Witham, 2005). Two of the students who took part in my research expressed the view that they were leaving their present studies with a feeling of that their studies had been "worth it" as they now had an increased knowledge of children's learning and improved personal confidence. Four students claimed that course satisfaction included a feeling that they had acquired the academic skills that would allow them to cope when they progressed to honours level study.

> Although I'm nervous about what is to come, the Fd has given me the confidence to know that I can tackle any new project and make it work as I have the skills to do it. Can't wait to get my teeth into it really. (Christina's individual response)

> I feel very well prepared for next year. The Fd tutors have been so supportive. I do believe that we will have the skills to get through next year. (Davina's individual response)

Julia also explained how she was leaving her Foundation degree with the confidence that she would have the capacity to undertake a higher level of study as she took the next step on her journey to a change of career. Hence, for some of the students, there was suggestion that a positive academic self-concept (Rodriguez, 2009) accompanied

their exit from Foundation degree study. A belief in their ability to cope with the next stage in their studies was symbolic of this self-belief.

> Paul: How are you feeling about next year?

> Georgina: Very nervous, but well prepared. All the reading and research we've done and working as well should make things OK hopefully. (Individual response)

This finding echoes Morgan's (2015) discovery that Foundation degree students, in the main, felt academically prepared to undertake their honours year. It also offers a challenge to research which has found that the practical focus of Foundation degrees could leave them feeling "ill equipped" when they progress to honours level study (Greenbank, 2007, p. 97). However, it should be noted that it has been argued that such difficulties have been discovered to disproportionally occur amongst Foundation degree students who are transferring from a further education college to a university context to complete their top-up year (Penketh & Goddard, 2008; Simm et al., 2012; Winter & Dismore, 2010). New surroundings, relationships and cultures are cited by these writers as making transition problematic for these students. Having experienced on-site teaching at the university where the Foundation degree's honours year top-up was also offered may have contributed to the reduction of these anxieties amongst the students that I studied. For those students who were individually interviewed, transition to honours degree was not aligned with a fear of cultural change. The absence of these issues perhaps shows the worth of enabling Foundation degree students to study at university before they progress to honours level study.

Fenge (2011) claims that some Foundation degree students who actually chose to study in a further education college did not define it as a genuine higher education experience, and therefore held a perception that this level of education seemed accessible. It does, however, potentially make academic progression beyond this level of study problematic. Rapley (2014) outlined how the Foundation degree students that she investigated at a land-based further education college decried a lack of contact with an authentic higher education and culture.

For a number of interviewees, their Foundation degree had also been beneficial in that it had left them facing the future with a strong sense of the direction they wanted their lives to take in terms of their careers. For those in employment, there was a consensus when they claimed that their imminent departure from their Foundation degree was accompanied by a continuing determination to leave their posts as teaching

assistants. For three of these students, having access to a reflective space to consider, and ultimately reject becoming a school teacher, was a positive outcome that was identified when students were asked about whether their Foundation degree had been a worthwhile experience. Christina's interview response was also typical of this position:

> I hope to be working in adult education maybe teaching other teaching assistants or working in another industry entirely but in a management capacity. As you can tell I'm not entirely sure what I want to do but I can tell you that I will not be a teaching assistant slogging my guts out for £8 hour or a teacher as they aren't appreciated either. As you reflect on it both of these become something that you realise you shouldn't try as a career option. This has been one of the worthwhile things as I've studied on the programme. (Individual response)

In a similar manner, Debra explained:

> I'd like to be a mentor or go into child counselling. I can't decide. I could do teaching, but I don't want to worry about everything else. I've changed my mind quite a bit, but the more I have seen what teachers do and we have discussed it, teaching's not what I want to be. Looking to the future, I can see I have other options. (Individual response)

Dunne et al.'s (2008a) research into the perceptions held by a similar group of students also found a similar elimination of school teaching as a future career as they progressed through their studies. The desire of some students to focus alternatively on more pastoral type roles was also noted. In Dunne et al.s' (2008a) research, rejection of entry to the teaching profession was solely linked to a rejection of the standards agenda and the accompanying discourse that was structuring teachers' work. In the findings gained from my research, participants did not find any overt links to this agenda; instead, an increased awareness of the workload, and accompanying pressures of teaching had informed such decision-making. It must be acknowledged, that many of these factors have been correlated to the intensification of the so-called standards agenda (Osgood, 2006).

Davina explained how having access to the university's careers service had been important in clarifying and modifying her career ambitions.

Paul: On reflection, was doing a Foundation Degree worth it?

> Davina: Yes definitely in respect of that it has prepared us for next year, with lots of support and encouragement. It also made me realise I don't want to teach which I thought I did coming into the course. I've been to see careers to see what you can do. I'm now thinking of working in a children's centre as a parental support worker. (Individual interview response)

This emphasis on the role that university advisors can have on mature students' career aspirations is very much consistent with Wintrup et al.'s (2012) findings. However, half of the students who were interviewed had not rejected school teaching and continued to aspire to entry to this profession. The career affirming outcome of Foundation degree study should also, therefore, not be underestimated. For some students this is an important part of the Foundation degree process that they valued as they approached the end of the programme. In her interview Kirsten stated: "This course has made me believe I can achieve my ambitions and fuelled my desire to be a teacher, even more so." For Betty, this had also been the case but she was unsure about whether she would actually achieve her ambition to teach due to the increasingly competitive nature of the graduate job market:

> I really still want to teach after this, but what worries me is that you have so many graduates. My daughter being one of them. There are few jobs and knowing that we are reducing in numbers and thinking what will be there in a couple of years' time, that's a real worry. They are saying you need a masters now in the next couple of years to teach. (Individual interview response)

For a number of students, university had been a valuable "third space" (Oldenburg, 1989) where critical reflection on, and sometimes an affirmation of, future career ambitions could be undertaken. Relatedly, it was a worthwhile space to review who they would like to be and "could potentially become" (Morgan, 2015, p. 113). As they reflected on the imminent ending of their Foundation degree studies, this outcome was highlighted as being one of the factors that made them believe that their studies had been worthwhile. Such an outcome existed irrespective of stage in the lifecycle, gender or whether students were parents.

For the majority of students who were individually interviewed, their exit from Foundation degree study was accompanied by a suggestion that their studies were a passport to future occupational change. As they ended this part of their higher education experience, the majority indicated that they continued to believe that a future change of career was a distinct possibility. As I outlined earlier in this chapter, they had not become sceptical about achieving the career change which other researchers

have suggested is a feature of such students' educational journeys (Dunne et al., 2008). Many continued to ascribe to a narrative of an "aspirational story" (Penketh & Goddard, 2008, p. 321) which encompassed a belief that Foundation degree study would produce a changed and enhanced occupational future.

In summary, a number of positive meanings were assigned to the Foundation degree experience. This view was predominantly structured by an understanding of "preparedness" (Simm et al., 2012, p. 563) for honours level study, as well as having gained an informed perspective on preferred future career pathways. Parenthood, gender, and age were not overtly discernible forces in influencing these responses.

6.2.2. Pride and relief at having navigated a variety of demands and expectations

As they approached the end of their studies, a number of interviewees stressed a feeling of pride at having successfully managed to negotiate a number of opposing claims on their time over a two year period. Five students expressed a feeling of "pride" at successfully overcoming the trials that their studies had presented them with. These included academic and personal challenges. Constructive feelings of this type were commonly the first emotions that female interviewees discussed as they reflected on their feelings about the ending of their Foundation degree; even if they then proceeded to describe more negative feelings. Four of these students, who were mothers, coupled their feelings of pride with a sense of relief. Betty contextualised her feelings in relation to the emotions that she had previously experienced about the graduation ceremonies of her daughters:

> It's a slightly different thing, but having been there to watch my daughters graduate and looking at their picture. They are so happy and so proud in these pictures. I now suddenly realise why. It is the phenomenal amount of work that they put in. Fortunately they were also falling out of pubs as well. Although I was phenomenally proud of them, I don't think that I appreciated the work, the time, the blood, the sweat and tears that had gone into it. They were only eighteen or nineteen. Equally I am proud of what I've done and relieved to have just about made it through. It's been a real roller coaster, but I am so proud of myself that I've just about completed this whilst keeping my job going and doing the things my head and family expect of me. (Individual interview response)

Debra's response also exemplified this narrative of pride at overcoming multiple challenges:

> I feel extremely pleased and proud of myself for this new achievement. I cannot believe two years have gone so quick and I have managed to juggle all the other things that I have. (Individual interview response)

Dawn similarly outlined:

> I feel very proud, and relieved that I have got to the end of the Fd especially with all the issues that I have had. It gives me a great deal of satisfaction that I have overcome illness, work commitments and my childcare to get through. (Higher Level Teaching Assistant in a primary school)

Her sense of pride from successfully managing to balance childcare with her studies was reflected in the accounts of others. Julia expressed this in the following way: "I am very proud of myself for getting to the end. However it has been hard work especially with working full-time and having to put Ella first" (individual interview response).

One of the younger students (who did not have children) also highlighted how her success in coping with conflicting claims on her time had provided her with a strong feeling of pride, as she reflected on the completion of her Foundation degree. Kirsten explained:

> I feel very proud of myself for getting through it. At the start of the course, I would never have imagined the wealth of knowledge and skills I would have gained from being a part of the Fd. It will however, be nice to have a bit of a rest from the constant demands of studying, to recharge my batteries over summer and start all over again in September. It has been a very hectic two years and at times somewhat difficult to say the least. I have been working four full days a week in my school, volunteering in a primary school for the other day and studying towards a Modern Foreign Languages degree with the Open University as well as the Fd. I am really proud of myself that I've managed it all and remain healthy and sane. I think gaining my Fd is a real personal achievement and I will be delighted and proud to graduate in November. (Individual interview response)

The Foundation degree, in conjunction with the coping strategies that the students had developed, was also viewed as having allowed the students to balance a range of roles and identities. This accomplishment was viewed as a source of satisfaction. The challenge that many students claimed to have experienced when trying to balance competing pressures associated with studying, being a teaching assistant and family life was identified in chapter five of this thesis. Earlier research has also noted this in

relation to both other Foundation degree students and adult students as a whole (Arskey et al., 1994; Baxter & Britton, 2001; Tierney & Slack, 2005; York & Longden, 2010). However, a notable omission is the potential sense of achievement and boost to conceptions of self-worth that getting to the end of a programme of study in these circumstances can offer.

Therefore for a number of female students, surviving the logistical challenges that Foundation degree study had presented them with had boosted their self-concepts to some extent. In this way, Foundation degree study might be viewed as having met one of the outcomes that many of them often had hoped for when they had decided to return to study. Curiously, as was also outlined in chapter four, a number of the student-mothers had been attracted to Foundation degree study as they had believed that it would allow existing life patterns to be maintained. Yet, they often subsequently suggested that once their studies had commenced balancing a variety of work and domestic obligations had not been without its challenges. Managing this situation to the end was however viewed as a positive accomplishment that was seen as a source of pride.

6.3. Theme two: Frustrations and anxieties around the need for further study

Alongside a general positivity about reaching the final part of their studies, a number of students expressed more negative feelings as they prepared to exit Foundation degree study. Frustration and anxiety about the need to undertake further study to access a change of career was articulated in their interviews. Chapter three of this thesis documented that this additional study took the form of undertaking a top-up BA honours degree year at the same university. There was also sadness at the loss of the support and certainty that the Foundation degree was portrayed as having provided them with. The demise of what has been labelled the Foundation degree "safety blanket" (Simm et al., 2012, p. 572), was an issue for some. Negative meanings, alongside more positive ones, were therefore apparent in students' accounts of how they felt about the forthcoming completion of their Foundation degree.

6.3.1. Partial achievement

All but two students who were interviewed claimed that they intended to progress to BA study. Age and personal circumstances were cited as the reasons for one non-progression. Eleanor informed me:

> I've decided not to come and do the top-up [*BA Education Studies*] next year. I don't want to teach. I am nearly fifty and by the time I have finished I'll be ready to retire. Besides I have a new grandchild and I want to spend time on things that are important. Don't get me wrong I have enjoyed the course. It is just too late for the teaching thing. Besides I really enjoy my job and my head really looks after me. (Individual interview response)

Most students though did intend to progress to the honours degree "top-up" year. There was an acute awareness that the completion of the Foundation degree in itself would not facilitate career progression. Jess described how her reaction to the end of her Foundation degree incorporated a variety of emotions partly for this reason:

> Right now I feel like I will get a bit of my life back, although I also know that I will find myself needing to read and wondering how I will fit everything in next year. It's a mixed emotion really, I'm really glad I did the degree. I'm amazed I've nearly finished it and I'm proud of the self-motivation I found within myself to do it, but it feels half done as we still need to do year three and then maybe teacher training. (Individual interview response)

Jan also offered an account that stressed achievement alongside pressure to undertake further academic study:

> I think it feels like it is the end of an emotional journey and graduation will be part of this, but I still think we are a long way away and we still have to get through the next stage which is going to be another challenge. So it is relief and fear. (Individual interview response)

Between 2009 and 2012, the vast majority of students on each cohort who had studied on the Foundation degree progressed to the university's honours degree level top-up year. There was no evidence, as I outlined earlier in this chapter, that the students regarded their present qualifications negatively. Rather progression rates might instead be viewed as reflecting an understanding that others did not often recognise it as a "qualification itself" (Woolhouse et al., 2009) and that this was therefore unlikely to result in career development. Consequently, as the students approached the final stages of their studies, the limited social status of their qualification was once again viewed

as being problematic and for some had pushed them towards further study. Foundation degree study was sometimes viewed as a "staging post" that the students needed to move beyond to gain the career modification they wished for. Tom expressed this in the following way:

> I feel a real sense of achievement on completion of the Fd, and so pleased to have some time for me and my family. It feels like an important hurdle on my way to my future goals has been overcome, yet it also feels like you're only half way there and that the main event is still around the corner and that's the main event. While I feel happy that I have achieved this, I know that I will need to do the top-up to achieve my long-term goal of teaching. It's a bit of a frustration as I'm ready to do it now and do lots of it in school. Ultimately the Fd doesn't allow you to achieve this. Next year is the next hurdle and it will be here we go again and then PGCE after that. It seems a very long journey and I always knew things were not going to happen overnight. (Individual interview response)

Davina's account also provided an example of a narrative which stressed a need to continue to study. Her account indicated that this situation had reduced the sense of satisfaction that she was feeling about reaching the end of her Foundation degree:

> I expected to feel relief and triumph but I don't, probably because we have another year ahead now. However I do feel quite chuffed with myself for completing it and really pleased to know I increased my grades towards the end and always managed to get my assignments in on time. I do feel disappointed and surprised that I don't feel more excited. I just know we've got it all to do again next year and this on its own won't move me on. (Individual interview response)

As with the Foundation degree students who took part in Robinson's (2012) study, interviewees were intensely conscious of the limitation of their award in terms of status and enhanced career development. To overcome this, many realised that they needed to progress to honours level study. Intriguingly, this awareness of a need for further study is in keeping with Brooks and Everett's (2008) study of widening participation graduates at a post-1992 university who felt a need to gain a post-graduate qualification due to an awareness of the value others assigned to their degree, especially employers (cited in Robinson, 2012). They were also alert to the hierarchal discourses related to higher education which encompass the assignment of differential levels of status to various qualifications at differing Higher Education Institutions (Brooks, 2012). Consciousness existed around the ways that this diminished the value of their achievements in the jobs market. For five individual interviewees, the satisfaction that students claimed to possess as they approached the exit from their

Foundation degree studies seemed slightly diluted by a sense of it being a "job half done" or a staging point on a journey to occupational change.

6.3.2. BA study and concerns about role and identity management

Student interviewees commonly expressed anxiety about the challenges presented by their final honours' year. Primarily, these revolved around the difficulties that accompanied attending university for an extended day, which involved studying three modules simultaneously per semester. This differed from the Foundation degree that required students to complete one module every half-term. These time periods were structured to reflect the school year. In just over half of individual interviews, students expressed concerns about whether their future involvement in BA study, with its whole day attendance, would undermine the fragile balance that they had managed to broker between studying and existing life commitments. Problems around maintaining existing lives were linked to the challenges of this new form of study. This viewpoint existed for those with and without dependent children; however student-mothers did cite more complexity in the challenges posed by this situation. Kirsten, who did not have children, explained:

> I am nervous about next year because it is a step up from the Fd however I am looking forward to a new challenge. I like the mix of modules, politics, sociology, psychology; although it is going to be tough adjusting to being at university one full day a week and then working the rest of the time. I am not expecting to have much of a social life! I think initially it will be difficult, like anything new but it will become my normal life soon enough. (Individual interview response)

Dawn also expressed her concerns about managing to secure time away from her workplace to complete the next stage of her studies.

> Dawn: I am totally relieved to get to the end of the second year. I am worried about next year being more demanding but am determined to finish. Doing three modules at once is something I'm aware of. That's a big worry for me.
>
> Paul: What is it about doing the three together that worries you?
>
> Dawn: Being able to do everything. We've been used to doing one after the other and coming on a night so it will be a challenge doing three at once. Getting time off for a full Tuesday and arranging childcare is something I've needed to look at, which fortunately I've now got arranged. It just adds to how I feel about the BA. I fear that I will not get into teaching. My head won't let me drop hours or I won't get anywhere with teaching. You know Andrea from my school. She is stuck doing

the HLTA. She can't get anywhere with just the Fd. I don't want to do all this and get stuck. I really hope I don't. It's a worry. (Individual interview response)

Jan, in an individual interview response, highlighted the dual burden student-mothers faced:

I believe next year will pose problems for me on an organisational and domestic level and work. I really hope that I am able to use my new writing skills to make a decent fist of the third year. This adds to the nerves, anticipation and dread all combined in me at the moment and I hope that the BA faculty is as understanding and calming as were the Fd staff. I don't mean understanding in the way of forgiving late assignments, I mean empathic and dedicated to helping us pass.

Similarly, Julia informed me:

I am looking forward to next year, although I know it is going to be even harder than the last two years by far. There will be a lot more theory which I've found difficult in the past. Childcare for a full day is also an issue and you now have the school holidays to think about as well. (Individual interview response)

Some students were therefore mindful that the demands of "family commitments" were a potential threat to students' chances of completion of BA studies (Merrill, 2014). The burdens that family obligations can place on mature Foundation degree students, as they aim to make the transition to successful honours level study is helpfully and well documented by other scholars (Penketh & Goddard, 2008; Morgan, 2015). As they discussed leaving their Foundation degree studies behind, a number of those who were interviewed recognised this pressure. They offered accounts that were reminiscent of the "the narrative of beset by trials" that has been identified in accounts of female mature Foundation degree studies as they describe undertaking an honours year study (Penketh & Goddard, 2008, p. 322).

The trials posed by attempting to maintain employment whilst studying can be seen as underestimated in research into Foundation degree students' transition to honours level study. Their schools were portrayed as "greedy institutions" (Edwards, 1993) which made taking a full day off to study difficult. In response to this worry, two students claimed that they had given up their jobs as teaching assistants. Financial constraints and the risks of not having employment after graduation were, however, cited as reasons why others had not taken this course of action. These were a concern for all types of student, but significantly added to the childcare pressures that those with dependent children believed that they would encounter.

Consequently for a number of students, anticipation of their transition to honours level study was one that incorporated anxiety. Nervousness about disruption to their existing patterns of life, and coping strategies, that had allowed students to complete their Foundation degree was evident. The anticipation of experiencing high levels of stress as they made the transition to honours level study resonates with Greenbank's (2007) finding that Foundation degree learners do actually experience pressure when they undertake this move. However, unlike those in Greenbank's (2007) study, this was not aligned to fears about having to undertake a more traditional style of academic learning. Predicted problems focused more upon the practicalities of fitting study around other obligations. This difficulty was connected to how their top-up year was structured in terms of the pattern of formal tuition that it presented.

Morgan's (2015) analysis of transition to honours level studies by students who had followed an Early Years Foundation degree showed that this process was viewed as problematic for some learners. The struggles that this presented for those who moved from further education colleges to universities to complete their undergraduate studies are identified as experiencing particular problems. Attending the campus, larger classes and encountering new students were cited as a concern for many of these learners. Those who took part in my research recognised and anticipated the challenges of transition, but as I discussed above these focused upon the logistics of managing rival claims on their time. As they were already accustomed to studying on the university's main campus, unsurprisingly fear of entering a new environment was not highlighted as an issue. Having been taught for the Foundation degree element of their studies on campus may have reduced some anxieties about transition that other students have been documented as experiencing and anticipating when moving from a further education college to university for their final year of undergraduate study.

A number of students reconciled fears about these potential difficulties by citing: "that it will be worth it in the end", "I've come this far" and "it's only two semesters". Sacrifice and deferred gratification were frequently offered in accounts for what the next year of their studies was likely to bring. For two students, not having to participate in and document work-based learning activity was also welcomed. It was seen as reducing the burden that their Foundation degree studies had placed on them. One of these students welcomed not having to relate their learning to their present workplace: "It will be nice not having to do work-based tasks and the pressures they give you. I'm

looking forward to not having to apply everything to my workplace" (Jan's individual interview response).

6.3.3. Sadness at a loss of sources of support

Four individual interviewees nuanced the positive meanings that they assigned to the end of Foundation degree study within a more general feeling related to sadness and loss about an anticipated demise of important sources of support. Interestingly, all of these students were mothers with children. The expected demise of peer group support and friendships was a negative outcome that the end of their studies symbolised. This was rather unsurprising as many interviewees had highlighted the importance this had played in making their present studies a productive and successful experience and so its anticipated loss was a source of some worry. Christina's comments were typical of those who linked sadness at completion to an expected loss of peer support:

> I'm not sad about the ending really as I am so pleased to have reached the end as I couldn't envisage getting there at the beginning. I am sad that the group will no longer be together in its present format. I will really miss the colleagues who are going on to do the other things instead of Ed Studies. I do feel a big sense of achievement and fulfilment about putting the last assignment in for marking, but will miss the support of everyone. We have been really supportive of each other in all sorts of ways and kept ourselves going. It's left me feeling a bit sad and scared about next year. I had expected to be elated. (Individual interview response)

Dawn also raised this issue in the following way:

> As I said, sad because we won't all be together. Nervous at the expectation that the workload will be too much and the standard will be much harder. I'm excited that I hopefully will get a full degree. I think I'd feel more happy if we all did it together and supported each other so well so am therefore quite sad we won't all be together next year. I will miss our group lots, more than I could have imagined when we started this. We've become so close. (Individual interview response)

For Kirsten, there was also some regret that she would be at losing contact with her Foundation degree tutors. She outlines:

> I also feel a bit sad that it is just about over. I will miss the staff on the Fd. They are knowledgeable, supportive and strive to ensure students achieve their individual aims. This course is a brilliant course and that is largely down to the huge role the tutors play. Their encouragement, advice and support has been invaluable to me throughout these past two years. (Individual interview response)

Poulson (2003) explained how, for adult students, moving on from undergraduate study; including graduation; an engender feelings of "sadness, loss and fear" and that moving on encompasses the loss of "comfortable routines" (p. 66). This was also equally the case for a number of the Foundation degree students, as they face transition beyond their present studies.

6.4: Chapter summary

This final results chapter has outlined an analysis of the meanings students gave to their impending departure from Foundation degree study. The findings were primarily gained from individual interviews. It explored the third of my three main research questions: What meanings do teaching assistants who are at the end of their Foundation degree studies assign to their imminent move away from being a Foundation degree student? Two major themes emerged from interview data. These were: 1) positive feelings about imminent course completion and 2) frustration and anxieties about transition to honours level study. Hence, as the students prepared to end their engagement with Foundation degree study, a variety of positive and negative meanings were assigned to their looming exit from Foundation degree study. Within each theme, anticipations about future identity and role management were to some extent embedded.

Positively, there was a high level of satisfaction with their achievements and that studying had been a worthwhile experience. The improved personal academic self-concept that was identified in many accounts of experiences of Foundation degree study was reflected in the confidence that students felt about their abilities to cope with the academic challenges of honours level study. Pride at succeeding in the face of multiple challenges that was assigned to Foundation degree completion was accompanied by a positive sense of self, especially for student-mothers who had childcare responsibilities. However, there was a view amongst a number of learners that their achievement was only partial as they still needed to complete a BA year to gain future occupational change. Anxiety existed in the minds of some as to whether or not they would be able to sustain the balance they had established between different parts of their lives whilst undertaking their Foundation degree. Female students with younger offspring expressed anxieties about the dual set of pressures that stemmed from their domestic and working lives. They seemed to be aware that they had a double disadvantage to manage. Sadness at leaving the Foundation degree was expressed by

some students, particularly around an expected loss of peer support. One explanation of this feeling could be that it reflects the value that they assign to learning with others that they imagine have shared identities and circumstances.

The findings described in this chapter were also often consistent with those found in relation to students' motivations for and experiences of Foundation degree study; in that they emphasised participation as an on-going struggle against a number of inequitable experiences. To varying degrees, these derived from the roles and identities connected to the home, university and workplace. The latter of these is underdeveloped in previous academic analysis of students' understandings of their engagement with Foundation degrees. Equally, the importance of learners' conceptions of needing to inhabit multiple identities, and not just social roles, are not adequately acknowledged in literature on the feelings of Foundation degree students on the transition to honours level study. The findings in this chapter also suggest that specific issues around transition can impact on Foundation degree students as they anticipate exit from their present studies that may not be experienced by other groups of higher education students.

7. DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

7.1. Introduction

This chapter of my thesis offers further discussion of the findings that have previously been reviewed; particularly endeavouring to provide additional critical exploration of the data that has been outlined in chapters four, five and six. However, in contrast to these chapters, the analysis that is offered in the following text examines students' understandings of their engagement with their Foundation degree more holistically. This is achieved by exploring a number of salient features that existed across accounts of their motives for study, experiences as learners and the impending ending of their Foundation degree studies. From this analysis, a new model or way of conceptualising teaching assistants' understandings of their engagement with Foundation degree study is proposed.

The possible consequences that this interpretation could have for the design and delivery of Foundation degrees, which are aimed at meeting the needs of teaching assistants, are then examined. Following on from this discussion, the implications for Foundation degree policy are more generally considered, before issues related to widening participation in higher education are discussed. This chapter ends by offering a summary of the discussion that has been presented.

7.2. Differentiated struggles for identity transformation

As each of this investigation's central research questions were analysed, the struggle for an enhanced sense of self clearly dominated student descriptions of their motivations, experiences and anticipations around their exit from their programme of study. Struggles and challenges were patterned by the domestic, workplace, and student identities that learners were expected to inhabit. The Foundation degree was often viewed as a "transitional space" (Morgan, 2015, p. 24) which offered an opportunity to construct fresh conceptions of identities for a variety of learners who had previously been excluded from higher education. This finding endorses O'Shea and Stone's (2011) discovery that transformation of self is central to mature women students' experiences. The findings documented here also suggested that this desire can be found in the views of student-fathers and younger childless female students. Both males and female students partially defined their motivation for study in terms of

a wish to contest and resist how they, and others, viewed who they were. Interestingly, Foundation degree study was viewed as providing a means of self-realisation; irrespective of students' gender, age and whether or not they had dependent children.

Students often explained their educational engagement in terms of having been denied access to a sense of "self-worth or personal significance" (Snow & Anderson, 1987, p. 1339). Previous educational and current occupational experiences were connected to conceptions of a negative sense of personal self. Enhancing personal pride and confidence, as well as resisting previous definitions of educational abilities were central to remedying such negativity. Students often presented their reasons for entry to higher education as a means of boosting their sense of self, having previously not had access to roles outside those undertaken as part of parenting that had offered this enhancement. O'Shea and Stone (2011) have, insightfully, also claimed that for mature higher education students: "Education then is not only about acquiring knowledge but can also provide the means to restore a sense of self or identity" (p. 281). Foundation degree engagement was viewed as providing a range of learners with differing social characteristics, such as opportunity. It was, however, overwhelmingly attractive to student-mothers who composed the vast majority of the students enrolled on the programme.

Once the learners had commenced their studies, many claimed to have experienced an enhanced self-belief and realisation (Reay, 2003). For the majority of those who expressed an opinion as part of this research, elements of perceived deficit in personal identity was portrayed as having been to some extent remedied by their involvement with Foundation degree study. As chapter four discussed, this finding resonated with those found elsewhere (Bainbridge, 2005). Research into mature students generally has also found comparable results (Shafi & Rose, 2014; Walters, 2000). Merrill (2014) has explained how: "A university education can be a powerful biographical experience for adults as it opens up new ways of looking at the world and the self" (p. 12).

The endeavours of students who aimed to achieve such personal self-realisation (Reay, 2003) were frequently regarded as being hampered by a number of structural constraints. Restrictions were related to the hierarchy of education (Robinson, 2012), workplace roles, and often gendered expectations related to domestic relationships. These were portrayed as having impacted on students differentially, depending on the other roles and identities students inhabited in each area of their lives. The perceived consequences of being a Foundation degree student, workplace situations and

domestic experiences were key features to emerge from the analysis of understandings of their studies. Only one group were identified as experiencing pressures from all of these; student-mothers with dependent children.

7.2.1. Opportunities and inequalities related to being a Foundation degree student

The specific experience of being categorised as a Foundation degree student, especially the identity it bestowed, was viewed as being another element that had configured engagement with their programme of study. Being on a Foundation degree programme encompassed a feeling of positivity and negativity. Positivity was expressed about Foundation degree's flexibility in regards to the qualifications required for entry to it. It had allowed a number of students who might have potentially been excluded due to a lack of qualifications or social circumstances access to higher education. The programme's delivery pattern was also regarded as enabling wider access. It was frequently seen as reducing the risks of disruption to established family and work commitments and established forms of self. For female students with dependent children, both of these were important concerns; being a student was an identity that needed to be secondary to the ones that they were expected to play in these social contexts. Student-fathers and younger childless females were generally only concerned about meeting employment obligations.

Once their studies began, sharing a common occupational position and often a similar family situation and educational biography with other Foundation degree students was viewed as having been advantageous. Biographical commonality was also viewed as having generated a strong peer support network that had helped them to manage the challenges that their studies had presented.

As they approached the end of their studies, many female students generally cited the anticipated loss of a group that shared a number of common identities and experiences as a source of concern. Askham (2008) explained how, amongst mature students on vocationally orientated higher education programmes, there is "a general tendency to seek support from one's social milieu rather than from within the 'alien culture' of higher education" (p. 95). Gendered notions of parenthood and shared inequitable experiences of being a teaching assistant seemed to strengthen the bond.

Less positively, many students claimed that they felt a feeling of stigmatisation and marginalisation as a result of the limited status assigned to their studies by others. Many of the Foundation degree students were aware of the hierarchical discourses (Robinson, 2012) which limited the esteem that they received for undertaking Foundation degree study. A consequence of this was that some students claimed to have engaged in a process of distancing (Goffman, 1961) which had involved concealment of their Foundation degree status. Here again, identity work in the form of identity management (Goffman, 1963) was depicted as having been undertaken. One possible way of explaining this strategy is that it is a means of protecting a developing positive sense of self that the students had gained from undertaking university level study.

Snow and Anderson (1987) label the above process as associational distancing. They argue that this endeavour involves disassociating oneself from a social identity that is negatively classified by others. They explain how:

> Since one's claim to a particular self is partly contingent on the imputed social identities of ones associates, one way to substantiate that claim, in the event that one's associates are negatively evaluated, is to distance oneself from them. (Snow & Anderson, 1987, p. 1349)

As the students approached the end of their studies, there was also a common frustration that the format and limited status of their Foundation degree had resulted in a feeling of a partial achievement and enhanced self-worth. One consequence of this was that academic achievements were in some ways diluted. This feeling led to a reinforcement of the "second-class" status that some students often viewed themselves as experiencing, in present and previous lives, as teaching assistants. Therefore, the specific identity that being a Foundation degree student conferred was often an important feature in narratives about engagement. Surprisingly, literature on students' experiences of Foundation degrees gives limited focus to the analysis of the specific consequences the official identity of Foundation degree student produces. Similarly, the way that the stigmatised identity of being a Foundation degree student is differentially and commonly responded to by students with diverse social circumstances is rarely explored.

7.2.2. The importance of workplaces on experiences and choices

Somewhat peculiarly, virtually all the existing analysis of teaching assistants' experiences of Foundation degree study provides little coverage of learner understandings of their workplace selves and experiences. Those who contributed to my investigation indicated that their workplace experiences had been a very strong and on-going influence on their engagement with their Foundation degree, from its beginning to its virtual ending. Workplace identities and the inequitable experiences that were viewed as being a consequence of this were recurrent and prevalent across a number of student explanations.

As many of these programmes were set up to meet the perceived skill deficiencies that it was believed teaching assistants' possessed, insufficient exploration of the workplace is an unexpected omission from research in this area. It is suggested that for those involved in the investigation that is described here, Foundation degree study was not routinely understood in terms of remedying a "skills-deficit", which policy makers had assumed that they possessed (Parry, 2006, p. 405). However, workplace identities and experiences were presented as having significantly informed their understandings of their engagement with Foundation degree study from its beginning to end. The recurrence of this issue is outlined in Table 7.1.

Table 7.1: Summary of the main research themes that emphasised the influence of workplaces and related identities by research question

Research questions	Main themes	Reduced codes
Question 1: What motives and circumstances influence teaching assistants' decisions when they decide to undertake a work-related Foundation degree programme?	Transformation of future occupational role and identity (theme one) Maintenance of established roles and identities (theme two)	• "Pull" of access a new occupational role • Reactions to changing workplace roles • The encouragement of other staff in schools • Sustaining being a teaching assistant
Question 2: How do teaching assistants interpret their experiences of studying for a Foundation degree that is directly related to their workplace roles?	Foundation degree as an initiator of enhanced self-belief and realisation (theme one) Status deficit as a constraint on self-realisation (theme two) Space, study and the challenges of established roles and identities (theme three) The importance of coping strategies in managing competing demands (theme four)	• Learning, self-assurance and increased belief in workplace abilities • Status constraints and continuing frustrations around occupational self • Time, problems around work-based learning and workplace identities • Studying on the periphery at work
Question 3: What meanings do teaching assistants who are at the end of their Foundation degree studies assign to their imminent move away from being a Foundation degree student?	Positivity around imminent completion of Foundation degree study (theme one) Frustrations and anxieties about transition to honours level study (theme two)	• A worthwhile experience (due to it strengthening present and future notions of occupational self) • Pride and relief at having navigated a variety of demands and expectations (including those connected to being a teaching assistant) • Concern, BA study and fitting things in (such as obtaining time off work)

As outlined in chapter two, one study that does usefully pay attention to the importance of workplace in influencing teaching assistants' experiences of Foundation degree has been provided by Morris (2010). In this work, the time pressures that employment

obligations place on opportunities to study are discussed. She also highlighted how teaching assistants defined their Foundation degree partially in terms of being a passport to new career, although the ways in which this might be part of the broader process of identity revisions are overlooked. The Foundation degree's explicit focus on teaching and learning, in addition to the clear pathway it provided to training to be a primary school teacher, had also motivated the students' initial decisions to apply for it. Work-based learning is however identified as challenging, without this being fully explained. Detail is provided on how Foundation degrees can produce workplace frustrations if teaching assistants acquire new knowledge and skills, but are not given access to higher level tasks that allow them to utilise these. Moreover, the consequent lack of extrinsic rewards that they had received for undertaking Foundation degree study was a source of irritation. In many respects, this situation could be reflective of the low regard and status that being a teaching assistant has in the United Kingdom education system (Dunne et al., 2008a). The specific identity of being a teaching assistant and the inequalities this encompassed seemed to impact on all types of students.

Unexpectedly, as outlined in chapter five, for a number of interviewees, their course participation was also viewed as having generated an enhanced present occupational self-concept. Specifically, they claimed to have gained an enriched belief about their capabilities as teaching assistants. Nevertheless, many interviewees also indicated that their engagement with Foundation study was defined in terms of the potential escape route it provided away from their current occupational role. Foundation degree study had not improved how they viewed the desirability of the teaching assistant identity. Indeed for some it had reinforced the negativity they associated with it. Interestingly, it could be argued that such views illustrate how being a significant "breadwinner" (Brooks, 2012, p. 455) cut across gender and whether or not students had dependent children. Constructively, this viewpoint could be a sign of female students resisting hegemonic notions of femininity (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005) which emphasises women as secondary breadwinners.

However, there is little detail in existing research literature on how the roles and identities which teaching assistants experience at work and in higher education combine to provide a specific learner identity. Askham's (2008) study illustrates the significance of this when he writes: "Work-based mature students enter higher education with a readily constructed identity based on their work role but this may be

in conflict with the new student identity" (p. 89). Certainly, being a teaching assistant and Foundation degree student were sometimes represented as generating conflicting demands and to some extent incompatible identities, especially around work-based learning.

The findings presented here suggest that capturing conceptions of workplace experiences is potentially useful and can inform theorising about how teaching assistants understand their engagement with Foundation degrees. In particular, teaching assistants' encounters with "role stretch" and "role creep" (Warhurst et al., 2014, p. 159) in their workplaces can be regarded as worthy of exploration. This is partially because it can be viewed as an important factor that can lead teaching assistants to reassess their capabilities and who they have the potential to become. Moreover, "role stretch" and the Foundation degree's requirement for work-based learning was sometimes represented as having been a significant challenge as students attempted to balance studentship and work. These could in some ways be seen as being patterned by inequalities related to social class and gender that surround the teaching assistant identity.

The Foundation degree was also generally comprehended as a mechanism that allowed students to distance themselves from being a teaching assistant by defining their present occupation as a temporary state. Reconciling a wish for identity change with a need to continue with being a teaching assistant, at least in the short-term, was often described as being problematic. Foundation degree study was viewed as potentially allowing such accommodation, although there were on-going problems associated with it. Workplace influences were commonly stated as constraining their learning. Work-based learning and finding time to study whilst being a teaching assistant were issues for some students. The motivation to enter honours level study was also frequently linked to a belief that further study beyond Foundation degree was required if they were to move on from being a teaching assistant. It is therefore suggested that teaching assistants' workplace roles and the identities have the potential to structure students' understandings of Foundation degree study. Moreover, this seems to be important throughout the lifespan of their engagement with their studies. It could be argued that the relative lack of discussion about this issue is misplaced and unfortunate.

7.2.3. The domestic sphere as a habitual influence on Foundation degree engagement

As outlined in chapters four, five and six, the influence of domestic identities and associated roles was cited as shaping many of the teaching assistants' views of their engagement with their Foundation degree. What has elsewhere been termed the "discourses of 'good mothering' and 'good fathering'" (Brooks, 2014, p. 9) seemed to structure how students experienced this influence, with student-mothers claiming added pressures as of consequence of these. In chapter four for example, the choice of Foundation degree was partly linked to a need and desire to maintain existing domestic arrangements. For many of those interviewed, successfully fulfilling their roles as mothers and/or partners was central to this desire. For this group of students in particular, Foundation degree study was an "intensely emotional process" (Christie, 2009, p. 125) which involved stress, relationship tension and guilt. Again this feeling was constant and not confined to any one phase of their engagement.

When the student-mothers discussed their actual experiences of studying, difficulties around reconciling the domestic commitments with those of being a Foundation degree student was a relatively widespread concern. Chapter five outlined how harmonising motherhood, sustaining relationships with partners and the commitments of studying was viewed as problematic. This was not the case for the small number of fathers who offered their opinions. In contrast to their female peers, the small number of fathers indicated that family life needed to undergo some alterations to accommodate their learning needs. This was described as an intentional change and not one that had occurred as an unintended consequence of the requirements of their studies. The opposite was generally the case for mothers. For these students, change was commonly resisted, and when it did occur, for some this had resulted in considerable guilt.

The theme of female mature students' engagement with higher education as being one that incorporates a high degree of familial guilt echoes the findings of earlier scholarly work (Brooks, 2012, 2014; Morris, 2010; Stone, 2008; Shanahan, 2000). What is not explained by these scholars is the possibility that these feelings can be derived from a sense of not successfully achieving a form of identity management which involves an attempt to confine study to the peripheries of family life. Again, the absence of such emotion in the accounts of male students raises interesting questions

about how familial guilt connected to participation in education is framed by wider gender relations.

Those with dependent children provided accounts in which gendered notions of the parenthood identities and domestic roles were prevalent. Their attempts at identity modification through study can subsequently be interpreted as being differentiated by family circumstances and gender. Specifically, they seemed to have been moderated by prevalent norms of "'good mothering' and 'good fathering'" in which mother is defined in terms of being an intensive caregiver (Brooks, 2014, p. 9).

As was outlined previously in this thesis, the above findings were in line with those provided by others who have studied female mature student-mothers generally (Blaxter & Tight, 1994; Brooks, 2012, 2014; Dewart, 1996; Leder & Forgasz, 2004; Merrill, 1999; Steel et al., 2005; Stone, 2008). Those on educationally-related Foundation degrees have also claimed that "being mum" is given prominence over studentship at the start of students' programmes (Bainbridge, 2005). However, as I also outlined in chapter five and six, the mothers who participated in my research often indicated that domestic obligations were a concern throughout their studies. Anxieties were not only assigned to an initial transitional phase. As a result of this, a series of coping strategies were said to have been employed. These included drawing upon peer support, fitting study in once domestic obligations had been undertaken and defining their study in terms of being a good parent.

As students reflected on the difficulties that progression to honours level study might involve, a number of mothers with dependent children highlighted the problems of balancing study with domestic commitments. The requirement of daytime study that extended beyond the traditional school day was problematic, as was the need to attend university classes in the school holidays. The consequent increased interference that this pattern of attendance potentially presented to established domestic life was cited as a worry. Anxiety was partly framed in terms of the challenges that it extended to the feasibility of the strategies that had been developed to previously limit disruption. Past analysis of transitions from Foundation degree to honours level study has not explored these reservations and the identity dilemmas they present for women with younger children (Penketh & Goddard, 2007; Pike & Harrison, 2011; Tierney & Slack, 2005; Winter & Dismore, 2010).

7.2.4. A new way to conceptualise teaching assistants' understandings of their engagement with Foundation degree study

The discussion that this chapter has provided thus far has outlined how although a number of distinct themes were revealed in relation to motives for, experiences of and anticipations around exit from study; common issues cut across each of these. These were framed in terms of Foundation degree study being viewed as a complex balancing act. Within this process there often seemed to be a desire, and indeed, an accomplishment of identity change which needed to be pursued within the context of a number of role and identity constraints. These varied, notably, according to whether students had dependent children and gender. Student-mothers with dependent children seemed to have experienced the greatest level of complexity as they endeavoured to manage their studentship.

It is suggested that one of the overarching findings of this thesis is that for many of those who participated in my research, Foundation degree engagement was understood as a complex process of identity work (Reay, 2010; Snow & Anderson, 1987; Young, 2006) which involved an attempt to manage new and existing identities. These flowed from the Foundation degree studies, teaching assistant roles and domestic situations. Significantly, student-mothers seemed to experience the greatest level of challenge in achieving this balance. They were the majority of those interviewed and as outlined in chapter three, numerically dominant in terms of numbers in student cohorts as a whole. The identity work (Reay, 2010; Snow & Anderson, 1987; Young, 2006) and identity practices (Lynch, 2008) that they were involved in seemed more complex than those undertaken by student-fathers and those without children. This added complexity sprang from their attempts at identity transformation being confined by pressures to conform to normative expectations of intensive mothering (Brooks, 2014). The different ways that student-mothers and fathers claimed to have experienced study as identity work is illustrated in Figures 7.1 and 7.2.

Figure 7.1: Illustration of the dynamic process of identity transformation and maintenance that permeated student-mothers' accounts of their engagement with their Foundation degree
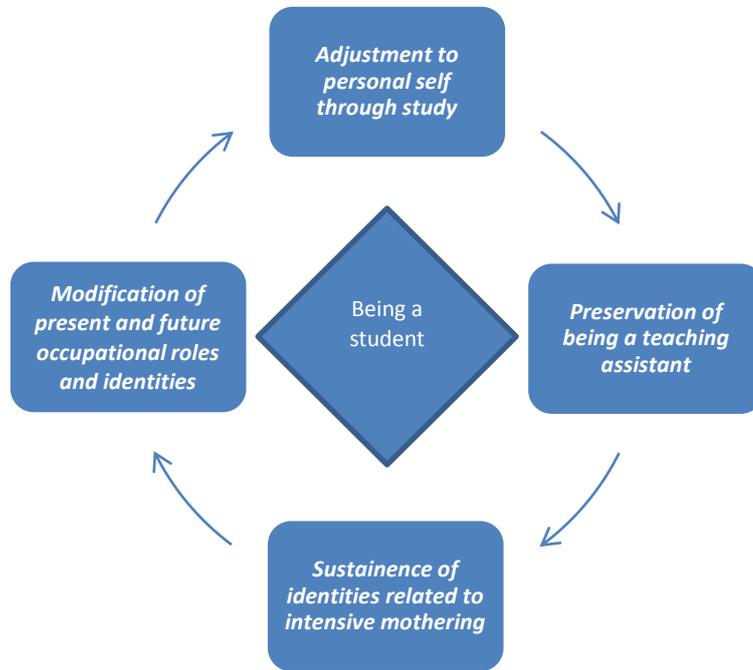
Figure 7.2: Illustration of the dynamic process of identity transformation and maintenance that permeated student-fathers' and childless students' accounts of their engagement with their Foundation degree
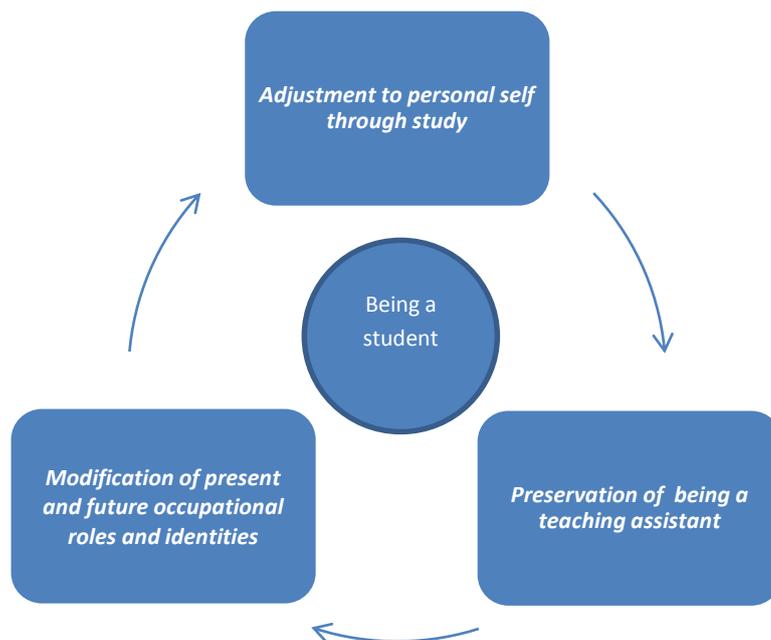
As students experienced the above process, many of them claimed that they had found their attempts at self-realisation (Reay, 2003) compromised. Being categorised as a Foundation degree student and also their workplace situations as teaching assistants were identified as key sources of such restraint for all types of student. However, student-mothers seemed be under a triple constraint as they also experienced pressures from highly gendered identities which incorporated intensive mothering (Brooks, 2014). Often their understandings of their experiences stressed an awareness that their engagement had been informed by the subordinate positioning that each of these provided. Foundation degree students' views of their experiences therefore inevitably seemed to be "situated within a socio-cultural context" (Morgan, 2015, p. 120). Their understandings are both similar and distinct to other mature learners' experiences of higher education due to a number of shared and divergent experiences. Navigating the complexities that this situation presented was often viewed as having led to students' being involved in innovative agency (Giddens, 1991), which had led to the development of a series of coping strategies as they attempted to achieve identity modification (see Figure 7.3). Again, the extent and form of these varied with whether or not students were mothers with dependent children.

Figure 7.3: Understandings of Foundation degree engagement as a cycle of change, constraint and innovation
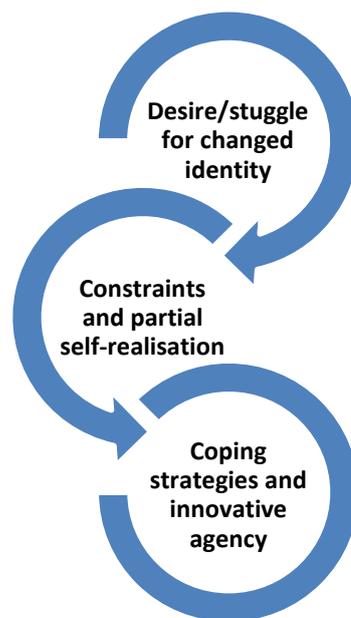
The importance of personal and professional identities in structuring such learners' conceptions of Foundation degree study has been productively discussed by Dunne et al. (2008c). However, their analysis did not explicitly draw upon the notion of identity work or explore the ways such students' commitments to a range of multiple identities produce a relatively distinct form of engagement. In particular, a lack of detailed discussion of familial and workplace identities would seem to be problematic.

The findings presented throughout this thesis suggest that the lack of detailed discussion of how teaching assistants' experiences of Foundation degree study are differentiated by a range of identities might be viewed as an important oversight. In particular, the ways that interactions with Foundation degree study can be regarded as being structured by students undertaking a complex process of identity transformation and maintenance is not fully emphasised within existing academic analysis. Previous research has also not fully analysed the ways that teaching assistants' conceptions of their personal, domestic, and workplace identities frame how they view their studies as they act to balance these. The second part of this chapter explores the possible consequences that such an analysis has for Foundation degrees aimed at teaching assistants specifically. It also discusses their role in helping higher education institutions expand a widening of participation in undergraduate study.

7.3. The design and delivery of Foundation degrees for teaching assistants

The discussion of research findings that has so far been offered in this chapter has a number of possible consequences for academic frameworks that seek to make sense of teaching assistants' engagement with Foundation degrees. The rest of the chapter explores the potential repercussions that this analysis potentially has for their design, teaching strategies and exit routes to honours level study.

7.3.1. Programme design

In terms of the knowledge base covered by Foundation degrees aimed at teaching assistants, the findings and analysis presented in this thesis suggest it could be worthwhile if they avoid a focus that stresses remedying skill deficiencies that some policy makers have assumed. This imagined need was not a major concern or desire for those who participated in my research. Offering Foundation degrees that give

prominence to the completion of a range of tasks related to the notion of becoming "better" teaching assistants would seem to be somewhat misplaced. It could be comprehended as not meeting students' needs and ambitions. Instead, it may reinforce the career glass identity ceiling that some of these learners are attempting to resist.

If such students' involvement with higher education is seen in terms of a wish to achieve identity modification, the design of such a qualification might productively reflect this ambition. Providing courses that will offer students the knowledge and skills that will allow them to progress from being a teaching assistant would seem to be more appropriate. Programme content could perhaps focus on general issues of teaching and learning, some of which they might observe in their schools, rather than be specifically related to students' experiences of being a teaching assistant.

Yet the findings described in this thesis indicate that it could also be argued that Foundation degree design should not be exclusively focused on learners' future career ambitions and ignore the realities of their present working situations. For some students, this is because an improved self-concept had partially been achieved by an enhanced sense of workplace confidence due to a deeper understanding of their school-based work.

The existing roles and identities of students also needs to be taken into account as they participate in Foundation degree study. Large numbers of those attracted to Foundation degrees are likely to experience significant demands from both of these as they carry out their roles as teaching assistants and mothers. Crucially, this is likely to include minimising the disruption that being a higher education student presents to domestic and occupational selves (Dewart, 1996; Dunne et al., 2008a; Stone, 2008). Timing of sessions seems to be a key factor in reducing such interference and opening up access for study, especially for student-mothers. Evening class provision that follows the school year is likely to assist such students in maintaining their present lives; notably as they undertake their roles as parents and workers.

Class start times need to allow parental and employment obligations and identities to be dispatched to allow all types of Foundation degree students to access these educational opportunities. Time should be allowed for these to be undertaken when the start times of sessions are established. One possible way to ensure such accessibility is off-site delivery, in workplace settings, closer to students' homes. However, for some of those who took part in this study, offering provision in a

workplace setting would undermine the positivity that they claimed to experience around having access to a new space where identity revision could be attempted.

Delivery in local further education colleges would also be a possibility. However, as I outlined in chapters two and six, much has been written about the inadequacies that higher education provision in further education settings can encompass (Fenge, 2010; Robinson, 2012; Creasy, 2013). In particular, it has been identified as being viewed "not quite education" (Fenge, 2010, p. 375) and "HE for the masses" (Robinson, 2012, p. 465) by some Foundation degree students. For Creasy (2013), such provision is exclusionary and socially reproductive because it is "HE-lite" (p. 38). He argued that it does not allow students to experience a higher education culture that is authentic.

I would also suggest that programme design should also be undertaken with awareness that teaching assistants are unlikely to be released from their duties at school to undertake course-related learning. The findings presented in chapter five indicate that this is probable, even when head teachers encourage their teaching assistants to study. Requirements for work-based learning should be carefully crafted to accommodate full and demanding workplace duties. Reliance on the time of other school-based colleagues would also not seem to be beneficial. Adopting such a strategy would not only reduce physical pressures on students' time whilst at school, but also provide the possibility of moderating instances of workplace guilt.

Equally, students should not be required to have head teacher support to gain access to this form of provision. Judiciously fashioning workplace learning, to avoid reliance on additional school-based activity, could facilitate a release from requiring head teacher permission to study. Allowing students to solely decide upon whether or not they should enter higher education could reduce learners experiencing a situation where a negative sense of self is reinforced.

Programme validation must also guarantee students access to core university services at the times that fit with their programmes of study. Access to student support services, as well as catering facilities, should be assured in this way. This contingency has the capacity to decrease the feelings of marginalisation amongst Foundation degree students and the consequent restraint that this has on students' self-worth. Off-site delivery may also be disadvantageous in this respect, and should this option be adopted, careful planning is likely to be required.

Whether sub-degree qualifications aimed at teaching assistants should bear the title of "Foundation" is also debatable and worthy of consideration. A key finding of my research was the resistance many students had to this and the identity that they believed it conferred. Being categorised as a Foundation degree student was not always viewed as providing a positive social identity. Indeed, the label "Foundation degree student" was something they regularly said that they had distanced themselves from. The issue of reforming the titles of sub-degree qualifications is discussed in greater detail later in this chapter.

7.3.2. Classroom practice

The model of students' understandings that was provided earlier in this chapter also potentially offers useful insights into how sub-degree tutors might conduct classroom practice when working with teaching assistants. Firstly, as mentioned previously, whether teaching and learning should always be explicitly related to a requirement to reflect on how issues are related to their occupational experiences as teaching assistants is questionable. As this is an identity many students claim that they wish to break free from, constantly forcing students to define themselves in terms of this is likely to be unfulfilling. In relation to this issue, it could be valuable to promote learning activities that are not tied to the role of being a teaching assistant could be valuable. One possible reason for adopting such an approach is that it recognises students' conceptions of self, which can include a belief in their capabilities beyond those typically associated with being a teaching assistant.

As many students are entering their studies partially as a result of undertaking critical self-reflection about their social situations and the identities that they hold, developing this skill may result in productive learning. Reflective activity might include consideration of previous, past and anticipated future experiences. Reflection built around students' past and possible future selves could offer a productive learning strategy. This type of reflection is likely to be preferable to an exclusive focus on students' present workplace selves.

As students are often involved in personal identity enhancement, where a heightened appreciation of self-worth is aspired to, tutors may benefit from being mindful of this situation. Involvement in such processes is likely to involve a series of psychological challenges as students contest and attempt to transcend definitions of

who they are. The potential fragility of evolving identities might be best overcome by offering students access to positive and personalised pastoral support and feedback. Creating space for peer support to develop may also assist this process. The findings of my research highlight how many students viewed this as crucial in managing their journey through their Foundation degree and movement towards self-realisation. Chapters two and three outlined how the value of peer support has also been relatively well documented by other scholars (Merrill, 2014; Taylor, 2014; Thomas, 2002; Tierney & Stack, 2005; Wintrup et al., 2012). My own investigation's results suggest that it can be a very important source of encouragement for student-mothers, who face pressures that are derived from concurrently inhabiting identities of intensive motherhood (Brooks, 2012), being a Foundation degree student and teaching assistant.

Making room for students to socialise both inside and outside formal classes could be one way peer support is given an opportunity to prosper. For some of those whose views are described in the earlier chapters of this thesis, breaks in classes were identified as being important spaces where peer support and advice had been gained. It is suggested that peer support networks that exist in spaces beyond the university context could potentially develop if student friendship groups prosper.

My research findings also indicate that Foundation degree tutors may find it beneficial to develop out of class learning activities that are compatible with the demands of students' experiences in their workplace and domestic situations. Setting activities that require physical meetings between students outside university time are likely to be difficult. They have the potential to undermine the complicated balance that the majority of students claimed that they were required to achieve as they attempted to manage learner, teaching assistant and domestic identities.

7.3.3. Transition to honours degree study

The students who took part in my research also indicated that their Foundation degree studies were part of a journey to a new career which would offer access to an enriched sense of personal and social self. Many students often seemed to feel compelled to undertake additional study beyond their Foundation degree to achieve occupational advancement. As outlined in chapter six of this thesis, a relatively high percentage of the Foundation degree students progressed to honours level study by accessing the third year of the university's BA (Hons) Education Studies programme. Successful

transition to and ultimately, achievement at honours level is therefore important. It was often regarded as a necessary step towards occupational change. In common with others findings, Foundation degree study alone was not generally viewed as facilitating such a transformation (Morris, 2010, Robinson, 2012).

To achieve a smooth progression to degree level study, Foundation degree students could benefit from undertaking learning activities that incorporate traditional academic skills; including independent critical learning and academic writing. Some assessments that mirror those that students are likely to experience at honours level study would perhaps be useful. Foundation degree learners should experience an academically challenging form of learning that equips them with the skills to succeed at honours and post-graduate levels, should the latter be part of their career plans. "Bridging" programmes that some Foundation degree students have been required to undertake to progress to honours level study might be avoided in this way. Requiring such transition arrangements could potentially undermine advances in self-worth that such students might have gained as part of their Foundation degrees. It also reinforces the "second class" status of such qualifications (Dunne at al., 2008a; Robinson, 2012).

One of the concerns that learners frequently expressed about progression was the risk that it posed to the situation where they could manage expectations from school, university and sometimes family members. As discussed in chapter five, this situation had been challenging whilst students were engaged in Foundation degree study. It had produced tensions and had led them to develop a number of coping strategies. These were played out in a variety of ways depending on the role and identity pressures that they were subjected to. The difficulties that the delivery format of honours level study presented to finely balanced lives were a concern for a number of students. Removal of study days that require extended time away from family and schools could potentially reduce such worries and assist students' transition. Offering top-up years in a format that follows the school year in order to allow childcare commitments to be achieved is one way that this could be achieved. Evening class provision could also be utilised to reduce such pressures.

7.4. Widening participation

Chapter two outlined how the development of Foundation degrees occurred within a wider policy context of New Labour's commitment to widening participation which stressed an increased involvement in higher education amongst groups that are historically under-represented (Doyle, 2003; Lammy, 2009; Parry, 2006). The final part of this chapter offers a tentative discussion of the inferences that my research findings might have for the role that sub-degree qualifications, such as Foundation degrees or their equivalents, could have in terms of widening access to higher education.

The relatively small sample of Foundation degree students, whose views that are considered throughout this thesis, suggested that for some at least, Foundation degrees can be highly effective in encouraging those who might be otherwise have been excluded from participating in higher education. Many of the students did not possess the qualifications usually required for entry to a university. For a number of students, having to achieve these before entry would have been exclusionary. This pattern is in accordance with previous investigations which have claimed that Foundation degrees have been very effective in producing a widening of participation amongst some disadvantaged social groups (Harvey, 2009).

In spite of the Foundation degree's success in encouraging a widening of participation in higher education, the findings of my research also suggest that these qualifications do have the potential to reinforce social disadvantage. Robinson (2012) has recently argued that Foundation degrees are "open to the criticism of maintaining social divisions" (p. 465), partly as a consequence of their position in the higher education hierarchy. This situation is viewed as being exacerbated in the case of those undertaking Foundation degrees in further education colleges.

As with the students in Robinson's (2012) study, many of those who took part in my own research were aware of the limited status of their award. They also suggested that they had resisted this by distancing (Goffman, 1961) themselves from being categorised as a Foundation degree student, and the restricted social identity this conferred. It could therefore be suggested that although sub-degree qualifications have the capacity to reinforce the social inequalities, students are not passive in this and they are consciousness of the restrictions of their awards.

It is further suggested that replacing the term "Foundation degree" with one which does not engender the negative connotations that my research participants identified, could be constructive. This change may assist in reducing some of the status inequalities that students, who participate in vocational sub-degree qualifications, believe they experience. Equally, developing policy mechanisms that strongly encourage research-intensive universities to offer sub-degree provision could help weaken the low levels of status these qualifications often convey. Whilst there are one or two notable exceptions, the vast majority of sub-degree provision is confined to post-1992 universities and further education colleges. One possible consequence is that they are linked to institutions that are labelled as lesser in the discourses that surround the British higher education hierarchy (Robinson, 2012).

7.5. Chapter summary

This chapter has offered further exploration of the findings which were described in chapters four, five and six. I have aimed to add to the uniqueness of the research that is represented in this thesis by holistically discussing students' views of motives for study, experiences of being a Foundation degree student and thoughts when coming towards the end of course participation. It is argued that a critical examination of the issues that recurrently featured across each of these enabled a new model of explanation was developed.

The analysis that is presented offers an explanation of teaching assistants' understandings of their engagement with Foundation degree study which stresses how these encompass a complex and dynamic process of identity work that includes reconstruction and maintenance. The desire for change and preservation was identified as being informed by the students' definitions of their personal, domestic, occupational and learner selves. These were, in part, structured by conceptions of past, present and imagined future experience. The analysis presented here suggests that the concept of identity work should be added to models and explanations that aim to provide an analysis of teaching assistants' accounts of their engagement with Foundation degree study. It should, however, be noted that those involved in this process suggested that their specific social circumstances and existing identities defined the form this process took. Gendered notions of parenthood significantly differentiated students' understandings of their experiences. Consequently, as was previously outlined in this thesis, those involved in this research should not be regarded as a homogeneous group

without difference. Nevertheless, they did often advance a common picture of their studies when discussing how their teaching assistant and Foundation degree student identities structured their engagement with studying.

The second part of this chapter discussed a number of implications that this research's findings might have for policy and practices connected to the provision of Foundation degrees for teaching assistants. Focusing curricular content on remedying supposed deficiencies in workplace skills was rejected. Instead, it was argued that curriculum should focus on an academically informed theoretical analysis of educational issues related to students' present working lives and possible future careers.

I also suggested that honours level progression could be improved by taking into account students' desires for domestic identity maintenance. This could be achieved by adopting a termly and evening class format. More broadly, it was suggested that if sub-degree qualifications, such as Foundation degrees, are to be used to promote widening participation, retitling them may be beneficial. Using policy levers to encourage even the high profile research intensive institutions to offer such provision in their portfolios is also argued for.

8. CONCLUSIONS

8.1. Introduction

The final chapter of this thesis begins by offering a summary of its main findings. As part of this process, the study's central aim and research questions are reiterated to provide a framework within which these can be understood. This reiteration is also offered to contextualise a number of additional concluding remarks that this final chapter makes. After summarising the thesis' main findings, it proceeds to offer a number of closing comments on the contribution that this thesis makes to academic knowledge and understanding. Again, this is contextualised by referring to the study's aim and central research questions. Subsequent to this argument, limitations of this study are considered; thus reflecting the author's commitment to reflexivity (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). The chapter ends, by not only reasserting the implications of my research's findings for the future of sub-degree vocational qualifications for groups such as teaching assistants, but also speculates about the need for longer-term alternatives to be established.

8.2. Summary of main findings

The principal aim of the study that is described in this thesis was *to explore the understandings that school-based teaching assistants hold about their engagement with a Foundation degree that is directly related to their workplace roles.* As this aim was pursued, students' views on reasons for study, experiences of being a Foundation degree student and the meanings held as they approached the end of study were focused upon. Three principal research questions were investigated:

1) What motives and circumstances influence teaching assistants' decisions when they decide to undertake a work-related Foundation degree programme?

2) How do teaching assistants interpret their experiences of studying on a Foundation degree that is directly related to their workplace roles?

3) What meanings do teaching assistants who are nearing the end of their Foundation degree studies assign to their imminent move away from being a student?

Each of these questions was investigated via qualitative research. Principally, semi-structured interviews were used to generate a series of research findings. Eight group

and 12 individual interviews were conducted, allowing 56 Foundation degree students to offer their views. Smaller amounts of contextual information were gained from participant observations and analysis of programme-related documentation.

8.2.1. Motives and circumstances influencing teaching assistants' decisions to undertake a work-related Foundation degree programme

The following themes emerged from data analysis: (1) transformation of future occupational role and identity; (2) positive modification of personal self not directly related to occupational position; (3) maintenance of existing roles and identities and (4) flexibility around entry requirements. The desire to achieve movement away from being a teaching assistant was a very strong feature in many students' accounts. This hoped for transition involved progression from both the teaching assistant role and identity. The "pull" of gaining eventual access to a new occupational role, notably teaching, was viewed as being an attractive element of Foundation degree study. Career switching of this form offered the opportunity to gain access to better conditions of employment and identity enhancement. Negative reactions to their experiences of being a teaching assistant provided a strong sub-theme. The teaching assistants often felt exploited and undervalued. For some, role "stretch" and "creep" (Warhurst et al., 2014) had added to their dissatisfaction. While experiencing these changes, other colleagues in their workplaces had encouraged them to enter higher education.

Another dominant theme was the related desire to gain a positive change around how they viewed themselves (their personal self). Improving levels of personal pride and confidence was cited as a key part of this detailed change, while countering previous negative educational experiences and definitions of students' educational abilities as sometimes part of this. Alongside the potential positive identity revision that Foundation degree study offered, was a theme that it was also attractive in terms of facilitating role and identity maintenance. The Foundation degree was regarded as allowing present occupational roles to be retained, whilst longer-term career switching could be realised. For those who were mothers, it also minimised the risks that higher education presented to this identity and role. The university's location and flexibility around entry requirements was seen as facilitating access to study and role maintenance. Data on motives for study initially illustrated how although common themes could be usefully identified across the Foundation degree student body, they

were nuanced and differentiated by highly gendered notions of parenthood. In particular, student-mothers with dependent children had their choices for study structured by a triple set of challenges: pressures of mothering, workplace commitments and a lack of appropriate university entry qualifications.

8.2.2. Interpretations of experiences of studying on a Foundation degree

Four major themes emerged when the study's second research question was addressed: 1) Foundation degree as an initiator of enhanced self-belief and realisation; 2) status deficit as a constraint on self-realisation; 3) space, study and the challenges of established roles and identities; and 4) the importance of coping strategies in managing competing demands.

The Foundation degree itself was often regarded as having produced the positive personal identity modification that many of the students had initially hoped for. For many, it had allowed them to gain an improved self-concept with a perception of increased self-confidence and belief. It was also indicated that these feelings were not only confined to the personal sphere, but had also influenced how students viewed their present occupational selves. Some students claimed to have experienced increased self-belief and assurance in their capacities as teaching assistants which had in turn boosted their aspiration of career change. Enhanced self-concepts were found across the student body, irrespective of the social characteristics of the students. Foundation degree study was believed to have provided them with a range of benefits beyond career development.

However, the potential that Foundation degree study had for positive identity modification was viewed as being limited by the status deficit it was considered to suffer from. Being a teaching assistant on such a programme was viewed as an aggravating feature of this scenario. A feeling of stigmatisation was occasionally directly connected to the negativity of others concerning Foundation degrees. Families, workplace colleagues and the students' host university were all pinpointed as being sources of such negativity. For some, the lack of appropriate reward for developing knowledge and skills had produced further frustration with being a teaching assistant.

Many student-mothers also claimed that being a Foundation degree student had been a challenge in terms of maintaining domestic and workplace roles alongside

study. This was frequently the case, even though many of these students had been attracted to Foundation degree study by the belief that it would minimise disruption to established domestic and working lives. Harmonising motherhood and study was highlighted as a challenge by some female students with dependent children. Pressure on the amounts time that students could dedicate to maintaining relationships was portrayed as producing tensions with partners. Limited time was also viewed as making work-based learning problematic. In this situation, a number of coping strategies were employed in an attempt to manage a situation where multiple identities and roles were inhabited. These stemmed from the home, school and university.

8.2.3. Meanings when nearing the end of their Foundation degree study

In relation to the third and final major research question that was addressed, two main themes emerged. These were: 1) positivity around imminent completion of Foundation degree study and 2) frustrations and anxieties about transition to honours level study. In common with the responses to the first two research questions that this thesis has discussed, these seemed to be partially nuanced within a concern about identity management related to conceptions of domestic, workplace and Foundation degree selves.

All those who were individually interviewed suggested that their studies had been worthwhile. This level of satisfaction was variously linked to gaining increased self-confidence, an improved academic self-concept and an informed and strengthened view of what occupational change they would like in the future. Interestingly, for some student-mothers, an improved positive self-concept was associated with having successfully managed a range of pressures that stemmed from their studies, workplaces and domestic lives.

While many students claimed that they had not become disillusioned with their Foundation degree, a number of them did express some frustration at having to undertake additional study to gain career change. Usually this was via progression to the university's honours degree top-up year. Pressure to proceed was often informed by the general awareness of the limited status Foundation degrees had in the eyes of others. Anxieties were expressed about moving to honours degree study. Managing domestic and working lives was often perceived as likely to be more of a challenge than they had experienced as Foundation degree students. Coping strategies that had

been drawn upon thus far in their higher education careers were not always deemed to be feasible. For female students, the feared loss of peer support was a particular concern.

8.2.4. Recurrent issues across research questions and a suggested new model

A number of recurring issues were identified as commonly featuring across the data that had been collected to investigate my three main research questions. These included: 1) differentiated struggles for identity transformation; 2) opportunities and inequalities related to being a Foundation degree student; 3) the importance of workplaces on experiences and choices and 4) the domestic sphere as a habitual influence on Foundation degree engagement.

One of the overarching conclusions of this research was that, for those whose views were captured, their engagement with Foundation degree study was often framed in terms of it being part of a complex and dynamic process of identity work (Reay et al., 2010; Snow & Anderson, 1987; Young, 2006). This cut across motives for study, experiences of being a Foundation degree student and the meanings ascribed to leaving their studies. Learners often defined their engagement across each of these in terms of identity transformation and preservation. Personal, occupational and learner identities were viewed structuring their understandings of their engagement with Foundation degree study. Student-mothers claimed that they had faced particular challenges related to managing the complexity of the roles and identities that they were expected to undertake as part of their domestic, workplace and Foundation degree lives. The need to juggle these was portrayed as having made studying particularly demanding.

Overwhelmingly, participation in Foundation degree study was not understood as involving the remedying of a skills deficit, as the programme validators and Foundation degree policy makers generally had envisaged. For most students course participation was not routinely defined in terms of becoming a "better" teaching assistant. More often, interviewees wished, in the longer-term, to move on from their roles and identities as teaching assistants. Considerable dissatisfaction was expressed about both of these when all three research questions were investigated. Workplace experiences as a teaching assistant were linked to motivation to study, learning experiences and thoughts about moving on from Foundation degree study. This finding illustrates how research that has investigated mature students studying for non-

vocational degrees and Foundation degrees aimed at non-teaching assistants, whilst informative, cannot wholly explain the Foundation degree experience of teaching assistants. Surprisingly, the influences that teaching assistants' workplaces can have upon their engagement with higher education are not explored in detail by academics.

Roles and identities in the domestic sphere of the students' lives also featured strongly as each research question was analysed. Employment commitments and gendered notions of parenthood were portrayed as having influenced their choice of university programme, learning experiences and thoughts as students approached the end of their Foundation degree studies. These understandings might also be regarded as supporting the contention that Foundation degree study can be understood as involving a complex process of role and identity maintenance and transformation that can be informed by students' locations in a range of social hierarchies related to occupational, educational and genderised domestic circumstances.

It has therefore been suggested that research into mature female students generally, and that which focuses upon student-mothers in particular, has previously provided useful insights that can be drawn upon in developing an analysis of the data provided; particularly in relation to the importance that identity and social inequality can have on students' engagement with higher education. Equally, it has been claimed that Fenge's (2011) discussions of the experiences of Health and Social Care Foundation degrees students and the value of viewing their perceptions as being informed by identity work is also useful, and can be utilised to provide a lens through which my findings can be understood. However, once again, the particular circumstances that English teaching assistants on a work-related Foundation degree face partially limits the extent to which Fenge's (2011) analysis can be applied to understand their specific experiences.

The study that is discussed in this thesis therefore also highlights the potential ways that differing groups of students who participate in higher education experience varying challenges and outcomes. These seem to be influenced by a number of identities that flow from the diverse social positions that they occupy. It illustrates how although mature students can be regarded as having some shared subjective experiences, this is differentiated by gender, parenthood and the status that their courses have within a highly stratified higher education system. Those undertaking low status programmes, related to occupations that are in the lower reaches of the class structure, face particular disadvantages and consequently specific understandings of

their experiences. These are in many instances compounded and influenced by further inequalities that stem from gendered expectations of parenthood.

8.3. Contribution to knowledge and understanding

The research that is contained in this thesis has offered an analysis of teaching assistants' understandings of engaging with a Foundation degree within a university setting as opposed to an offsite further education college. There is very limited research into this group of students in these settings. Moreover, as I outlined earlier in this thesis, whilst there is a relatively small body of research that explores teaching assistants' understandings of their experiences of Foundation degree study (Dunne et al., 2008a, 2008b; Edmond, 2010; Morris, 2010; Penketh & Goddard, 2008), there is no published research that offers a synthesis of their conceptions of decisions to begin study, on-course experiences and exit from such learning. The research discussed in thesis provides such an analysis in order to begin to address this omission.

In addition to this, a potential new model or conceptual framework of understanding is provided. The potential importance of viewing teaching assistants' understandings of their engagement with Foundation degree study, as being framed by a need to successfully undertake identity work, is a novel contribution to the established body of academic work. It is argued that such a process involves both working at identity transformation and preservation. Personal, occupational, domestic and learner identities are all highlighted as making this process quite distinct for teaching assistants involved in Foundation degree study. Unlike other research, the extent to which these vary with gender and gendered notions of motherhood is explored in some detail.

The analysis that this research presents is also unusual in that it illustrates the ways that teaching assistants' understandings of their Foundation degree experiences can be significantly structured by their workplace interactions and the policies that inform these. This thesis illustrates that the changing workplace lives of teaching assistants are perhaps an important factor that can influence their understandings of their interactions with Foundation degree study from the start to the finish. Furthermore, the findings presented endeavour to add to the body of research that provides insights into student-parents' experiences of higher education by offering an analysis of how such learners engaged with a sub-degree vocationally-related qualification.

8.4. Limitations of study

The research that has been presented and discussed in this thesis does have a number of limitations. Firstly, it offers analysis of students at one higher education institution that, inevitably, exposed its students to a distinctive set of social and cultural circumstances. Although the research site was a post-1992 university, it was not typical of this sector for a number of reasons. For example, it had a relatively small student population with just over 6500 learners studying on campus. The student body was also highly gendered in terms of numbers. Throughout the period that this research covered, over two thirds of the university's students were female.

The university was a very well established, respected and large provider of primary teacher education. Ethnic minority students were under-represented in the student body as a whole. The research was also limited in that it only analysed sub-degree experiences within an English policy context. Potentially therefore in key respects the above limitations reduced the ability to make generalisations from this study. However, as will be discussed at end of this chapter, this limitation does generate possibilities for future research in other contexts. It is also anticipated that other scholars may find it has relatedness (Dzakiria, 2012) or transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) which can be drawn upon as they interrogate other situations.

The sampling method that I employed to gain participants for interviewing is also, potentially, problematic. As outlined in chapter three, sampling was based upon seeking volunteers. This strategy was undertaken due to ethical and practical concerns. Ethically, due to my position as a module tutor on the Foundation degree, I did not wish students to experience a sense of compulsion to take part in interviews due to my existing relationship with them. Students having time to be interviewed was also an issue that I had reflected on. This non-random and self-selecting approach to sampling could have produced a non-representative group of research participants who had viewed me positively when I had taught them. It did however seem that those who volunteered possessed a spread of social characteristics that broadly reflected the wider population that was under investigation.

The insider nature (Mercer, 2006) of this research could also be viewed as producing an element of bias in the accounts that the students provided. There is a possibility that the students were influenced by the fact I had taught them as part of their programme. I had also been their Head of Programme. There is therefore a

recognition that positionality, power and identities (Brooks, 2014) could have influenced the views that students offered. It would be remiss of a study that has found that understandings of identity shape the Foundation degree experience, to fail to acknowledge the potential role that conceptions of identity can play in the research process. Strategies were put in place to mitigate against this source of bias. As was previously outlined in chapter three, at the start of interviews with students, I also probed responses and stressed that I wished to capture their actual views. Interview responses were also cross-checked with observational data, where this was practical. I was also reassured that some students provided accounts that were critical of aspects of their programme of study and the university where they were studying.

The position and perceived identity that gender and class location provided were also another possible cause of bias. As a male researcher interviewing predominantly female students, it could be argued that participants' accounts could have been potentially influenced by the gender difference and perceptions of the different identities this is viewed as giving. Whilst it is acknowledged that this outcome was a possibility, I again tried to monitor bias by probing answers and by stressing that I wanted to capture students' actual opinions. It was also hoped that previous and supportive interactions between myself and the research participants would stimulate trust and openness. However, for some feminist writers, research with female participants should ideally be conducted by female researchers to gain empathetic understanding (Oakley, 1979). Identity matching is viewed as promoting such understanding.

Other scholars have, however noted that identities are multiple and "even where there are evident 'matches', there can be many complex instances of difference too" (Brooks et al., 2014, p. 110). Social class, age, ethnicity, sexuality, and previous and existing occupational identities are some of the other aspects of perceived identity that can come into play in the research situation. Although it is not denied that gender can be important in structuring interactions in research, other aspects of the identity students perceived me as having could be seen as facilitating a positive research process. These included the fact that I had previously been a mature student, teaching assistant and working class. It was also believed that providing a voice to a group of learners who are often ignored in debates about higher education, was important and should be pursued irrespective of the gender of the researcher who facilitated this. Additionally, the idea that matching appropriate is open to debate (Brooks et al., 2014).

Another source of potential bias stemmed from being a sole researcher. Yet, fortunately, I was part of an academic community of active researchers whilst undertaking my research. This allowed critical academic friends to offer views on the sense I was making of my data and the theorisation I developed. Informally, students were also asked about their views of the emerging themes that were evident in group interviews and contextualising data in individual interviews. It is acknowledged though, that in common with other qualitative research, subjectivity was an inevitable issue. Becoming overly involved and a subsequent loss of detachment (Denscombe, 1998), was also a particular hazard that I was aware of throughout my research. To counter this, I tried to subscribe to Hume and Mulcock's (2004) suggestion that researchers should aspire to:

> maintaining enough intellectual distance to ensure that researchers are able to undertake a critical analysis of the events in which they are participating. This means that they should be willing, and able, to take a step back from the relationships they form with the people they encounter in the field for long enough to identify and reflect upon some of the taken-for-granted rules and expectations of the social world they are studying. (p. xi)

To try to avoid bias, between September 2013 and February 2015, when final theorisation and writing up of the thesis occurred, no formal contact with the Foundation degree programme or its students was undertaken. It was hoped that this would aid critical distance, whilst theorisation was attempted.

Possibly interviewing a smaller and randomly selected cohort of students, and following them longitudinally, may have been a very useful strategy to adopt. Undertaking such an approach would have limited the time-lag that existed between capturing students views of some elements of their engagement and when they had experienced these. Relying on students' memories of some aspects of their decision-making is open to selection and distortion. It is, therefore, another possible limitation of the research that is outlined in this thesis. The length of time that this thesis took to complete, as a part-time student, could also be perceived as being problematic, and the data accused of being somewhat dated. However, the extended period over which this investigation was carried out allowed considerable time to be devoted to data collection, results analysis and theorisation. One benefit of this was that issues could be explored in greater depth than would have been possible if I had conducted the study over a shorter period.

8.5. Implications for research, practice and policy

Further research could be developed from that which is documented in this thesis. Longitudinal research that explores teaching assistants' post-Foundation degree experiences could be beneficial. Capturing students' views about honours level study and future career experiences would be particularly interesting. Such research could further inform academic debate and future policy making. Larger scale quantitative research that examines the tentative findings that this research proposes would be useful. Research of this type could also seek to explore a range of variables that were beyond the scope of this study, including age, social class and type of school that the students had previously attended.

Additional exploration of the extent to which the analysis offered here is applicable to Foundation degree students who are not teaching assistants could also be advantageous. Is the same process of identity work viewed as informing the experiences of students across different types of Foundation degrees? Future research could also explore the extent of, and ways that workplace guilt is experienced by higher education students on other vocationally related programmes. Research that also explores gender and the Foundation degree experience across a range of Foundation degree provision could be advantageous. Cross-national study on the experiences of students undertaking vocationally-related sub-degree programmes also presents a potentially fruitful research opportunity. The experiences of student-parents on such programmes could be an especially interesting area to research.

This chapter ends by summarising the implications for sub-degree policy and practice that were discussed in chapter seven, before suggesting some wider conceivable inferences that may flow from my study. With respect to the implications for sub-degree policy related to producing provision for teaching assistants, if their involvement is viewed as being significantly informed by a desire to achieve a positive modification of personal and the related concept of occupational self, then sub-degree awards aimed at them should avoid titles that undermine this. As a term, Foundation degree seems to have the potential to produce a feeling of negativity and an alternative title for such awards may be productive. The findings outlined in this thesis also suggest that it would be perhaps astute to develop qualifications that focus upon both future as well as present occupational selves. Moving beyond skill development for present roles could be beneficial in this respect.

Designers of higher education programmes aimed at encouraging teaching assistants should also consider the other roles and identities that these potential students inhabit. In light of this situation, start times and the location of formal classes might be carefully reflected upon. Progression routes to honours level studies should also be developed with an awareness of the constraints that these students face due to having to navigate a distinct set of multiple identities, especially those who are working student-mothers. It is further suggested that universities also need to be flexible in their delivery of central university support services in order to promote a sense of inclusion amongst Foundation degree students. Offering teaching and learning experiences that are academically rigorous and reflective might also be beneficial in meeting students' ambitions for educational and career progression. This analysis, however, assumes that a continuation of such provision is desirable because it has been successful in engaging teaching assistants in higher education which they to benefit from.

The findings that are outlined in this thesis also raise issues about the desirability of encouraging disadvantaged groups to engage with higher education via awards that are often defined as having low status in institutions, particularly as they are also frequently labelled as inferior in discourses that stressed that some higher education experiences are more valuable than others. As was outlined in the second chapter of this thesis, women, disadvantaged ethnic minority groups and those from lower socio-economic groups are disproportionately represented on Foundation degrees. Foundation degrees could therefore be viewed as reinforcing and reproducing social inequalities.

The students in this study often recognised the way others defined their studies as inferior and consequently diminished their achievements in some ways. The intense pressures that this group of learners, and particularly those who were student-mothers, faced as they managed a complex process of identity transformation and maintenance seemed to be worthy of greater reward. In some respects, Foundation degree study was found to have often left learners unfulfilled and frustrated in terms of the constrained self-realisation that it offered. Ironically, students who were actively rejecting an occupational identity that they viewed as unsatisfactory were forced to undertake continual reflections about how they could pursue it more effectively.

Learners' endeavours to resist what they believed were negative identities and social positions that they possessed may be better served by being offered accessible

opportunities on full vocationally related BA (Hons) degree programmes in subjects that present good career pathways to new professional occupations and identities. If this course of action is employed, these should be offered by all types of universities to break down status and social inequalities that the hierarchy of higher education reproduces. This outcome would also require a significant move away from traditional patterns of delivery, to allow students, who do not have traditional student lifestyles and identities to be able to gain access. The second class label that vocational education has in higher education also needs to be challenged and subverted. Policy makers and academics have a key role to play in this. In this way, it might be possible to avoid placing students who enter higher education in a disadvantaged position.

It is unlikely though that such radical reform and change will take place in the short-term and Foundation degrees will continue to be accessed by teaching assistants and other socially disadvantaged groups. Consequently, the suggestions for how Foundation degrees might be modified to better meet the needs of those who study on them, could offer a potential short-term way forward and reduce the social disadvantages students on these programmes can experience.

Appendices

Appendix A: Group interview preamble with ground rules

Thank you for agreeing to take part in this interview. As I outlined when I asked for your participation, the aim of my study is to capture your views of your experiences of being Foundation degree student. This research is for a PhD that I am studying for at the University of York.

In final reporting of my findings I will not use any information from which people might be able to identify you. No real names or schools will be included. All of your views will there be anonymised. You have the right to withdraw from the interview at any point. If you feel uncomfortable at any point, just ask me if we can stop at that point. All recordings and transcripts will securely held. Your views may however be outlined in my final thesis and other publications.

As this is a group interview situation I would be grateful if you could respect others when they offer views and I would be grateful if you do not discuss what people have said outside this room. If is however OK to disagree with them. Can you answer my questions honestly. I would like to assure that any critical views that you offer will be treated confidentially. If anyone would like to see my findings can you let me know at the end of this or via an email.

Appendix B: Briefing sheets with ethics covered

Briefing sheet for potential research participants

This sheet provides details of a piece of research that I am undertaking for a PhD that I am undertaking at the University of York. It aims to examine teaching assistants' understandings of their experiences of Foundation degree study. Its provisional title is: An Ethnographic Study of teaching assistants' understandings of Foundation degree study.

The study intends to seek volunteers to engage in both group and individual interviews. I also wish to undertake a number of contextualising observations of Foundation degree classes. There is no compulsion for anyone to take part in this research. Any information that is recorded will be anonymised and no individual will be personally identified. The information gathered may be included in my final thesis and other publications.

Classes where observation is intended will be identified before modules start and students will have a right to stop this activity from occurring. Alternatively, individuals may request that their activities are not recorded. This can be communicated in person to myself or via an email to my university email address.

I would like to gain an honest a picture of students' views as possible. All points of view are welcome and it is hoped that the research offers Foundation degree students a voice about their learning.

Best wishes

Paul

Appendix C: Letter of consent

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Letter of consent

Provisional PhD title: An Ethnographic Study of teaching assistants' understandings of Foundation degree study
Researcher: Paul Smith

The aim of this investigation is to explore teaching assistants' understandings of their engagement with Foundation degree study. Interviews will be used as the primary method of data collection. The aim of these is to gain honest insights into students' understandings of their experiences. Observations of Foundation degree classes and some analysis of course-related documentation will be undertaken to gain supplementary and contextualising information. The purpose of information gained from these sources is to refine the focus my research should take and provide a further supporting data that can be drawn upon when analysis of interview data is undertaken.

Interviews are expected to between 30 and 45 minutes. All of these will be audio recorded using a flip video, but only your voice will be recorded. Parts of what is said in interviews and recorded in observations may be included in the final PhD thesis that I intend to submit and possibly journal articles. There is no compulsion for anyone to take part in this research. Any information that is recorded will be anonymised and no individual will be personally identified.

Participation is voluntary and you have the right to withdraw at any time, including if an interview or observation has started. All the data that is collected will only be utilised only for research purposes. The data that is collected will securely stored. If you are happy to consent to participate in this research can you tick the appropriate box and place your signature at the end of this form.

	Yes	No
I have read the over above outline and I agree to take part in the research that is described.		
I am part of the group of students from which interview volunteer have been requested. I would like to take part in this activity and understand the aims of the interview.		
It has been requested that the researcher observes my Foundation degree class. I consent to being observed.		
I consent to be audio-recorded, if I agree to be interviewed.		
I agree that results of the planned research (including anonymised verbatim extracts from interviews) can be present in the researcher's final thesis and publications.		
I in no way feel under pressure to take part in the above research and I am a willing volunteer.		

Signature ……………………………………….. **Date:** ……………………

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Appendix D: Individual interview preamble

Thank you for agreeing to take part in this interview. As I outlined when I asked for your participation, the aim of my study is to capture your views of your experiences of being Foundation degree student. This research is for a PhD that I am studying for at the University of York.

In final reporting of my findings I will not use any information from which people might be able to identify you. No real names or schools will be included. All of your views will there be anonymised. You have the right to withdraw from the interview at any point. If you feel uncomfortable at any point, just ask me if we can stop at that point. All recordings and transcripts will securely held. Your views may however be outlined in my final thesis and other publications.

The interview focuses on your reasons for starting the Foundation degree, experiences of being a student and feelings you have as you approach the end of your present studies. I would be grateful if you could answer my questions honestly and fully. If anyone would like to see my findings can you let me know at the end of this or via an email.

Appendix E: Sample observation notes

Time: 17:00 – 20:00 (Written up on the train after the session from brief notes taken in session)

Date: 8 March 2010

Group: Year two (Changing roles, contexts and responsibilities)

The classroom was fairly full as usual. At the start of the session one group was outside the classroom discussing the BA year and what they intended to do. A number of the class place their mobile phones on their desks as usual. The session was involved an intense debate about the challenges of being a teaching assistant and the lack of access to courses was a common concern. "Dogsbody", "ripped off" and "just mum's army" were referred. The lack of appropriate pay was stressed by a number of students.

Students had enthusiastically discussed the stress and strains they felt as teaching assistants. Learners seemed to value having time to discuss their issues and feelings. Students were particularly critical of TA apprenticeships and what it suggested about the importance of their work. They felt that they would end up teaching the apprentices literacy and numeracy. HTLAs believed that as usual they would become responsible. Students expressed pride in what they did for children. Teaching was often cited as enjoyable, but needed lots of planning. PPA time for teachers was resented by a couple of students. Students were extremely enthusiastic and active in learning tasks. They were very critical in their learning activities.

Appendix F: Sample interview transcript

Paul: There we go [Flip video turned on]. Can I just start with what you would expect as researcher yourself, my interview preamble.

Thank you for agreeing to take part in this interview. As I outlined when I asked for your participation, the aim of my study is to capture your views of your experiences of being Foundation degree student. This research is for a PhD that I am studying for at the University of York.

In final reporting of my findings I will not use any information from which people might be able to identify you. No real names or schools will be included. All of your views will there be anonymised. You have the right to withdraw from the interview at any point. If you feel uncomfortable at any point, just ask me if we can stop at that point. All recordings and transcripts will securely held. Your views may however be outlined in my final thesis and other publications.

As this is a group interview situation I would be grateful if you could respect others when they offer views and I would be grateful if you do not discuss what people have said outside this room. If is however OK to disagree with them. Can you answer my questions honestly. I would like to assure that any critical views that you offer will be treated confidentially. If anyone would like to see my findings can you let me know at the end of this or via an email.

Paul: So really just to start off with, can you describe the role you undertake when at school?

Sara: I'm a level three teaching assistant at the moment cause I've got HLTA status which at present I'm not using. I've used it previously and I think it's too much work. Too much planning erm I was taken advantage of for the amount of extra money I received and that's why I came to come down to a level three teaching assistant again. However, saying that I have been asked to take on a teaching role next year one day a week so I'm doing it again for my sins.

Jean: I'm a HiLTA.

Cara: Erm I'm just a general teaching assistant. Yeah though I seem to, because we're in a real small setting erm like today I've taken the Foundation Stage children all day today and I've got them tomorrow and Tuesday, so I'm to be honest cheap cover most of the time. It's very annoying sometimes. I've just got to live with it until I get to where else I want to be. It does make you fed up when you actually think about what you do. You do sometimes think it's not long-term. Coming on the course was my tunnel.

Mel: I'm pretty similar. I'm a level three teaching assistant and you just put a lot in as you get a lot out of it. You know you just get it back but you are put on a lot. You are expected to come to school's parent evening and that sort of thing definitely.

Julie: I think you are on a daily basis, like I'll get there in the morning and there will be things that one of the teachers want me to get ready and sort out and I need to clean out the water tray out and I need to fill the water bottles and I need to do all this stuff and then I need to the phonics and this. And I'm thinking they have extra time on a morning to sort it out and it's only because I come in early that I get any near sorting it out. It difficult really

Cara: It is difficult really.

Paul: Have things changed over the years? You know since you started.

Sara: Yeah massively. Like I said earlier there's now so much planning. The workload. I'd say so. We used to just help out. You're more involved with the children.

Mel: It has been a good thing for us [*role extension*]. Yeah I've been given more opportunity to go down the SEN route. I've been involved in case meetings and things like that so it's opened that route up. I think that it's been a good thing for us, but it's still not highly thought of as it should be and the pay is still very poor for what you do. You do it for the kids. You wouldn't do it for the money. Tesco erm pays more [*laughs*].

Erin: I think that it's more than it was.

Mel: Yeah I agree definitely, but I still think that people who aren't involved in school life don't appreciate how much a TA does. They think you are just a helper really a nobody.

Erin: Yeah a mum's helper. People who aren't in education think that's what only what we do. Senior managers see us as ten a penny and someone will always do it.

Sara: I intended to use my return to study to help me advance my career. I enjoyed doing the job [*being a teaching assistant*] but I didn't think it would get me anywhere if I continued as I was. I feel like a little hamster running as quick as I can and not achieving that much.

Mel: I also think it depends on who you are saying to. If they just saw somebody just go into their school and listen to a few readers so it depends. There are some teachers who now appreciate a TA and know what's involved.

Sarah: I've been taken advantage of for the amount of extra work that I've taken on.

Cara: I'm pretty similar. I guess that's just how it goes. I'm part-time but I must admit on the days that I'm due to finish at lunch time I always end up working later.

Jean: All my friends are TAs. Four of my neighbours are TAs. It's really weird but everyone I know is a TA.

Erin: Really?

Jean: We've all reached that certain part in our life and we've all gone down this route. We've all started by helping out in school.

Paul: So you seem to be basically saying that you have these challenging roles. Can you summarise your reasons for deciding to study on the Foundation degree?

Jean: It was a good excuse for me to stop taking work home. I said to my supervisor look I'm sorry I'm doing this course, I won't be able to do all the things I've done on a night and she was OK with that and because I stopped doing that so have my colleagues so it was a good excuse for not taking home all the extra work that we used to do on a night and at weekends.

Sara: I've been taken advantage of for the amount of extra work that I've taken on.

Cara: I'm pretty similar. I guess that's just how it goes. I'm part-time but I must admit on the days that I'm due to finish at lunch time I always end up working later. Doing this might help in the future. Maybe.

Paul: Are you saying was about partly about escaping being a TA in the future?

Jean: Yes, it was it was about stopping. It was getting too much.

Paul: In what about the future?

Jean: If I get through it and get the top-up, I hoping to have choices and maybe get a higher paid job.

Paul: So anybody have a similar or different set of reasons?

Mel: I've got more involved in teaching and I've loved it. I now teach one day a week already and really enjoy it and erm I can do it as well as some of the teachers and it started me thinking more about teaching. I applied for the primary course, but didn't get an interview. They have loads of applicants and I didn't have the right qualifications and then my mum saw this and said why don't you do this. It seemed ideal and now I think it was a better route for me at least. As it's worked out its been a much better choice.

Julie: Well I'd done NVQ3 and it was too easy and it wasn't challenging me enough. I was a bit stale and I needed to push myself a little bit more so we had someone coming doing the GTP at school and one of the teachers said oh why don't you have a go at it [*teaching*]. I did a lot of investigation and they wouldn't accept the course that I'd already done because it was too long ago and not the right level so I decided to come to this. She really encouraged me and said I know what you can do in the classroom. You'd should try it. You'd be a great teacher. Go for it.

Cara: I did it for myself really. Erm I don't really know. I suppose, I think that it was sort of a little project for myself really. For me, to make me feel better about myself. Something so erm I can be proud of myself. It was just like a little project for me, for

my myself like an evening a week. Not outside my house because I quite like my house and my children, but it's just something for yourself to achieve something and to have a bit of input into work and to believe in yourself and maybe do better in the future. It was quite selfish really just to say it was for me

Erin: Not having to do another course to do first was really good and so I applied. It made me think I could get to where I want to be [teaching]. I didn't leave with much.

Julie: Well I did it for a few reasons really. I went for a job and all the other girls had Foundation degrees and it gave them the edge. It came down to that something extra and I though I'm missing out here and my sister and sister in law are teachers and I started being an ATA and I got qualified and everything and Penny my sister said look I think that you should go for your Foundation degree. You should do it and I kinda just fell into it really, but also I wanted to do something for me and build my confidence in myself. There were several reasons really.

Paul: Can you tell me about your experiences of being a Foundation degree student?

Jean: I didn't realise it did impact on the work that you do.

Julie: Yes.

Jean: You don't realise the impact that you're doing until you hear about the theory behind it. That fact that we are all doing the same thing is reassuring and we are following things like this

Julie: That's been brilliant actually. I think the ECM, don't you. I oh that's why we do all these clubs and that's why we're doing this and that's why we're doing the other. I mean you do know it's for your Ofsted ticky boxes but you do understand more. And I think that you appreciate more what the Heads got to put up with. Just the legislation stuff.

Paul: How do other people react when you say you're doing a Foundation degree?

Jean: They say why? What are you going to get out of it? You're not going to get anymore money for doing it.

Sara: They say why do you want to be a teacher?

Mel: I don't talk about it at work actually.

Julie: I was asked about it at work actually in the staffroom .They all wanted to know more about it. We were talking about funding and that it was going to go up and I was saying it's crazy. You're not going to pay nearly £8,000 and you're not going to get that back on our wages are you. But I now see it as a stepping stone to something else. I am more confident that I can progress more now that when I started, but they all think I'm off my trolley.

Jean: Where I work they all want to help if they can.

Julie: Teachers like it because they can write some on their SEF form that someone's doing the Foundation degree.

Cara: [Laughs]. Yeah.

Jenny: It's basically when you go in with your folder and you say that I'll just ask you a few questions that makes me guilty.

Paul: Dou you have problems with work-based learning?

Mel: I struggle with it in my setting, but then it's a ridiculously small setting. It's rare if I get a chance to talk to another member of staff about something and I have to go root round the office at the end of school to find any policies so I do struggle. Some of the previous modules I have really struggled because I've not been able to ask anyone anything at work which has made things difficult, but there's not a lot I can do about it. I am more confident and independent from reading and finding policies. You understand more what is going on.

Paul: Where any other advantages that you have found about being a Foundation degree student

Jean: I think it's made me more aware of things I didn't know about before. Things like IEPs. I didn't know what an IEP was. A CAF form. I didn't know what a CAF form is and now since you've learnt about them it, you hear people talking about it all the time and I didn't realise I had access to them all on the shared server. And it's like everybody needs to know this really, but they don't because they've not been on this course.

Paul: How does that make you feel?

Jean: Yeah, it makes you feel more confident especially in relation to what you do.

Julie: It makes you feel greater confidence in that you have a greater insight into what you're doing and what you're on about as well. Yeah.

Jenny: I'm really happy I've done this and I get so chuffed when I get a good mark. I go woo.

Julie: [Laughs] Yeah.

Paul: What have you gained from doing the Foundation degree?

Jean: I think that hearing things from other colleagues that are here on the course has been really really interesting and some of their ideas that you can put into place the next day and not hanging on waiting. It's putting it into action. Thinking it's a really good idea.

Paul: How much learning do you feel you gain from others in the group?

Sara: Lots.

Jean: Lots. Yeah from their experiences. Yeah.

Erin: Some of the problems you are facing other people have too. You don't feel like you're on your own. You're up against the same brick wall all the time and it's nice to know that it's not just you and it's not just your school.

Julie: We have shared things that aren't necessary to do with the module we are doing. Say I say I've got a problem with this, someone will bring in some literature from a course they been to. So I would say we have worked quite closely together.

Jean: It's also good to find other people that you have stuff in common with each other, than the staff you are working with because they don't always want to progress or have the same outlook as you and other people in here do and I think that's been good.

Julie: It's been good to share things as well. Like we weren't very keen on that the very first. We were very protective.

Sara: Yeah.

Julie: We do it to kids all the time and it's amazing what you do learn from each other. We encourage each other and build everyone up.

Paul: How does that make you feel?

Sara: Like you can make a difference and that you can do things that you wouldn't do if you were just a TA not doing this [*course*]. You can believe more in your abilities as a TA.

Sara: I do cause I thought to myself it will be really interesting. I know it will, but I do always worry. I just about get all my thoughts on to paper in a sort of assignment and I do struggle with that. And I think that because it's linked to things that you are doing it's not abstract so you've got something. You know what I mean? It's easier than just trying to write about something that you know about when you're so busy with other things.

Cara: I think it's interesting. That's half the battle. As I say. I think a lot of it falls into place in the setting as well now and you think yeah that's why we do that. Now the head, she talked to me before, but she talks more. She said something the other day about ECM and about her role at school and it was quite interesting and we had like a discussion about it ECM which before we wouldn't have done really. Do you know what I mean? I think they are interest I think it's good. It's gone quite well. I'm proud to get to where we have.

Jean: Yeah, I found the first module hard and writing that assignment was just really hard.

Paul: Which one was that one?

Mel: What that developing and learning?

Jean: Erm yeah. There was an awful lot of reading and theory which I wasn't used to.

Julie: That was very hard as he was very specific though and wanted it in this form and we needed to learn referencing. It was a bit of a worry.

Erin: I've struggled with some of the modules but I didn't lose heart.

Julie: I like the formative. The 2,500 words. That's been great. I struggled with Tracy's. I struggled with that.

Paul: Does that reflect other people's opinions.

Erin: I think everyone's lovely.

Julie: Yeah.

Erin: Really nice very supportive.

Cara: Yeah every one's nice and in the same roles. Nobody's a problem. We all really help each other out which has been one of the best things about the course. It keeps you going when you're struggling with things.

Julie: We all help each other out.

Paul: And how do you help each out?

Erin: Support really.

Julie: We email to say, have you started yet? How many words are you at? Oh God I can't believe I've left it until the last day.

Jean: Nobody's had a real crisis.

Julie: We've had one or two. There's probably three or four small groups. It was just who you were sat with in the first few weeks, but we are one big group.

Paul: Where any other advantages that you have found about being a Foundation degree student?

Mel: I think it's been really interesting listening to other people doing similar stuff to you. Either in the same way or a bit different, but either way you think OK well it is good.

Julie: You get other ideas to put in your assignment and stuff for the classroom.

Jenny: Yeah we've all picked up things. That a good idea. People are so supportive and want to share.

Paul: Have do your studies had an impact on other areas of your life?

Jean: Well I try to do my work when nobody's there because my husband was like what are you going to get out of it? You know are you going to able to earn more money? I said well I don't know. I don't know what I'm going to do with it. I wanted to do it and he's like as long as you've got time for everything else that's fine.

Paul: Does that reflect other people's opinions?

Julie: Yeah it's really impacted on my family life. There's no question it really impacts on my family life.

Jean: Ah well I'm lucky, I only work three days a week so I don't do Monday and Friday so I get up and do it six until nine.

Julie: I do late every night. I think that you just juggle things don't you. You know it impacts but I tend to get up early if I need to do it or so it doesn't impact on my family day.

Julie: My mum looks after my kids when I come here. It is only three hours on a night.

Paul: Did that make a difference?

Julie: Erm I would say so. My mum's a wee bit older now. She can do a night looking after them while I am here. It's good that we don't have to be here in the school holidays. It's a struggle for me but how it works is good. For me it made things possible, to follow my dream of teaching.

Jean: On the other hand I think that's good for your children to see you studying.

Cara: Yeah.

Jean: If they get to come and see you at the Minster ceremony you know. I think it's good for your kids.

Julie: It's certainly show my son that mum's working really hard.

Jean: Yeah you have to.

Julie: It's really good for them to see that, but end up erm I get up at half past three this morning when it's assignment time and crack on with it.

Cara: Do you?

Julie: Yeah I do.

Mel: I feel awful as I don't have all these commitments and I still struggle for time.

Jean: My mum and dad help. They think it's fine.

Julie: Mine say you should have done it years ago when I left school.

Sara: My sister qualified about two years ago. Not this course and my mum and dad were there and they thought it was fabulous. Really positive event.

Siren from a passing police car results in silence for a few seconds.

Paul: So what would you say the biggest positives have been of doing the Foundation degree?

Jean: Having the opportunity. For me to come here is just brilliant. It just works so well for me and that's probably why I would go on to do the third year because this fits in so well. Being five until eight on a night I can drop my daughter off at grandmas and the corner and you can park outside. You get home eight o'clock to get your tea and I think that is just brilliant. You know you don't have to keep dipping out of work all time. I know that you will in more in year three and I just thinks it's so handy for me.

Julie: This course has been great. I haven't cleaned up for two years. It's been a great excuse. My husband has been really good, he's learned how to iron. Mine's taken on all sorts of things that I used to do, to help out.

Paul: Ideally, where do you want to be in five years' time?

Mel: Emigrate. I want to do my teaching first. I'm in the process of doing my forest schools' leaders award so I think that I'd quite like to do that somewhere nice and warm. Who knows.

Julie: Erm I can't decide. I like to be a learning mentor, but then I'd like to go into the parental support routes or being a teacher. So I can't decide at the moment to be honest. Then I think I'd like to be a teacher. I could do that. I don't know.

Mel: I quite like my role in some ways better. You're closer to the children. I mean I practically do the same as the teacher does but I don't have to worry about everything else. I just plan my little bits that I do and I'm the constant in their school lives at the minute but doing this has made me realise I can do more. I've been selling this [the Foundation degree] to loads of people.

Jean: Could I just say, could you get HLTA into this course?

Paul: We might look at it in the future. I will ask Jane. Look thanks for helping me with this. I really appreciate your time. OK.

(Group two of the group interviews)

Appendix G: Example of analysis where codes were developed into themes (research question one)

Themes and codes that emerged from interview data on reasons for enrolment as cited in individual and group interviews

Main themes (reasons)	Number of group interviews where it was identified	Number of individual interview where theme was confirmed	Reduced codes
1) Transformation of future occupational role and identity	8	10	"Pull" of access to a new occupational role (PNO) Reactions to changing workplace roles (RCWR) The encouragement of other staff in schools (ESS)
2) Positive modification of personal self not directly related to occupational position	4	**7**	Enhancing personal pride and confidence (PPC) Resisting previous definitions of educational abilities (RPDEA)
3) Maintenance of established roles and identities	3	7	Prioritisation of motherhood (PM) Sustaining being a teaching assistant (STA)
4) Flexibility around entry requirements	2	6	Location and identity conservation (LIC) Not needing A level qualifications (NAL) Being able to start university immediately (SUI)

Appendix H: Example of analysis where codes were developed into themes (research question two)

Themes and reduced codes that emerged from students' accounts of their experiences

Main themes	Number of group interviews where the main theme was identified	Number of individual interviews where theme was confirmed	Reduced codes
1) **Foundation degree as an initiator of enhanced self-belief and realisation**	5	10	Enhanced personal confidence and self-belief (EPCS) Learning, self-assurance and increased belief in workplace abilities (SAWA) The negativity of others, stigmatisation and being a Foundation degree student (NS)
2) **Status deficit as a constraint on self-realisation**	5	7	Foundation degree status, invisibility and securing access to university services (SIUS) Status constraints and continuing frustrations around occupational self (SCFOS)
3) **Space, study and the challenges of established roles and identities**	6	8	The difficulties of attempting to harmonise motherhood and study (AHMS) Being a partner, time constraints and relationship pressure (TCRP) Time, problems around work-based learning and workplace identities (TW)
4) **The importance of coping strategies in managing competing demands**	4	9	Peer support (PS) Studying on the periphery (SP) Good parenting, studying and the reconciliation of guilt (GPRG) Distancing and the concealment of Foundation degree status (D&C)

Appendix I: Example of analysis where codes were developed to themes (research question 3)

Themes and sub-themes from individual interview data on learners' feelings about coming towards the end of their studies

Main themes	Number of individual interviews where theme was identified	Reduced codes
1) **Positivity around imminent completion of Foundation degree study**	12	A worthwhile experience (WE) Pride and relief at having navigated a variety of demands and expectations (P&R)
2) **Frustrations and anxieties about transition to honours level study**	8	A partial achievement (PAC) Concern, BA study and fitting things in (BAFTI) Sadness at a loss of sources of support (SLSS)

Appendix J: Schedule for final individual interviews

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Questions

Question aimed at making interviewees relaxed

1. How was the journey here? *

Questions on workplace roles

1. Can you describe the role you undertake when you are at school? *

2. Has this changed over the years? *

Questions on motivations for study

1. Can you summarise your reasons for deciding to study on the Foundation degree? *

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2. It has been said to me by other students that their decision to undertake the Fd was influenced by their future career aspirations. Did this influence your decision to come on the course? How? **

3. Did anyone encourage you to come on the course? Who? *

4. Other students have also said that they came on the course to improve how they felt about themselves. Was that in any way behind your reasons for study? **

5. It has also been suggested to me that the Foundation degree was a practical option as it allowed them to also meet other commitments at work and home. Did this influence your decision to do the Fd? If so, in what ways? **

6. Was the location of the University important to you? If it was, why? *

7. Some students have also indicated that the course's flexible entry policy for mature students was important? Was it for you? **

Questions on experiences of being a Foundation degree student

1. Can you tell me about your experiences of being a Foundation degree student? *

2. In other interviews, students have suggested that the Foundation degree has made them feel more positive about themselves. Would you say that this has been part of your experiences? **

3. Have your studies influenced your work as a teaching assistant? How? Do believe that being a TA has influenced your studies in any ways? **

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4. Other students have told me that although they believed that they had undertaken the same level of study as BA students, other people do not always see it in this way. Do you feel the same? **

5. Previously some students have said there are disadvantages with being Foundation degree student. Have you experienced any disadvantages? *

6. Some of the students that I have spoken to have claimed that they don't refer to Foundation degree when discussing their studies with others. Do you? **

7. Do you think being a parent influences students' experiences of being a Foundation degree student? *

8. I have been told that people have developed a number of strategies to cope with the pressures of studying. Have you? If so, what are these? *

Questions on feelings about imminent exit from being a Foundation degree student

1. Now that you are approaching the end of your Foundation degree, can you explain how you are feeling about this? *

2. On reflection, was doing a Foundation degree worth it? Can you give me a bit more detail about this? *

*Question asked to all interviewees
**Question asked if not discussed in students answer to core questions. These questions were designed to test out whether or not individual interviewees had similar views to some of those who had previously taken part in group interviews.

List of abbreviations

ATL = Association of Lecturers and Teachers

BA (Hons) = Bachelors' degree with Honours

DfCSF = Department for Children, Schools and Families

DfE = Department for Education

DfEE = Department for Education and Employment

DfES = Department for Education and Science

DoES = Department of Education and Science

DfES = Department for Education and Skills

DipHE = Diploma of Higher Education

Fd = Foundation degree

FEC = Further education college

GTA = General teaching assistant

HEFCE = Higher Education Funding Council for England

HEI = Higher Education Institution

HESA = Higher Education Statistics Agency

HLTA = Higher Level Teaching Assistant

HNC = Higher National Certificates

HND = Higher National Diploma

PLC = Public Limited Company

PPA = Planning, preparation and assessment

NUT = National Union of Teachers

NVQ = National Vocational Qualification

SSSNB = School Support Staff Negotiating Body

TA = Teaching assistant

TDAS = Training and Development Agency for Schools

SEN = Special educational needs

SWR = School Workforce Remodelling

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