Engaging *internal conversations*: The interplay of structure, culture and agency, and how they affect GCSE English and Mathematics results in *16-19* study programmes

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Abstract

This thesis examines the interplay of structural, cultural and agential factors and how they affected GCSE English and mathematics outcomes in 16 to 19 study programmes in a Further Education College in the period 2014/15 to 2017/18. A social realist (Archer, 1995) conceptual framework was employed, which examined structural, cultural and agential factors and focused on individuals' *internal conversations* (Archer, 2003) in order to understand attitudes and behaviours. A mixed-methods case study approach was adopted involving an analysis of quantitative data on GCSE English and mathematics outcomes and qualitative data from interviews with 10 academic staff and 15 students on study programmes within the College. A complex picture emerged from the research of the interplay between structural, cultural and agential factors shaping GCSE English and mathematics outcomes. Students' learning experiences and individual GCSE outcomes were shaped by structural factors including government policy and funding, college policies and practices, their individual social circumstances, and by cultural messages and expectations. For each individual student, however, their engagement with learning in these subjects was also shaped by their beliefs about the value and relevance of these subjects and their perceptions of the *enablements* and *constraints* (Archer, 2003) they faced. Relationships, communication and consistency emerged as three key themes from the interviews with students and lecturers in relation to effectively engaging and supporting students. This thesis contends that structural factors, including funding and curricula, and cultural factors, including messaging, impact on GCSE outcomes. It further contends that whilst structural and cultural changes may be necessary to improve these outcomes, these need to be based on an informed understanding of student beliefs and values and the *enablements* and *constraints* they face. Students must be engaged in dialogue with educators and policy makers to ascertain how best to engage and support them in their learning.

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Chapter 1. Introduction

1.1 Context and rationale

This thesis examines the factors impacting on English and mathematics GCSE (General Certificate in Secondary Education) outcomes in 16 to 19 study programmes in a Further Education (FE) College from 2014/15 to 2017/18. From August 2014, FE colleges have been subject to conditions of funding which have required them to enrol certain students studying vocational programmes onto English and mathematics qualifications, with the requirement from 2015 that some of these students be enrolled onto a GCSE in these subjects. This policy has been viewed to be failing to meet its objectives of significantly increasing the proportion of students leaving full-time education with 'good' passes (C/4 or above) in GCSE English and mathematics and to be negatively impacting on students through experiences of repeated failure (Ofsted, 2018). Given the significant effort and resourcing colleges have been required to invest in the GCSEs, the continued low pass rates and the potentially demoralising experiences for students and lecturers, this is an area worthy of investigation.

Students aged 16 to 18 enrolling on 16 to 19 study programmes from 1 August 2014 were required to study mathematics and/or English as a condition of the government funding their study at college if they had not already achieved a 'good' pass in these subjects. This condition was tightened the following year, with students who started their programmes of study after 1 August 2015 being required to study a GCSE in English and/or mathematics if they had achieved a grade 3 or D in either of these subjects with the option of studying for a 'stepping stone' qualification if they had achieved a lower grade (ESFA, 2018). These requirements, and study programmes themselves which were introduced in 2013, followed the Coalition Government's acceptance (DfE, 2011) of Wolf's recommendations in her 'Review of Vocational Education' (Wolf, 2011). She recommended that students under 19 should continue to study English and mathematics, arguing that:

> English and Maths GCSE (at grades A*-C) are fundamental to young people's employment and education prospects. Yet less than 50% of students have both at the end of Key Stage 4 (age 15/16); and at age 18 the figure is still below 50%. Only 4% of the cohort achieve this key credential during their 16-18 education. Worse, the funding and accountability systems established by government create perverse incentives to steer 16+ students into inferior alternative qualifications. (Wolf, 2011, p. 18)

In terms of the success of the policy in increasing the proportion of young people achieving 'good' passes in their English and mathematics GCSEs, Ofsted's 2015 Annual Report stated that the quality of teaching in general FE colleges had declined due to colleges not having an adequate strategy to deal with the dramatic increase in the numbers of students studying English and mathematics as a condition of funding (Ofsted, 2015a). The following year Ofsted reported that, 'While the policy's intention to improve literacy and numeracy levels is well intentioned, the implementation of the policy is not having the desired impact in practice' (Ofsted, 2016). Foreshadowing Smith's (2017) recommendation concerning mathematics a year later, Ofsted suggested that the GCSE retakes may not be the most appropriate vehicle for improving the English and mathematics skills of post-16 learners in FE colleges. Ofsted reported again in 2017 that the government's policy was not achieving its aims, stating that only 'around a fifth of students not attaining GCSE 9 to 4/A*to C grade in English by age 16 did so by 19' (Ofsted, 2017, p. 53). By the end of the 2017/18 academic year, the last year for which data are analysed in this research, Ofsted were continuing to express concern regarding the GCSE resits, referring to continued low pass rates and the impact on students of repeated failure (Ofsted, 2018). The issue of resourcing of colleges was raised, and it was suggested that the focus should be on students continuing to improve their skills to avoid the potential perception of the resits as punishment.

The 16 to 19 English and mathematics condition of funding guidance was updated for the academic year 2019/20. Students on 16 to 19 study programmes who had achieved a grade 3 in English or mathematics were still required to study for the GCSE. Students with a grade 2 or below, however, who went on to study and achieve a Level

2 Functional Skill were no longer required to continue to work towards the GCSE (ESFA, 2020).

This thesis examines the structural, cultural and agential factors impacting on the outcomes of GCSE resits being sat at an FE College by students on 16 to 19 study programmes in order to shed light on why the policy outlined above may not be having the desired impact, and to identify implications for practice.

1.2 Research aims and research questions

As implicit in the title of this thesis, the overarching aim of this research has been to undertake a social realist analysis (Archer, 1995) of results in GCSE English and mathematics in 16-19 study programmes and to make suggestions for improvement based on this. The analysis considers the interplay of structure and culture on the one hand and the agency of college students and lecturers on the other, focusing on internal conversations and their role in mediating the effects of structure and culture.

In order to shed light on the context of, and background to, the current situation, key policies since 1996 relating to post-compulsory English and mathematics and vocational education have been reviewed and their impact on the FE sector, the case study College and individuals have been examined. It is evident from this review that the FE sector has been subject to constant 'churn' (Norris and Adam, 2017, p. 3). Despite a 'tsunami of change' (Green, 2012, p. 58), however, the policy relating to GCSE English and mathematics has been deemed to be failing. In part, this may be the result of the processes of policy making and policy implementation failing to sufficiently account for the agentic powers, interests and beliefs of the students themselves. Consequently, this study has aimed to collect data on *internal conversations,* through which agents reflexively deliberate, prioritise concerns and subjectively determine their practical projects (Archer, 2003), to develop a deeper understanding of students' perceptions of the value and relevance of studying for GCSE English and mathematics as part of their study programmes. The interview data were further analysed in relation to the *enablements* and *constraints* (Archer, 2003) which students identified as supporting them (*enablements*) or acting as barriers (*constraints*) to achieving 'good' passes in these subjects. In this regard, this thesis

seeks to make a contribution to knowledge by developing an understanding of students' and tutors' *internal conversations* as it is the mutual interactions of these two groups that are vital in improving GCSE English and mathematics results. The research questions guiding this study are as follows:

1. What are students' perceptions of the value and relevance of GCSE English and mathematics resits as part of 16 to 19 programmes of study?
2. What *enablements* and *constraints* do students face in relation to achieving 'good' passes in their English and mathematics GCSE resits?
3. What key structural, cultural and agential factors impacted upon outcomes in GCSE English and mathematics outcomes within 16 to 19 study programmes in a Further Education College over the years 2014/15 to 2018/19?

1.3 Structure of thesis

To facilitate an analysis of the interplay between agency on the one hand and structure and culture on the other and to develop an understanding of the factors impacting the English and mathematics GCSE outcomes, this thesis has utilised a conceptual framework based on Archer's (1995) morphogenetic approach which is explained in Chapter 2. This approach posits that structure and agency are temporally separable and that it is therefore possible to analyse social change (morphogenesis) or stability (morphostasis) in terms of the interplay between them. Key concepts, for example, personal identity, agency, the *internal conversation*, and *enablements and constraints* are explained. The critical realist meta-theoretical framework underlying Archer's theory is also outlined.

Literature on vocational education and post-compulsory English and mathematics is discussed and analysed in Chapter 3. Key reports and policies from 1996 onwards relating to these are outlined, and emergent themes identified including: the constant change experienced by the FE sector; the knowledge economy and skills shortages; social mobility; parity of esteem between academic and vocational

pathways; professionalisation of the workforce; resistance to the policies and the current 'what works' (HM Government, 2017) agenda.

Chapter 4 discusses the mixed methods case study approach developed to meet the aims of the research and collect empirical data to answer the research questions. The critical realist meta-theoretical framework (Bhaskar, 1989) and the social realist conceptual framework (Archer, 1995) are discussed in relation to the research design, with consideration of issues of rigour, ethics and the role of the researcher.

The analysis of the quantitative data and the student interviews is presented in Chapter 5. The quantitative analysis points to a lack of the usual patterning of outcomes by demographic characteristics, whilst finding a positive relationship between attendance and progress. The qualitative data paint an interesting picture of students' *internal conversations* regarding the resits, highlighting a range of beliefs about the value and relevance of the resits, particularly the skills required to achieve 'good' passes. These differing beliefs, paired with different agential circumstances and differing perceptions of *enablements* and *constraints*, lead to different agential responses and behaviours. This chapter, therefore, begins to shed some light on the structural and cultural contexts surrounding the GCSE resits in which students find themselves and how they make sense of, and respond to, these contexts.

Chapter 6 further examines the structural, cultural and agential factors affecting the GCSE resit outcomes. Analysis of the interviews with lecturers and academic managers provides insight into how the policy was viewed and responded to by the College and implemented in classrooms. Lecturers, like students, were found to have responded in different ways to the policy, the implementation of which is mediated by the *internal conversations* of academic staff. Lecturers and academic managers provided reflections on what they perceived to be enabling and constraining delivery of the GCSEs. They also shared their perceptions on what was working well and areas for development. The *internal conversations* of academic managers and lecturers, which shape the delivery of the GCSEs, also involve their perceptions of *enablements* and *constraints* facing students, which in some respects differ from students' own

perceptions, and their beliefs about student attitudes and values, which again did not always match with students' stated attitudes and values.

Chapter 7 draws together the findings from the previous chapters. Areas of convergence and divergence in the data are explored and the emergent themes of relationships, communication and consistency are discussed. Also, implications for policy, theory and practice are explored. The resulting picture is of a complex interplay between structural, cultural and agential factors. That the impact of structural and cultural factors is mediated by the *internal conversations* of individuals is demonstrated and it is argued, therefore, that policy makers and educators need to engage with students' *internal conversations* if outcomes are to be improved.

Chapter 2. Conceptual Framework

2.1 Introduction

This research focuses on the interplay of structure, culture and agency and how they affect GCSE English and mathematics results in 16-19 study programmes. It is rooted in a social realist perspective (Archer, 1995) which facilitates an analysis of the properties and powers of agents on the one hand and the properties and powers of structure and culture on the other, as well as the interplay between them. This paradigm acknowledges 'real powers for real people in the real world', whilst simultaneously acknowledging that 'we do not make our personal identities under the circumstances of our own choosing' (Archer, 2000, p. 10). This framework enables an analysis of the factors impacting on GCSE outcomes which considers structural factors including government policy and college policies and procedures, cultural factors including messages about the value and importance of the GCSEs, the agential actions of lecturers and students, and the interplay between them. Section 2.2 outlines Archer's morphogenetic approach to analysing the interplay between structure and agency and the resulting social change or stasis. Section 2.3 outlines her conceptualisation of the development of human and personal identity and the role of the *internal conversation* in terms of both the development of personal identity and in mediating between structure and agency (Archer, 2003). Section 2.4 discusses the application of these concepts to this research.

2.2 Archer's morphogenetic approach

Archer (1995, p. 15) developed a morphogenetic approach to supply 'a genuine method of conceptualizing how the interplay between structure and agency can be analyzed over time and space.' This approach considers the interaction between the 'people' and the 'parts' and looks at how, on the one hand, agents and their interactions cause social change (or stasis) and, on the other, how social and cultural transformation transform social agency. As well as allowing for an analysis of the roles of the 'people' and the 'parts' (analytical dualism), the morphogenetic approach is rooted in the assertion that agency and structure are temporally separable. This makes it methodologically possible to explain change over time through an

examination of the interplay between agency and structure. This second assertion involves the recognition that, when analysing change, 'any activity took place in a context of prior emergent structures and that determinate activities were antecedent to specific structural changes' (Archer, 1995, p. 67). Examples of social structures include discourses, for example patriarchal discourse, institutions, for example families and colleges, and systems, for example the education system (Scott, 2000).

2.3 Archer's conception of the development of human and personal identity and the role of the *internal conversation*

Archer's (2000, p. 17) 'real people' are regarded as having properties and powers which are relational, 'stemming from the way our species is constituted, the way the world is and the necessity of their mutual interaction.' She argues that, 'The properties and powers of the human being are neither seen as *pre-given*, nor as *socially appropriated*, but rather these are emergent from our relations with our environment' (Archer, 2000, p. 87). The individual develops a continuous sense of self, the basis of human identity, through their practical interaction with their environment. Archer sees personal, as opposed to human, identity as emergent from the continued interaction between human beings and the three domains of the natural, the practical and the social. Archer's (2003) concept of the *internal conversation* is key in this interaction as it is the medium through which individuals reflexively deliberate, prioritise concerns and subjectively determine their practical projects. Archer (2000, p. 221) argues that we develop a *modus vivendi* in which we strike our own balance between the concerns of the three domains, adding that, 'which precise balance we strike between our concerns, and what precisely figures amongst an individual's concerns is what gives us our strict identity as *particular persons.*'

Having explained the emergence of human and personal identity, Archer explains how individuals come to acquire a social identity. Firstly, an individual attains status as a 'Primary Agent' by virtue of their social positioning in relation to societal resources. In Archer's terminology, individuals who reflect upon the *constraints* and *enablements* they face as a result of their positioning as a Primary Agent and subsequently organise with others who are similarly situated to seek a change to (or

maintenance of) the status quo become 'Corporate Agents'. On the other hand, individuals continue to act as 'Primary Agents' when they act and respond individually to situations in which they find themselves (Archer, 1995). Social change (or stasis) is seen as resulting from Corporate Agency or from the aggregate effects of Primary Agency. Examples of lecturers responding to policy as 'Corporate Agents' are discussed in Chapter 2. The aggregate effects of students acting as 'Primary Agents' which result, for example, in lecturers experiencing student behaviour as a structural constraint, are discussed in Chapter 6.

In the morphogenetic cycle, agency elaborates and reshapes structure and is in turn elaborated and reshaped (double morphogenesis) as groupings and their relative standings change. Archer (1995, p. 275) describes the process through which agents become actors in terms of triple morphogenesis, a process through which 'Agency conditions (not determines) who comes to occupy different social roles.' Actors are social agents who have adopted roles which are pre-existent and durable and not reducible to the characteristics of the agents who hold them. For young people, such as those providing the focus of this study, there is a recognition that their personal identity may not yet be fixed and that they will still be choosing between available roles. Archer (2000, p. 291) argues, however, that 'the *internal conversation* [will have] begun a dialogue of the kind of person an individual believes they want to be'.

As well as highlighting the role of the *internal conversation* in the development of personal identity, Archer (2003) further presented it as a mechanism through which the interplay between structure and agency can be examined. In developing Bhaskar's (1989, cited in Archer 2003, p. 2) assertion that 'the causal power of social forms is mediated through social agency', Archer outlines a three stage process of mediation between structure and agency as follows:

(i) Structural and cultural properties, *objectively* shape the situations which agents confront involuntarily, and possess generative powers of constraint and enablement in relation to

(ii) Agents' own configurations of concerns, as *subjectively* defined in relation to the three orders of natural reality – nature, practice and society.

(iii) Courses of action are produced through reflexive deliberations of agents who *subjectively* determine their practical projects in relation to their *objective* circumstances. (Archer, 2003, p. 135)

The medium through which agents reflexively deliberate and subjectively determine their practical projects is conceptualised in terms of an *internal conversation* with Archer arguing that:

> our personal powers are exercised through reflexive internal dialogue and are causally accountable for the delineation of our concerns, the definition of our projects, the diagnosis of our circumstances and, ultimately the determination of our practices in society. (Archer, 2003, p. 130)

The role of *internal conversations* is thus of critical importance in this study as young people will be making choices about what is important to them in terms of helping them to develop into the kind of person they want to be and live the life they want to live. Students' beliefs and values regarding the English and mathematics GCSEs will shape their engagement with their studies and, ultimately, outcomes.

The fact that objective circumstances, as well as subjectively defined concerns, enter into *internal conversations* means these are conducted by agents as opposed to persons. Objective circumstances impinge on individuals' projects in the form of *enablements* and *constraints*. *Enablements* and *constraints* do not exist as independent entities. They are 'potential *causal powers'* (Archer, 2003, p. 5) with their exercise being contingent upon whether or not agents design and follow projects which they can act upon. The anticipation of *enablements* and *constraints* can impinge on agents' formulations of projects in that enabling factors could make some projects seem more attractive or constraining factors may deter agents from pursuing particular projects. In terms of projects which agents have already decided upon, they can act strategically in making the most of *enablements* they encounter or in seeking to work around *constraints* or modifying their goals in the light of them.

2.4 Conclusion

The use of this conceptual framework in the current study has facilitated an exploration of the impact of structural and cultural factors on GCSE English and mathematics outcomes in the College being studied. Examples of structural and cultural factors include government policy, organisational culture and structure, class, gender, and ethnicity. On the other hand, the conceptual framework focuses attention on the concerns and values of students and lecturers whose behaviour is regarded within this framework as conditioned, but not determined, by structure and culture. As outlined above, structure and culture are viewed as being mediated through agency via the medium of individuals' *internal conversations*. This research explores if and how learners are engaged with the GCSE English and mathematics programmes, the *enablements* and *constraints* they and their lecturers perceive they face, and how these influence their engagement and behaviour in these subjects and, ultimately, outcomes.

Social realism (Archer, 1995) builds upon the critical realism of Bhaskar which he describes as an 'underlabourer' for social science (Bhaskar, 1989, p. 2) in that it provides a philosophical standpoint on ontology and epistemology and outlines how, given this standpoint, science and social science do, and must, work. Elements of critical realism and their relevance to this research are discussed in Chapter 4 along with further discussion of the methodology in relation to Archer's concepts.

Chapter 3. Literature Review

3.1 Introduction

Given the focus of this research on the interplay between structure, culture and agency and how these affect GCSE English and mathematics results in 16-19 study programmes, this chapter begins with a discussion of the policy backdrop to vocational and post-16 literacy and numeracy education since the Dearing Report (1996). This report was the outcome of a review into the existing framework of 16-19 qualifications and focused on issues including the rigour of academic qualifications, increasing participation and achievement, preparing young people for their next steps, and providing value for money. As will be seen in this chapter, these are themes that have been regularly revisited since. In terms of the College being studied, the vast majority of students studying English and mathematics as part of their study programme are on vocational courses. As explained in Chapter 1, policies relating to vocational education have made it compulsory for these students to study for these GCSEs. It, therefore, makes sense to consider policy relating to vocational education on the one hand and post-16 literacy and numeracy on the other hand and to look at the inter-relations between the two. This is followed by an analysis of the themes which emerged from the literature. Archer's (2003) concept of individuals facing *enablements* and *constraints* as they formulate life projects through *internal conversations*, discussed in Chapter 2, will frame an analysis of how structure may impinge on agency and vice-versa.

Section 3.2 outlines key reports and policies relating to further education and literacy and numeracy from 1996 to the present along with an analysis of the changes resulting from these in terms of, for example, qualifications, requirements concerning the training of those teaching in the sector, and bodies responsible for monitoring and supporting the sector. What is most evident and striking is the sheer scale of change experienced by the sector, described by Green (2012, p. 58) as a 'tsunami of change'. Literature analysing, seeking to explain and critiquing this 'churn' (Norris and Adam, 2017, p. 3) is discussed in Section 3.3 along with other emergent

themes from the literature including the knowledge economy and skills shortages, social mobility, parity of esteem between academic and vocational pathways, professionalisation of the workforce and resistance to the policies. Section 3.4 provides a brief summary of the current state of affairs with regards to the 'what works' agenda.

In terms of academic literature directly addressing the issue of compulsory English and mathematics GCSE resits in further education, a comprehensive search found only two articles directly related to the resits, one on re-motivating students (Anderson and Peart, 2016) and one on student attitudes towards the resits (Bellamy, 2017). Initial search terms including 'GCSE resits further education UK', 'GCSE English further education UK' and 'GCSE mathematics further education UK' were broadened out to include search terms such as 'adult literacy', 'adult numeracy', 'vocational education' and 'post-compulsory education' etc. The literature reviewed in this chapter is therefore drawn from a number of areas including key reports, policy documents, guidance and legislation relating to vocational and post-compulsory literacy and numeracy education; commentaries, empirical studies and theory from the social sciences relating to the themes emerging from the literature; and current literature relating to 'what works' along with critiques of these 'technicist' approaches.

3.2 Policy regarding vocational education and English and mathematics since the Dearing Report (1996): a 'tsunami of change'

As indicated above, it has been argued that the FE sector over recent years has been subject to constant change. This section details and analyses key reports and changes of policy since 1996, summarised in Table 1, and analyses the changes they introduced and the impact of these on the FE sector.

Table 1 Key reports, policy documents guidance and legislation relating to further education and post-compulsory literacy and numeracy 1996 to present

Year	Numeracy/ Literacy	Skills/ Vocational Education
1996 (Conservative Government)	**Report:** *Review of Qualifications for 16-19 year olds* (Dearing, 1996)	**Report:** *Review of Qualifications for 16-19 year olds* (Dearing, 1996)
1997		**Report:** Learning Works: Widening Participation in Further Education (Kennedy, 1997)
1998 (Labour government)		**Green Paper**: *The Learning Age* (DfEE, 1998)
1999	**Report:** *The Moser Report: Summary and Recommendations* (Moser, 1999)	**White Paper:** *Learning to Succeed* (DfEE, 1999) FENTO Standards published
2000	**QCA Guidance:** *National standards for adult literacy* (DfES and QCA, 2000a) and *National standards for adult numeracy* (DfES and QCA, 2000b)	**Curriculum 2000:** *The National Curriculum Handbook for Secondary School Teachers in England.* (DfEE and QCA, 1999) **Report:** *Skills for all: Proposals for a National Skills Agenda. Final Report of the National Skills Task Force* (National Skills Task Force, 2000)
2001	**Strategy:** *Skills for life: The national strategy for improving adult literacy and numeracy* (DfEE, 2001) **New curricula:** *Adult Literacy Core Curriculum including Spoken Communication* (Basic Skills Agency, 2001a) and *Adult Numeracy Core Curriculum* (Basic Skills Agency, 2001b)	**Statutory Instrument:** *The Further Education Teachers' Qualifications (England) Regulations 2001* **White Paper:** *Opportunity for all: in a world of change* (DTI, 2001) **Report:** *Modern Apprenticeships: The way to work* (Cassels, 2002)
2003	**Survey:** *The Skills for Life survey: A national needs and impact survey of literacy, numeracy and ICT skills* DfES (2003)	**Report:** *The Initial Training of Further Education Teachers* (Ofsted, 2003)
2004	**Report:** *Skills for Life – the national strategy for improving adult literacy and numeracy skills. Delivering the vision 2001-2004* DfES (2004a) **Report** *Making Mathematics Count: The report of Professor Adrian Smith's Inquiry into Post-14 Mathematics Education* (Smith, 2004)	**Report:** *Equipping our Teachers for the Future* (DfES, 2004b) - response to 2003 Ofsted Report **Report:** *14-19 Curriculum and Qualifications Reform. Final Report of the Working Group on 14-19 Reform* (Tomlinson, 2004) - introduced idea of functional skills
2005	**National Standards:** National standards for adult literacy, numeracy and ICT (DfES and QCA, 2005)	**White Paper:** '14-19 Education and Skills' (DfES, 2005a) - key role given to functional skills **White Paper:** Skills: Getting on in business, getting on at work (DfES, 2005b) **Report:** Realising the potential: A review of the future of further education colleges (Foster, 2005)
2006		**Report:** *Prosperity for all in the global economy – world class skills* (Leitch, 2006) **White Paper:** *Further Education: Raising Skills, Improving Life Chances* (DfES, 2006)
2007		**Act of Parliament:** Further Education and Training Act 2007

		Statutory Instrument: *The Further Education Teachers' Qualifications (England) Regulations 2007* **White Paper:** *World Class Skills: Implementing the Leitch Review of Skills in England* (DIUS, 2007) – raising participation age and new Diplomas
2008		**Act of Parliament:** *Education and Skills Act 2008*
2009		**Report:** *Education for all: The future of Education and Training for 14-19 year olds. Summary, Implications and Recommendations* (Nuffield Foundation, 2009)
2010 (Conservative-Liberal alliance)		**Strategy:** *Skills for Sustainable Growth. Strategy Document* (BIS, 2010)
2011	**Reform Plan:** *New Challenges, New Chances: Further Education and Skills System Reform Plan* (BIS, 2011a) **Survey:** *2011 Skills for Life Survey: Headline findings* (BIS, 2011b)	**Report:** *Review of vocational education – The Wolf Report* (Wolf, 2011) **Policy Guidance:** *Study Programmes for 16-19 year olds* (DfE, 2011) TES declares new Diplomas officially dead (Isaacs, 2013)
2012		**Report:** *Professionalism in Further Education: Interim Report of the Independent Review Panel* (Lingfield, 2012a)
2013	**Minimum Core:** *Addressing literacy, language, numeracy and ICT needs in education and training: Defining the minimum core of teachers' knowledge, understanding and personal skills. A guide for initial teacher education programmes* (LSIS, 2013)	**Statutory Instrument:** The Further Education Teachers' Qualifications (England) (Revocation) Regulations 2013
2014	**Condition of funding:** Continuing to study English and mathematics compulsory for 16-18 year old students on programmes of study without 'good' pass (see ESFA, 2018)	**Strategy:** *Further Education Workforce Strategy: The Government's Strategy to Support Workforce Excellence in Further Education* (BIS, 2014)
2015 (Conservative Government)	**Condition of funding:** Continuing to study GCSE English and/or mathematics compulsory for 16-18 year old students on programmes of study with a D/3, 'stepping-stone' qualifications allowed for those with lower grade (see ESFA, 2018)	
2016		**Report:** 'Report of the Independent Panel on Technical Education' (Sainsbury, 2016) **Report:** *Post-16 Skills Plan* (BIS and DfE, 2016) – college-based programmes in 15 technical routes with 'common core' including English, mathematics and digital skills/ area reviews announced
2017		**Green Paper:** Building our Industrial Strategy (HM Government, 2017) **Act of Parliament:** Technical and Further Education Act 2017

Dearing, in his 'Review of Qualifications for 16-19 year olds', argued that:

> Education is about developing all the talents, abilities and faculties of young people. It is about developing them as human beings, and about preparing them for citizenship and parenthood as well as for the world of work. (Dearing, 1996, p. 3)

The development of key skills, such as communication, application of number and information technology, was argued to be crucial to young people developing to their full potential. Couched partially in terms of responding to employers' concerns, it was suggested that all young people should be supported to develop their skills in these areas. In terms of vocational qualifications, the report noted that General National Vocational Qualifications (GNVQs) had not yet received wide recognition and that concerns had been expressed about rigour and the burden of assessment. The recommendation was made to add additional units, to provide more choice and to monitor how well the qualifications prepared students for universities.

The report of the Widening Participation Committee established in 1994 was published in 1997 (Kennedy, 1997). The Kennedy Report argued that the FE sector suffered as a result of the privileging of academic success over success in other fields and also as the result of 'an appalling ignorance amongst decision-makers and opinion-formers about what goes on in further education' (Kennedy, 1997, p. 1). The role of FE in providing vocational training and second chances and thereby supporting economic renewal and social cohesion was stressed (Kennedy, 1997). Concern was expressed that the removal of FE from the control of Local Authorities (LAs), which encouraged colleges to behave as businesses, combined with the linking of funding with successful outcomes, may lead to selection procedures which would narrow rather than widen the opportunities of those groups 'for whom learning is a daunting experience' (Kennedy, 1997, p. 4). This report emphasized the public service ethos of colleges and sought to perpetuate a view of FE which did not reduce learning to training and which emphasised the role of education in enabling participation and empowering individuals to become active citizens. Stoten, however, argued that:

> The election of New Labour in 1997 ironically signified the end of the social democratic model of education and its liberal-humanist values and the confirmation of the neo-liberal State with its emphasis on economic instrumentalism. (Stoten, 2013, p. 366)

Following New Labour's Green Paper 'The Learning Age' (DfEE, 1998), the White Paper 'Learning to Succeed' (DfEE, 1999) set out a new framework for post-16 learning. A Learning and Skills Council (LSC) was to be established in 2001 to replace the Further Education Funding Council (FEFC) and the Training and Enterprise Council (TEC). Ofsted was to assume responsibility for inspecting provision for young people up to the age of 19 in colleges from the FEFC. The government undertook to 'lead the development of a range of qualifications for all post-16 teaching and training staff' (DfEE, 1999, p. 46). These qualifications were to build on the Further Education National Training Organisation (FENTO) standards which were published the same year (Nasta, 2007).

As part of the Curriculum 2000 reforms (DfEE and QCA, 1999), and in an attempt to achieve parity of esteem between vocational and academic pathways, Advanced Vocational Certificates of Education (AVCEs) were developed and introduced in 2000. The more academic nature of these qualifications, resulting from the desire for them to be viewed as offering a viable alternative to A levels, resulted in low take up, or quick abandonment of, the qualifications by colleges who favoured qualifications with more vocational content (Hodgson and Spours, 2007).

The Moser Report, published in 1999, proposed a national strategy to tackle problems with literacy and numeracy within the adult population (Moser, 1999). The report estimated that one in five adults were not functionally literate and numerate (defined as operating below level one in literacy entry level in numeracy). This was seen as negatively impacting on society, the economy and individuals with the report stating that, 'It is one of the reasons for relatively low productivity in our economy, and it cramps the lives of millions of people' (Moser, 1999, p. 7). The publication of this report was followed two years later by the launch of the Labour government's Skills for Life (SfL) strategy.

The foreword to the SfL strategy referenced the growth of the knowledge economy, national prosperity and individual social disadvantage, in that order (DfE, 2001). The government committed to investing £1.5 billion on the strategy over the next three years aimed at providing 'high quality training and support for teachers and in the tools they need to do their job' and 'engaging and supporting learners themselves' (DfEE, 2001, p. 2). In terms of tools for teachers, the report refers to National Standards, which had been published the previous year (DfES and QCA, 2000a; 2000b), core curricula which were released in 2001 (Basic Skills Agency, 2001a; 2001b), and national literacy and numeracy tests based on these curricula. The emphasis was on functional literacy and numeracy. From September 2001 FE teaching qualifications were to contain elements of literacy and numeracy to better equip lecturers to support learners with these skills. In addition, there were to be new specialist literacy and numeracy qualifications for those delivering in these areas. ReadWritePlus materials were developed to support SfL delivery.

Alongside the introduction of National Literacy and Numeracy tests, Key Skills qualifications were introduced in 2001 for post-16 learners in Communication and Application of Number. Again, these focused on functional literacy and numeracy and were designed to equip learners with 'the skills most commonly needed for success in a range of activities at work, in education and training and life in general' (City & Guilds, 2005, p. 9). Initially these were expected to be taken by all post-16 learners, but from 2001 learners with an A* to C in English and/or mathematics were exempted from the corresponding level 2 Key Skill (City & Guilds, 2005). The Cassel report on Modern Apprenticeships recommended the continuation of the requirement to achieve Key Skills in Application of Number and Communication within apprenticeships, at level 1 within Foundation Modern Apprenticeships and at level 2 within Advanced Modern Apprenticeships, in order to claim the full apprenticeship whilst noting that, at the time, considerably fewer than half of apprentices completed the Key Skills required (Cassel, 2001). In the same year these qualifications were introduced, a Statutory Instrument made it compulsory for new teachers in FE to gain an approved teaching qualification (Nasta, 2007).

A number of reports were published in 2002 relating to mathematics. The Roberts Review (Roberts, 2002) noted decreasing numbers of students studying mathematics, as well as the physical sciences and engineering, alongside an increasing demand for graduates and postgraduates with strong numerical skills which was stated to be leading to skills shortages. Action by schools and colleges was reported as necessary to address issues including teacher shortages; poor teaching environments; courses failing to inspire learners, especially girls; and careers advice. The shortage of suitably qualified mathematics and science teachers was linked to the more lucrative and attractive options available to science and mathematics graduates. Concerns were expressed that teachers in FE colleges were often teaching areas that they had not studied at A-level or degree level. Recommendations included better remuneration for teachers, improved initial training to equip teachers to deliver in areas in which they had not specialised, and Continuing Professional Development (CPD). In terms of curricula, the review stated that they should be made more relevant to learners. In addition, improved careers advice, which stressed the range of careers open to students who studied maths, science and engineering, was called for. In this year, when reports were commenting on the need for improved initial teacher training and CPD, the Institute for Learning (IfL) was established as a professional, voluntary membership body for FE teachers, trainers and assessors (SET, 2016).

In 2002 the Advisory Committee on Mathematics Education (ACME) was established by the Royal Society and the Joint Mathematical Council and published a report picking up on one of the concerns raised in the Roberts Review and outlining recommendations for CPD for mathematics teachers (ACME, 2002). Supporting the Roberts Review's assertions of a growing skills gap, a report to the Science, Technology and Mathematics Council, in April of the same year, stated as a key finding that 'mathematical literacy' is 'displacing basic numeracy as the minimum mathematical competency required in a large and growing number of jobs' (Hoyles *et al.*, 2002, p. 3).

In 2004, DfES published a new report on the SfL Strategy. The report, which this time referred to the ill-health and isolation resulting from poor literacy and numeracy skills

before commenting on productivity, stated that the government had 'made great strides in ensuring adults are able to gain the skills they need to be productive at work, active in their communities, and fulfilled in their home and family lives' (DfES, 2004a, p. 3). It reported that initial targets had been exceeded and outlined plans to further extend provision. The Smith Report on post-14 mathematics education published in the same year raised concerns familiar from the Roberts Review: curricula and qualifications failing to inspire learners as well as failing to provide them with the required skills and to meet the needs of employers and higher education; teacher shortages and a lack of CPD and resources (Smith, 2004).

The government responded in 2004 to an Ofsted report of the previous year which had concluded that, 'The current system of FE teacher training does not provide a satisfactory foundation of professional development for FE teachers at the start of their careers' (Ofsted, 2003, p. 2). New teachers to the sector would be required to initially complete a level 3 'passport to teaching' qualification and to then go on to complete full teacher training, leading to the new Qualified Teacher Learning and Skills (QTLS) status within 5 years (DfES, 2004b). The training courses were to incorporate elements recommended by Ofsted. Lifelong Learning UK (LLUK), which replaced FENTO as the sector skills council in 2004 (Nasta, 2007), was given the role of developing initial teacher training standards and a professional development framework and the IfL was to be responsible for registering teachers as both trainees and licensed practitioners.

In terms of vocational education, the Tomlinson report on '14-19 Curriculum and Qualifications Reform', also published in 2004, argued that reforms were needed to 'Raise participation and achievement', 'Get the basics right', 'Strengthen vocational routes', 'Provide greater stretch and challenge', 'Reduce the assessment burden', and 'Make the system transparent and easier to understand' (Tomlinson, 2004, p. 4). Basics in this context referred to skills in literacy, mathematics and ICT. The recommendation was that 14-19 programmes should include core learning which would require learners to achieve specified levels of functional literacy and communication, functional mathematics and ICT. A further key recommendation was that vocational routes be strengthened in terms of improved status and quality.

The White Paper '14-19 Education and Skills' (DfES, 2005a) which followed, outlined reforms argued to be vital in terms of the economy and social justice. It set out proposals aimed to increase the percentage of young people engaged in education post-16, to ensure young people have the literacy and numeracy skills they need, to provide higher quality vocational routes, to provide stretch for all young people and to re-engage those who are disaffected. One of the proposed reforms was the introduction of Diplomas in 14 lines with the requirement that 'young people will need to achieve appropriate standards in English and maths, specialised material, relevant GCSEs and A levels and have work experience' (DfES, 2005a, p. 6). In terms of the English and mathematics elements, students were to be required to achieve functional skills at level 2 in both subjects to achieve a Diploma at level 2. The government also pledged to increase the number of Apprenticeships and include them within the Diploma framework. Functional Skills were to be trialled in 2006/7 with a full national pilot in 2007. Diploma Development Partnerships were to develop the first five Diplomas to be ready for delivery in September 2008 (DfES, 2005c).

The Skills White Paper of 2005, referring to the challenges of the global economy and the need to replace 'the redundant notion of a 'job for life' with [the government's] new ambition of employability for life' (DfES, 2005b, p. 1), set out plans for upskilling the adult workforce which were seen as complementing those set out for 14–19 year olds. The Leitch Review of the following year argued that the UK compared unfavourably with other comparator nations in terms of its skills base and argued that, 'Skills were once *a* key lever for prosperity and fairness. Skills are now increasingly *the* key lever. A radical step-change is necessary' (Leitch, 2006, p. 3). This review proposed that plans to improve skills levels should be founded on the following principles: 'shared responsibility', 'focus on economically valuable skills', 'demand-led skills', 'adapt and respond', and 'build on existing structures' (Leitch, 2006, pp. 3-4).

The Foster Review of 2005 into the future role of FE colleges looked at key challenges and opportunities facing the sector. It suggested the impact of the sector was hampered by schools 'exporting too many failing pupils'; the lack of a basis for locality strategy following incorporation; funding issues; a poor reputation due to some

colleges and courses persistently underperforming, 'too many initiatives', and confusion concerning the roles of, for example, DfES and the Learning and Skills Council (Foster, 2005, p. vii). Recommendations included focusing primarily on employability and skills deemed to be economically valuable; improving quality and striving for excellence; taking account of the learner voice; meeting employer needs; promoting services to stakeholders; developing improved management information systems.

Despite Foster's assertion that the way forward in resolving the issues in FE required 'evolutionary, not revolutionary change' (Foster, 2005, p. vii), Blair announced in the 2006 White Paper that, 'Evolutionary and incremental change will not be enough. We need fundamental reform in the role colleges and training providers play' (DfES, 2006, p. 2). The primary mission of the FE sector was spelt out as being an economic one of equipping people for employment. A single Quality Improvement Agency (QIA) was to be established to be responsible for implementing an FE Quality Improvement Strategy. FE staff were to be trained and required to complete CPD annually, principals were to undertake a leadership qualification, the LSC would step in where providers were failing, the best providers would spread their influence and new high-quality providers would be encouraged into the sector. These requirements were enforced through Regulations in 2007 (Lingfield, 2012a).

Following the White Paper, the QIA was launched in 2006 and the Further Education Standards Unit, established three years earlier, disappeared (Kingston, 2007). Only two years later, in 2008, the QIA itself disappeared along with the Centre of Leadership Excellence which had been formed five years previously as their functions were taken over by the newly formed Learning and Skills Improvement Service (LSIS, 2008). In terms of the training and continuing professional development of FE lecturers, from 2007 all FE teachers were required to register with the IfL, and to meet set CPD requirements each year. In addition, new entrants into the sector were required to gain one of the new teaching qualifications (LSIS, No date). SfL literacy and numeracy teachers were further required to gain subject-specific teaching qualifications. The Further Education and Training Act was passed in 2007.

The 2007 White Paper, 'World Class Skills' (DIUS, 2007), which followed the Leitch Review, again stressed the importance of, and outlined plans regarding, upskilling adults in terms of literacy, numeracy and intermediate skills and equipping 14–19 year olds to access both further learning and employment. A highly skilled workforce was argued to be essential for economic success and social justice. The new Department for Universities, Innovation and Skills (DIUS) was to be responsible for 'bringing together the key drivers of a successful, knowledge-based economy, and leading work to ensure that the nation has the skilled workforce it needs to compete' (DIUS, 2007, p .5). The Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) would be responsible for education. It was argued that a culture change was necessary, with individuals and employers taking on responsibility for lifelong learning and upskilling and the government supporting those who accepted this responsibility. Colleges and other training providers were to be increasingly responsive to stakeholders in terms of their offer. A new UK Commission for Employment and Skills was announced, and Sector Skills Councils were to be reformed and empowered with the aim of them being heavily involved in the development and approval of vocational qualifications. The White Paper referred to the planned rolling out of the new Diplomas and to the integration of English, mathematics and ICT within these and Apprenticeships. Consultations regarding raising the participation age to 18 were also highlighted, and the age of participation was subsequently raised in the Education and Skills Act 2008. Young people completing year 11 in or after 2014 have been required to remain in education or training until the age of 18 (Cabinet Office and DfE, 2015).

'Raising Expectations' (DCSF and DIUS, 2008) again referred to raising the participation age and the new Diplomas, and also to guaranteed pre-Apprenticeship or Apprenticeship places for young people. The funding and commissioning of education and training for 16-18 year olds was to become the responsibility of LAs. A new Skills Funding Agency (SFA) was to be established 'to oversee the development of the FE sector and to route public funding effectively to where it is most needed' (DCSF and DIUS, 2008, p. 4), and a new National Apprenticeship Service would sit within the SFA. The SFA replaced the LSC in 2010.The new Diplomas which were introduced in 2008 were short-lived, being declared officially dead in the *Times*

Education Supplement in November 2011 (Isaacs, 2013). It is noteworthy that failure to achieve one or more of the required functional skills is thought to have been one of the most common reasons for failing to claim diplomas (Isaacs, 2013).

The 'Nuffield Review of 14-19 Education and Training', conducted between 2003 and 2009 published its final report in 2009. The report argued that despite numerous interventions over the preceding forty years, there was little evidence of progress and that lessons were not being learnt. Notably, this conclusion preceded evidence of the failure of the new Diplomas detailed above. The report suggested that educational reform had been used, unsuccessfully, in an attempt to solve social and economic problems, the roots of which lie outside of education.

The '14-19 Education and Skills' White Paper (DfES, 2005a) outlined a future role for the functional skills qualifications heralded in the Tomlinson Report (Tomlinson, 2014). Following a three-year pilot these qualifications became available as stand-alone qualifications in 2010 and replaced the Certificates in Adult Numeracy and Literacy in 2012 (ETF, 2018). As mentioned above, students failing the pilot versions within the new diplomas was believed to have contributed to the low success rates of these qualifications.

The 2010 Strategy Document 'Skills for Sustainable Growth' again discussed the need to improve skills in terms of economic and social imperatives (BIS, 2010). The expectation that employers and individuals would take responsibility for improving skills was restated and the Government committed in the plan to provide support for those least able to help themselves, those without basic numeracy and literacy skills and young people. A Growth and Innovation fund would support training in work, co-funded by employers. In terms of individuals helping themselves, new Lifelong Learning Accounts were to be established which would give access to FE student loans. Unfavourable international comparisons were again made in terms of skills levels. Within the context of a stated need to reduce the deficit, inefficiencies in terms of centralised control and regulation were to be reduced and a demand-led system developed. In line with a neo-liberal agenda, individual choice and competition between providers was put forward as allowing greater freedom which

was also provided as a justification for the removal of the requirement for principals of colleges to gain a qualification. The growth of apprenticeships was key to the plan and again the issue was raised of parity of esteem between vocational and academic pathways and the desire that vocational qualifications enable progression to higher level study.

In 2011, the government published 'New Challenges, New Chances' (BIS, 2011a), a plan to reform the FE and Skills system. The plan stressed student choice, referring to Lifelong Learning Accounts and FE loans and heralding the launch of a National Careers Service. Vocational pathways to Higher Education were again highlighted with a stated intention to grow Higher Apprenticeship numbers. In terms of promoting excellence in the sector in teaching and learning, it was announced that the government would establish 'an independent commission on adult education and vocational pedagogy to develop a sector owned strategy and delivery programme' and 'facilitate an independent review of professionalism in the FE and skills workforce' (BIS, 2011a, p. 4). Bureaucracy was to be reduced for colleges (implemented through the Education Act 2011) and colleges were to concentrate on serving their local communities in close collaboration with Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs), LAs and other providers. In terms of literacy and numeracy, this plan moved away from a focus on functional skills and towards a focus on GCSE English and mathematics, stating as key actions the provision of funding for GCSEs in these subjects from September 2012 and the re-establishment of the terms 'English' and 'Maths' in adult provision.

Lingfield's interim report into 'Professionalism in Further Education' was published in 2012 and recommended that the 2007 Regulations be revoked thus removing requirements for teaching qualifications, post-qualification professional formation and annual CPD in the FE sector (Lingfield, 2012a). Colleges, monitored by Ofsted, should be responsible for ensuring that staff are qualified and engaged in CPD. It was also recommended that the qualifications for FE teachers be reviewed. Reasons given for these recommendations included the lack of success of the IfL in winning the confidence of the sector and attracting members and the demise of many of the organisations that were part of the infrastructure at the time the regulations were

put in place (including LLUK, some of the responsibilities of which had been transferred to LSIS, LSC and the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority). The phasing out of government funding for the IfL had already been announced. As a result of the report, membership of the IfL and achieving QTLS were dropped as requirements for FE teachers from September 2012. LSIS was to be charged with supporting the development of professionalism in the sector (Lingfield, 2012b).

Surveys of adult skills in literacy and numeracy were published in 2011 and 2012. The 2011 'Skills for Life Survey' found, at a headline level, that literacy levels had exceeded the 2003 benchmark but that there had been a slight decrease in numeracy levels (BIS, 2011b). The 'International Survey of Adult Skills 2012' found adult skills in literacy in England to be in line with the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) average but significantly below the average for numeracy (BIS, 2012).

The Wolf report, referred to in Section 1.1, argued for the central importance of learners continuing to receive mathematics and English teaching in post-16 provision (Wolf, 2011). Whilst the Review does, in places, refer to 'good levels of English and Mathematics' (Wolf, 2011, p. 10), it is clear from Recommendation 9 that these are being equated with the achievement of a GCSE Grade A*-C (p. 13). In addition to equating developing good levels of English and mathematics with achieving 'good' passes in GCSE English and mathematics, the Review also focused on English and mathematics as vocational' skills (Wolf, 2011, p. 8), stressing their importance in terms of labour market entry, career progression and pay (Wolf, 2011, p. 32). Interestingly, Recommendation 10 called for increased support for CPD for mathematics teachers, especially for those in post-16 education, and for a consideration of funding for CPD for those teaching English and mathematics to apprentices or working with young people and adults in FE colleges.

In 2013, LSIS published a revised minimum core of literacy, language and numeracy for teaching qualifications for the FE sector (LSIS, 2013). New professional standards for FE teachers were produced by the ETF, which replaced LSIS in 2013, and published in 2014 (ETF, 2014), the same year that the new Award, Certificate and Diploma in

Education and Training were launched (Pearson, 2018). The 'Further Education Workforce Strategy' published in 2014 pointed towards the introduction of compulsory resits in English and mathematics GCSEs stating that, 'Giving all young people the opportunity to achieve highly valued qualifications in maths and English has significant implications for the sector' (BIS, 2014, p. 5).

A Report by the Independent Panel on Technical Education chaired by Lord Sainsbury recommended in 2016 that minimum levels of mathematics and English should be set for technical education certification that covered college-based technical education as well as apprenticeships (Sainsbury, 2016). The Conservative government's Post-16 Skills Plan (BIS and DfE, 2016) of the same year reported that the conditions of funding introduced in 2014 had led to increased numbers of students studying GCSE mathematics and English post-16. The plan stated that, in line with the Sainsbury Report, new college-based programmes were to be developed within 15 identified technical routes containing a 'common core' to include English and mathematics alongside digital skills. In terms of support for the FE sector in delivering high quality English and mathematics teaching, the plan stated that the government was:

> investing over £15 million in the provision of bursaries and in grant funding to the Education and Training Foundation (ETF) in 2016-17, and would continue to run these or similar schemes until spring 2019. (BIS and DfE, 2016, p. 35)

Colleges were to take greater responsibility for developing teachers in these areas, making use of the services of the ETF. The Post-16 Skills Plan also referred to the area reviews being carried out with the intention of rationalising further education provision.

The 2017 Green Paper, 'Building our Industrial Strategy', restated the government's focus on improving English and mathematics provision in FE stating, 'We will explore how to support FE colleges to be centres of excellence in teaching English and maths' (HM Government, 2017, p. 40). Research was to be carried out by the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) and the Behavioural Research Centre for Adult Skills

and Knowledge into 'what works'. Significantly, as well as having to deal with vastly increased numbers of students enrolling on GCSE English and mathematics from August 2015 colleges also faced delivering new GCSEs in English and mathematics syllabuses (DfE, 2013) for examination from June 2017.

In an interesting twist, the Report of Sir Adrian Smith's review of post-16 mathematics (Smith, 2017, p. 62) appeared not to support the compulsory resitting of GCSE mathematics for 16-18 year olds, recommending that 'the Department for Education should review its 16-18 resit policy' and that 'there should be fresh consideration of appropriate curricula and qualifications for these students'. This was justified in terms of the low GCSE mathematics resit achievement rates.

In addition to the policy changes outlined above, the changes in funding to which the FE sector has been subjected should also be borne in mind. A recent report by the Institute of Fiscal Studies and the Nuffield Foundation highlighted that:

> further education has been a big loser from education spending changes over the last 25 years. There have been significant cuts to spending per student since 2010, and further changes are on the horizon… (Belfield, Farquharson and Sibieta, 2018, p. 4)

3.3 Themes

This section examines the key themes emerging from the review of policy in the previous section. These themes include the state of near constant change in the sector (Section 3.3.1); narratives around a knowledge economy, an associated skills shortage and a requirement for upskilling to facilitate economic growth and social mobility (Sections 3.3.2 - 3.3.3); and the aim of parity of esteem between vocational and academic pathways (Section 3.3.5). Analyses and evaluations of the policy shifts concerning the professionalisation of the FE workforce and the consequences are discussed in Section 3.3.5 followed in Section 3.3.6 by a discussion of lecturer and student agency with a focus on lecturers' responses to the professionalisation agenda and New Public Management (NPM), which prioritizes 'marketized, metricized and managerialist practices' (Hall and McGinty, 2015, p. 11). The examination of these

themes will support the analysis in later chapters of the impact of structure, culture and agency on the college and GCSE outcomes. Policy, curricula, and organisational bodies form structures which impact upon colleges. Government messaging around policy forms part of the cultural environment in which the College is situated, for example the messages that skills development is a key to both economic growth and social mobility and that it is the role of FE to deliver skills development. As previously highlighted (Section 2.4), both structural and cultural forces are seen as conditioning but not determining behaviour. Existing literature on lecturer and student engagement with policy and their acceptance, or not, of the surrounding messages, provides insight into possible agential responses to the policy and the associated cultural messages.

3.3.1 'Tsunami of change'

The most prominent theme arising from the review of policy over the last two decades is the state of constant change in vocational education in general and English and mathematics education within this. There has been change in terms of: literacy and numeracy qualifications (key skills to functional skills to GCSEs); expectations regarding qualifications and CPD for FE teachers; government and other bodies responsible for monitoring and supporting the sector; and views on whether the teaching of literacy and numeracy should be embedded within vocational learning or delivered separately by specialists. Green (2012, p. 58) writes about the sector as being subject to a 'tsunami of change'. Avis (2009, p. 263) describes the FE sector as a 'turbulent environment' and suggests that 'policy makers seem to suffer from a form of amnesia' (Avis, 2009, p.654). Norris and Adam (2017, p. 3) reported that, 'In the FE sector, since the 1980s there have been 28 major pieces of legislation, 48 secretaries of state with relevant responsibilities, and no organisation has lasted longer than a decade.'

Foster (2005) was not alone in calling for an end to revolutionary change within the sector. Raffe (2015) has suggested three reasons to pause before launching into further radical reform: some of the criticisms made of the sector are open to question; many of the problems that changes are designed to fix may actually reside

in the social and economic sectors, a point made by the Nuffield Review (2009); and there is danger of repeating mistakes if the lessons of history are not heeded. In terms of lessons not being learned, a 2007 article on the new diplomas which were to be introduced in 2008 predicted correctly, on the basis of historical evidence, that they would not be successful in transforming vocational education for young people (Hodgson and Spours, 2007).

The constant change has occurred against a backdrop in which the stated aims of vocational and literacy and numeracy education, and the rationales for these, have remained fairly stable over the last two decades. There has been continued concern around improving the literacy, numeracy and vocational skills of young people and adults in order to increase employability, economic growth, social mobility and social justice (Dearing, 1996; DfEE 1999; Moser, 1999; DfEE 2001; Tomlinson, 2004; DfES, 2005a; DfES, 2005b; Leitch, 2006; DIUS, 2007; BIS, 2011a; Wolf, 2011). Another fairly consistent aim has been to achieve 'parity of esteem' between academic and vocational pathways and develop vocational programmes that provide progression onto higher levels of education. Even Wolf, who consciously avoided discussing this throughout most of her report and described it as a 'completely misguided objective', was concerned that vocational awards should 'enjoy high esteem' (Wolf, 2011, p. 111). Similarly, a number of reports and policy documents have suggested that the FE workforce needs improved training and CPD. Why then the constant change?

Norris and Adam suggest that the churn results from systemic weaknesses resulting from:

- poor institutional memory
- the tendency to abolish and recreate organisations as a proxy for demonstrating progress
- a centre of government that remains too weak at long-term planning
- a policy development that is not as resilient as it could be. (Norris and Adam, 2017, p. 3)

Whilst Norris and Adam's (2017) analysis sheds light on important systemic weaknesses, the question remains whether further issues may be at play in the context of vocational education. One issue worthy of consideration is whether reforms of vocational education really can solve economic problems of perceived under-productivity, slow economic growth and youth unemployment. If they cannot, and young people recognise this, this may be one reason for any apparent lack of engagement with elements of the agenda, e.g. GCSE English and mathematics, which is discussed later (see Sections 3.3.2 and 3.3.3). Furthermore, is there an irreconcilable tension between expecting vocational pathways to be designed in ways which appeal to disaffected learners who have eschewed academic study whilst also requiring them to contain enough academic content to enable progression to higher levels of study and appear rigorous when compared to academic qualifications such as A levels? These issues are explored in Section 3.3.4.

3.3.2 The knowledge economy and skills shortages

Sahlberg (2006, p. 263) points to the rise and spread of 'GERM', a Global Education Reform Movement, seeking to reform education in order to equip students with the skills needed for a knowledge economy. Features identified by Sahlberg as central to GERM are evident in the policies outlined in Section 3.2. The emphasis on the development of literacy, numeracy and other skills, such as problem-solving and interpersonal skills, deemed important for work in knowledge economies are clearly central to the policies outlined. Despite the above, the assertion that we now live in a knowledge economy with growing skills shortages is open to question and empirical investigation, as is the assertion that increasing the skills levels of the population will necessarily lead to economic growth and increased social mobility. An alternative viewpoint is that educational institutions are being inappropriately charged with solving social or economic problems, a phenomenon Bridges (2008) describes as 'educationalization'. Regarding the argument that increased skills levels lead to economic growth, Young (2011) argues that Gove's acceptance that it would be necessary to reform vocational education in order to grow the manufacturing sector is not borne out in the international data. Young (2011, p.272) argues that 'industrial policy-targeted state investment, tax-free zones and the aggressive encouragement

of overseas investment' have been behind the economic growth of successful Asian economies with reforms to technical education being a response to, rather than a generator of, demand.

Simmons (2010, p. 370) states that, 'Assumptions about a direct causal relationship between levels of education, training and economic success appear to have achieved an almost hegemonic status.' He argues, however, that the picture of the UK economy as a knowledge economy does not accurately reflect the reality where 'the majority of jobs are located in labour-intensive and predominantly localised parts of the service sector' (Simmons, 2010, p .372). Nevertheless, the education sector is charged with providing individuals with high level skills and generally criticised for failing to do so.

3.3.3 Social mobility

The argument that increased skills levels are required to facilitate social mobility in the interests of social justice was a key theme of the policies outlined in Section 3.2. Also evident in the 2007 White Paper was the shifting of responsibility to individuals to ensure their employability, a move which has been described as 'responsibilisation' (Fejes, 2010). Leach (2017, p. 221) suggests that making individuals responsible for upskilling themselves when opportunities for social and economic advancement may not exist acts as a 'cooling out process' and creates a 'cruel optimism' which diverts attention from flaws in the economy. Simmons and Smyth (2016, p. 136) have similarly suggested that policies on post-compulsory education and training are 'part of an attempt to resolve the crisis of legitimation associated with contemporary capitalist societies.' They point out that contradictions within capitalism, exacerbated under neo-liberalism, not skills deficits amongst young people, are the source of youth unemployment. Bagnall (2000, p. 20) argues that the current lifelong discourse is, in fact, 'regressive, counter-ethical and non-liberatory' with its narrow focus on skills for employment. Doherty (2017) described Australia's extension of compulsory education in the title of her article as 'Edufare for the future precariat' and concluded that the promise that it will improve their work prospects is false.

From a critical realist perspective, the existence of demi-regularities is seen to indicate the possible operation of structural mechanisms (Bhaskar and Lawson, 1998). To accept this in relation to the social world is not to accept social determinism as the operation of mechanisms can be, and often is in an open system, thwarted by the operation of other mechanisms and powers, including those resulting from individual agency. There is evidence that, despite the educational opportunities regarded as being open to all in modern Britain, social reproduction rather than social mobility remains dominant. Themelis (2008) has argued that the evidence from the last 60 years suggests that increasing levels of education have not resulted in reductions in inequalities or injustices. There is widespread evidence that gender, ethnicity, deprivation/socio-economic status, and parental level of education significantly impact on educational outcomes (Glaesser and Cooper, 2012; Parsons and Thompson, 2017; Strand, 2014; Collins, Collins and Butt, 2015). A 2016 report published by the ETF stated that 'only 41.1% of students in receipt of Free School Meals (FSM) attain GCSE English and mathematics by age 19 compared to 68% of the non-FSM group' (Maughan *et al.,* 2016).

As noted above, outcomes in the social world are not socially determined, and Archer (2003) alerts us to the way in which individuals develop projects in response to the situations in which they find themselves. Why then do patterns of social reproduction persist despite policy interventions allegedly designed to promote social mobility? Willis argued in his study of 'the lads', who in the 1970s appeared to be rejecting the opportunities afforded them by a comprehensive education, that their decisions and behaviours were rational in the sense that they were rehearsing behaviours that would prepare them for their likely future working in the local factories (Willis, 1977). Other qualitative studies have sought to explore how structural *constraints* in relation to educational performance are experienced and confronted. For example, Mansfield and Jean-Marie (2015) examined how school leaders sought to tackle education inequities to support all students in achieving. Gillborn *et al.* (2012) used interviews with Black Caribbean parents to explore their educational strategies and experiences. These studies point to the interplay between structure and agency and the choices that individuals make in the light of the *enablements* and *constraints* that they face

(Archer, 2003). Might young people be rejecting the narrative that gaining a GCSE in English and mathematics will significantly improve their life chances and might they be realistic in doing so? Interestingly, research has suggested that the wage premium gained by the possession of literacy and numeracy skills in the UK is linked to the supply deficiency (Vignoles, Coulon and Marcenaro-Guiterrez, 2011). One conclusion that could be drawn from this is that if higher levels of literacy and numeracy were achieved across the population, this premium may be reduced.

3.3.4 Parity of esteem between vocational and academic pathways

Vocational education is regarded by many as offering a pathway that will engage disaffected learners who have become disenchanted with the educational offer to which they have previously been exposed. It has been argued that this can have the negative, unintended consequence of vocational qualifications being seen as of low value as a result of being seen as aimed at low achieving students (Ecclestone, 2000). It has also been argued that the use of criterion rather than norm-referenced assessment has led to them being viewed negatively when compared with A levels which are viewed as the 'gold standard' (Ecclestone, 2000). Concerns over the lack of rigour in GNVQs was mentioned in the Dearing Review (Dearing, 1996). Some researchers have suggested that such concerns, along with the aims of increasing the esteem in which vocational qualifications are held and positioning them as qualifications facilitating entry to higher level learning, tend to lead to academic drift which entails 'greater relevance being given to educational goals in an occupationally oriented curriculum' (Edwards and Miller, 2008, p. 123). This may prove problematic given that research with 14-16-year-old students found that engagement and achievement in work-based learning did not always transfer to school-based learning (Hall and Raffo, 2004). Learners attracted to the work-related elements of vocational courses in FE may continue to reject what they view as academic elements. Hodgson and Spours' (2007) research into the new diplomas introduced in 2008 suggested that they were being positioned as providing a middle-track between vocational and academic pathways in that they had a vocational focus but contained significant academic content. As a result, they accurately predicted that they would fail to attract large numbers from either those seeking high status academic qualifications,

or from those seeking qualifications valued by employers and offering employment-related experiences. Can vocational pathways be all things to all people?

The requirement to study English and mathematics GCSEs as a condition of funding on a 16-19 study programme, the main component of which is vocational, could be regarded as prioritising the academic over the vocational. This is particularly the case given the recent policy swing away from functional skills and towards GCSEs. A number of reports, Smith (2017) for example, have suggested that vocationally relevant numeracy and/or literacy qualifications may be more suitable. Writers in the Times Educational Supplement have been fairly vociferous in arguing the point (Belgutay, 2017; Birkinshaw, 2017; Exley, 2016). There seems to be evidence of FE teachers developing as 'Corporate Agents' (Archer, 1995) and seeking to influence policy around this issue.

In tension with the above, there is an argument that vocational education, if it is to fulfil the often stated aims relating to social justice, should not have a narrow focus on skills and competencies required for employment. Social realists have argued that vocational students 'need access to theoretical knowledge' and that 'a focus on experiential and applied learning constitutes a mechanism for social exclusion' (Wheelahan, 2015, p. 750). Young (2013, p. 108) has expressed concerns about learners being denied access to 'powerful knowledge' which he defines as 'specialized' and discipline-based, and 'differentiated' from everyday knowledge. From a social realist perspective, all knowledge is fallible, but it is argued that this does not necessitate adopting a relativist position because some knowledge is more reliable than other knowledge (Moore, 2013). Social realist curriculum theorists such as Young and Wheelahan, therefore, argue that the knowledge content of curricula is an important issue. In terms of who decides the knowledge content of vocational qualifications in England and what they choose to include, a study by Bathmaker (2013, p. 101) found it 'difficult to discern which stakeholders take any responsibility for knowledge outside of qualification awarding bodies.' With regard to GCSE mathematics and English within programmes of study, however, the role of Michael Gove, who wrote the foreword to the Wolf Report (Wolf, 2011), has been emphasised

in influencing the content of the new GCSE specifications published in June 2013 (Allen, 2013).

The Wolf Report argued for a sound basis in core academic studies, including English and mathematics, up to the age of 16 to prevent a narrowing of students' options later in life. The report stated that, despite claims often made to the contrary, there was no evidence that taking vocational courses raised the general attainment of Key Stage 4 students 'at risk of disengagement' (Wolf, 2011, p.109).

3.3.5 Professionalisation of the workforce

Concerns about the quality of teaching and learning were raised in a number of reports with various recommendations being made regarding the professionalisation of FE teachers and assessors (DfE, 1999; DfEE, 2001; Ofsted, 2003; DfES, 2004b; DfES, 2006; BIS, 2011a; Lingfield, 2012). These concerns have been made in relation to teachers and assessors in the sector generally, and also to literacy and numeracy specialists (Roberts, 2002; ACME, 2002; Smith 2004). As outlined above, in a move towards professionalisation of the workforce, it became compulsory in 2001 for new teachers to the sector to gain an approved qualification based on the FENTO standards. New FE teaching qualifications, to be based on new LLUK standards, were announced in 2004 (DfES, 2004b). From 2007 new teachers were required to gain one of the new qualifications (Preparing to Teach in the Lifelong Learning Sector as an initial licence to practice, and then the Certificate in Teaching in the Lifelong Learning Sector or the Diploma in Teaching in the Lifelong Learning Sector depending on their role) and all teachers in the sector were required to register with the IfL and complete CPD annually. SfL literacy and numeracy teachers were required to gain subject-specific qualifications in addition. These 2007 Regulations were revoked in 2012.

Some saw the requirement for FE teachers to be qualified as positive and contributing to raising the status and professional profile of the FE workforce (Gleeson *et al.*, 2015; Lucas, 2013). Broad reported in 2010 that the professionalisation agenda had 'been largely welcomed by the sector' (Broad, 2010, p. 5). Appleby and Hillier, in discussing practice-research networks in the context of compulsory CPD for teachers in the FE sector, suggested that:

> The recent English policy shift towards mandatory professional development for FE teachers, potentially linked to a licence to practice, suggests a need to re-focus on teacher agency and on meaningful professional development. (Appleby and Hillier, 2012, p. 31)

With regard to the professionalisation of those teaching literacy and numeracy within the FE sector, Hamilton argues that the SfL strategy introduced in 2001 had:

> transformed the field of adult literacy from one characterised by informal and fragmentary practices, highly dependent on volunteer labour to a professionalised subject area within the further education sector. (Hamilton, 2014, p. 111)

Hamilton's research draws attention to the fact that government policy on literacy is shaped by local, regional and global influences, and the interplay between them. She locates the development of 'common benchmarks of achievement' and a 'standardised national framework for adult literacy and numeracy qualifications' within a neo-liberal agenda supported by the European Union and the OECD which supports the free market and the free movement of labour and therefore requires transparent qualification frameworks (Hamilton, 2014, p. 111).

Despite some positive reactions to the government's strategy on the professionalisation of the FE workforce, however, the new requirements were resisted. Lingfield (2012a), in justifying the recommendation that the 2007 Regulations be revoked, argued that the professional body, the IfL, had failed to win the confidence of the sector and pointed to the small number who had gained QTLS. In his final report Lingfield (2012b) highlighted the University and College Union boycott of IfL membership when fees were introduced. Lucas and Nasta (2010) suggest a number of reasons for the failure of the FE teaching workforce to develop a professional identity. They suggest that the standards developed for FE are occupational, as opposed to professional, and argue that this remains the case following the change to the LLUK standards from the FENTO standards and despite the effective resistance of FE teachers to a National Vocational Qualification (NVQ)

model of training. They also highlight divisions within the sector between, for example, colleges and sixth form colleges, and weak intermediary bodies in the sector. In addition, they point to a desire on the part of FE teachers and managers to emphasise their vocational professional identities and thereby to differentiate themselves from teachers in other sectors.

3.3.6 Lecturer and student agency

The above section suggests there is potentially some evidence that FE teachers acted as 'Corporate Agents' (Archer, 2003) in resisting the government's professionalisation agenda, or at least the way in which it was operationalised. With regard to literacy and numeracy specialists, in contrast to Hamilton's (2014) assertion that the SfL strategy led to a professionalised teaching workforce, some of the staff interviewed by Hodgson, Edwards and Gregson (2007) felt that they were not trusted as professionals and that the bureaucracy involved in the SfL agenda was about surveillance, not meeting the needs of students. Autonomy, along with specialised knowledge and responsibility, is seen as a key element of professionalism (Robson, Bailey and Larkin, 2004) and the above could therefore be viewed as a form of de-professionalisation as opposed to increased professionalisation. The professionalism resulting from the NPM agenda has been described as 'fragile, limited and tightly managed' (Hall, 2013, p. 279).

Those working in the FE sector may be particularly vulnerable to top-down changes. Current government narratives around further education limit the roles of professionals within the sector to delivering the government's skills agenda (HM Government, 2017). The government has a number of 'levers' which can be used to shape FE provision including conditions of funding, such as those discussed in this thesis (ESFA, 2018; ESFA, 2020), and the introduction of new qualifications alongside the removal of funding for alternatives as is currently being planned in relation to T Levels (DfE, 2021). Jephson and Salisbury (2009) suggested that a fragmented professional base, combined with major changes to working conditions, made FE lecturers vulnerable to the re-forming of their professional identities. Specifically, professional identities formed around promoting the social well-being of students

were ‘under threat from growing bureaucracy and the demands of an increasingly managerialist institutional regime in colleges’ (Jephson and Salisbury, 2009, p. 966). In comparison with school teachers, the range of constructions of professionalism held by FE lecturers has made it difficult for them to organise themselves as a profession in order to ‘create a less exploited workforce’, focused on improving the quality of teaching in FE rather than compliance with managerial institutional regimes (Clow, 2001, p. 407).

Changes in ways of working within the FE sector which impacted those working within it notably include the new ‘professional’ contracts issued following the Further and Higher Education Act in 1992 entailed ‘intensification’ involving overload in terms of workload, reduced time available for CPD, and reduced control and opportunities for professional discretion (Clow, 2001). Shain and Gleeson (1999, p. 445) have argued that changes following the 1992 Act meant that many FE lecturers ‘experienced reductions in their pay, security, academic freedom and job satisfaction accompanied by an increase in their workload.’ Contracts requiring 800-900 hours of class contact time referred to by Clow (2001) are still in place in FE. In addition to the challenges to professionalism posed by high workloads reducing time for CPD and planning etc., there are challenges posed to control and professional discretion by moves towards greater standardisation and increased surveillance which it can be argued have gathered pace in the years since 1992. The location of lecturers in FE, which has been described as the ‘Cinderella Service’ due to the low priority it has been accorded, may make them more prone to deprofessionalisation (Randle and Brady, 1997). It is worthy of note that funding for 16-19 students is lower than that for secondary students, with the 16-19 sector having experienced a fall in funding in real terms of sixteen percent between 2010/11 and 2018/19 (Dominguez-Reig and Robinson, 2019).

Teacher professionalism and agency need to be considered in the context of NPM and the increased managerialism and emphasis on technicist and ‘what works’ approaches which involve tendencies towards standardisation of practice and a

reduced emphasis on context and professional judgement. Shain and Gleeson argued that:

> Central to the processes of regulation and intensification is the discourse of *managerialism* that has pervaded the new management of FE in an attempt to elicit the compliance of FE lecturers in new modes of control over their work. (Shain and Gleeson, 1999, p. 448)

Dennis (2016, p. 116) regards the growth of managerialism in the FE sector, coupled with deregulation and austerity, as being responsible for the development of an 'ethics of survival'. She goes on to suggest that the nature of education in the sector has fundamentally changed due to the overarching emphasis on 'efficiency, effectiveness and economy' (Dennis, 2016, p. 116). In line with this, Preston and Hammond (2003) argue that technicist approaches to vocational learning with an emphasis on documentation and standardisation may limit the wider benefits of student self- development which FE practitioners feel that the sector provides.

Professional identity formation has been even more complex for teachers delivering English and mathematics within FE colleges as they are a fragmented group. Whilst, as noted above, subject-specific qualifications were briefly compulsory for SfL teachers of literacy and numeracy, there have been debates and changes in practice regarding whether these subjects should be delivered discretely, embedded within vocational lessons and delivered by vocational lectures, or delivered in ways involving a mixture of the two. Some of those who have taught literacy and numeracy in FE colleges, therefore, have been vocational lecturers and not literacy and numeracy specialists. A systematic literature review on improving level 2 mathematics and English outcomes for learners between 16 and 18 found some evidence that embedding literacy interventions improved outcomes in some cases although the findings were mixed, and the evidence was deemed to not be robust (Maughan *et al.,* 2016). The three articles reviewed on embedding mathematics within vocational provision had all found evidence of positive effects on learning, again the evidence was deemed to be of limited value because of the qualitative or small-scale nature of the studies. The research report, entitled 'You wouldn't expect a maths teacher to

teach plastering…' reviewed approaches to embedding language, literacy and numeracy within vocational provision and found both retention and success to be higher on embedded courses (Casey *et al*., 2006). However, how the embedding was achieved was found to be key with 'teams of staff, each with their own different areas of expertise, working closely together' being more effective than a single teacher delivering both vocational skills and literacy and numeracy (Casey *et al.*, 2006, p. 6)

Hodgson, Edwards and Gregson (2007) highlight that whilst embedding literacy and numeracy within adult provision may be seen as a way of supporting adults to develop these skills and may also lead to learners going on to take discrete classes in these subjects, others argued that it may deter some learners from undertaking courses in the first place. The 2014 'Further Education Workforce Strategy' stated that, 'Too many teachers do not have the level of professional skills or subject knowledge needed in the key area of maths and English' (BIS, 2014, p. 8). The growth of GCSE provision and decline of functional skills provision in FE may have led to a greater emphasis on separate mathematics and English provision delivered by subject specialist as opposed to vocational lecturers.

Notably, it has been argued that students have not had a voice in the development of policy on forced GCSE resits in English and mathematics as part of 16 to 19 study programmes (Bellamy, 2017). Elwood (2013) argues that it is rare for children and young people to have been consulted in any meaningful way with regard to qualifications reform. Bellamy (2017) found 42% of students resitting GCSE mathematics in an FE College strongly disagreed with the statement 'If I had a choice, I'd study mathematics this year' and that 70% would not choose to study mathematics. The only other published academic study focusing on FE students undertaking compulsory GCSE resits similarly found GCSE resit students to be initially demotivated whilst offering some solutions for getting these students 'back on track' (Anderson and Peart, 2016).

Whilst evidence regarding the views and actions of students in connection with the GCSE resits is scarce, broader literature on goal and learning theory may be seen to

be of relevance. In reviewing the literature on goal theory and motivation in relation to academic achievement in school, Covington concludes that:

> the quality of student learning as well as the will to continue learning depends closely on an interaction between the kinds of social and academic goals students bring to the classroom, the motivating properties of these goals and prevailing classroom reward structures. (Covington, 2000, p. 171)

The above reminder that students have numerous, potentially competing goals, brings us back to Archer's (2003) assertion that individuals, through their *internal conversations*, balance concerns in the natural, practical and social orders. Research into self-worth strategies, for example, highlights how students may adopt self-handicapping strategies which impede academic success but enable them to protect their self-worth (Jackson, 2002). Concerns with protecting self-worth may be particularly salient for the group of students under consideration given that they have already 'failed', numerous times in some instances, highly valued qualifications.

Motivational theories focus on the individual, and it is important to bear in mind the social context at both the meso and macro levels. Research has, for example, highlighted how the classroom and school environments, and their associated goal-structures, impact on individuals (Kaplan *et al.,* 2002a, cited in Jackson, 2006). In terms of the impact of macro level structures, research has, for example, investigated how the neoliberal agenda which emphasises competition and individual responsibility impacts on students (see, for example, Phoenix, 2003) and how 'target-setting' impacts on schools and ultimately students (see, for example, Fielding, 1999).

It is also important to consider agents qua agents, i.e. as socially situated. Jackson, in considering the strategies employed by pupils to balance academic and social demands, concluded that:

> some pupils are better resourced than others to be able to balance these demands successfully and that time is central to the equation. Those pupils with the resources at home to be able to undertake homework quickly and effectively are most likely to be able to manage successfully their academic

> demands while at the same time having the time and space to be popular. (Jackson, 2006, p. 121)

From an Archerian (2003) perspective, individuals encounter different *constraints* and *enablements* in relation to their projects as a result of their differential social placements as agents.

3.4 Literacy and numeracy within vocational programmes: what works?

The current emphasis on 'technicist' and 'what works' approaches, with a preference for randomised controlled trials over other forms of research (Clegg, 2005) is evident in a number of reviews and reports. The EEF report published in 2016 which reviewed strategies for improving English and mathematics outcomes at level 2 for students between the ages of 16 and 18 (Maughan *et al.,* 2016) evaluated the robustness of the studies reviewed in terms of whether or not there was a control group, the size of the sample and whether the evidence was quantitative or qualitative. Features of interventions in English found to have a positive impact were 'peer mediated support', 'sustained input', and 'multi-strand approaches'. Features of mathematics interventions found to have a positive impact were 'targeted increases in time spent on maths', 'realistic contexts' and 'classroom discussion'. It is unlikely that any of these findings would be a surprise to teachers.

The first report from the Behavioural Insights Team on interventions to support students studying for English and mathematics GCSE resits in FE colleges looked at how social support can be mobilised to improve attendance in sessions (Groot, Sanders and Rogers, 2017). This report recognised the importance of structural factors including 'school climate and the availability of peer, parental, and tutor support' (Groot, Sanders and Rogers, 2017, p. 1). Two randomised field experiments were conducted to investigate the impact on attendance of providing student-nominated study supporters with information about the student's course content and upcoming examinations. The report concluded that robust evidence had been provided that 'social support is effective at increasing the attendance of students at FE colleges' (Groot, Sanders and Rogers, 2017, p. 24). It was recognised, however,

that further research would be needed to understand the mechanisms underlying the intervention in order to ascertain which students may benefit and on which courses.

In support of research which provides insight into underlying mechanisms in order to understand what might work for whom in what circumstances, a literature review of 'Post 16 remedial policies', conducted against the backdrop of the GCSE English and mathematics resit policy in England, highlighted the difficulty, or impossibility, of finding approaches that will work effectively with all students in all situations. Van Effenterre (2017, p. 1) suggested that factors impacting the success, or otherwise, of remedial courses included 'state, institution, background and level of academic preparedness.' This review highlighted the need to investigate interventions in context in order to understand which interventions work for which students. It stressed the need for research into which aspects of interventions are responsible for their success in order to understand whether or not they may be effective in other contexts. It was recognised that demographic factors such as age and gender may influence whether or not students are responsive to particular interventions. The review also noted that the positive effects of interventions may be short-lived.

3.5 Conclusion

This chapter has outlined the development of policy relating to vocational education and literacy and numeracy and discussed the impact of this on the sector. The 'tsunami of change' (Green, 2012, p. 58), the apparent policy amnesia (Avis, 2009) which has led to policies being introduced which highly resemble previously failed ones, the tension between possibly incompatible policy aims, and the sector's status as a 'Cinderella service' (Randle and Brady, 1997) have provided the sector with significant challenges in meeting the goals set for it of providing young people with the skills required by the alleged 'knowledge economy'. Whether or not the FE sector can realistically be expected to solve economic and social problems has also been discussed. Literature relating to lecturer and student agency has also been reviewed which will aid the analysis of the interviews in relation to the remaining research questions in Chapters 5, 6 and 7. As discussed at the outset of this chapter, literature

on the compulsory GCSE English and mathematics resits within 16-19 programmes of study is virtually non-existent. This research seeks to address this gap by examining the impact of structural and cultural forces on the College (some of which have been identified in this chapter), the interplay between these forces and student and lecturer agency, and the resulting impact on GCSE outcomes.

Chapter 4. Research Methodology

4.1 Introduction

This chapter begins with an outline of approaches to case study (Section 4.2) before moving on to a consideration of the critical realist meta-theoretical framework underpinning this research and the ways in which this framework has shaped the mixed methods case study approach adopted (Section 4.3). The processes of data collection and analysis are discussed in Sections 4.4 and 4.5 respectively. Issues of rigour are discussed in Section 4.6 with a consideration of both traditional and critical realist notions of validity, reliability and generalisability. My role as researcher in this project is discussed in Section 4.7. Ethical issues and the approach taken to these are discussed in Section 4.8.

4.2 Mixed methods case study approach

A case study approach was adopted in this research which drew on Simons' definition of a case study as:

> an in-depth exploration from multiple perspectives of the complexity and uniqueness of a particular project, policy, institution, programme or system in a 'real life' context. It is research-based, inclusive of different methods and is evidence-led. The primary purpose is to generate in-depth understanding of a specific topic (as in a thesis), programme, policy, institution or system to generate knowledge and/or inform policy development, professional practice and civil or community action. (Simons, 2009, p. 27)

Simons (2009, p. 19) argues that the case study approach gained a following amongst those evaluating curriculum development in the UK in the 1960s and 1970s because, unlike the prevailing positivist models which had proved unsuccessful in adequately explaining why innovations succeeded or failed, it 'included participant perspectives, [was] responsive to audience needs, attentive to the process and dynamics of implementation and interpretation of events in their socio-political contexts.'

Stake's (2000, p. 21) approach to case study focuses on 'understanding, extension of experience and increase in conviction on that which is known'. His approach views the strength of case study research in providing detailed and rich understandings of particular cases with the identification of themes. The case study in this research has been used to explore how a policy is interpreted and responded to by academic managers, lecturers and students in a single institution with the aim of problematising the findings of increasingly quantitative, technicist research into 'what works' by using *internal conversations* to reveal the complex realities and multiplicity of factors that affect GCSE outcomes. The effectiveness of a policy will be affected by cultural and structural factors including the ethos and organisation of a college and the student demographic, as well as factors relating to student and lecturer agency. The College in which the research was undertaken provided a suitable case for investigation in that as a large college there were substantial numbers of students on 16 to 19 study programmes studying for GCSE resits. The conditions of funding introduced from August 2014 had required the case study College, like other colleges, to significantly increase its GCSE English and mathematics GCSE provision and, in line with many other colleges, outcomes were not what the College would like them to be. The College had been exploring various strategies in an attempt to improve outcomes and the academic staff were, therefore, likely to have useful insights into the impact of the policy and improvement strategies on the College and students.

The approach to case study in this research was influenced by the critical realist meta-theoretical framework, the detail and implications of which are discussed in Section 4.3. This approach favours the use of mixed methods in the study of cases. The use of mixed methods within case studies has been supported more broadly outside of critical realism. Stenhouse (1980, p. 4) stated that 'there is an acute need for attention to be paid to quantitative aspects of case study', arguing that descriptive case studies can usefully include quantitative data to both illustrate aspects of a case and locate it within a broader population. Simons additionally argues that the choice of methods should be determined by:

> whether they facilitate an understanding of the particular case, what kind of inferences you can make from the data and how these are valued by different audiences for different purposes. (Simons, 2009, p. 13)

Quantitative data in this research have been used to search for any patterns, which critical realists refer to as demi-regularities or contrastives (see Section 4.3). These may be seen to point to the operation of generative mechanisms. Quantitative (extensive) methods in this research have been used to examine the impact of structural factors such as gender and social deprivation on GCSE English and mathematics outcomes in 16 to 19 programmes of study and the relationship between attendance and progress has been examined.

Qualitative (intensive) research, in the form of semi-structured interviews, was conducted to investigate the experiences and viewpoints of students, lecturers and academic managers and shed light on structural and agential factors affecting student outcomes. Drawing on Archer's (2003) concept of the *internal conversation* discussed in Chapter 2, semi-structured interviews explored students' perceptions of the value and relevance of the GCSE resits, the *enablements* and *constraints* they faced and their effort and attendance in relation to these subjects (see Appendix 2). Semi-structured interviews with lecturers and academic managers investigated their perceptions of government policy, the *enablement*s and *constraints* they perceive in terms of delivering the English and mathematics, what they view as areas for development or as 'working well' and the barriers and *enablements* they perceive students as facing (see Appendix 1). The critical realist meta-theoretical framework which underpins the conceptual framework adopted from Archer (1995, 2000, 2003) and the approach taken to this study are discussed further in Section 4.3.

4.3 Critical realism and critical realist case study

Critical realists make a clear distinction between reality, the intransitive domain, and our socially produced knowledge of this external reality, the transitive domain (Moore, 2013). This distinction underlies three concepts key to critical realism which have significant implications for the methodological approach adopted in this study: '*ontological realism, epistemological relativity* and *judgemental rationality*' (Moore,

2013, p. 343). Researchers working within the social sciences who subscribe to the key tenets of critical realism have developed what they describe as a social realist position. Social realists working in the field of educational research have argued that the key concepts of critical realism provide 'a way out of an impasse that has debilitated sociological thinking about knowledge and education for decades' (Maton and Moore, 2010, p. 1). These concepts make it possible to avoid an 'either/or' approach to positivist absolutism and constructivist relativism and to adopt instead a 'both/and' approach (Maton and Moore, 2010, p. 4). Knowledge is recognised as socially constructed and fallible (epistemological relativism), but there is a (social) reality that exists independently of our knowledge (ontological realism) and judgemental rationality points to the belief that there are rational bases for judging which truth claims regarding this reality are more or less accurate. In the field of curriculum development, social realists have argued that the use of this judgemental rationality is essential in engaging with issues of content and judging between different types of knowledge in order to evaluate the development of vocational, competency-based curricula which they argue lock young people out of access to 'powerful' knowledge (Wheelahan, 2007).

Social realism further provides a model of social reality as an open and stratified system. It distinguishes between the domains of the real, the actual and the empirical. The real domain consists of generative mechanisms, the powers and potentials of entities to cause events; the actual domain contains all the events that occur, whether or not they are experienced by anyone; and the empirical domain consists of those events that are experienced (Danermark *et al.*, 2002). This has profound implications for an understanding of the social world as an open-system. The separation of the real domain from the actual domain entails a recognition that it is possible for mechanisms residing in the powers and properties of entities to remain unexercised or to be exercised but not causally effective due to the operation of other mechanisms.

Critical realists also emphasise the fact that not all events generated by mechanisms will be observed or experienced. Critical realist explanations of events in terms of generative mechanisms cannot therefore be based on the observation of regularities

(Sayer, 2010). This leads to a critical realist rejection of the Humean notion of causality as rooted in the 'constant conjunctions of empirical events' (Hurrell, 2014, p. 242). For critical realists, mechanisms need to be studied in context. This approach can therefore be regarded as providing a corrective to 'technicist' and 'what works' approaches which are currently politically in favour. Clegg (2005, p. 426) has argued that randomised controlled trials, which are often upheld as the gold standard in such approaches, due to a lack of clarity 'about the underlying mechanisms being investigated.' Scott (2000) similarly points to the link between empiricist/positivist research and political agendas seeking to predict and control educational outcomes and argues for realist research which views education holistically.

In addition to distinguishing between the realms of the real, the actual and the empirical, critical realism presents a stratified ontology with entities in different strata possessing properties and powers and entities at higher levels possessing emergent properties and powers which are not reducible to those of entities at lower levels (Sayer, 2010). This makes it possible to view both agents and social structures as possessing properties and powers which are not reducible to the properties and powers of the other.

Whilst not seeking to uncover law-like regularities, for the reasons discussed above, critical realists argue that the existence of demi-regularities or contrastives may alert us to the operation of structural mechanisms (Bhaskar and Lawson, 1998). Mixed methods are favoured within critical realism because, on the one hand, extensive (quantitative) research methods are viewed as valuable in providing descriptive statistics in order to identify any such patterns. On the other hand, intensive (qualitative) methods are viewed as essential in formulating explanations and identifying mechanisms and structures, as social phenomena are viewed as concept-dependent, meaning that agents' understandings and interpretations of their actions are relevant (Zachariadis, Scott and Barrett, 2013). Critical realists define the 'mode of inference in which events are explained by postulating (and identifying) mechanisms which are capable of producing them' as 'retroduction' (Sayer, 2010, p. 72). In addition, abduction is used to relate theory to empirical phenomena to produce new explanations. Danermark *et al* argue that:

> Social scientists do not discover new events that nobody knew about before. What is discovered is connections and relations, not directly observable, by which we can understand and explain already known occurrences in a novel way. (Danermark *et al,* 2002, p. 91)

In addition to critical realism supporting the use of mixed methods, it has been claimed by some that 'the case study is *the* basic design for realist research' (Ackroyd and Karlsson, 2014, p. 23). It is argued that the case study provides the ideal vehicle for studying the operations of mechanisms in context. Abduction is used to re-describe the observed processes and regularities in a more abstracted sense, with established concepts and theories being drawn upon to explain these patterns and suggest possible mechanisms at work (O'Mahoney and Vincent, 2014). Retroductive logic is then applied in an attempt to explain why those mechanisms are in existence in that particular context. Danermark (2002, p. 96) describes retroduction as 'advancing from one thing (empirical observation of events) and arriving at something different (a conceptualization of transfactual conditions).' In the current research, what properties and powers of culture, structures and agents must be operating within the case being studied to make the situation what it is/the outcomes what they are?

This research draws on Vincent and Wapshott's (2014) critical realist approach to case study research, which in turn draws on the work of Elder-Vass (2010). This approach, which acknowledges the stratified nature of reality, allows for an exploration of mechanisms in operation at different levels of social reality, for example the level of individual agents or the level of the organisation (Elder-Vass, 2010, p.49, describes this in terms of taking 'level-abstracted' views). From a critical realist point of view, Vincent and Wapshott (2014, p. 149) argue that case studies can provide 'a better explanation of broader social mechanisms (class-based, racial, religious, sectoral, national, cultural, etc.) that operate through a case or class of cases.'

Vincent and Wapshott suggest the following analytical tactics when examining the mechanisms operating within a case:

> (1) Analyses of how actors and groups are articulated and positioned – *configurational analysis,* (2) analyses of how the people tend to respond to their situations – *normative analysis*, (3) analyses of how broader contextual conditions manifest themselves within the case – *field analysis*, and, (4) analyses of how (1), (2) and (3) can be combined to explain the genesis of causal powers and potentials of the emergent institutional mechanism – *institutional explanation.* (Vincent and Wapshott, 2014, p. 159)

In this research, the configurational analysis draws on the quantitative data which provide some demographic information on the students and also on the interview data which shed light on how students and lecturers perceive their positions and relations with others. The interviews with academic staff and students also provide data for the normative analysis. Data concerning broader contextual conditions and how they manifest themselves within the case, which will inform the field analysis, are provided by the literature review in conjunction with the interviews.

The work of Elder-Vass (2010) complements that of Archer by providing an analysis of the mechanisms resulting in the emergent properties and causal powers of social structures including norm circles, organisations, associations, and interaction-groups. Like Archer, Elder-Vass (2010, p. 143) sees individual behaviour as being influenced, but not determined by, the causal powers of social structures arguing, for example, that norm circles and norm-set circles 'exercise normative causal influences over the behaviour of individuals, influences that are mediated by each individual's understanding of the normative environment in which they live.' He views normative institutions as emergent causal powers of norm circles arising as a result of mechanisms of actual and imagined endorsements and enforcements of behaviours.

Elder-Vass (2010) recognises that individuals are likely to belong to a number of norm circles and may feel stronger or weaker affiliations to them. Like Archer, therefore, he sees individuals balancing commitments that may be in tension with each other and reflexively negotiating a unique path. Where he perhaps diverges from Archer is in his greater emphasis on 'acquired dispositions' in influencing behaviour (Elder-Vass, 2010, p. 113).

4.4 Evidence collection

The College provided anonymised quantitative data relating to all students on 16 to 19 study programmes over a four-year period covering the academic years 2014/15 to 2018/19. The dataset provided contained the following data fields:

- Academic year
- Age on 31st August (in years)
- Ethnicity (BAME/ non-BAME)
- Sex (male/female)
- Declared learning difficulty, disability or health problem? (Y/N)
- Enrolled on GCSE mathematics? (Y/N)
- Enrolled on GCSE English? (Y/N)
- Highest GCSE mathematics qualification grade at start of academic year (A*-U or 9-1)
- Highest GCSE English qualification grade at start of academic year (A*-U or 9-1)
- Living in a postcode area for which the postcode disadvantage uplift applies? (Y/N)
- Feeder school (anonymised)
- SSA (Subject Sector Area) of main learning aim
- Level of main learning aim
- Mathematics attendance (%)
- English attendance (%)
- GCSE mathematics outcome (Grade/not completed)

The numbers of students in the data sets are provided in Table 2 (Redacted to protect the identity of the college).

Table 2 Student numbers in data sets

Academic year	No. of students in data set	No. of students enrolled on GCSE English	No. of students enrolled on GCSE mathematics
2014/15	XXXX*	XXXX*	XXXX*
2015/16	XXXX*	XXXX*	XXXX*
2016/17	XXXX*	XXXX*	XXXX*
2017/18	XXXX*	XXXX*	XXXX*

*Figures redacted to protect the identity of the College

The analysis of the data is discussed in Section 4.5. It is important to note, however, that a preliminary analysis of the data on GCSE outcomes by Sector Subject Area (SSA), shaped the sampling process for the interviews in that it identified a contrastive for exploration. Prior to 2017, English and mathematics GCSEs were graded from A*-U with A* being the highest grade and a C and above being the standard for a level 2 qualification. From 2017 onwards, they were graded from 9-1 with 9 being the highest grade and a grade 4 and above being regarded as a level 2 pass. Across the four years under consideration, the percentage of Health, Public Services and Care students (SSA 1) enrolled on an English GCSE with a D/3 achieving a C/4 or above, i.e. crossing the boundary from level 1 to level 2, exceeded that of students studying Engineering and Manufacturing Technologies (SSA 4). The situation was reversed in mathematics with the performance of the Engineering and Manufacturing Technologies students exceeding that of the Health, Public Services and Care students. This led to a decision to focus on students from these two SSAs to investigate possible factors influencing the different outcomes.

Qualitative data were collected from semi-structured interviews with 10 academic members of staff and 15 students. Purposive sampling was used for both groups. The Academic Head responsible for the management of English and mathematics delivery within programmes of study within the College was contacted initially and they identified key staff involved with managing or delivering GCSE English and/or mathematics in 16 to 19 study programmes. In total, ten academic staff were

contacted and invited to participate in the research and all ten of those approached agreed to participate. Nine of the interviews with staff were held towards the end of the first term of the 2018/19 academic year with one being held at the start of the 2019/20 academic year (see Appendix 5). Following the decision to focus on students from SSA 1 (Health, Public Services and Care) and SSA 4 (Engineering and Manufacturing Technologies), College Managers assisted in identifying a Health and Social Care group (SSA 1), an Electrical Engineering group (SSA 4) and a Motor Vehicle group (SSA 4) all of which contained students who either had or were currently studying GCSE English and/or mathematics at the College as part of their study programme since the introduction of the condition of funding. From the groups approached, 7 Health and Social Care students, 4 Electrical Engineering and 4 Motor Vehicle students were willing to participate and subsequently available for interview. Interviews with the Health and Social Care students were conducted during the second and third terms of the academic year 2018/19 and interviews with the Electrical Engineering and Motor Vehicle students were conducted during the third term (see Appendix 5).

Interviews were chosen as an appropriate research method to seek insight into interviewees' *internal conversations* on GCSE English and mathematics and their perceptions of *enablements* and *constraint*s. Following Smith and Elger's guidance, the interviews were framed by:

> an appropriate analytical framework, which can guide questions, frame answers and suggest probes and directions for further discussion, so as to enhance the depth, texture and complexity of the accounts being developed. (Smith and Elger, 2014, p. 119)

The semi-structured interviews with the lecturers and academic managers (see Appendix 1) prompted lecturers to reflect on the impact of government policies on English and mathematics on the College, teaching and students; messages currently promoted within the College concerning the GCSEs; practices and strategies they believed to be working well or could be improved; and *enablements* and *constraints* they perceived students to be facing.

The interviews with students were designed to encourage reflection on their experiences of learning English and mathematics and their feelings on 'having to' continue to study these subjects as part of their programmes of study. In light of the conceptual framework which posits that, 'Courses of action are produced through reflexive deliberations of agents who *subjectively* determine their practical projects in relation to their *objective* circumstances' (Archer, 2003, p. 135), the interviews were designed to encourage students to reflect on *enablements* and *constraints* that they were aware of in relation to achieving their GCSE English and mathematics (see Appendix 2).

4.5 Data analysis

The quantitative data were analysed using SPSS to identify any patterns or demi-regularities, as discussed above, which may point to the operation of structural mechanisms. Percentages of students with a D/3 grade on entry achieving a C/4 or above each year were calculated for both English and mathematics. Further analyses were conducted to identify if there were differences related to ethnicity, gender, the presence or absence of postcode disadvantage or of a declared learning difficulty, disability or health problem in terms of students improving their grades from a D/3 to a C/4 or above. In addition, a measure of progress was calculated for each student each year in English and mathematics (see Section 5.2.1) and the resulting scores analysed in relation to their attendance in order to identify any patterns relating to attendance and progress. The results of these analyses are discussed in Chapter 5.

Thematic analysis was used to identify patterns in the interview data. Braun and Clarke (2006, p. 87) suggest six phases of thematic analysis as follows: 'Familiarizing yourself with your data', 'Generating initial codes', 'Searching for themes', 'Reviewing themes', 'Defining and naming themes', and 'Producing the report'. Familiarisation with the data was achieved through the full transcription of each interview with the interviews being re-listened to several times following transcription until all errors were eliminated. Once this was completed, the interviews were coded. Nvivo 12 software was used to support in the coding of the data. Initially, each interview was coded as an individual case, classified and assigned attributes. For example, the

lecturer and manager interviews were categorised as academic and assigned attributes relating to role (manager or lecturer) and subject (mathematics, English or not applicable).

Following the coding into cases, nodes were created to form a structure for the coding of the data in the search for themes. As the questions asked had already been shaped by the theoretical and conceptual framework, this was reflected in the structure of the coding. When coding the data from the interviews with academic staff, nodes were created in Nvivo 12 for 'Cultural Factors', 'Structural Factors' and 'Individual Factors'. Within the 'Structural Factors' node, first level child-nodes were created for data relating to the 'Policy Framework' and 'Institutional Factors'. Second level child-nodes were created, guided by the conceptual framework: 'Works Well', '*Enablements*', 'Development Points', '*Constraints*'. Third level child-nodes were then inductively generated from the interview transcripts (an illustration of this section of the coding structure and examples of coded extracts can be found in Appendix 6). The aim, following Auerbach and Silverstein (2003), was to create codes which represented 'repeating ideas'.

During and following initial coding, codes arising from the transcripts were grouped together where appropriate and organised into potential themes. Auerbach and Silverstein (2003, p. 38) define a theme as, 'an implicit topic that organises a group of repeating ideas.' Themes were largely identified at a semantic, as opposed to latent, level (Braun and Clarke, 2006) given the theoretical and conceptual framework which regards individuals' *internal conversations* and reflexive narratives as causally efficacious (Archer, 2000). Themes were then reviewed for internal homogeneity and external heterogeneity (Braun and Clarke, 2006) through a review of the coded extracts grouped within each theme.

4.6 Validity, reliability and generalisability

Zachariadis, Scott and Barrett (2013) outline a critical realist approach to validity. They suggest that in terms of internal validity, critical realists are concerned with whether or not observed events are in fact the result of the generative mechanisms

identified. They view construct validity as relating to whether what is accessed in the empirical domain provides valid information about events in the actual domain and the underlying generative mechanisms. Finally, they suggest that external validity relates to whether or not the identified mechanisms produce similar outcomes in different settings.

Regarding internal validity, Auerbach and Silverstein (2003) suggest that the concept of justifiability is useful in judging the validity of the arguments presented in qualitative research. They suggest that for an analysis to be justifiable it needs to be transparent, communicable, and coherent. Transparency relates to making clear to readers the steps taken in the analysis so that they are able to form a judgement about the steps taken and decisions made to arrive at the given conclusions. In Chapter 5, the steps taken in the coding and analysis of the data are detailed in full and the decisions made in the analysis of the quantitative data concerning coding and inclusion/exclusion criteria etc. are also detailed. Regarding communicability, themes and codes were checked for recognisability, and participants' words have been used where appropriate to try and ensure their accessibility to lecturers and students. The recognition that the social world is an open system entails an acceptance that analyses of social phenomena will never provide a complete explanation, but for coherence the critical realist perspective does require laminated explanations that draw together 'level-abstracted' (Elder-Vass, 2010, p. 49) explanations into a coherent whole.

Regarding the qualitative element of the research, construct validity according to the above definition would concern whether interview data can provide valid information about events and the generative mechanisms causing them. If the delivery of mathematics and English is regarded as a programme or intervention, Pawson and Tilley (1997) argue that interviews with subjects (students) and practitioners (academic staff) can provide useful information on the context, mechanisms and outcomes. They argue that subjects (students) are well placed to provide information concerning the mechanisms as they will have a personal view of whether the programme (teaching) had a positive impact. In this case, did the English and mathematics delivery engage them and develop their skills in these areas? Whilst

Pawson and Tilley (1997) suggest that subjects will be less sensitised to context as they will only have experienced a programme in a single context, students in this research had experienced English and mathematics delivery in both a compulsory school setting and a post-compulsory school setting and may, therefore, have had some insight into the impact of contextual variation. In addition, the Archerian model (Archer, 2003) suggests that individuals formulate plans in the light of (fallibly) perceived *constraints* and *enablements* and it may be expected, therefore, that students' (fallible) perceptions may shed some light on their behaviours and therefore on GCSE outcomes. Pawson and Tilley argue that practitioners (lecturers) on the other hand will have information on what they have found to be effective and of individuals for whom and contexts in which delivery is effective. They suggest, therefore, that the combination of information from both practitioners and subjects is valuable for researchers in arriving at explanations of what works for whom in what circumstances.

In terms of external validity, the exploratory nature of this investigation and the recognition of the social world as an open system, and the associated acceptance that in any social system a complex array of mechanisms will be in operation, means that the aim of this study is not to provide explanations or solutions in the form of putting x into operation will invariably produce y due to the operation of mechanism z. The aim is to identify the plethora of mechanisms apparently in operation in the case being researched, how these mechanisms interact with contextual factors and each other, and the impact of these mechanisms on outcomes. Regarding generalisability, therefore, this would be of the more naturalistic kind which Stake (2000, p. 22) proposes as appropriate in relation to case study findings and suggests is arrived at through 'recognizing the similarities of objects and issues in and out of context and by sensing the natural covariations of happenings.' To generalise the findings to other settings it would be necessary to identify which of the structural and agential factors identified in this study are present in those settings and to seek to identify if, when they are found in similar combinations, similar mechanisms appear to be coming into play with similar outcomes.

In discussing validity in critical realist research, Porter (2007), makes an additional pertinent point. He argues that the recognition of the importance of considering 'what works for whom in what circumstances' means that the focus of validity involves a 'judgement of the degree to which the researcher has encapsulated the multiple perspectives pertaining in a given situation' (Porter, 2007, p. 82). He suggested the use of the criteria of transparency, accessibility, purposivity, utility, propriety, accuracy, and specificity, included in the TAPUPAS model developed by Pawson *et al.* (2003), in judging whether enough confidence could be placed in research findings to use them as a guide for practice. Ryan and Rutty's (2019) extension of this model is discussed and considered in relation to this research project below.

Ryan and Rutty (2019) suggest the use of a TAPUPASM quality framework to assess critical realist research. In aiming for *transparency*, the first element of the model, this chapter sets out the meta-theoretical and conceptual frameworks of the research along with the aims, research questions and methods. The role of the researcher is discussed in Section 4.7. In terms of *accessibility*, summaries of the research will be available to lecturers and students who took part in the research and will be available to be shared more broadly with practitioners. *Purposivity* relates to the fitness of the methods in relation to the research questions. This research has taken a holisitic approach, analysing government policy and using quantitative data and qualitative data from a case study to analyse the impact of structural, cultural and agential factors on GCSE English and mathematics outcomes in a single college. *Utility* relates to fitness for use and relevance to practice and this research aims to unpick the factors impacting on GCSE English and mathematics outcomes, identify *enablements* and *constraints* faced by lecturers and students and identify side-effects of policies and practices in order to provide practitioners with information to inform decisions about policy, organisation and management and teaching and learning in these areas. In terms of *propriety*, ethical issues were considered, and guidelines adhered to, as in Section 4.8. In seeking to maintain accuracy, all interviews were fully transcribed, and sense-checking was carried out during the interviews through feeding back summaries of points that participants appeared to be making. *Specificity*

relates to whether those in the field judge the knowledge produced to 'pass muster' (Long, Grayson and Boaz, 2006, p. 210), i.e. be accepted as satisfactory, and can be checked by the sharing of preliminary findings. *Modified objectivity* relates to the critical realist assertion that knowledge is fallible but that some theories sheds greater light on reality than others. It is argued that whilst it is impossible for researchers to be totally objective, it is important to consider and acknowledge perspectives and assumptions which shape theories. This is discussed further in Section 4.7.

4.7 Role of the researcher

Ryan and Rutty argue that critical realist researchers working within critical realism aim for modified objectivity stating that the meta-theoretical framework:

> assumes that researchers can never completely overcome their own assumptions and perspectives in such complex social systems. However, it also assumes these are part of the experience of reality and therefore should be acknowledged and considered – they are likely to have led the researcher to the research question in the first place. (Ryan and Rutty, 2019, p. 39)

My choice of research topic was shaped by my past and current roles in an FE College. In the past I have both taught and managed English and mathematics in college environment and whilst my current role, managing Higher Education in an FE College, means that I am not directly involved with the management or delivery of English and mathematics within Study Programmes, I am aware of government policies on English and mathematics for 16 to 19 year-olds and some of the responses to these.

As well as choice of topic being influenced by interests of the researcher, Greenbank (2003, p.791) suggests that the research methods adopted by researchers are shaped by competency values which he defines as 'what an individual believes is the most effective way to go about doing something'. My choice of research methods was not shaped by a sense of my personal competence, or lack thereof, in quantitative or qualitative methods as he suggests is sometimes the case. My choice of methods was shaped more by my choice of theoretical framework which was in turn shaped by my

beliefs concerning what type of research would produce the best understanding of the issue under investigation. My use of critical realist and Archerian concepts stems from my belief that whilst individuals make choices and decisions, and act on the basis of these, they do not do so in circumstances of their own choosing and that the adoption of a framework and concepts which enable an examination of the interplay of agency and structure was therefore necessary to produce useful findings.

As discussed in Section 4.4, the choice of questions included in the interview schedules (see Appendices 1 and 2) was influenced by the conceptual framework adopted in that, for example, questions were included concerning *enablements* and *constraints* faced by students. This line of questioning arose from the view that individuals act and choose courses of behaviour but that they do so in the light of (fallibly) perceived *enablements* and *constraints*.

In the data analysis, I had to make a number of decisions as the analysis progressed, for example, about how to code data and what data to include and exclude from analyses of the quantitative data. One example relates to coding a student's best GCSE grades at the start and end of an academic year. Due to the change in the way GCSEs were graded from the 2016/17 academic year, some grades were in numerical form (9 to 1) and some were alphabetical (A* to C). I had to decide what numerical value to attach to the alphabetical grades and did this based on an equivalence table provided by Ofqual (2018). Other choices and decisions that were made are further discussed in Chapter 5.

I also clearly made decisions regarding the presentation of my findings. In relation to the outcome of these decisions, as well as those made at earlier stages of the research process, I used the TAPUPASM model outlined in Section 4.6 above as a tool to consider issues of rigour relating to this research.

4.8 Ethical issues

In designing and conducting the research, reference was made to Stutchbury and Fox's (2009) ethical grid which encourages focus on external/ecological; consequential/utilitarian; deontological and relational/individual questions and

issues. In terms of external and ecological issues, which focus the environment in which research takes place (Stutchbury and Fox, 2009), the research was conducted in line with BERA (2018) and UEA (University Research Ethics Committee, 2016; EDU Research Ethics Committee, 2013) ethical guidelines. For example, BERA (2018) ethical guidelines state that bodies providing access to data and participants should be regarded as sponsors and provided with information concerning the proposed research. Once approval to carry out the research had been granted by the EDU Research ethics committee, permission to conduct the research was sought and obtained from the Principal of the College, as gatekeeper. In addition to ethical guidelines, the General Data Protection Act 2018 and the General Data Protection Regulation were adhered to in the study. Where personal data were being collected, informed consent was obtained from participants who were informed who would have access to the information they provided and how the data would be handled and securely stored (see Appendices 3 and 4).

Once approval to conduct the research had been gained from the Principal, the academic manager for the area was contacted to identify suitable lecturers for interview, i.e. lecturers or academic managers involved with the delivery of English or mathematics GCSEs to students on 16 to 19 study programmes. Academic managers and lecturers with relevant experience and knowledge were contacted in person or via email, provided with a participant information sheet and asked whether they would be interested in taking part in the research. Recognition of the importance of gaining informed consent was borne in mind when designing the participant information sheet which covered many of the deontological issues identified by Stutchbury and Fox (2009) including what the study is about; what the study would involve for them; the right to withdraw; potential costs and benefits; how the data would be handled and stored; how they could receive feedback of the results of the study and what to do should they have a complaint or any concerns, In addition, the academic participants were given the opportunity to ask further questions prior to them consenting to take part in the study. Relevant student groups as identified by the academic staff were visited, the research was outlined to the group and all students in the group were invited to take part. They were provided

with a participant information sheet and, again, were given the opportunity to ask further questions prior to agreeing to take part.

In terms of consequential/utilitarian issues, which focus on the consequences and outcomes of actions (Stutchbury and Fox, 2009), the research was designed to provide a space for exploring issues identified in previous research as having a negative impact on a significant number of students (Bellamy, 2017). Finally, with respect to relational/individual issues, participants were reassured that their participation was voluntary, and it was made clear that they could be entirely candid and open in the views that they expressed and that these would be respected. With respect to participant validation, during the interviews, respondents' responses were regularly summarised or paraphrased and repeated back to check that the points they were making were being correctly understood.

Chapter 5. Analysis of Quantitative Data and Interviews with Students: The impact of demographic factors and attendance on outcomes and an exploration of students' *internal conversations*

5.1 Introduction

This chapter examines the findings from the analysis of the quantitative data and the qualitative data obtained from student interviews. As discussed in Chapter 4, quantitative data on outcomes were analysed prior to the collection of the qualitative data to check for any patterns (demi-regularities) which may indicate the operation of structural mechanisms (Bhaskar and Lawson, 1998). Section 5.2 analyses the quantitative data and contributes towards answering elements of the second and third research questions concerning *enablements* and *constraint*s faced by students (Research Question 2) and key structural factors impacting on GCSE outcomes in the College (Research Question 3). The coding of the data is discussed in Section 5.2.1 followed by a discussion of the patterns observed in the data in relation to overall achievement, demographic factors and achievement, and attendance and progress (Sections 5.2.2 to 5.2.4). The key findings regarding low achievement overall, an absence of patterning by demographic factors and a positive relationship between attendance and progress are summarised in Section 5.2.5.

The analysis of the quantitative data is followed by an analysis of the qualitative data from the interviews with students in Section 5.3. Analysis of the student interviews has been used to begin to examine student perceptions of the value and relevance of the GCSE English and mathematics resits (Research Question 1), the *enablements* and *constraints* students perceive in relation to achieving 'good passes' (Research Question 2) and the structural, cultural and agential factors impacting on the outcomes (Research Question 3). It is worth repeating that according to the conceptual framework being utilised, social and cultural mechanisms do not operate in a straightforward 'hydraulic' manner but are mediated via *internal conversations* (Archer, 2003). Section 5.3.1 provides information on the sample (main qualification and where they are at in terms of achieving a 'good pass' in GCSE English and mathematics) followed by a short pen-portrait for each student picking out key

features from their interviews. Section 5.3.2 presents data related to students' beliefs about English and mathematics. This is followed by a discussion of the messages that students were aware of concerning English and mathematics that may have influenced their beliefs (Section 5.3.3). The students' attitudes to the resits, as revealed by the interviews, are discussed in Section 5.3.4, followed by an analysis of their perceptions of *enablements* and *constraints* in relation to mathematics and English (Section 5.3.5). Section 5.3.6 explores the interview data in terms of apparent effects of beliefs, attitudes and perceptions of *enablements* and *constraints* on student behaviour, attendance and effort. The analysis of the qualtitative data is summarised in Section 5.3.7 and points to some interesting findings with regard to how students valued these subjects, particularly mathematics; how likely (or not) they felt they would be to use the skills learnt, particularly the higher-level skills; the identification of personal support as a key enablement; and their identification of more constraints in relation to mathematics than English.

5.2 Quantitative data

Following an explanation of how the data were coded, this section explores the patterns found in the quantitative data. The College achievement data on students with a grade D/3 achieving a C/4, is compared with national achievement data for the academic years 2014/15 to 2017/18 with a resulting picture of low achievement at both the College and national levels. The outcomes are then examined for any patterning related to demographic factors with an overall lack of patterning found. Finally, the data on attendance and progress were analysed with evidence of a positive relationship emerging between the two.

5.2.1 Coding of quantitative data

The anonymised data provided by the College covered the academic years 2014/15 to 2017/18 and included data for all students on 16 to 19 programmes of study during these years. Table 3 shows the data provided for students in each of the academic years.

Table 3 Quantitative data collected for the academic years 2014/15 to 2017/18

Data field	Attributes
Academic year	2014/2015; 2015/2016; 2016/2017; 2017/2018
Age on 31st August	Age in years
Ethnicity	White/Black and Minority Ethnic Group (BME)/Unknown
Sex	F/M
Declared learning difficulty, disability, or health problem?	Y/ N
Enrolled on GCSE mathematics	Y/N
Enrolled on GCSE English	Y/N
Highest GCSE mathematics qualification grade at start of academic year	A*-U/9-1/Blank
Highest GCSE English qualification at start of academic year	A*-U/9-1/Blank
Living in a postcode area for which the postcode disadvantage uplift applies	Y/N
Feeder School [1]	4-digit anonymised code
Sector Subject Area (SSA) of main learning aim [2]	1-15
Level of main learning aim [3]	QCF level 0-3
Mathematics attendance (%)	0-100%
English attendance (%)	0-100%
GCSE mathematics outcome (Grade/ not completed)	A*-U/9-1/Not completed/Blank
GCSE English outcome (Grade/ not completed)	A*-U/9-1/Not completed/Blank

[1] The last school the student attended prior to enrolment at the College.

[2] The Ofqual category into which the qualification is classified (Ofqual, 2020).

[3] As defined by the Regulated Qualifications Framework or the previous Qualifications and Credit Framework (GOV.UK, No Date).

The data were uploaded into SPSS with the data for each academic year forming an individual data set. Recoding was carried out where required, as follows. Initially all non-numerical variables were recoded into numerical form. Blank cells for GCSE grades on entry were given a code of 99 to indicate missing data. Blank cells in relation to GCSE outcome grades were coded 99 when the student had not been enrolled on the qualification and 999 when they had been enrolled but the outcome was missing. In relation to ethnicity, BME (Black and Minority Ethnic Group) was recoded as 1, White was recoded as 2 and Unknown was recoded as 999. Gender was coded with F recoded as 1, and M recoded as 2. For Learning difficulty, disability or health condition and living in a postcode area for which the postcode disadvantage uplift applies Y was recoded as 1 and N as 0 with missing values coded as 999. Non-numerical entry and outcome grades were recoded numerically (Table 4) based on a comparison chart (Figure 2) provided by Ofqual (2018). The chart (Figure 2) provided visual equivalence without directly providing a numerical equivalent value for the alphabetical grades. Of key significance is the C/D and 4/3 border and coding a D as 3.5 and C as 4.5 fits with the new grading system in which 4 and above is classed as a standard pass.

Figure 1 Ofqual comparison of new and former grading structures (Ofqual, 2018, p.1)

New grading structure	Former grading structure
9	A*
8	
7	A
6	B
5	
4	C
3	D
2	E
1	F
	G
U	U

Table 4 Numerical values attributed to grades in the former grading structure

Original value	New value
A*	8.5
A	7
B	5.5
C	4.5
D	3.5
E	2.5
F	1.5
G	0.5
U,X,N,Not completed	0

In addition to the recoding mentioned above, as the analysis progressed new variables were computed. Given the importance placed upon achieving a grade C/4 or above, two new variables were created from the GCSE English and mathematics outcome grades with a code of 1 for an outcome grade of C/4 or above and a code of 0 for an outcome grade below this. This enabled analysis to be undertaken into differences between groups in terms of achieving that 'good' pass grade. Another variable created related to progress and measured the distance travelled in-year by subtracting the numerical value of the highest grade on entry from the numerical value of the highest grade achieved by the end of the academic year. Depending on whether a student's grade had improved or not this could result in a positive or negative figure. Interviews with lecturers (Chapter 6) revealed that there were significant numbers of students who remained enrolled on GCSE English or mathematics to the end of the academic year but who did not sit the exam, therefore, a further variable was created which excluded non-completers who had originally been given the same code (0) as students who had sat the exam and achieved an X,N, or U. This is discussed further in Section 5.2.4.

5.2.2 Achievement data

Table 5 shows the percentage of students enrolled on GCSE English within the College with an entry grade of D or 3 achieving a grade C/4 or above by the end of the academic year for the academic years 2014/15 to 2017/18 inclusive. Table 6 displays comparable data for GCSE mathematics. The benchmark figure is the percentage of students in that year achieving a grade C/4 or above in GCSE English or mathematics in General FE and Tertiary Colleges as detailed in the National Achievement Rates Tables (SFA and DBIS, 2016; DfE and ESFA, 2017; DfE, 2018a; DfE, 2019).

As highlighted previously, in the academic year 2014/15 students on 16 to 19 study programmes without a Grade C/4 or above were required, as a condition of funding, to be enrolled onto an English or mathematics qualification. The condition of funding was tightened for 2015/16 and students with Grade D/3 in English or mathematics GCSE had to be enrolled onto the GCSE with the option of enrolling students with a lower grade onto a stepping-stone qualification. Given the option of enrolling some students onto stepping-stone qualifications rather than GCSEs, it is potentially problematic to compare GCSE outcomes between colleges, as different colleges may have made different decisions about which students to enter onto GCSEs and which students to enter onto functional skills. This contextual information is not available in relation to success/achievement rates published in National Achievement Rates Tables (NARTs). The College being researched decided to make enrolment onto the GCSE the default position and to only enrol students onto functional skills qualifications in exceptional circumstances. The rationale was that as students had sat GCSEs at school and would be working towards achieving a grade C/4 or above in the long term, it would be in their best interests to be enrolled on the GCSE with the goal of improving their grade in-year, even if it was likely that it would take more than one year to get to a grade C/4. This may lead one to expect a lower percentage of students in this College achieving a grade C/4 or above than in colleges where only those with a grade D/3 were entered. This led to the decision to compare the College data on outcomes of students enrolled on the English and mathematics GCSEs who had an entry grade of D or 3 to the published achievement rates for the sector which were used as benchmarks.

Table 5 Percentage of students with a GCSE English entry grade of D/3 achieving a C/4 or above

Academic year	2014/2015	2015/2016	2016/2017	2017/2018
Percentage	6.9	6.3	32.4	22.9
Benchmark	27.4	19.8	24.6	23.4

Table 6 Percentage of students with a GCSE mathematics entry grade D/3 achieving a C/4 or above

Academic year	2014/2015	2015/2016	2016/2017	2017/2018
Percentage	16.5	18.3	27.5	19.7
Benchmark	24.6	17.6	17.9	15

The starkest finding to emerge from the analysis of the quantitative data is the relatively low percentage of students on 16 to 19 programmes of study within the College who achieved the grade C/4 or above in their English and mathematics retakes over the academic years 2014/15 to 2017/18. As explained in Chapter 3, the picture nationally is not positive, with Ofsted (2018, p.11) stating in their 2017/18 Annual Report that, 'Resit pass rates are low, at 24% for English and 19% for mathematics, and the impact of repeated 'failure' on students should not be underestimated'. The above data point to Research Finding 1: Resit pass-rates for GCSE English and mathematics at the College for the period under consideration were low.

Another striking feature of the above data is the sharp increase in the percentage of students enrolled with a D/3 achieving a C/4 or above between 2016/17 and 2017/18. A possible explanation given for this by one of the lecturers was the introduction of

the new GCSE English curriculum in 2016/17 which was assessed by examination only with no coursework component. It was suggested that prior to 2016/17, resitting the GCSE between September and May/June and being required to produce coursework did not allow sufficient time in lessons for skill development. It is of note, however, that the benchmark data do not as clearly show a clear increase between 2014/15 and 2015/16 on the one hand and 2016/2017 and 2017/2018 on the other.

5.2.3 Demographic (structural) factors and achievement

Under the Common Inspection Framework (Ofsted, 2015b), which was in place during the years under consideration, the grade colleges received for 'Effectiveness of leadership and management' was informed by the degree to which leaders 'narrow any gaps in achievement between different groups of children and learners'. The self-assessment reports of the College being researched analyse results based on gender, ethnicity, social disadvantage and learning difficulties and disabilities (LDD). As discussed in Chapter 2, this focus results from research that has highlighted the continuing impact of these factors on educational outcomes. Tables 7 to 14 illustrate the findings concerning the impact of these factors on GCSE outcomes in English and mathematics resits for the cohorts under consideration in the College, firstly for English and then for mathematics.

Table 7 Percentage of students enrolled on GCSE English with a D/3 achieving a C/4 or above by gender

Academic year	2014/15	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18
Female	5.5	8	36.8	23
Male	7.9	5	29.1	22.8
All	6.9	6.3	32.4	22.9

Table 8 Percentage of students enrolled on English GCSE with a D/3 achieving a C/4 or above by ethnicity

Academic	2014/15	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18
BME	13.9	7.8	36.7	20.8
White	6.4	6.2	32.2	23.1
All	6.9	6.3	32.4	22.9

Table 9 Percentage of students enrolling on English GCSE with a D/3 achieving a C/4 or above by LDD

Academic	2014/15	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18
No LDD	6.8	6.2	33.9	25.9
LDD	7	6.7	30.5	18
All	6.9	6.3	32.4	22.9

Table 10 Percentage of students enrolled on English GCSE with a D/3 achieving a C/4 or above by disadvantage (postcode uplift)

Academic	2014/15	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18
No postcode disadvantage	6.5	7	33.7	26.3
Postcode disadvantage	8.7	3.8	28.5	14.4
All	6.9	6.3	32.4	22.9

The pictures painted by these descriptive statistics concerning students on 16 to 19 study programmes enrolled on GCSE English do not evidence entirely clear patterns of the impact of the selected factors on students moving from a D/3 grade to a C/4

grade or above. Female students outperformed male students in three out of the four years under consideration, but the gap was very small in the final year. BME students outperformed white students in three of the four years and were outperformed by white students in one of the years (largely reversing the usual pattern). Students without a disability outperformed students with a disability in two of the four years and underperformed in comparison in two of the years. Finally, with regard to social disadvantage, for which postcode uplift is used as a proxy, students with no postcode uplift outperformed students in three of the four years with the pattern reversed in the first year. In terms of cross tabulations of English outcomes (C/4 or above) by gender, ethnicity, LDD and postcode disadvantage for the students enrolled with a D/3 at the start of the year across all four years, statistically significant chi-square results were only found for gender in 1617 with females performing better than males: X^2 (1, N = XXX*) = 5.13, p < .05; LDD in 1718 with those without performing better: X^2 (1, N = XXX*) = 5.934, p < .05; and postcode disadvantage in 1718 with those without performing better: X^2 (1, N = XXX*) = 11.643, p < .05.

*Figures redacted to protect the identity of the College.

Table 11 Percentage of students enrolled on mathematics GCSE with a D/3 achieving a C/4 or above by gender

Academic year	2014/15	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18
Female	16.4	17.3	22.8	17.2
Male	16.8	19.6	32.2	22.7

Table 12 Percentage of students enrolled on mathematics GCSE with a D/3 achieving a C/4 or above by ethnic group

Academic year	2014/15	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18
BME	23.5	28.6	23.5	17.8
White	15.9	17.6	27.8	19.7
All	16.5	18.3	27.5	19.6

Table 13 Percentage of students enrolled on GCSE mathematics with a D/3 achieving a C/4 or above by LDD

Academic year	2014/15	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18
No LDD	16.2	16.9	28.7	20.6
LDD	18	22	25.2	18.1
All	16.6	18.4	27.5	19.7

Table 14 Percentage of students enrolled on mathematics GCSE with a D/3 achieving a C/4 or above by disadvantage (postcode uplift)

Academic year	2014/15	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18
No postcode disadvantage	17.9	18.7	28.5	19
Postcode disadvantage	9.2	16.9	24.5	21.7
All	16.5	18.3	27.5	19.7

It can be seen from Table 13 that male students outperformed female students in mathematics in all four years which is perhaps notable given that in general female students outperform male students in GCSEs (Glaesser and Cooper, 2012). As with

English, the other patterns relating to mathematics outcomes are less clear-cut. BME students outperformed White students in two out of the four years and underperformed compared to them in the other two years. The same pattern was found with learning difficulties and disabilities with those without a declared disability outperforming those with a disability in two of the years and underperforming relative to them in the remaining two years. In terms of social disadvantage, students with no postcode disadvantage outperformed those with a postcode disadvantage with the pattern reversed in the final year under study. In terms of cross tabulations of mathematics outcomes (C/4 or above) by gender, ethnicity, LDD and postcode disadvantage for the students enrolled with a D/3 at the start of the year across all four years, statistically significant chi-square results (at the 0.05 level) were only found for gender in 1617 with males performing better: X^2 (1, N =XXX*) = 6.866, p < .05. This points to Research Finding 2: The pattern linking academic achievement to demographic factors evidenced in national outcomes (see DfE, 2020) was not clearly visible in the College GCSE resit outcomes.

*Figure redacted to protect the identity of the College.

5.2.4 Progress/distance travelled and attendance

Given the College's focus on students making progress and not just on achieving the coveted C/4 grade (see Section 5.2.1), the data provided were used to compute a new variable which measured progress in-year for students enrolled on GCSE English and mathematics as described in Section 5.2.1. Interviews revealed a focus on seeking to improve attendance at English and mathematics lessons within the College (as these lagged behind attendance rates for main qualifications) in an attempt to improve outcomes. This variable and the attendance data were used to calculate mean average progress by rates of attendance. Students who did not complete the GCSE were removed from this analysis so that the analysis only included progress data where a student had a GCSE result at both the start and the end of the year. Students at the College are expected to attend all lessons and additional support, above the usual monitoring and contact, is put in place for students where attendance drops below 80%. However, the College emphasises the importance and

benefits of improving attendance for students whose attendance is between 80% and 99%. Tables 15 and 16 show findings regarding progress and attendance and demonstrate greater progress as attendance improves over 85%. This points to Research Finding 3: Higher attendance was linked to higher mean average progress in both English and mathematics.

Table 15 Attendance and average (mean) progress for GCSE English

Academic year	2014/2015	2015/2016	2016/2017	2017/2018
<85%	-1.51	-1.31	-0.84	-0.6
≥85%	-0.67	-0.28	-0.11	0.01
≥90%	-0.65	-0.21	-0.1	0.03
≥95%	-0.59	-0.08	-0.16	0.05

Table 16 Attendance and average (mean) progress for GCSE mathematics

Academic year	2014/2015	2015/2016	2016/2017	2017/2018
<85%	-0.7	-0.35	-0.51	-0.65
≥85%	0.14	0.36	0.17	-0.14
≥90%	0.26	0.42	0.21	-0.08
≥95%	0.38	0.45	0.32	0.01

5.2.5 Summary of findings from the quantitative data

The below are the key findings from the quantitative data:

Research Finding 1: Resit pass-rates for the GCSE English and mathematics at the College for the period under consideration were low.

Research Finding 2: The pattern linking academic achievement to demographic factors evidenced in national outcomes (see DfE, 2020) was not clearly visible in the College GCSE resit outcomes.

Research Finding 3: Higher attendance was linked to higher mean average progress in both English and mathematics

Perhaps the most striking finding of the analysis of the quantitative data discussed in Section 5.2 was the low rates of students achieving a grade C/4 even when looking at those who already hold a D/3. Across the four years under consideration, between 85% and 72.6% of students who started with a D/3 in English or mathematics GCSE did not improve their grade to a C/4. That analysis of the data did not find evidence of a clear statistically significant impact of gender, ethnicity, Learning Difficulties and Disabilities (LDD) or social disadvantage (postcode uplift) on the GCSE outcomes must be viewed in light of the high levels of failure to achieve a 'good pass' across all groups. The data did show a pattern, or demi-regularity (Bhaskar and Lawson, 1998), in terms of the relationship between attendance and progress.

5.3 Student interview data

All students interviewed were asked questions regarding GCSE English and mathematics (see Appendix 2 for the interview schedule). As discussed in Chapter 2, the Archerian conceptual framework adopted in this study portrays human behaviour as resulting from a complex interplay between structure, culture and agency (Archer, 2000). To facilitate an understanding of the interplay between these factors, the students were asked about the messages they had received about the English and mathematics GCSEs (culture) and any *enablements* and *constraints* they perceived to developing their skills in these subjects/achieving 'good passes' (structure). As previously discussed, however, Archer does not regard structural and cultural mechanisms as determining behaviour, she argues that their causal powers are mediated by agency as individuals' *internal conversations* determine which projects

individuals pursue and how they respond to messages, *enablements* and *constraints*. Their projects may succeed or fail, and their strategic responses to *enablements* and *constraints* may prove more or less effective due to the operation of various mechanisms, but their *internal conversations* must be taken into account. Students' views on the GCSE resits were therefore sought and they were also asked about their behaviour and attendance in these subjects.

The above highlights the potential fruitfulness, when analysing the data, of looking at the holistic situation of each individual in the first instance before looking for commonalities and differences, as well as themes. Despite the compulsory nature of the GCSE resits, individual students make decisions regarding behaviour, e.g. attendance and effort, which may be shaped by their valuing (or not) of the qualification and the *enablements* and *constraints* they face along with their assessment of these and their resulting strategies.

5.3.1 Student interviews

The fifteen students interviewed were all students on 16 to 19 study programmes during the academic year 2018/19. They were all studying programmes which fell within either Sector Subject Area 1 (Health, Public Services and Care) or Sector Subject Area 4 (Engineering and Manufacturing Technologies). In addition, they were all either studying or had previously studied English and/or mathematics GCSE during their time at college. The breakdown of interviewees by their main qualification aim and their status in terms of English and mathematics GCSE is detailed in Table 17.

Table 17 Main Aim and English and Mathematics Status of Interviewees

Pseudonym	Main qualification	English status	Mathematics status
Faye	Level 3 Health and Social Care (HSC)	Passed at school	Studying at college
Gemma	Level 3 Health and Social Care	Studying at college	Studying at college
Rebecca	Level 3 Health and Social Care	Passed at college	Studying at college
Emily	Level 3 Health and Social Care	Passed at school	Studying at college
Marie	Level 3 Health and Social Care	Passed at school	Studying at college
Sophie	Level 3 Health and Social Care	Studying at college	Studying at college
Charlotte	Level 3 Health and Social Care	Studying at college	Studying at college
Liam	Level 3 Electrical Engineering (EE)	Passed at college	Passed at college
Noah	Level 3 Electrical Engineering	Passed at college	Passed at college
Oliver	Level 3 Electrical Engineering	Passed at college	Passed at school
Lucas	Level 3 Electrical Engineering	Passed at school	Passed at college
Daniel	Level 1 Motor Vehicle (MV)	Studying at college	Studying at college
Haydn	Level 1 Motor Vehicle	Studying at college	Passed at college
Matthew	Level 1 Motor Vehicle	Studying at college	Passed at school
Owen	Level 1 Motor Vehicle	Studying at college	Studying at college

Whilst these are clearly very small samples, it was striking that all interviewed students on the Level 3 Electrical Engineering course had passed their GCSE

mathematics whereas none of the Level 3 Health and Social Care students had passed their mathematics since starting at college. Similarly, all of the interviewees on the Level 3 Electrical Engineering course had passed their English while some of the interviewees enrolled onto Level 3 Health and Social Care were still working towards this. This pointed to a possible difference relating to entry requirements onto the courses, for example an absolute requirement to have a grade C/4 or above in mathematics and English for entry onto Level 3 Electrical Engineering, which may have had an impact on student motivation or how they viewed resitting GCSE mathematics in previous years. The quantitative data set only had data relating to SSA and not programme aim, so it was not possible to ascertain conclusively from this data whether all students enrolling on Level 3 Electrical Engineering had previously achieved a C/4 or above in GCSE mathematics. The data did show that a smaller percentage of students in each year who were enrolled onto a Level 3 course within the 'Engineering and Manufacturing Technologies' SSA did not have a C/4 or above in GCSE mathematics compared with those enrolling onto a Level 3 course within the 'Health, Public Services and Care' SSA (Table 18), but it was not possible to ascertain whether they were enrolled on Electrical Engineering or another Level 3 course within the SSA. Higher percentages of Level 3 students within the 'Electrical and Manufacturing Technologies' SSA did not have a C/4 in GCSE English on Entry compared to those within this SSA without mathematics each year, and in 3 out of the 4 years in comparison with Level 3 students in the 'Health, Public Services and Care' SSA (Table 19).

Table 18 Percentage of Level 3 students with a D/3 or below in GCSE mathematics on entry by Sector Subject Area

	2014/2015	2015/2016	2016/2017	2017/2018
SSA 1: Health, Public Services and Care	17.7	8.6	21.5	18.2
SSA 2: Engineering and Manufacturing Technologies	13.3	4.1	5.9	10.6

Table 19 Percentage of Level 3 students with a D/3 or below in GCSE English on entry by Sector Subject Area

	2014/2015	2015/2016	2016/2017	2017/2018
SSA 1: Health, Public Services and Care	10.4	1.5	13.8	7.0
SSA 2: Engineering and Manufacturing Technologies	28.6	9.2	5.1	21.2

5.3.1.1 Students 'pen portraits'

Faye

Faye (HSC) had achieved a 'good pass' in her GCSE English at school but was still studying mathematics at college. She wanted to progress to University and pursue a career in nursing and stated that English skills would be very relevant explaining that she would need skills in 'communication, because you've got to have the right grammar and vocab' and that 'you've got to write a lot of documents'. In terms of mathematics, she stated that, 'I'm always going to be using it and I'm going to need it.' She cited needing it for medication and telling the time. After failing her mathematics at school, she said that she had actively researched whether she would need it for a career in nursing through speaking to some of her mum's friends who work in the health care sector, and as a result had decided to 'knuckle down' which she said she had done. Regarding the resit, she expressed frustration with struggling with it and feeling held back on her (vocational) course. She estimated her attendance at mathematics lessons at 96% and said that she worked on her mathematics outside of college with the help of a tutor. Another *enablement*, Faye identified was that she enjoyed it. She expressed a certain satisfaction gained from studying the subject saying:

> The good things in maths was, there's always ways around it and you can work out different things and there's different, many ways in getting your answer, so… with maths you can, you can get there in the end with maths. (Faye)

She also found help from her dad useful. She identified a number of *constraints*: coursework relating to her main vocational qualification, being a practical learner who is 'not very good on pen and paper' and needing to ask and push for help in lessons (although she did not personally find this difficult). She reported having struggled with English but having been enabled by one to one support. In addition, she stated that her parents had been supportive. She cited the messages from her mum's friends who worked in the health sector as being influential in shaping her beliefs about the importance of English and mathematics.

Gemma

Gemma (HSC) was still studying her GCSEs in both English and mathematics at college. She felt that English would be useful to her in life and her planned career as a paramedic in helping her 'to speak a lot more presentable' and teaching her 'to, like write letters and how to write formally and stuff'. She thought she would use mathematics as a paramedic in taking measurements and bloods but that, 'in real life I don't think it's that useful because nowadays things just tell you how much everything is.'

In terms of messages, her friends and parents were encouraging her to persevere with the resits and her understanding of the importance of mathematical skills had been shaped by the College and the army cadets. She stated that she hated the English resit, expressing frustration at repeatedly sitting the exam and getting the same result. She stated that her attendance at English lessons was 'alright' and that she tried to work outside the lessons on areas she has not done well on in the exams. She felt less negatively about mathematics, saying that she did not really mind studying it as part of her course. She reported on working on her mathematics outside of college explaining that she got help from a cousin who was studying it at university.

She felt that she had been enabled in English through additional support at school but currently felt the lack of additional support to be a *constraint*, along with the assessment being exam-based stating, 'I get it when I'm in class and then once I'm

sat in front of an exam, it just like goes.' She identified MyMaths, an online teaching and homework website that the College subscribed to, as an *enablement* in mathematics. As with English, she identified assessment by examination as a barrier and the speed at which the lecturer worked through things in class.

Rebecca

Rebecca (HSC) had not achieved a 'good pass' in GCSE English at school, but had done so in college the previous year and so was no longer studying it. She was still studying GCSE mathematics. She was aiming for a career in the NHS and stated that she believed English to be 'really important' because 'you're going to need to know how to write certain things, and what format, and how to write it and address people.' She similarly felt that mathematics would be relevant in her working life saying that she used it in her current job where she worked on a till and that she would need it for her planned career as an occupational or play therapist.

Rebecca expressed annoyance at having had to retake her English GCSE, but this appeared related more to having failed than to resitting it as she reported being glad that she had subsequently passed it. Concerning messages surrounding mathematics, she had picked up on news reports that studying it can cause stress and she felt that its importance was 'over exaggerated'. She appeared annoyed but resigned to still be working towards the mathematics GCSE saying, 'I'm very annoyed about it… but it's what needs to be done and I'm going to have to do it until I pass it because I want to pass it for later on in careers, so…'

She reported having worked on her English 'occasionally' stating that 'most of the time I was doing my coursework'. She stated that her attendance at mathematics was very good and that she did not 'skive' because she felt that doing so would mean that she would not learn anything and would miss out. She said that she did not do much work on it outside of college, again citing coursework and the absence of anyone outside of college to help her.

Rebecca identified the pressures of coursework, regular changes of tutor and problems caused by a specific learning difficulty as constraining her in both English

and mathematics. She felt additionally constrained in mathematics by disruptive behaviour in the classroom, finding it difficult to study it alone without someone to help, difficulty booking a support session at the College because of a lack of free appointments, exam stress and three-hour lessons. She also argued that there was too much content to cover in a resit year. With regard to mathematics, she expressed feeling more enabled in the current year than the previous year because of a good teacher who provided different approaches to problems, being provided with exam strategies, and being placed in a mathematics class with other students on her vocational course as opposed to being placed with students she did not know in the previous year. She felt enabled in English by having had a private tutor when at school and by having been in the college environment where she reported lessons being less disrupted by people talking in lessons than at school.

Emily

Emily (HSC) had achieved her 'good pass' in English GCSE but was still studying her mathematics having achieved a grade 3 at school and a grade 2 in her first resit. She was not sure if she would need English for her chosen career in mental health but identified that she would need it for interviews. She saw mathematics as relevant to her life in terms of providing a required qualification for entry to university stating that, 'I'm not the biggest fan of it but I think it's very good because, like, you need extra grades to like get into Uni. Because I really want to go to Uni.'

She estimated her current attendance at mathematics at 73% saying that it had dropped to 50% at one point but that she was working it back up. She had not started working on her mathematics outside of college, having prioritised studying for health and social care exams up to that point. In terms of *enablements*, she found additional classroom support in the class she was currently in helpful, as well as the small group size. She also reported finding the MathsWatch resource helpful. Problems with friendship groups were identified as a *constraint* and provided as the explanation for the low attendance. Additional *constraints* identified included behavioural disruption in the classroom and a dislike of the subject which had led her to prioritising revision for other subjects at school. In English, she had felt enabled by a strict teacher at

school who maintained good classroom discipline and she did not identify any *constraints*.

Marie

Marie (HSC) had achieved a grade C in her English GCSE at school and had chosen to resit it in an attempt to achieve a grade 5, which she had failed to do. She was still studying for her mathematics GCSE having obtained a grade 3 both at school and in her first resit. She stated that she would need English to be a social worker as there is office-based work involved but said that, 'I think that some of the things you do learn are not relevant for some jobs, that you don't need, I think there's too much content for what it's worth….' She viewed the relevance of mathematics in terms of it being a required qualification for social work whilst not being able to express how she might use it.

In discussing cultural messages, she said she felt that the government puts too much pressure on students to achieve English and mathematics GCSEs, arguing that, 'you need your English and maths, well, yeah, but we need to revise for every other one as well.' She expressed frustration and worry about the mathematics resit saying:

> it's quite frustrating because I'm worried that I'm not going to get it because I find it so hard and I swear like every year the grade boundaries go up. Where this year I got like 126 and I was thinking, oh, well I remember, roughly, and like this year it was like 146 to pass. I was like, great, so it was still like that gap. And I think that's what I find frustrating because I know, like, you come away from doing an exam like, I've done quite well, you feel like you've done quite well, it's just a bit like, yeah…. (Marie)

She attended mathematics lessons but did not revise a lot at home citing other pressures including work three days a week, college three days a week and one day a week on placement. Other identified *constraints* to developing her mathematical skills included a dislike of exams, the breadth of the curriculum students have to try to 'cram in', large group size, parents who are not 'very good at maths either', finding MathsWatch uninteresting, regular changes of tutor and frustration with a tutor who

makes mistakes in class. In identifying *enablements* she mentioned an enjoyment of maths, and a consistent teacher for two years, which had enabled the establishment of a working relationship within a small group. Regarding English, she felt that the barriers she had faced at school related to issues with friendship groups, finding English boring and not being studious. She felt enabled by the revision guides the school provided.

Sophie

Sophie (HSC) was still studying for both the English and mathematics GCSEs at college, having achieved a grade 3 in English at school and a grade 2 in mathematics both at school and in her first resit. She appeared sceptical about the need for the 'good pass' in English stating:

> I don't know because everyone seems to say there's a bit stigma around having it, but I'm not sure. I always feel like there will be a job out there where you can always just achieve it later on if you never had it. (Sophie)

She felt that mathematics would be more relevant to her future life than English stating that she would need it for 'medications, sizes and stuff like that'.

In identifying cultural messages, she said she had been 'pushed' to achieve both mathematics and English by school, friends and family, whom she described as supportive, coming from a family where her brother and sister had both passed mathematics and English. she appeared frustrated, and possibly passive, stating:

> Er, I just feel like I want it out of the way now, because I've done, like, retaken it so many times and I'm at like a level 3 now so it's not like far away at all. So I do just want it, like, to have it now. (Sophie)

Similarly, when discussing mathematics, she stated that, 'I wish I did just have it'.

She reported her attendance at English as 87% and at mathematics as between 80% and 90% and stated that she did not spend much time working on either subject out of college. She reported feeling constrained in both English and mathematics by being

in the lower sets where she reported behavioural disruption. In terms of *enablements*, she had been taken out of music lessons for additional English lessons and had also received additional support in mathematics at school. Additional *enablements* identified in relation to mathematics included feeling that the small group she was currently in was helpful and that she benefitted from tutor input as opposed to working through activities on a computer. Her brother would also be able to help her if she needed it.

Charlotte

Charlotte (HSC) was still studying for both English and mathematics GCSEs at college having achieved grade 3s at school and in a retake for both. She stated English would be relevant to her future because she would need to be able to read and write and spell but argued against the necessity of achieving a grade 4 or above stating that, 'I don't think it's really relevant, more like 3s. It's just like… Everyone says that employers look for it, but they don't.' She felt that it would be relevant if she wanted to go to university which she did not as she intended to work her way up to management in the care sector. Similarly, she thought that she would use mathematics daily but was not convinced of the relevance of all of the GCSE content stating, 'I think it's, like, quite important because you use it, like daily, but it's just like some of the algebra and stuff you're not going to use, like Pi.'

In discussing her experience of the English resit, she described being thrown in at the deep end with little support. She expressed annoyance at resitting mathematics feeling that it caused her stress. She estimated her attendance at English lessons at 66% and said that she did not work on it out of lessons, preferring to focus on her main course. She rated her attendance at mathematics higher at 70-80% explaining this in terms of receiving support and feedback in mathematics but hating her English teacher. She said that she sometimes worked on MathsWatch outside of college.

English was this student's second language and she had additional support in primary school. She felt that she had been constrained by changes of teacher at college and felt that her current teacher just set work for them to get on with which she found

less helpful than a previous teacher who had provided constant feedback. In terms of *enablements* in relation to mathematics, she valued differentiated support from her college tutor and could not think of any *constraints* other than feeling that she had a lack of ability stating, 'I just get confused with all the algebra and stuff. That's the thing that gets me.'

Liam

Liam (EE) had achieved a 'good pass' in his English and mathematics GCSE during 2016/17, his first year at college, whilst studying a Level 1 qualification in electrical engineering. He felt that he would need English GCSE for employment stating that it had already enabled him to get his current part-time job and that it was an entry requirement for an electrical apprenticeship he had recently applied for. He stated that maths was:

> a really big thing for me because electrical is hugely based around science and maths so I think to get higher maths done, to learn about all what you need for higher maths has really, really helped me. (Liam)

In terms of messages, he felt the English and mathematics GCSEs were valued by his parents and his friends stating that he chose to 'hang around with' people who wanted to be successful. He had been home schooled prior to attending college and had not previously sat the GCSEs. He stated that he had found studying the English GCSE at college relaxed and had enjoyed it. He also enjoyed mathematics but struggled with the lesson finishing at 17.00.

He stated that his attendance at English and mathematics lessons had been 100% and that he had worked on his mathematics outside of college but not on his English. He felt he did not need to revise because the lessons provided him with everything that he needed to pass. Both in his home education and the teaching in college he felt well supported with his English and did not identify any *constraints*. In addition to feeling supported by friends and family, he felt enabled in mathematics by the work which was set and the additional support he received from his tutor for the higher paper.

Noah

Noah (EE) had spent two years studying for his English GCSE at college, achieving a grade 4 at the end of his second year following a grade D at school and 2 Ds and a grade 3 in previous resits. He achieved a grade C in mathematics in his first year following a D at school. In terms of the relevance of English, he felt that whilst 'you can do stuff that doesn't involve writing', he felt that it would help with writing formal emails and letters and appearing professional. He felt that mathematics would be relevant for the calculations he would have to perform as an electrician.

In identifying what had shaped his attitude to studying English he had had a girlfriend who had supported him with revision at school. He expressed frustration at having to resit his English and, like Marie in relation to mathematics, cited moving grade boundaries as contributing to this frustration. He did not believe that he had missed any English lessons at college and that his attendance at mathematics 'was pretty much 100%'. He also stated that he had studied for his English outside of college, working through past papers. For English, in addition to being provided with revision materials, practice and guidance, he cited being given a separate room for exams as an *enablement* which had allowed him to focus. In terms of *constraints* he cited limited time due to involvement with sporting activities from primary school upwards, which he also said impacted on his mathematics, difficulties concentrating in class, and finding exams more problematic than coursework. In mathematics, which he had only studied for a term at college, he felt enabled by the feedback and small groups.

Oliver

Oliver (EE) had achieved a grade C in his mathematics at school. He achieved a grade D at school in his English GCSE and subsequently achieved a grade 4 in his first year at college. In discussing the relevance to his life and career he did not think that he would use the skills he had developed in English on initially leaving college but that he may need them later in life if he were to 'go solo' and be required to correspond with customers. He believed that he would need mathematics in general, and

particularly in as an electrician carrying out calculations saying that, 'if you're wiring up a house, beforehand you'll need to know certain like allowances of, you know, voltage or….'

The main message he had been aware of regarding the English and mathematics GCSEs was that he had needed a grade D to achieve a place on his Level 1 course and that he subsequently needed a 'good pass' to get onto the Level 3 course. His stated attitude to the English was that he was aware that you did not 'get a choice until 18'. He estimated his attendance at English in the College as 'relatively high, it was in the 90s definitely'. In terms of effort, he said that he had not initially worked on his English outside of attending lessons but that he did some revision papers near the end of the year. He cited revision sessions after school as having been helpful and only cited classroom disruption as a *constraint*. In mathematics, he had felt constrained by some minor distractions at school.

Lucas

Lucas (EE) achieved a 'good pass' in his English at school. He achieved a D in his GCSE mathematics and again in his first year at college, achieving a C in his second year. When asked about the relevance of English he stated, 'It's, obviously it's good to know how to spell stuff and to write sentences, but it doesn't really help you that much.' He saw mathematics as relevant because the electrical examination he had recently taken had involved a lot of mathematics. Whilst he was not aware of any messages he had received concerning English in particular, he said that his parents had stressed the importance of education and wanted him to push himself to further his education. In terms of mathematics, he said, 'I feel like you're told the facts of what will happen if you don't pass and then you just do what you want with that information.'

He said that he was fine with resitting mathematics as he had not expected to pass it at school, although he found staying behind once his colleagues had left difficult. He estimated his attendance at higher than 90% but did not work on it outside of lessons until instructed to start revision 12 weeks prior to the examinations. In identifying

enablements and *constraints*, he said that English had just come naturally to him and that he had not needed to revise. He felt that he had been constrained in his mathematics by students who 'messed about' but had felt enabled by extra classes before and after school and during lunch, and also by help from older siblings.

Daniel

Daniel (MV) left school with a grade 3 in GCSE English and had achieved a grade 3 in mathematics both at school and in a retake and was still studying both at college. He stated that mathematics was relevant to his course. In terms of the relevance of English to him he stated that, 'I didn't really think I needed it.' When asked, he was unable to articulate why he believed this.

He said that the mathematics resit was 'alright, I think it's better than English.' He said he had spent time on mathematics outside of lessons when he had had a private tutor which he viewed as an *enablement*. Regarding the English resit he said that he did not mind doing it in his first year in college but that he felt that after that it should be optional. He estimated his attendance at English lessons at 93-94% and said that he sometimes worked on past papers outside of college. He was unable to identify *enablements* or *constraints* in relation studying English.

Haydn

Haydn (MV) had been studying Functional Skills English and achieved Level 1 having achieved Entry Level 3 in college the previous year. He had left school with a grade 1 in his English GCSE and attributed this to it being a closed book exam and not having a scribe stating that, 'I'm damn good at my reading and listening as well, but I'm absolutely terrible with writing. I can't write for anything unless I'm using a computer or a scribe.' He was exempted from the condition of funding on the basis of a specific learning difficulty. He had obtained a grade 4 in maths during the previous year at college having obtained a grade 3 at school.

He felt that functional skills English was relevant to him but that he would not need a GCSE arguing, 'As long as you know how to read and write, I think you're perfectly

fine', and that, 'You don't need to learn about Shakespeare, that should be part of history.' He rated his attendance at functional skills English at 93%, said that the teacher was amazing and said that he worked on it outside of class if it challenged him, for example he enjoyed writing poetry. He believed that he would use his maths when working with measurements and calculations feeling that it was more applicable to his general life than English. He said that he had enjoyed the mathematics GCSE resit and but said that he did not work on it out of lessons because he could not be bothered. He felt enabled by the lessons which he stated, 'really helped'.

Matthew

Matthew (MV) had just sat his English GCSE exams at college, having previously achieved a grade 2 at school. He had gained a grade 4 in his mathematics at school. On the relevance of achieving a 'good pass' in the English GCSE he argued that:

> Well, in my head, I think when, like, you go and apply for a job, they don't really like really look at your GCSEs, like, if I've got, say I've got 9 in English, it'll give me like a better chance than someone who's got, like, a lower grade but, like, I just think they base it more on like, how, yes, you're now coming into the world of work, but how's your experience been? (Matthew)

He did, however, report that he had had job applications rejected and been told that he could reapply once he had got a higher grade in his English. He felt that he would need mathematics as a mechanic for oil measurements and calculations and in general life to work out finances.

When identifying messages, he said his mum was also 'always on at me' about his English. When asked about how he felt about studying for the resit at the College he stated that it had helped him to develop processing skills and to explain what he was doing and how. He said his attendance in English had been 100% up to the exam and that he worked on past papers at home. In terms of *enablements*, he reported that he had been supported inside and outside of lessons at school and college, the support consisting of encouragement and motivation as well as going over areas of

difficulty. He reported being supported with his English outside of college by his mum. In addition, he felt that being in an English group with other people on his vocational course was beneficial as they were positive about learning. In terms of *constraints*, he identified large classes and being placed with students who do not want to learn as well as a specific learning difficulty. When taking his mathematics at school he had found he was easily distracted and worked better on his own with tutor support.

Owen

Owen (MV) was studying both English and mathematics GCSEs at college, having achieved a grade 2 in English and a grade 1 in mathematics at school. He felt that English would be relevant for his career in that he would need it for completing paperwork and talking to customers. He currently had to fill in job cards in his work experience. He felt that he would use mathematics in calculating costs and charging customers.

He said the messages he had received from his tutors concerning English had encouraged him and kept him going. In terms of his attitude to the resit stated that, 'it's not my favourite subject to study, but I have to have it, so I just go to it, get on with it and go home.' His response concerning mathematics was similar: 'Well it's just one of those things that I need it, that's it … go home, that's it.'

He said that he had attended English and mathematics lessons up until the exams following which his attendance had drastically dropped off. He reported that he did not really work on either of them outside of lessons. In English he felt enabled by extra support he had received at school, as a result of English being his second language, and at college by the useful explanations provided by tutors, the resources and the opportunities to practice skills. He felt enabled by a patient and helpful tutor in mathematics.

5.3.2 Students' perceptions of the relevance and value of English and mathematics

How students perceive the relevance, and value of, English and mathematics GCSEs can be expected to influence engagement with these subjects and ultimately impact

the results. Whether or not success in these subjects is prioritised in their 'personal projects', in Archerian (2003) terms, along with their perceptions of *enablements* and *constraints* they face in achieving 'good passes', would be expected to influence students' behaviour in terms of attendance and effort, thus shedding some light on agential factors impacting on the results (Research Question 3). A summary of the data on students' perceptions of the relevance of English and mathematics to their lives and careers and their attendance and effort outside of class is presented in Tables 20 and 21.

Table 20 Student beliefs and behaviours in relation to English

Student	Relevance to employment/career				Relevance to life			Retake status	Declared attendance	Study outside of lessons
	Entry requirement	Use skills learnt	Career progression	Not relevant	Generalised statement of relevance	Use skills in daily life	Not relevant			
Faye		X			X			Passed at school	N/A	N/A
Gemma		X				X		Studying at college	Alright	Yes
Rebecca		X				X		Passed at college		Occasionally
Emily						X		Passed at school	N/A	N/A
Marie		X						Passed at school	N/A	N/A
Sophie				X				Studying at college	87%	No
Charlotte				X			X	Studying at college	66%	No
Liam	X	X						Passed at college	100%	No
Noah		X						Passed at college	100%	Yes
Oliver			X					Passed at college	In the 90s	Revision at end of year
Lucas				X			X	Passed at school	N/A	N/A
Daniel							X	Studying at college	93 or 94%	Sometimes – work on past papers
Haydn	X						X	Studying at college	93%	I do enjoy making a bit of poetry.
Matthew				X				Studying at college	99%	Yes – working on past papers
Owen		X						Studying at college	Did not estimate	Not really, no

Table 21 Student beliefs and behaviours in relation to mathematics

Student	Relevance to employment/career				Relevance to life					Retake status	Attendance	Study outside of lessons
	Entry requirement	Use skills	Career progression	Not relevant	Generalised statement	Use skills learnt	Use skills in course	Course entry requirement	Not relevant			
Faye		X						X		Studying at college	96%	Private tutor
Gemma		X							X	Studying at college		Sometimes
Rebecca		X								Studying at college	Really good – don't skive	Not much
Emily				X		X		X		Studying at college	73%	No
Marie	X	X							X	Studying at college	I do attend	I don't revise a lot at home
Sophie		X			X					Studying at college	Around 80s and 90s	No
Charlotte				X	X					Studying at college	70 or 80%	Sometimes
Liam	X	X	X		X					Passed at college	100%	
Noah		X								Passed at college	Pretty much 100%	
Oliver		X			X			X		Passed at school	N/A	N/A
Lucas							X			Passed at college	>90%	Revision before exam
Daniel					X					Studying at college		Maths tutor
Haydn		X			X					Passed at college		No
Matthew		X				X				Passed at school	N/A	N/A
Owen		X								Studying at college	Not sure - dropped drastically	No

As can be seen in Tables 20 and 21, all students stated that they could see some relevance of mathematics to either their career or life in general. In contrast to this, five students stated that they could see no relevance of English to their life or career. This has been identified as Research Finding 4: Mathematics was viewed by more students as relevant to their career or life goals than English.

A more detailed look at the responses given by students concerning the usefulness of English to their lives and careers sheds some potential light on this. A number of students stated that it was the material they were required to study for the GCSE that was irrelevant as opposed to communication skills in general. Sophie (HSC) and Daniel (MV) were both sceptical of the message that they would need the English GCSE for employment. Lucas (EE) also did not think it would be very relevant stating, 'It's, obviously it's good to know how to spell stuff and to write sentences, but it doesn't really help you that much.' Charlotte (HSC) similarly stated acceptance of the needs for some English skills but not necessarily for a 'good pass' at GCSE. Matthew (MV) said that whilst in his head he has the thought that a 'good pass' in GCSE English may give you an advantage over another applicant, he said that he really believed that work experience was more important.

The remaining students said that they believed that English was relevant in some way. However, when questioned, the students made reference to basic communication skills and not the higher-level skills required for a 'good pass. Emily (HSC) stated that the skills learnt would help her in interviews. In terms of English skills which he believed would be useful, Noah (EE) highlighted 'formal kind of emails and letters, erm, what words to use and what words not to use, erm, like, the professionalism of it all, so I guess that, yeah, that's quite helpful.' Rebecca (HSC) and Marie (HSC) similarly highlighted administration tasks connected with their desired careers. Faye (HSC) and Gemma (HSC) focused on the need for clear communication skills. Oliver (EE) did not think he would use English much initially as an electrician on site but that it might help him later in his career if he decided to 'go solo'. Liam was the most convinced of its immediate relevance, currently using it in his part-time job

and having applied for an apprenticeship where it was required. Similarly, Owen (MV) was aware of using English in his current work experience and believed that in the future he would 'use it on a daily basis with paperwork, and talking to people, and talking to customers and things I really need.'

Some of the students saw the value of the qualification as providing a passport to something else, for example employment. However, the students who stated that it would be relevant did not differ greatly from the students who stated that they did not think that the GCSE was very, or imminently, relevant in the skills they thought they would go on to use. It was not clear that the skills they were identifying were those required to achieve a 'good pass' at GCSE.

None of the students made reference to the higher-level skills within the GCSE syllabus relating to, for example, 'critical reading and comprehension' and no students reported a recognition of the value of studying 'high-quality, challenging texts from the 19th, 20th and 21st centuries' from a range of genres which is central to the reformed GCSE (DfE, 2013, p.4). These students appear to have accepted, at least on a superficial level, the message relating to English skills being required for employment and for basic communication but were not able to articulate the relevance of the level 2 skills required for a 'good pass' at GCSE. Given elements of the GCSE subject content including 'identifying bias and misuse of evidence, including distinguishing between statements that are supported by evidence and those that are not; reflecting critically and evaluatively on text' GCSE English could be seen as providing useful skills given concerns surrounding the dangers of 'post-truth politics' (Suiter, 2016, p.25).

Another potential pattern visible in Table 20 is that those who were still studying for their English GCSE appeared more likely to view English as not relevant than those who had passed it either at school or college. It is not possible to ascertain from the data whether viewing it as important had led to greater effort in achieving it early on or whether a sense of having achieved it led students to value it compared to those who had not yet achieved it tending to downplay its significance.

All the Health and Social Care students felt that mathematical skills were relevant to their lives in some way but none of them highlighted any examples where they felt they may use the skills required to achieve a 'good pass' at GCSE, at best seeing the 'good pass' as a passport to further education and training. Emily felt it would not be relevant to her career whilst recognising its usefulness for life in general. Marie perceived its usefulness primarily as an entry qualification for social work. Charlotte accepted the need for some mathematical skills whilst suggesting that a 'good pass' at GCSE may not be required. The other students all stated that it would be relevant for their career citing that they would need it for medication and telling the time (Faye), measurements and medication (Gemma), weighing (Rebecca), and medication (Sophie). As with English, it is not clear that the skills students identified they would use are those they would need to achieve a 'good pass' at GCSE with some students being able to articulate this. Marie argued:

> I understand like everyone needs like basic maths, like if you work in a shop, like you need to know like your basics, but some of the things like square root of this and that and I'm, like, you don't really need that for everyday life. (Marie)

All of the Engineering students believed that mathematics would be relevant to them, with Haydn (MV) perhaps being the most emphatic, stating that, 'it's needed in literally every form of life.' The Level 3 Electrical Engineering students referred to potentially using more complex mathematics in their careers than the health and social care students had. For example, Liam referred explicitly to the usefulness of the skills developed for the higher paper in GCSE mathematics, Oliver mentioned using Pythagoras and carrying out calculations in circuit diagrams, Noah mentioned using calculations referencing what he had learnt in physics and science as well as in mathematics and Lucas referred to having used maths in a recent electrical examination. The Level 1 Motor Vehicle students who were still studying for their GCSE were less able to identify how they would use the skills necessary to achieve a 'good pass', with Owen referring to calculating costs and logging hours, Matthew referring to measurements of the amount of oil required for a particular engine and

Haydn mentioning needing to know what socket and ratchet sizes were required. As with the health and social care students, therefore, whilst students may recognise the importance of having basic mathematical skills, they may not be convinced of the need to develop the skills required to achieve a 'good pass'. In the case of engineering students, it appears that working towards a higher level qualification provides students with more of an appreciation of these skills. It is worthy of note that Liam (EE) and Oliver (EE), as well as viewing mathematical skills as relevant for their career, made reference to having needed certain grades in order to gain entry onto their college courses. This leads us to Research Finding 5: When identifying English and mathematics skills they were likely to use in their lives students tended to identify lower level skills with only Level 3 Electrical Engineering students potentially identifying mathematical skills associated with 'good passes' at GCSE.

5.3.3 Messages influencing students' beliefs concerning English and mathematics

Cultural forces operate through narratives that exist in society. Culture does not determine behaviour because the impact of culture on the behaviour of agents is mediated via the *internal conversation* (Archer, 2003). Individuals can accept or reject messages and, even if they accept them, can decide whether or not to behave in accordance with the expectations contained within them following an evaluation of the costs and benefits of doing so. Students' responses to the dominant messages about the need to achieve 'good passes' in GCSE English and mathematics may, therefore, shed some light on the operation and impact of cultural forces (Research Question 3). The Health and Social Care students were aware of messages surrounding the English GCSE from a variety of sources with Gemma most aware of the messages from her family friends who were all encouraging her to persevere, Rebecca referring to general messages about the importance of English skills for work and Marie referring to government emphasis on GCSE English and mathematics. As discussed above, student assessment of the veracity of these messages varied. The messages about English promoted by the College are discussed in the analysis of the interviews with the academic staff in Chapter 6.

Three of the Health and Social Care students were able to articulate messages that had been important in shaping their attitudes towards GCSE mathematics. Gemma had been convinced of the value of it for a career as a paramedic by the College and the army cadets. Rebecca had received a message from her family that mathematics is difficult stating that her family 'struggle with maths, especially my mum' and that only her dad really knew how to do mathematics 'but, it's different from when he did it so it's a lot harder'. The message that mathematics is 'hard' was referred to by lecturers (see Chapter 6). Marie was aware of the government emphasis on the importance of achieving GCSE 'good passes' in English and mathematics. It is clear students were aware of dominant messages about these subjects from a number of sources and different students emphasised different messages. It is also worth noting that hearing messages about the importance of these subjects, which was viewed positively by lecturers, did not necessarily translate into positive attitudes towards the subjects (see Chapter 6). Marie perceived the governmental messages as creating pressure and appeared to be responding with a fatalistic view that despite achieving good grades in other subjects you may be forced to start at the bottom of the career ladder and work your way up if you do not achieve 'good passes' in mathematics and English despite trying your best.

Not all the Engineering students were able to clearly identify messages that had been important in shaping their views on the English and mathematics GCSEs. The message that 'good passes' in these subjects were required for progression was referred to by three students. Liam and Oliver repeated the message that they needed them as entry qualifications for courses and Matthew had been rejected from a job based on not having a high enough grade in his English. Haydn said that peers had concurred with his assessment of the English GCSE as not being worthwhile. Lucas mentioned that his parents had promoted the value of succeeding in education generally.

5.3.4 Attitudes towards the GCSE English and mathematics resits

Three of the Level 3 Health and Social Care students and one of the Engineering students had achieved a grade C/4 or above in their GCSE English at school. Of the students who had studied English at the College, Liam (EE), who had sat the exam for

the first time at college and passed, had reported enjoying it, whilst Matthew (MV) appeared to be valuing the skills he was developing and noted that studying English was helping his academic progress generally. Rebecca (HSC) who had passed at college was annoyed at having had to do it but pleased she had subsequently passed. Daniel (MV) reported having been resigned to continuing to study English in his first year at college but felt that students should be given a choice in subsequent years. Oliver (EE) and Sophie (HSC) expressed a resigned attitude with Oliver (EE) additionally stating that initially failing it was a 'sore subject' and Sophie also expressing frustration. Gemma (HSC) stated that she hated it and Charlotte (HSC) that she found it really hard.

In terms of the mathematics resit, Rebecca (HSC) and Charlotte (HSC) expressed feeling 'very' and 'really' annoyed respectively with Rebecca nevertheless stating that 'it needs to be done' in order to achieve career goals. Faye (HSC) and Marie (HSC) expressed frustration. Noah (EE) reported frustration with the resit because he had not been expecting to fail it when at school. Frustration for him, therefore, appears explicitly linked to previous failure as opposed to the compulsory nature of the retake. Emily (HSC) and Sophie (HSC) appeared resigned with Sophie stating, 'I suppose it has got to be done', and Emily saying she were not the biggest fan of the subject but that she would need to achieve it to go to university. Lucas (EE) stated that, 'I was fine with it because I didn't think I was going to pass it at GCSE.' Gemma (HSC) felt that it was alright and said that she quite liked mathematics. Liam (EE) who sat the examination for the first time reported positively on the experience.

5.3.5 Students' perceptions of *enablements* and *constraints* in relation to achieving 'good passes' in English and mathematics GCSEs

A summary of the *enablements* and *constraints* identified by students in relation to English and mathematics is provided in Table 22 and Table 23 respectively. It can be seen from these tables that all students were able to identify at least one *enablement* or *constraint* they perceived in studying either English or mathematics. Some students gave more nuanced answers than others with some (Gemma, HSC; Rebecca, HSC; Charlotte, HSC; and Matthew, MV), for example, identifying elements of

teaching within the College that enabled them and elements that constrained them. It is worthy of note that in some instances, students' perceptions of the *enablements* and *constraints* they faced differed from lecturers' perceptions and this shall be explored more fully in Chapters 6 and 7.

Table 22 Students' perceived *enablements* and *constraints* in relation to English

Student	*Enablements*						*Constraints*							
	Additional support	Family support	Natural ability	Peer support	School experience	Teaching in college	Vocational course demands	Dislike/fear of exams	ESOL	Health/ mental health	Lack of interest	Other interests	School experience	Teaching in college
Faye	X													
Gemma	X	X		X		X		X						X
Rebecca		X				X	X			X			X	X
Emily					X									
Marie					X						X		X	
Sophie	X	X				X							X	
Charlotte	X					X	X							X
Liam		X				X								
Noah				X		X		X		X		X		
Oliver					X								X	X
Lucas			X											
Daniel														
Haydn	X							X		X				
Matthew	X	X		X		X				X			X	X
Owen	X					X			X					

Table 23 Students' perceived *enablements* and *constraints* in relation to mathematics

Student	*Enablements*					*Constraints*										
	Satisfaction/ enjoyment	Family support	Teaching in college	Additional support	Peer support	Other coursework	Teaching in college	Fear/dislike of exams	School experience	Health/ mental health	Lack of family support	Size of curriculum	Relationship difficulties	Lack of enjoyment	Employment	Other interests
Faye	X	X	X			X	X									
Gemma		X	X				X	X								
Rebecca			X			X	X	X	X	X	X	X				
Emily			X			X	X	X					X	X		
Marie	X		X			X	X				X	X			X	
Sophie		X	X	X					X							
Charlotte			X													
Liam		X	X		X		X									
Noah			X		X											X
Oliver									X							
Lucas		X	X	X					X							
Daniel		X														
Haydn				X			X									
Matthew				X												
Owen			X													

It can be seen from Tables 22 and 23 that support involving other people, in addition to that offered by lecturers, was mentioned by a significant number of the student participants. When referring to English, seven students mentioned additional support, five mentioned family support and three mentioned peer support. Similarly with regard to mathematics, six students mentioned family support, four students mentioned additional support and two mentioned peer support.

Some students described support from their families in terms of general encouragement. Gemma (HSC) reported that her parents and friends encouraged her

to ‘keep doing it’ in relation to English, Sophie (HSC) described being ‘pushed’ by friends and family in mathematics, Matthew (MV) described his mum as being ‘always on at me’ concerning his English, Lucas (EE) described his parents as more generally making sure ‘that education is important’, and Liam (EE) described his parents as supportive. As well as general encouragement, students also identified more direct help from people around them as being supportive. Faye (HSC) said that her dad helped her with her mathematics, Gemma (HSC) reported that her cousin was able to help her with mathematics, and Liam (EE) described how his mum had taught him. Some families provided support through employing private tutors. Faye (HSC) reported the benefit of the tutor being in terms of helping her to stay focused as opposed to supporting her with content arguing that the tutor was beneficial because ‘when I’m at home I’m the type of person who can’t tend to revise for long, especially if I’m on my own…’.

Peer relationships were also highlighted by students as having a significant impact. In English, Gemma (HSC) described having been encouraged by her friends, Matthew (MV) described being motivated by his peers stating that ‘they’re all bubbly, joyful and like we’re going to do well’, and Noah (EE) described having been supported in his studies by a girlfriend whilst at school. In mathematics, Liam (EE) talked positively of having had a couple of friends in his group who were supportive, and Noah felt that he had been helped by not having too many distractions because ‘we’re all there and we all wanted to pass this subject.’ In contrast, one student, Emily (HSC), described a negative impact of peer relationships, having had to change mathematics group due to difficulties with her peer group. The perceived importance of additional support from other people as a significant enablement has been identified as Research Finding 6: In terms of *enablements* relating to both English and mathematics, support from other people in the form of family, peers or personal tutors/classroom support featured prominently in the student interviews.

In addition to being personally supported, or not, by peers, the students interviewed were also impacted through the behaviour of their peers in the classroom. A negative impact of peer behaviour identified in the student interviews was disruptive

behaviour in class which contributed to students' evaluations of school experience and teaching in college as constraining. Several students referred to being disturbed by the behaviour of others. Oliver (EE), Matthew (MV), Sophie (HSC), Lucas (EE), Rebecca (HSC), Emily (HSC) and Liam (EE) all reported having been disturbed by the behaviour of others at school or college. Sophie, Rebecca and Lucas linked disruptive behaviour to the set they were in, with Sophie and Rebecca stating that they were in lower sets and Sophie explaining:

> I've always sort of been in the lower sets so I feel like most of the time, it's from like the children that don't really want to be there and that don't really want to achieve much so it sort of makes it hard for like the teacher to teach you and for you to learn things when everyone's sort of just like chatting and don't really want to be there. (Sophie)

Related to the teaching in college, disrupted relationships resulting from changes in lecturer were also highlighted as constraining by three students. Rebecca (HSC) reported having three different lecturers for English in the space of a year and Charlotte (HSC) reported having 'different teachers throughout' following the departure of one lecturer whom she had found particularly helpful. Marie (HSC) reported having three or four different lecturers for mathematics in her first year. She went on to say that stability of lecturer in the following year 'helped, because you build that relationship that he kind of knows where you need to work on.' The impact of changes in lecturer was also raised by academic staff.

On a more positive note, Matthew (MV) felt that being in an English group with his vocational peers had supported his learning as he described himself as 'self-conscious and shy' and found it easier to be in a group with people he already knew. Rebecca (HSC) who had experienced being in a mathematics group with students she did not know prior to being in a group with her vocational peers similarly reported that she found it better because:

> if you go into a group with people that you do know, into a maths group that are the same class it's not as bad because you already know them so you're

> not there thinking oh my god everyone's judging me and everything… (Rebecca)

Rebecca also reported that whereas she had been impacted by negative behaviour in school, classroom behaviour was better at college and Emily (HSC) reported that she valued the group she was currently in because 'everyone's quiet'. Sophie (HSC) felt that being in a small group helped them to work positively together, as did Noah (EE).

Another finding that emerged from the coding detailed in Tables 22 and 23 was that whilst several *constraints* identified by students related to both English and mathematics, some *constraints* were identified as relating to mathematics or English only with a greater number of *constraints* being identified in relation to mathematics. Other coursework, dislike/fear of exams, health/mental health issues, lack of interest or enjoyment, other interests, school experience and teaching in college were mentioned regarding both subjects. Whilst one might expect students to highlight ESOL as a barrier to success in English, interestingly some mathematics lecturers highlighted literacy levels needed to access mathematics exams as a barrier. This will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 6. In terms of *constraints* identified by students as impacting on mathematics only, the following were identified: lack of family support, size of curriculum, relationship difficulties and employment. Some of the differences can potentially be explained by looking at the situations of the students who highlighted them, when they experienced them and where they were with their mathematics and English GCSEs. For example, relationship difficulties at college were highlighted as a *constraint* in terms of mathematics by Emily (HSC) but she had passed her English whilst at school. Similarly, employment was mentioned as a *constraint* in terms of mathematics by Marie (HSC) who had passed her English whilst at school and may not have been working at that time. That the size of the mathematics curriculum, but not the English curriculum, was mentioned is interesting given that it was identified as a *constraint* by three mathematics lecturers and no English lecturers (see Chapter 6). Two mathematics lecturers and only one English lecturer identified lack of family support as a *constraint* for students (see Chapter 6). To conclude, Research Finding 7 has been formulated as follows: Students identified some

different *constraints* in relation to mathematics and English. Students identified more *constraints* impacting on mathematics. Two of the unique *constraints*, size of the curriculum and lack of family support, were also only highlighted, or given greater prominence by, mathematics lecturers. Similarities and differences between the data supplied by students and the perceptions of the lecturers and academic managers regarding the *enablements* and *constraints* faced by students are further explored in Chapter 6.

A further finding visible in Tables 22 and 23 is that students in the sample did not view the teaching they had received as either wholly positive or wholly negative with several students being able to identify positive and negative aspects of their experiences. Some examples are provided below in Section 5.3.6 and student views of what they found helpful and not helpful are further analysed in Chapter 6, along with the views of academic staff.

5.3.6 Behaviour (attendance and effort) in relation to the GCSE English and mathematics resits

Respecting *internal conversations* and resultant agential choices as having causal powers, one would expect the perceived value of the subject in a student's *modus vivendi* to play some part in determining behaviour in terms of attendance and effort (Archer, 2000) with the negative and resigned feelings to the English resits highlighted above having potentially negative impacts on attendance and behaviour in English lessons. Charlotte (HSC), who felt she had been thrown in the deep end without much help, reported lower attendance in English (estimated at 67%) than in her vocational lessons (estimated at 87%) and also reported not working on her English outside of sessions. Whilst Sophie (HSC) estimated her attendance at English as being higher (87%), she too reported that she did not spend much time working on it outside of college. Gemma (HSC) rated her attendance as 'alright' and reported that she did work on her English outside of class stating that, 'I work on, like, I work more on like a different bit every time I fail, like, the exam because I don't, they don't tell you what part you've got, like least marks on, so…'

Despite both expressing frustration with repeated failure, the behavioural responses of Gemma (HSC) and Sophie (HSC) regarding effort outside the classroom were differentiated. Sophie's scepticism about the value of the English GCSE coupled with her experiences of failure appeared to have led to a passive attitude to achieving the GCSE demonstrated by limited effort and expressed in her statement that, 'I do just want it, like, to have it now.' While Gemma used more emotive language about the resit, stating that she hated it, she had expressed a recognition of the value of possessing English skills and, as above, reported making some efforts outside of class to develop her skills and improve her exam performance. This provides some evidence to support the concept of values and beliefs being causally efficacious in the sense of a belief about the value and importance of a qualification impacting on the effort put into achieving it.

As well as expecting student behaviour to be influenced by their valuations of the English resits and their perceived importance of achieving them as part of their *modus* vivendi, it may also be affected by their perceptions of related *enablements* and *constraints* and potential resultant strategies (Archer, 2000). Of the three Level 3 Health and Care students who achieved a grade C/4 or above in their English GCSE at school, Faye and Emily did not identify any barriers they had faced. In terms of *enablements*, Faye stated that she had been enabled by one-to-one support and extended English and Emily by a strict teacher who maintained good classroom behaviour. Marie stated that she had found the resources and revision guides provided by the school helpful but that she had been hindered by problems with friendship groups, finding the subject boring and not being very studious. This response by Marie highlights the importance of bearing in mind context when considering what works for whom in what circumstances (Pawson and Tilley, 1997). The impact of any specific teaching interventions may be 'blocked' by the operation of other causal mechanisms, in this instance relating to the properties of negative social relations. Emily and Sophie also mentioned being negatively influenced by peers.

Of the three Health and Social Care students still studying English at the College, Gemma believed English was relevant to her, rated her attendance as 'alright' and reported doing some work on her English outside of college. She felt that she had been enabled by additional support at school and had investigated getting some additional support at college which was being set up by a tutor. She identified assessment by examination as a *constraint* stating that, 'I get it when I'm in class and then once I'm in front of an exam, it just like goes'. She appeared, therefore, to be actively seeking support to overcome perceived barriers. Sophie who rated her attendance at English lessons at 87%, but who reported not working on her English outside of college, said she found lessons 'set out and, like, productive'. She did not identify any *constraints* to studying English outside of college, having only identified disruptive behaviour in the lower sets in which she had been placed at school as a barrier, saying that her brother would be able to help if needed. She was, however, the student who had been most sceptical about the value of the GCSE to employment. Charlotte felt that English was relevant, but queried the necessity of a 'good pass' and reported 67% attendance as well as not working on her English outside of college. She appeared disillusioned with her current teacher saying, 'he sets you work and you have to, like, get on with it.' She compared him unfavourably with a tutor the previous year who had provided constant feedback and who had been replaced with a number of teachers when she left. Charlotte's effort appears, therefore, to be related more closely to the perceived barriers she was facing than to her perception of the importance of developing her English skills.

In English, the three Level 3 Electrical Engineering students who had achieved a 'good pass' whilst at college estimated their attendance as relatively high. They all stated that they believed that English was relevant to them with Liam identifying its usefulness both in providing an entry qualification into employment and providing useful skills and Noah and Oliver believing that they would need the skills learnt at some stage in their careers. Liam stated that his attendance had been 100%, Noah could not remember having missed a lesson and Oliver estimated his attendance as being 'in the 90s definitely'. As well as reporting 'perfect' attendance, Noah reported having put in the most effort outside of college saying that he worked through past

papers. This effort was possibly supported by his feeling enabled by the guidance he received stating that, 'they emphasised the right parts to revise and where to, where you could go right and where you could go wrong.' Regarding *constraints*, Noah mentioned commitments to sports clubs and reported that he had struggled to concentrate in primary school but had been enabled by being given a separate room which enabled him to focus. Liam reported 100% attendance but said that he did not really work on his English outside of college. His lack of effort outside the class may seem strange given his belief in the relevance of English and his perfect attendance record until one looks at the broader picture. He stated that he felt he already had the English skills required to achieve a 'good pass' when he started college, with the exception of setting out letters. He also said he found that the lessons, which he enjoyed, covered any gaps which was ultimately borne out by his achievement in the examination. He had not identified any *constraints* he had faced. Oliver, who was the least convinced of the relevance of English, reported the lowest attendance, estimating it as 'being in the 90s definitely', and did report revising but only near the end of the year. He did not identify any *constraints* other than disruptive behaviour in class. He did identify after-school revision sessions as an *enablement*, however, and perhaps missed this structure in college.

Three Motor Vehicle students were still studying English GCSE at college. Matthew, who had a seemingly instrumental view of the GCSE as a passport to a job, reported his attendance as 100% up until the examination he had sat the previous week and reported working on past papers at home. He reported having received *enablements* in the form of one to one support, both at school and college, and support from his parents which appear to have enabled him to overcome barriers he identified in the form of a specific learning difficulty, large classes and behavioural disruption. Support in the form of confidence boosting appears to have been significant for Matthew as he reported that one to one helpers used to prompt him with, 'none of this I can't malarkey'. He also reported that studying English with students he already knew from his vocational course helped him because of his shyness and self-consciousness. This is another instance of a student identifying relationships and social support as significant. Owen who had been most emphatic about the need for English skills was

unable to estimate his attendance, reporting that it had dropped recently and that he did not work on his English outside of college. It was not clear why his attendance had dropped. He did not identify any current *constraints*, stating that in the past he had found English semi-difficult because he had moved to the UK from abroad but reported that he had received additional support and felt that he had 'picked it up'. It may be that he was feeling confident about the recent exams as he said he had found the input of teachers at college helpful and the resources better and he reported having passed his mock exam. Daniel who did not really think he needed the English GCSE reported his attendance as being 93% and also reported working on past papers outside of college. He did not identify any *enablements* or *constraints*.

The above paints a picture consistent with the conceptual framework of individuals making decisions on whether or not to engage with a particular course of action depending on a number of factors including judgements of its value and perceptions of *enablements* and *constraints*. Sophie (HSC) attributed limited value to the English GCSE and whilst attending lessons was not engaging with the subject outside of lessons despite not highlighting *constraints* to this. In contrast, Gemma (HSC) who believed that English was important was seeking to take advantage of *enablements* in the form additional support despite feeling constrained by her struggle with exams. Matthew (MV) who also viewed English as relevant, largely in his case as a 'passport' to employment, and recognised *enablements* he had benefitted from reported good engagement. Alternatively, Charlotte (HSC) appeared to be responding to perceived *constraints*, in this case perceived poor teaching, through disengagement in the form of low attendance and non-engagement outside of college.

The picture regarding mathematics is an equally complex one with a variety of mechanisms in play which lead to enabling and constraining forces impacting on individuals' projects. Amongst the Health and Social Care students, Faye rated her attendance the highest at 96%, giving a holiday as an explanation for missed sessions, and reported that she did work on her mathematics outside of college. This is perhaps unsurprising given that Faye rated mathematics as being highly relevant, had had this belief ratified by professionals in the sphere she wanted to enter, felt supported with

her mathematics at home by a private tutor and expressed a general sense of satisfaction from studying it. Rebecca, who believed mathematics to be relevant but had also received the message that it is hard, also stated that her attendance was very good because she did not want to miss out but reported not working on it outside of college due to the absence of anyone at home to help her. Whilst currently feeling supported at college, the absence of help outside of college was viewed by this student as a significant *constraint* reminding us of the importance of considering context and the fact that individuals face differential *enablements* and *constraints* resulting from their positioning as agents (Archer, 2003). Marie stated that she did attend lessons but that she did not work on her mathematics outside of college citing the pressures of work, college and placement as *constraints*. Whilst recognising the requirement to achieve a 'good pass' in order to qualify as a social worker, she recognised that she was prioritising other areas and that this was detrimental stating that, 'I think at home, is the thing I need to work on is being able to go on, because I don't really do a lot of revision outside of college.' Marie, then, appeared to be taking more ownership of her situation although it remains to be answered whether there were sources of support that Rebecca could access. Gemma did not estimate her attendance at mathematics lessons but, in contrast to Rebecca, said that she did work on her mathematics outside of college because she had support from a cousin who was studying mathematics at university and wanted to become a teacher.

Of the remaining three Health and Social Care students who all estimated their attendance below the college target of 95%, Sophie rated her attendance at mathematics lessons highest at 80-90%, with Charlotte rating hers at 70-80% and Emily stating that hers was 73%. Sophie stated that she did not work on her mathematics out of college despite not identifying any *constraints*, only mentioning disruptive behaviour in the class as a barrier, saying that she felt supported her family and that her brother would be able to help if she asked. This may be the result of her apparently passive attitude represented in her statement that, 'I wish I did just have it' and her stated preference for listening to the teacher rather than working through problems. Charlotte despite relatively low attendance worked on MathsWatch outside college and stated that the tutor supported her with worksheets or

homework to complete outside of lessons because he knew that she did not like working with the whole class. She valued this individualised support. Emily explained her low attendance at mathematics, as at English, with reference to issues with her friendship group. It was clear, however, that mathematics was not a priority for her as could be expected given her belief that it was not relevant for her. She said that she had not started working on her mathematics out of college yet as she had been prioritising revising for her health and social care exams up to that point of the year. She had given not revising, as a result of prioritising revising for her English, as the reason for her not achieving a 'good pass' at mathematics at school and explained this in terms of just not enjoying it. She looked to others to motivate her saying that she 'bounced off other people's energy' and that 'if they're working hard, it gives me the motivation to work hard too'.

All four Level 3 Electrical Engineering students had previously achieved a 'good pass' in GCSE mathematics whilst at college. As outlined above, Liam believed that achieving a 'good pass' in mathematics was important and had enjoyed studying for it at college. He had felt enabled by parental, tutor and peer support and the homework he had been set. Perhaps unsurprisingly this translated into 100% attendance and constant preparation outside of lessons. Noah also believed that mathematics would be important for his career and was frustrated that he had failed it at school. He had felt enabled by small groups and individualised support at college. Interestingly, he felt enabled by not being with his vocational peers in his mathematics lessons as he felt this reduced distractions. He cited outside commitments as being a barrier to studying outside of lessons but also stated that his attendance at lessons was 'pretty much 100%'. Oliver was able to detail how he would use elements of the GCSE mathematics curriculum in his future career and had been aware that he needed to get a 'good pass' in the subject to progress onto the Level 3 course. He did not identify any *enablements* and the only *constraints* he mentioned were 'minor setbacks' in the form of classroom distractions. Lucas, who again believed mathematics was important, reported having been enabled by extra classes at school, help from older siblings and revision resources provided by college but constrained by students messing about and rated his attendance at over 90% and

reported starting revision 12 weeks before the exam. All of these students reported relatively positive attitudes to mathematics which were reflected in relatively high attendance and effort and in positive examination results.

Of the Level 1 Motor Vehicle students who had studied, or were studying, GCSE mathematics at college, Haydn had achieved a 'good pass' and Daniel and Owen were continuing to study it. Haydn stated that maths 'is very important' and reported having enjoyed studying it stating, 'I loved it'. He had received help in lessons but reported not working on it outside of lessons because he could not be bothered. This may have been a result of his confidence that he would pass because he stressed that he had passed it without revision. Daniel who felt that mathematics was relevant to his course and said that continuing to study it was 'alright' reported having been enabled by a personal tutor and did not identify any *constraints*. He reported spending time on mathematics outside of class because of receiving personal tuition. It was not clear whether he would have done so in the absence of this *enablement*. Owen, who believed he would need mathematics, gave the most negative response regarding the resit stating, 'Well it's just one of those things that I need it, that's it… go home, that's it.' He did report, however, that his current tutor was patient and would help 'no matter how many times I ask'. He reported relatively high attendance saying, 'these last couple of weeks I haven't been to it… Well I missed a couple of weeks before as well.' Like Haydn he reported not really working on it out of lessons but this was possibly linked to his more passive, resigned position to the resit as opposed to confidence in his ability. Again, these responses of students indicate that two individuals demonstrating similar behaviours may have different reasons for these behaviours, Haydn and Owen having different reasons for not working on their mathematics outside of class for example. In addition, structural *enablements* or *constraints* may have a significant influence, mediated via students' *internal conversations*, on behaviour. Daniel and Owen both viewed maths as important and were both fairly unenthusiastic about the resit but Daniel worked on his mathematics outside of sessions whereas Owen did not with this difference possibly being explained by the support of a personal tutor.

There is clearly a mixed picture with students varying in the degree to which they were engaging with the mathematics GCSE resit. Emily (HSC) who had stated that she did not feel that mathematics was relevant to her appeared the most disengaged in terms of attendance and effort. Liam (EE) at the other extreme believed it was relevant, felt enabled by several factors and cited 100% attendance and 'constant preparation' outside of lessons. For other students, the patterns of engagement were varied and often clearly linked to perceived *enablements* and *constraints*. Charlotte struggled in a classroom environment but took advantage of individualised support which enabled her to work on her mathematics outside college. Rebecca, in contrast, did not want to miss lessons which she valued, but felt unable to work on her mathematics outside college due to the absence of anyone to help her at home. Owen (MV) stated that mathematics was important, had relatively high attendance and valued the help of his tutor but had a fairly negative attitude towards the resit and reported not really engaging in study outside of lessons.

5.3.7 Summary of findings from student interviews

The key findings from the student interviews are as follows:

Research Finding 4: Mathematics was viewed by more students as relevant to their career or life goals than English.

Research Finding 5: When identifying English and mathematics skills they were likely to use in their lives, students tended to identify lower level skills with only Level 3 Electrical Engineering students potentially identifying mathematical skills associated with 'good passes' at GCSE.

Research Finding 6: In terms of *enablements* in relation to both English and mathematics, support from other people in the form of family, peers or personal tutors/classroom support featured prominently in the student interviews.

Research Finding 7: Students identified some different *constraints* in relation to mathematics and English. Students identified more *constraints* impacting on mathematics. Two of the unique *constraints*, size of the curriculum and lack of family

support, were also only highlighted, or given greater prominence by, mathematics lecturers.

The interview analysis identified multiple factors (structural and cultural entities) which featured in students' *internal conversations,* for example their views about the relevance of mathematics and English to their career and life goals and their perceptions of the *enablements* and *constraints* they faced in developing their English and mathematics skills. An analysis of the qualitative data in Section 5.3 provides evidence of an interplay between numerous mechanisms mediated by students' *internal conversations*. A complex picture emerges of student behaviour in terms of, for example, attendance and engagement in the GCSEs being shaped by *internal conversations* which include considerations of life and career goals, beliefs about the relevance and importance of the GCSEs and individual assessments and responses to perceived *enablements* and *constraints.*

5.4 Conclusion

The analysis in this chapter has begun to provide preliminary answers to the research questions. The analysis of the quantitative data, whilst showing a pattern in the data indicative of a relationship between attendance and achievement, did not reveal the patterning of outcomes usually found along lines of ethnicity, gender, disability, and disadvantage. This lack of patterning may be due to the overall high rate of failure to achieve a 'good' pass irrespective of demographic factors. Even if clear patterns were evident, the conceptual framework being employed would still emphasise the need to understand what mechanisms lay behind the patterning, regarding statistical associations as interesting but not adequate in terms of providing causal explanations. The analysis of the student interview data has begun to shed light on structural entities (demographic and institutional factors) and cultural entities (societal messages about the resits) potentially impacting on student outcomes via students' recognition of them and responses to them. Examples have been highlighted of students responding in particular, and individual, ways to both messages they have received and *enablements* and *constraints* of which they are aware. As previously noted, however, individuals do not make history in

circumstances of their own choosing and there may be factors in operation of which they are unaware (Archer, 2000). The analysis of the data from the interviews with the lecturers in Chapter 6 is used to shed further light on the impact of structural and cultural factors on outcomes from their perspectives. Lecturers' perspectives on how students respond to and negotiate these factors are also analysed. The findings from the quantitative data and from the interviews with the students and the academic staff are drawn together to provide a holistic view in Chapter 7.

Chapter 6. Analysis of Interviews with Academic Staff: The beliefs, values, strategies and perceptions of staff participants and their correspondence with students' stated experiences, values, beliefs and behaviours

6.1 Introduction

This chapter presents an analysis of the interviews with academic staff. Ten members of academic staff within the College were interviewed and the sample included three academic managers and seven lecturers in English or mathematics (see Table 24). As academic staff are key actors within the College, they form and create the College 'structure' and 'culture' which enables and constrains students in particular ways. How they deliver the curriculum, manage the classroom, and relate to students shapes students' experiences. Student perceptions of this 'structure' and responses and reactions to it were explored in Chapter 5. It is necessary to remember, however, that the stratified view of reality presented by critical realism draws attention to the fact that entities at different strata have emergent powers and properties not reducible to entities at the lower levels (Sayer, 2010). As discussed in Chapter 4, lecturers operate simultaneously within a college, local, national and international environment. Like students they are situated agents and operate within institutional, policy and legal structures the powers of which they mediate via their *internal conversations*. The interviews with academic staff were designed to elicit data on their perceptions of the impact of government policy on the College, themselves and students, the *enablements* and *constraints* faced by students (Research Question 2) and the structural, cultural and agential factors impacting on GCSE English and mathematics outcomes (Research Question 3).

The interview schedule (see Appendix 1) explored lecturers' perceptions of government policy and its impact on the College, teaching and students. Lecturers are in a unique position to be able to reflect on the *enablements* and *constraints* they are aware of and how they respond to these (via *internal* conversations) and thereby shape students' learning experiences. Academic managers are also able to reflect on how they respond to broader policies and priorities and seek to shape the

environment in which lecturers teach and students learn. As well as creating the structural environment encountered by students, lecturers and academic managers also create a cultural environment and the interviews explored the messages promoted within the College by lecturers and academic managers concerning English and mathematics GCSEs. In addition, as reflective practitioners, lecturers will formulate opinions on how best to teach and 'what works well for whom in what circumstances' and shape their practice accordingly. The thematic analysis of interviews with academic staff presented in this chapter seeks to explore these issues as well as lecturers' perceptions of the *constraints* and *enablements* faced by students (Research Question 2). Where relevant, data from the student interviews are introduced into the discussion to highlight areas of divergence and convergence and explore possible reasons for these.

6.2 Academic staff roles

As can be seen in Table 24 the academic staff interviewed included three academic managers (AM), three English lecturers (EL) and four mathematics lecturers (ML).

Table 24 Academic staff roles

Pseudonym	**Role within the College**
Stuart (Interview 1)	Academic manager (AM)
Michael (Interview 2)	Mathematics lecturer (ML)
Sandra (Interview 3)	English lecturer (EL)
Lucy (Interview 4)	English lecturer
Philip (Interview 5)	Mathematics lecturer
Charlotte (Interview 6)	Mathematics lecturer
Yvette (Interview 7)	English lecturer
Helen (Interview 8)	Academic manager
Belinda (Interview 9)	Mathematics Lecturer
Aileen (Interview 10)	Academic manager

6.2 Impact of the policy framework

As discussed in Chapter 3, the policy environment in which further education lecturers operate has been described as being subject to a 'tsunami of change' (Green, 2012, p.58). Key features of the environment identified by the participants included managerialism and an emphasis on 'technicist' solutions. When questioned

on their views of current and previous government policy, it was clear that lecturers and academic managers were, to differing degrees, aware of these elements of the policy environment (see Appendix 1 for a copy of the interview schedule). For example, six of the participants referred to the current policy as lacking flexibility and limiting professional judgement, features related to managerialism (Shain and Gleeson, 1999). In terms of providing evidence that *internal conversations* mediate the impact of cultural and structural forces, some of the academic staff were able to outline their responses to policy and institutional imperatives and to verbalise their thought processes. Furthermore, it was clear in some cases that their responses were indeed coloured by their values and beliefs. For example, Michael (ML) was clear that he avoided a didactic approach because of his dislike of 'pedantic' teaching. The assumption that values shape responses to structural and cultural forces is aligned with Archer's (2000) concept of individuals being motivated by a *modus vivendi* which influences their responses to external forces. Overall, more negative references (38 in total) were made about the government policy on GCSE English and maths within study programmes than positive references (12 in total, see Table 25).

Table 25 Staff views of GCSE English and mathematics policy

Negative references		Positive references	
Issue	No. of staff (No. of references)	Issue	No. of staff (No. of references)
Lack of flexibility/limiting professional judgement	6 (11)	All achieve basic standard	3 (3)
Demoralisation of students	5 (5)	GCSE is a valued qualification	2 (2)
Less about the student	3 (3)	Increased employability	2 (2)
Devaluation of functional skills	2 (2)	Second chance	2 (2)
Feels like school	2 (2)	Aids social mobility	1 (1)
Irrelevant curriculum	2 (2)	Good for the economy	1 (1)
Removing student choice	2 (2)	Return to more rigorous examinations	1 (1)
Unrealistic	2 (2)		
Culture blind	1 (1)		
Divisive	1 (1)		
Educationalization	1 (1)		
Emphasis on qualification	1 (1)		
Examination poor mode of assessment	1 (1)		
Government interference in academia	1 (1)		
Loss of emphasis on skills development	1 (1)		
Numbers game	1 (1)		
Staffing issues	1 (1)		

The most common negative reaction to the policy by academic staff, referred to by six of the interviewees, was the lack of flexibility. Philip (ML) expressed the most extreme view stating that:

> it's terrible. It's a mess really, for loads of reasons. Erm, alright, number one, people will come to subjects at certain times in their lives, and maybe at 16 to 19 it's not the right time. So it should be optional, and if you want to do it then, do it then. (Philip)

Other participants argued that the GCSE option was suitable for some students but not for others. Stuart (AM) argued that for some students, lecturers should be able to develop personalised programmes and assess progress thereby focusing on more than a GCSE outcome saying that:

> I would be really keen to develop our own courses, our own programmes of English and maths, where appropriate, where we can provide really clear evidence, similar to the RARPA [Recognising and Recording Progress and Achievement] type tracking that we do for our supported learners. I think we should be able to do that and personalise to the needs of students so if we know what they want to do in the future, then we can develop their English and maths and tailor it more towards what they want to do, rather than making them sit a maths or an English exam like everybody else. (Stuart)

This concern with the lack of flexibility embedded in the policy could be viewed as being linked to the next most common negative reaction to the policy, the demoralisation of students, which was referred to by five of the academic staff and related by them to the fact that the compulsory resits meant that students were experiencing multiple 'failures'. Extreme words were used to describe the perceived effects on students of being required to sit a qualification multiple times in the attempt to achieve a 'good pass'. Michael (ML) referred to it as 'heartbreaking', Lucy (EL) described it as 'torturous' and Philip (ML) said that the stress students were being put under was 'ridiculous' and that he imagined that they felt 'absolutely sh*t'.

Perhaps related to the perception of a lack of flexibility and the effect of demoralising students, three participants expressed a view that that the current policy was 'less about the student'. Sandra (EL) and Helen (AM) compared the current policy

negatively with previous policies which they reported focused more on developing student skills. Sandra stated that:

> I have seen that it has been economic. I know, you know, with, when functional skills first came in and it took over from key skills, English and maths, has always, have always had to form part of vocational courses, and when it was key skills it was about developing student skills. It was more about the student I felt then because you could do level 3 key skills for students that already had a GCSE and came in and did key skills. (Sandra)

Helen (AM) similarly argued that focusing on skills development should be more important than focusing on achieving a particular grade in a certain exam saying that, 'it's not in the best interests of all students to take any formal English or maths exam, although it is in their best interests to continue to develop their literacy and numeracy skills.' Like Sandra (EL), Philip (ML) referred to economic drivers stating that:

> The main problem is that we aren't delivering something that is useful in the eyes of the students. We are delivering something that is useful in the eyes of the College because it gets funded off the back of it. Whatever they dress it up as, that's the problem. (Philip)

The above critiques of policy highlight the perceptions of academic staff that the policy is inflexible, demoralising for students and not in students' best interests. As discussed in Chapter 3, attempts at standardisation and the discouraging of professional judgement are key features of managerialism and technicist approaches (Shain and Gleeson, 1999). In this instance, academics have pointed to their professional judgement being curtailed in the area of being able to decide the most appropriate course of study for their students which the staff expressed as being the ideal. Another feature of new managerialism, the linking of funding to the fulfilment of performance targets (Randle and Brady, 1997), was also pointed to by Sandra and Philip.

It was clear from the interviews with the academic staff that some of them (Philip, ML; Charlotte, ML; Stuart, AM; Helen, AM) recognised a conflict between what they

believed to be pedagogically sound and what they were able to do within the parameters of policy and the college's response to this. Michael, on the other hand, appeared not to perceive a conflict. Amongst those who appeared to perceive a conflict between what they believed was pedagogically sound and what they were able to deliver within the *enablements* and *constraints* they faced, reactions differed. Again, this is to be expected as individuals mediate structural forces via their *internal conversations* which are influenced by, amongst other things, their values and beliefs and their perceptions and evaluations of the *enablements* and *constraints* they face.

One reaction to the perceived conflict, evidenced by Philip (ML), was to reject what he regarded as the current focus, i.e. results and league tables. Philip stated that, 'it misses what, for me, education is, which may not quite. Erm, well I don't think it's what the government are necessarily looking at.' Given that *internal conversations* mediate between structural forces and cultural forces and agential actions, it would be expected that taking this standpoint would shape Philips's actions. He emphasised that this did influence how he taught, saying that he refused to teach students 'a method to pass an exam' and instead downplayed the significance of exams and focused on teaching the students to solve problems.

Others (Charlotte, ML; Stuart, AM; Helen, AM) reacted to the perceived conflict by adopting a position of trying to effect a compromise. Charlotte (ML) appeared largely supportive of the condition of funding requirements stating that, 'I think it is important that they keep striving to get it because it opens up so many more opportunities. So I'm, I'm, I, the understanding behind it, I go with.' She appeared to recognise that in order to fulfil the managerialist agenda, however, she was rejecting commonly held theories of learning saying that:

> I just have to, I try and pitch it to the exam. I must admit, not everybody will agree with me. A lot of people say, oh yeah if you keep going on about the exam it's going to put them off, but my experience is, actually, they want to pass. So, tell them how to pass. Tell them what they've got to do to pass. (Charlotte)

Stuart (AM) similarly was seeking a compromise by trying to modify managerialism to bring it more in line with theories of learning:

> I think we should be able to … personalise that to the needs of the students so if we know what they want to do in the future, then we can develop their English and maths and tailor it more towards what they want to do, rather than making them sit a maths or an English exam like everybody else. And again that's just in certain scenarios. I still think, generally speaking, that everybody should resit and try to get to that desired standard but I think we should just have more flexibility with that. (Stuart)

The impact of this viewpoint on his approach was that he sought to modify the managerialist process:

> we try really hard to promote the fact that we are progressing their English and maths and grade 1 is effectively a pass, grade 2/3 are passes, it's grade 4 which is the magic pass if you like but they simply still see it as grade 4 is a pass and anything below that is a fail. So we're trying really hard to promote that message that it's not and what we're trying to do is progress you from a grade 3 pass to a grade 4 pass. (Stuart)

The approach taken by Helen (AM) was to modify both managerialism and theories of learning, stating that:

> I think, here at this college, the way that we've taken the policy and put it into something that we can operationalise, particularly with those motivational problems we have with the students, is actually to focus on progress in English and maths rather than attainment. (Helen)

This led Helen, similarly to Stuart (AM), to take a stance which emphasised progress, but which also recognised that there was still a need to continually attempt to strike a balance between adopting a problem-solving approach which she believed to be effective and getting through the GCSE curriculum in two terms.

Unlike Philip, Charlotte, Stuart and Helen, Michael (ML) did not appear to recognise the conflict between the managerialist emphasis on outcomes and league tables, which prescribed what qualifications students were to undertake, with colleges measured by results, and student-centred learning: 'I think it's a good idea. I don't see why it isn't a good idea, erm, because I think they should improve the levels across the board.'

The analysis presented above points to Research Finding 8: Academic staff differed in their levels of awareness of the policy environment but, overall, they made more negative than positive references to the GCSE re-sit policy with lack of flexibility/limiting professional judgement and demoralisation of students being highlighted most frequently. The analysis further points to Research Finding 9: Four of the academic staff perceived a conflict between what they viewed as pedagogically sound and what they perceived as the focus of policy, leading either to resisting the focus on results and league tables, or different attempts to effect a compromise between this focus and sound pedagogy.

6.3 *Constraints* and *enablements* in relation to delivery identified by academic staff

In response to questions concerning what they thought was working well in the College and what needed improving, academic staff highlighted several factors that they felt enabled and constrained effective delivery. These are summarised in Table 26.

Table 26 *Enablements* and *constraints* to delivery as identified by academic staff

Enablements	No. of staff (No. of references)	*Constraints*	No. of staff (No. of references)
Student attitudes	4 (7)	Student behaviour	9 (24)
Relevance to some vocations	1 (1)	Student attitudes	8 (28)
Additional funding	1 (1)	Curriculum	7 (25)
Alignment between specifications	1 (1)	Timetabling and grouping issues	5 (6)
		Lack of consequence of no effort	4 (6)
		Student starting points	3 (7)
		Financial constraints	3 (4)
		Staffing issues	2 (3)

6.3.1 *Constraints*

This section discusses the *constraints* identified by academic staff in descending order of perceived priority, with the *constraints* identified by the most members of staff considered first. The most mentioned *constraint* was student behaviour, mentioned by nine of the academic staff, closely followed by student attitudes, mentioned by eight of the academic staff. Referring back to critical realism here is useful because it reminds us that reality is stratified with the powers and properties of entities at higher levels, for example the student body, not being reducible to those at lower levels, for example the individual student (Danermark *et al.,* 2002). At the College (institutional) level the behaviour of students can be experienced by academic staff as providing either a structural *constraint* or *enablement*. Staff participants, for example, viewed disruptive behaviour at the institutional level as constraining.

Of the nine staff participants who referred to student behaviour as a *constraint*, seven referred to disruptive behaviour. At the most extreme end, Michael (ML) reported that a student had threatened to 'hang' a female English teacher. At the other end of the scale lecturers reported non-engagement distracting other students. In discussing student behaviour, the academic staff offered observations and theories

to explain it. Michael, Philip (ML), Yvette (EL) and Helen (AM) all explained behavioural disruption as stemming from students not wanting to be in the GCSE lessons, being reluctant or being shut down to learning. Michael stated that:

> I think we possibly have the hardest job in the College, I'd say. The [GCSE English and Maths] department as they call it. It's the subject, it's the things they're forced to do you know, they're not forced to do childcare, they're not forced. There's very few things they're forced to do. So, this is what they are forced to do. And, there's a lot of work, and it's not something they want to do. So, I think it is quite a challenge. It's a hell of a challenge actually. (Michael)

Academic staff, therefore, gave weight to students' *internal conversations* in shaping behaviour. It is also worthy of note that Michael linked students' attitudes and resultant behaviours to compulsion, thus reflecting on how students' *internal conversations* may be influenced by structural factors. This in turn informed lecturer's *internal conversations*, shaping their strategies for working with students (see Section 6.4 below). Stuart (AM) and Sandra (EL) linked disruptive behaviour to previous low achievement.

In addition to highlighting disruptive behaviour as constraining students from achieving 'good passes', three of the staff participants referred to low attendance and one of these also mentioned non-attendance at exams (the link between attendance at lessons and progress was analysed in Chapter 5). Three also referred to lack of effort. The compulsory nature of the study, as with disruptive behaviour, was linked to lack of effort. Lucy (EL) argued that:

> some students seem to take it on the chin a bit more that it is a legal requirement, and so they do kind of attend. I think then you get that there in body but not in spirit kind of, I can't remember the, RINOs I think they're called, which is register in name only. Which means they're present, they've got their mark, they know they have to legally be there but they, they do nothing, and they sort of don't write anything for you, they make no attempt. They're not necessarily even disruptive but they just kind of zone out. (Lucy)

Lucy also linked lack of effort to experience of failure.

It is noteworthy that, as discussed in Chapter 5, four students highlighted disruptive behaviour in mathematics lessons throughout their educational journey as having constrained their learning and four students also mentioned this in relation to English. Some students, for example Sophie (HSC) and Lucas (EE), identified themselves with groups who had been 'naughty' at school. Interestingly, Sophie appeared to regret this, stating that with hindsight, she wished she had not identified with those that did not want to be in mathematics lessons. She also reported more positive behaviour currently resulting from the behaviour of others in her class stating that, 'if they're working hard, it gives me the motivation to work hard too.' Matthew (MV), similarly, whilst reporting being motivated in the current year due to the influence of 'bubbly' and 'joyful' people, described less positive behaviour in the previous year stating, 'I got to the point where I was like, I've done about a page and I'd just like leave.' There was a clear message from the participants about the importance of maintaining class discipline, with the interviewed students eloquently describing how their behaviour was influenced by those around them.

Some students reported relatively low attendance, providing different explanations for this. For example, Emily (HSC) mentioned issues with her friendship group whereas Charlotte (HSC) explained it in terms of just hating English and her teacher. Commenting on the low attendance of other students, Oliver (EE) linked this to timetabling issues saying that when English lessons were timetabled in the afternoons at college, the 'majority of people don't bother going.' Some students rated their attendance as high with some stating that they never or rarely missed lessons. In terms of rationales for high attendance, Liam (EE) stated, 'I really wanted to get it done.' Rebecca (HSC) said, 'if you skive you're going to not learn anything and you miss out.' Good attendance appears to be related to valuing the lessons as one might expect. Poor attendance appears to be linked to a variety of factors, some of which are out of the teachers' control, such as friendship issues, and some which may be within the power of the College to change, such as timetabling. Whilst the

College does design timetables, efficient use of lecturers would preclude all mathematics lessons from being delivered in the mornings.

As discussed in Chapter 5, students described varying levels of effort. Factors that promoted their effort outside of lessons included help from tutors or family members and being provided with resources, for example MathsWatch, and past papers. Factors identified as limiting effort outside of lessons included the pressures of vocational coursework, which was mentioned most frequently, other time pressures including paid employment as well as not being bothered. Again, this identifies some areas where teachers may be able to have a positive impact, for example by providing resources which students feel are helpful. It also identifies areas that are out of their control, students having limited time due to work commitments for example.

After student behaviour, student attitudes were the most referred to *constraint*, cited by eight of the lecturers and managers. Central to Archer's model (Archer, 2003) is the idea that individuals, through their *internal conversations*, develop a *modus vivendi* in which they prioritise certain goals based on their values. Students' internal conversations are relevant here in that a key issue impacting student engagement with the GCSE resits will be whether or not they value them.

Academic staff linked the compulsory nature of the resits to disruptive behaviour and lack of effort and Aileen (AM), Michael (ML) and Charlotte (ML) all referred to *constraints* arising from students' reactions to the compulsory nature of the GCSE retakes. All three suggested that the fact that students did not have a choice about the retakes led to a negative attitude of 'not wanting to be there'. Aileen highlighted the impact on students who did want to retake the GCSE of being in lessons with students who do not want to be there, again linking student attitudes to behaviour:

> And they, a lot of them don't want to do it. Some of them do. And for some of them they can really see the value of it, but the compulsory nature of it means that you're going, they're going to be affected by the disruption of those who don't want to do it, who see no value in it, and then just turning up to get an attendance mark for the rest of their qualification. (Aileen)

This recognition of mixed student attitudes to the resits matches the range of attitudes displayed in the student interviews. It is worth noting, as mentioned above, that the attitude of a particular student may not be fixed over time but may change as a result of various factors, as in the cases of Matthew (MV) and Sophie (HSC) highlighted above. Four staff participants referred to *constraints* in the form of students believing either that they were not competent (Sandra, EL) or expected to fail (Stuart, AM; Michael, ML; and Yvette, EL). Comments from the lecturers revealed their reflections on students' *internal conversations* and their perceived agentic responses. Sandra said that, 'They decide that they can't write… I can't do English, I can't use punctuation, I can't do this and it's… they're just totally switched off…'. Michael described one interaction he had had with a student which epitomised a student who was capable of passing, viewing the progress they needed to make as insurmountable:

> I have students with a 3 and I had someone the other day who actually said that, oh well, I'll never pass, and so I said, well why not? What did you get? She got 120 – she was 15 marks away. To her, 15 marks seems a whole lot. So, I said, okay, we have 3 papers, that's 5 marks a paper. That's nothing. (Michael)

Believed lack of competence and expectation of failure can be linked to a lack of confidence. Charlotte (ML) was aware that her students were approaching an assessment period and she was concerned about the potential impact the outcomes would have on her students' confidence, saying, 'it could destroy their confidence completely. And it's, they can't, they find it difficult to keep it in perspective.' Interestingly, Charlotte (ML) pointed out that the same assessment outcome would probably impact different students differently, with positive impact on students who took it as a wake-up call: 'I've really got to go for it now.' Whilst not referring directly to (low) self-confidence, Philip (ML) referred to the emotional fragility of some students saying that:

> you see how fragile they are, mostly I think, is the main thing, and there's all the bravado on top, but it's the fragility underneath. And what you're trying to do is saying is it's okay to make mistakes, I do it all the time. (Philip)

The idea that some students expected to fail is supported by the student interviews. Gemma (HSC) stated that she was making no progress in English, 'I just, because I've done it so many, like, years and I've just got the same exam result like every time I've done the English GCSE exam. So it's not really getting any better, so….' She was not confident of ever passing the mathematics examination despite feeling that she could do the work in class. Many of the student participants expressed similar fears.

Whilst the above student attitudes represent pessimistic views about the possibility of achieving a 'good pass', seven of the staff participants also referred to students being unconcerned about failure as a *constraint*. Five discussed students being 'along for the ride' or not caring. Stuart (AM) suggested that the majority were 'along for the ride' and Philip (ML) described students who were disengaged and 'not there'. Michael (ML) and Helen (AM), respectively, discussed students who were not concerned about achieving a 'good pass' because they perceived there were 'no consequences' and they could 'get away without doing it'. Philip described students who had just 'had enough of the whole thing' which he related in some instances to students, in his opinion accurately, judging that they would not need the 'good pass'. This highlights another subset of students whom the staff identified as being unconcerned about failure, those who believed that achieving a 'good pass' was not relevant to them. Sandra (EL) said there were students who 'say to us actually, GCSE doesn't make any difference to me.' Like Philip, she talked about a student for whom this viewpoint appeared to be accurate, describing a student whose dance teacher said that he would gain a place on a dance course without his GCSE. Helen suggested that students with certain vocational aims would not be able to see the relevance of GCSEs, highlighting mathematics and beauty therapists. Yvette (EL) talked about students facing high levels of unemployment whose parents had been unable to find a job potentially feeling unmotivated. Whilst Charlotte (ML) had experienced a student telling her that they did not need to learn 'standard form' because they were

going to teach little children, she emphasised that students may find that they need the GCSE later in life:

> I tell them a lot, we have 250 adults that are also coming back, applying to do it because they've been out there and can't get that job and [the adult students] say please tell your students that I can't get a job because I haven't got my grade C or 4. And we tell them that but they're teenagers and there's only so much that's going to sink in without it. They have to have experienced it, some of them, before it's real. (Charlotte)

Seven staff participants highlighted a difference in attitude between adult students and students on study programmes, suggesting that adult students were more motivated. In addition to students who appear unconcerned about failure, Sandra (EL) pointed to students failing to attend lessons due to prioritising other things and Michael (ML) spoke about lack of interest related to other distractions. These are interesting observations in light of Archer's (2003) emphasis on individuals developing a *modus vivendi* and prioritising activities and behaviour in line with their values.

In terms of being unconcerned about failure, most students seemed to express an acceptance, to varying degrees, that it 'had to be done.' However, as discussed in Chapter 5, some students did express doubts as to whether it was really necessary to achieve the GCSE. It was certainly the case, however, that even students who seemed to recognise that they should 'just get on with it' did not prioritise putting effort into achieving it

Other constraining attitudes identified by academic staff included general negativity characterised by Michael (ML) as 'doom and gloom' and by Helen (AM) as 'huge motivational problems'. Michael also highlighted a 'lack of work ethic' and a reluctance amongst some students to try new things.

The curriculum, particularly the mathematics curriculum was identified by academic staff as constraining. Helen (AM) said that:

> maths particularly, is hard, it's not something that you can just sit down, you have to think hard to do maths, it's not pleasurable at times, it's really, really hard slog. You feel like you've done a mental workout when you come out of a maths lesson sometimes and students are not prepared for that. (Helen)

Two of the mathematics lecturers stated that the GCSE mathematics curriculum had become more difficult since the introduction of the new specification, which was first examined in summer 2017, with resit students still being able to take the legacy qualification in that first year. Michael described the new specification as 'definitely more challenging', arguing that the new GCSE mathematics curriculum contained some content which had previously been in the A Level curriculum and that the questions were more complex and unpredictable with single questions testing skills in more than one area. Charlotte argued that some of the elements of the foundation level of the new specification had previously been examined on the higher-level papers and described some of the additions as 'ridiculous'. Interestingly, this led her to adopt a particular strategy in her teaching due to her concern regarding students' low confidence. She said that:

> But all of these things spheres, pyramids, cones, volumes and things like that, they were all dead set on the higher paper, but now I'm expected to teach them to foundation students. So I don't. Because in my mind, they're not going to be confident in all of that, and that's going to deter me from making them confident in grade 4. (Charlotte)

Three of the mathematics lecturers (Michael, Charlotte and Belinda) all reported the amount of material included in the new specification to be constraining with Belinda arguing that, 'I am aware that in GCSE that we have a huge content to cover in one year so we're normally all panicking that we're not going to get through it….'

Aileen (AM) commented that this emphasis on building student confidence, which led to students being entered onto the foundation paper in mathematics rather than the higher paper, may be limiting some more able students by removing the possibility of achieving them higher grades. She noted that across the College, higher

grades were achieved in English which was not tiered. In line with lecturer perceptions, two students had identified the size of the mathematics curriculum as constraining with Marie (HSC) saying that lecturers have 'a lot of workload they have to try and cram in'. Rebecca (HSC) mentioned lecturers having to go over everything students had covered in primary and high school in a single year. Lecturers needing to support learners with a 'lack of basics' was identified as a *constraint* by some of the lecturers and is discussed later in this section.

Another factor which was believed by mathematics lecturers to be constraining students, mentioned by Michael and Aileen (AM), was the level of literacy required to decode the examination papers. Aileen also argued that the content of the examinations posed cultural barriers in that the scenarios used were often middle-class and alien to many of the students, for example references to chicken coops. Irrespective of the content of the new curriculum, Helen (AM) referred to the regular changing of specifications as a constraining factor due to the time and effort it required lecturers to become familiar with the new curricula and adapt their teaching. This links to the 'tsunami of change' discussed in Chapters 1 and 3.

Two members of academic staff, in comparison with five students, highlighted examinations as a *constraint*. In terms of students, Gemma (HSC) had said she was disadvantaged by being assessed via examination in both English and mathematics. Noah (EE) and Haydn (MV) referred negatively to assessment by examination in English and Rebecca (HSC) and Marie (HSC) in mathematics. Rebecca directly mentioned finding examinations stressful, Marie referred to not being able to remember how to tackle questions in exams and Gemma and Noah argued that whilst they could complete coursework they just did not perform well in examinations. In line with these student comments, Helen (AM) argued that examinations did not suit two-thirds of the students at college. Interestingly, despite both male and female students arguing that they were disadvantaged by examinations, Lucy (EL) suggested that examinations favoured male students arguing that female students struggled more than male students with an 'adrenalin response'

to examinations and that boys expressed that exams enabled them to 'wing it' at the end of the year.

The final *constraint* to the curriculum, mentioned by Aileen (AM), Michael (ML) and Sandra (EL), was the perceived lack of vocational relevance. Again, staff participants reported nuances in this. For example, Aileen argued that vocational pathway and employment goals had an impact, suggesting that Health and Social Care students tended to recognise the relevance of English over mathematics whereas Construction students were more able to recognise the benefit of mathematics. Similarly, Sandra argued that mathematics was not particularly relevant to a dance student. Michael and Sandra also pointed out, as had students, that certain elements of the curriculum were less relevant than others. Sandra argued that 19th century writing was not a good fit with any vocational area and Michael said, 'look, to be honest, not all of the maths is relevant, you know, they're never going to look at a quadratic equation in their life.'

As discussed in Chapter 5, students' attitudes regarding the relevance of English and mathematics to their chosen vocation varied with some students viewing the skills gained as relevant and others being less convinced. In line with the comment above from Sandra, however, very few of the students when outlining the skills they thought they would use in their future career mentioned skills required to achieve a 'good pass' at GCSE. The notable exceptions were the students on the Level 3 Electrical Engineering course who referred to using skills taught for the higher paper in mathematics.

The next most commonly referred to *constraint* following issues related to the curriculum, mentioned by five staff participants, was the timetabling and grouping of students. A number of different issues were highlighted regarding this. Yvette (EL) and Sandra (EL) highlighted students changing groups in-year as being problematic with Yvette explaining it sometimes happened in year to reduce gaps between lessons for students. As well as seeking to keep gaps between lessons to a minimum, Belinda (ML) highlighted the issue of seeking to fit students' studies into as few days as possible as she argued that many students had to fit in paid work around college.

Charlotte (ML) and Helen (AM) explained other barriers faced to effective timetabling with Charlotte highlighting that the College does not know until GCSE results are released in mid-August how many students they will be catering for and Helen arguing that even at this point information about students' starting points is often far from comprehensive. Charlotte expressed a view that it was difficult to teach mixed-ability groups. Other lecturers, however, had different views on this. This will be discussed further in Section 6.4.1 on practices the academic staff described as working well in the delivery of the English and mathematics GCSEs.

A number of students commented on issues related to timetabling in terms of both positive and negative experiences. In English, Matthew (MV) reported struggling due to what he described as a large group in contrast to his smaller mathematics group. Oliver (EE) reported feeling lucky that his session was timetabled in the morning as he said that attendance to afternoon sessions was poor. With regard to mathematics, Rebecca (HSC) and Marie (HSC) both reported that their group was too large, and Rebecca also commented that she thought that three-hour lessons were too long. Liam reported a five o'clock finish for his mathematics lesson as being a struggle. On a positive note, five of the students reported being enabled by small class sizes for mathematics. Issues of group size and length of lesson are discussed in Section 6.4 as development points raised by staff participants. Another feature of timetabling, grouping by vocational area and not ability, is discussed separately in Section 6.4 because of the prominence given to it by the staff as a strategy which the majority suggested was working well.

Financial *constraints* were highlighted by three of the academic staff. Sandra (EL) linked financial *constraints* to timetabling issues arguing that they were one reason that groups changed in-year with groups being consolidated once students had left or passed their exams. This highlights the importance of recognising the *constraints* that colleges work within. Sandra also suggested that limited finances meant that students who would benefit from additional support but did not 'come with the funding' did not always get it. Phillip and Helen (AM) also mentioned financial considerations as constraining. Phillip said, 'You know, they're stuck inside a funding

situation where there's a crisis in FE funding and they've had no real increases. So, you've got less resources….' Helen put it even more starkly:

> So, you know, funding regimes that go just for a year… Well they don't just go for a year actually, but to be, actually, to be financially viable, you know, you have to do things to be sure that you can pay your staff and keep the lights on. And, with the way things are set up, you can't do it any other way. So it's, some more money would be nice. (Helen)

Another *constraint* identified by academics was the lack of consequences to students of non/low attendance and effort. Aileen (AM) and Charlotte (ML) both argued that although there was a message that non-attendance could result in students being withdrawn from their vocational course, this was not followed up. Phillip agreed that this was problematic, but ultimately supported the lack of consequences arguing:

> But they won't throw them out the College, nor I think perhaps should they, because they are losing students who might be really good at their main course. And this is a problem. (Philip)

Academic staff referred to lack of apparent consequences for poor effort and behaviour as well as attendance. Charlotte (ML) reported a conversation with a student who said they felt, unlike at school where they would have received a detention, there were no consequences at college for failing to complete homework. Charlotte reported the student appearing shocked when she suggested that the consequence may be that they did not pass. Yvette (EL) mentioned not being able to exclude a learner from her lessons.

Constraints in the form of staffing issues were mentioned by two members of staff. Sandra (EL) mentioned both changes in management leading to in-year changes and the merging of groups to free up teachers to reduce the use of agency staff. Helen (AM) reported issues related to needing to rely on agency staff:

> often agency staff do not, they provide very little stability for students, you know, the subjects that they haven't been able to get to grips with at school,

> you know, they rock up to college and they get a very poor experience because they don't even get the same teacher. (Helen)

Three students mentioned changes of lecturer as constraining. Marie (HSC) reported that she had had difficulties in her first year as a result of having three or four different mathematics lecturers due to staff sickness. On a positive note, she reported that she had had the same throughout the current year. Charlotte (HSC) had reported that she had had an English teacher who had given constant feedback and helped them a lot but that this teacher had left and they then 'had different teachers throughout.' Rebecca (HSC) reported having had three English teachers in the space of a year. In her case this was a result of moving groups, once to move her out of an English group which was timetabled on a day she was not attending for her vocational course, which links to Belinda's (ML) comment about the College trying to limit the number of days students are required to attend, and a second time for a reason of which she was unaware. This links in with the issues surrounding timetabling discussed above.

The final *constraint* mentioned by three staff participants related to the starting points of students and the 'lack of basics'. Michael (ML) said:

> My biggest bugbear, and what's bothered me quite a bit, ever since I've started teaching maths, was this lack of basics. And I mean the real nuts and bolts of it. And I know it's old-fashioned and it's really the times tables, the multiplying, the dividing, the adding. I mean it's a huge part. I don't think people realise how big a part of it it is. (Michael)

Yvette (EL) shared an interesting insight that she had gained into this regarding English:

> And also, what I think we don't recognise if you're a reader, when I read, and it took me quite a way into my teaching career to realise, when I read it all kind of comes together in my head and I have a picture and… They don't necessarily, if you're not a regular reader you kind of then have to jigsaw, you kind of figure out each word and then you have to jigsaw it together, so it's

> not as fluid a process. So it's really challenging. It's not just that there's a lot to read. It's, it's that they aren't used to that process of reading and putting it together and picturing it, so… (Yvette)

Again, regarding mathematics, Phillip (ML) described how he found that this 'lack of basics' meant that what students said that they struggled with was often not the issue and that it was often necessary to go back and deal with the fundamentals in order to support students with the problem at hand.

The above analysis points to Research Finding 10: In identifying *constraints* to effective delivery, staff placed factors relating to students above those relating to policy, procedures or practices. Student behaviour was the *constraint* referenced most frequently by staff followed by student attitudes and then factors relating to curricula.

6.3.2 *Enablements*

As can be seen in Table 26, academic staff highlighted far fewer *enablements* than *constraints*. Interestingly, given the emphasis on constraining student attitudes discussed above, the most often mentioned *enablement*, referred to by four staff participants, was student attitudes. Michael (ML), who had highlighted the lack of a work ethic as a *constraint* argued that he found it easier to teach the Health and Social Care cohort due to the better work ethic which he suggested was linked to the cohort being 99% female. Yvette (EL) and Helen (AM) highlighted students viewing the subject as relevant to their planned careers as enabling. In contrast to Michael's 'doom and gloom' statement, Stuart (AM) argued that, 'in lots of cases there's positivity there and they're willing to have a go'. This comment followed a statement regarding those students with a 'near-miss' who in his opinion believed that a good pass was achievable. This again highlights the importance of understanding all the factors that may influence individuals' *internal conversations.*

Whereas perceived lack of relevance was generally identified as a *constraint*, Philip (ML) suggested that students on Engineering and science pathways were more positively disposed to mathematics because of the priority it was given in careers in these fields. Again, whereas financial pressures had been highlighted as generally

constraining, Belinda (ML) referred to new funding recommended to the government by Adrian Smith as potentially enabling. Finally, against the backdrop of the curriculum and curriculum changes generally being viewed as constraining, Aileen (AM) reported that with the development of the new specifications there had been greater alignment between examining bodies. This meant that students did not have to get to grips with a curriculum that felt unfamiliar on starting college.

6.4 What 'works well' and what 'could be improved'

Academic staff were also asked in the interviews what they thought was working well in terms of English and mathematics delivery in the College and what could be improved. The aim was to encourage academic staff to identify strategies, practices and approaches that they believed to be effective and to explore in more depth whether they felt that different strategies, practices and approaches worked better with certain groups and/or under certain circumstances (see Appendix 1). The aim was not, therefore, to identify 'universally effective' strategies typically pursued as part of the 'what works' agenda.

A summary of the coded data on areas of improvement and strategies, practices and approaches perceived to be 'working well' is provided in Table 27. This is based on the number of staff participants who mentioned a particular area and the number of references made to it.

Table 27 Areas for improvement and 'what works well' as identified by staff

Areas for improvement	No. of staff (No. of references)	What 'works well'	No. of staff (No. of references)
Improved communication and closer working	5 (11)	Improved communication and closer working	9 (27)
Timetabling	4 (5)	Pedagogy	7 (17)
Pedagogy	2 (4)	Setting by vocational course	6 (6)
Upskilling staff	2 (3)	Additional support	4 (5)
Management support	2(3)	Improved English and mathematics attendance	3 (3)
English and mathematics department identity	2 (2)	Emotional containment	2 (2)
Disciplinary policy	1 (3)	College as a fresh start	2 (2)
Reporting	1 (2)	Reinforcing consequences	1 (1)
Greater ESOL support	1 (1)	Timing of lessons	1 (1)
Reward scheme	1 (1)	Diagnostics	1 (1)
Support staff in lessons	1 (1)	Management consultation	1 (1)
Improved attendance	1 (1)		

6.4.1 What 'works well'

Regarding 'what works well', nine of the staff participants referred to improved communication and closer working. Seven participants mentioned links between the English and mathematics team and the vocational areas. Stuart (AM) explained that the College had 'restructured things so that staff, English teachers, are working specifically with a smaller group of vocational colleagues.' This meant that whereas an English teacher could have previously been working with up to 35 tutorial supervisors the maximum was currently about 15. Similarly, whereas course leaders and tutorial supervisors may have previously had to communicate with 10 English teachers they were currently communicating with 2. Stuart argued that this meant that issues were dealt with more quickly and improved links meant that communication was no longer only about problems, with successes also being

celebrated. Aileen (AM) echoed Stuart's view of better developed links between the English and mathematics lecturers and vocational colleagues stating that:

> I think we've worked really hard, erm, even in the short time I've been here, erm, to create links with the vocational areas and make sure that the tutorial supervisors and the course leaders are sending out the same message. I think the enrolment this year was much clearer, saying, you know, you've got to go to your English and maths and you need to redo it if you haven't got it. (Aileen)

In explaining how this closer collaboration impacted positively on English and mathematics performance, Aileen (AM), Charlotte (ML) and Belinda (ML) highlighted English and mathematics lecturers being linked to a particular vocational area making it possible for them to make their materials more vocationally relevant and for them to support vocational colleagues in embedding English and mathematics in their vocational lessons. Lucy (EL) and Belinda (ML) also suggested that the support from vocational teams in emphasising the importance of attendance and effort in English and mathematics had improved because of the closer working. Interestingly, whilst Lucy could see the value of closer working between the English and mathematics team and the vocational areas, she suggested that the loss of GEM (GCSE English and mathematics) as a distinct team as part of the restructure also had a downside arguing that:

> So, there was that sense that there was a united team that was delivering what the government required of us, and now it's devolved down to individual programmes and how programme managers want to promote that, and I think that is a bit of a retrograde step actually. (Lucy)

In addition to highlighting closer working between English and mathematics lecturers and vocational colleagues as working well, three participants highlighted helpful collaboration between members of the English and mathematics team. Lucy (EL) and Yvette (EL) spoke about the sharing of resources and schemes of learning and Belinda (ML) described how members of the team had paired up to develop, for example, new resources and feedback strategies. She also described a 'marketplace' that had been held where members of the team had a stall and showcased ideas.

Furthermore, closer working between Heads of Area was mentioned by Stuart (AM) and Aileen (AM), and Sandra (EL) and Lucy both suggested that building relationships with parents worked well where it happened.

Seven of the staff participants referred to pedagogic approaches that they perceived worked well. Stuart (AM) and Sandra (EL) both argued that project work was an effective way of delivering English and mathematics. Aileen (AM) reported that Creative Arts students tended to perform relatively well in English and put this down to the portfolios they were required to produce as part of their vocational qualification which meant 'they need to think about imagery, they think about persuasive language, all those things.' Belinda (ML) stated that teaching through problem-solving was key and Yvette (EL) described a murder mystery activity that she reported had been particularly effective:

> We set up a whole murder mystery one year complete with murder weapon and crime scene and took groups out there and that was really engaging for them and got them thinking, and discussion. Getting it then on paper and getting them to sort of turn it into something, but I don't know whether that was entirely the value for that, that was the first thing that we did with them that year. Erm, so, giving them stuff that really engages them, that seems different, giving them group work. (Yvette)

Three of the academic staff highlighted vocational contextualisation as working well where it was possible. Yvette (EL) described contextualising English for drama students and Belinda (ML) described her success in teaching angle-bisectors by relating this to arcs on brick walls which the students were working on in their vocational lessons. Michael (ML) was clearer about what, in his opinion, did not work than about effective strategies stating that young people are not used to pedantic teaching and that you therefore had to adapt. This apparently fitted with his preferences as he stated, 'I've never liked pedantic type teaching…'

Charlotte (ML), as with the issue of setting by vocational pathway, offered a dissenting voice regarding pedagogical approaches stating:

> I must admit, not everybody will agree with me. A lot of people say, oh yeah if you keep going on about the exam it's going to put them off, but my experience is, actually, they want to pass. So, tell them how to pass. Tell them what they've got to do to pass. You might get them on board. And if you can, I try and make sure that, can you walk out of here gaining one more mark than you could when you came in. Even if it means you show that bit of working out or, you know, 2 times 3 isn't 5, it's 6. If you can gain one more mark then you're making progress, and I try and boost the confidence because if we have 30 weeks, if you can gain one more mark every week, you're there. And so I go down that road. Right from the start I start talking about the exam and the expectations and, and if I see a student that's got that one more mark, well done. And so, me, it's all about trying to boost that confidence rather than how I'm going about teaching it. I don't think a lot of them want to get up and walk around the room and play games and play cards and card sorts and things like that. They want me to tell them how to get this done. (Charlotte)

This may be related to her preference for streaming in that this approach may be most effective for those on what she described as on the 'D/C borderline' whom she had previously had most experience of working with.

Related to pedagogy, three of the staff mentioned TLA (Teaching, Learning and Assessment) initiatives which they believed were having a positive impact. Michael (ML) and Belinda (ML) both referred to the College's involvement with the Maths4Life project which Belinda reported helped because:

> we've got a few things where we're kind of spreading out a little bit, and I think that helps, because we all learn from each other, oh, we haven't tried that, that would be, or they've tried something we have and had totally different results, so… I find those really useful. (Michael)

Stuart (AM) referred to involvement in a pilot with an organisation called Creative Education which provided access to a bank of resources related to assessment objectives. Again, whilst involvement in TLA initiatives was generally reviewed as

positive, Stuart suggested that some of the learning from involvement in pilots etc may be lost and not capitalised upon.

The third most commonly mentioned strategy believed to 'work well', mentioned by six of the academic staff, was setting by vocational stream and not ability. Sandra (EL) explained the change of policy meant that lecturers tended to work within a single vocational area, and groups were made up of 'like minded' students from a single vocational area but with a mix of abilities. She suggested that this had overcome the historical problem of behavioural issues in bottom tiered groups. She said that:

> It's just made a huge difference. So those students have come in with no GCSE or a grade 1 or a 2 working with the students who have a grade 3, some of them have just done a November resit and so we, we've got students who haven't worked brilliantly in school seeing, with students who are working well, and it seems to be bringing them up. (Sandra)

Stuart (AM) similarly argued that teachers perceived that, '3s are pulling people up as opposed to the 1s and 2s pulling people down.' He argued that there was a positive impact on attendance as well as on behaviour. Helen (AM) suggested that behaviour was better because students 'are with their peers and they've got less audience to play to'. Regarding other benefits, Yvette (EL) argued that concentrating on groups from a particular vocational area meant that she could develop vocationally specific resources and Lucy (EL) reported that lecturers had been matched with vocational areas to which their teaching strategies were best suited. Interestingly, as elsewhere, what works for some people will not work for others and whilst Charlotte (ML) reported that other lecturers had found the new strategy an improvement, she stated that she had found mixed groups better saying, 'it does just depend, erm, on the attitude, the level, whether you've got students that are 16/17 or fast approaching 19, you know, which year group they're in.'

Three students commented on being grouped for English or maths with other students from their vocational course. In evaluating being in an English group with some students he already knew from his vocational course, Matthew (MV) said, 'it

helped me quite a lot because I'm self-conscious and shy.' Rebecca (HSC) was able to compare being grouped predominantly with people from other courses with being grouped predominantly with people from her course having experienced each in different years. She found the latter an improvement stating that:

> I think that last year I didn't have many people on my course. I only had one person that was on my course that was in the group with me. Whereas going into a group with people that you don't know, it's a bit like oh my god. But if you go into a group with people that you do know, into a maths group that are the same class it's not as bad because you already know them so you're not there thinking oh my god everyone's judging me and everything, so… (Rebecca)

Again, there was a dissenting voice with Noah (EE) 'guessing' that being with students he did not know meant that he faced fewer distractions. Unlike Rebecca (HSC) he had not experienced both methods of grouping. It is again worth noting, however, that different strategies will work for different people in different circumstances. Matthew (MV) and Rebecca suggested that being with grouped with others that they already know works well for them because they describe themselves as self-conscious and concerned about others' judgements respectively. Noah, on the other hand, feared that being with people he is familiar with poses dangers of distraction. It is perhaps worth noting again that the dynamic lecturers described most often said that they had observed was of positive rather than negative influence where students were placed with their vocational peers.

Four of the academic staff mentioned additional support offered by the College as working well. Philip (ML) referred to the benefits of one-to-one support outside of the classroom. Yvette (EL) and Belinda (ML) both referred to the GEM centre where students could book one-to-one appointments with qualified maths or English tutors. Belinda also mentioned additional lessons that were put on and a new mentor that funding had recently been received for in the GEM centre. Sandra (EL) mentioned more general non-academic support available to students through wellbeing services or the specialist support available for students on the autistic spectrum. Interestingly,

Philip expressed concerns that some forms of support may be less than helpful arguing that:

> I think with support, it's a weird sort of thing. Some of them, it's really useful to have support in the room. If it's the right support. If it's not the right support they're more trouble than they're worth to be perfectly honest. (Philip)

He went on to suggest some potential unintended consequences of support, arguing that in-class support could make students feel awkward and suggesting that additional support:

> should be timetabled so that it doesn't make them feel like they're having extra lessons for stupid kids, cos that again is, it is, this is all about confidence as much as it is about anything else. So it has to be sort of built in in a way which is reasonably subtle and is just kind of normal. (Philip)

Sophie (HSC), Haydn (MV) and Matthew (MV) reported having received additional support with both English and mathematics. Faye (HSC), Gemma (HSC), Charlotte (HSC) and Owen (MV) said that they had had additional support for English and Lucas for mathematics. All students mentioned their additional support as something that had helped them and none of them mentioned any perceived negative consequences. It may be that Philip's (ML) concerns were not founded in the case of the students interviewed or that it was just the case they were not consciously aware of how it may have damaged their confidence or self-perception. It does appear, however, that students do not always view additional support as something 'done to them'. Matthew, for instance, appeared to feel that he was in control as he described walking out of lessons when he was struggling, and a member of staff then being sent to work with him. This perhaps reinforces Philip's suggestion that how the additional support is organised and presented is key.

Stuart (AM), Michael (ML) and Belinda (ML) all reported that college efforts to improve attendance at English and maths were having an impact and this can be seen to be significant given the link between attendance and progress found in Section

5.2.4. Other things identified by one or two staff participants as 'working well' were differentiating college from school, using diagnostics to gain a good understanding of students' starting points, using strategies to make students feel secure, management involving lecturers in decision making, carrying through on disciplinary policy for non-attendance and finishing teaching at 16.30 rather than 17.00.

6.4.2 'What could be improved'

As well as identifying what worked well, staff participants also identified development points. There was some overlap between strategies and practices deemed to be working well and development points, in that some areas for development were identified in those that were generally deemed to be working well. Improved communication and closer working was the area the highest number of staff mentioned as working well. This area was also the most often mentioned area for development. This perhaps highlights the significance it is given by staff. In terms of communication, Phillip suggested that there was room for improvement both between management and teaching staff and between Curriculum Support Services, who work with students with Specific Learning Difficulties (SpLD), and lecturers. Stuart (AM), Charlotte (ML) and Yvette (EL) suggested that support from vocational staff could be improved in some areas. Stuart said that:

> the vocational teams that really support the idea that English and maths is part of the programme of study and therefore just as important and are therefore chasing the attendance, are dealing with behaviour issues, if that's working well then the rest works well. Where it's not, and there are areas of the College who don't, erm, that aren't as good at that, then it all kind of falls apart because behaviour isn't supported, management of attendance isn't there and actually the maths or English teacher isn't supported…. (Stuart)

Yvette suggested that she would like to go and deliver workshops within vocational lessons supporting students with English and maths. Interestingly, Aileen (AM) suggested that how English and mathematics was being considered in vocational lessons was something that she was looking to explore.

Timetabling issues were raised by four staff participants as a development point. Two expressed a dislike of the three-hour lessons and another expressed a preference for smaller groups. Charlotte (ML) said that, in her view, students would benefit from more delivery hours. Timetabling was on the agenda for management but the below quote from Helen (AM) highlighted there are multiple mechanisms at play and solving one perceived problem may cause others:

> I think, well, to be fair, until you're going to put, we have put English and maths up front and central, it's timetabled before everything else, to be sure that it's in, but I think it would have to be, you know, for students who wanted to study at level 3 particularly, I don't understand why there couldn't be any kind of necessity to do perhaps a 3 month intensive English and maths course before you did something. Now it wouldn't be popular, but at least students would know where they were with it, and then they went onto the next course. But of course, that would be highly costly, and I think most colleges would be terrified of doing that because students wouldn't want to come, who would, because, you know, students might not sign up, they'd find another way round it. (Helen)

Again, despite pedagogical approaches being cited by seven staff participants as something that was working well, two raised development points. Helen (AM) suggested that some of the mathematics teaching may be 'a little bit dull' and that there could be a greater focus on deeper learning. Stuart (AM) did feel that the mathematics team had been more experimental in recent years but that some of the learning from pilots and trials was not carried through.

Two of the academic managers mentioned the need to upskill staff. Stuart (AM) referred to supporting lecturers who had come from High Schools to adapt to the FE model of delivery. Both Stuart and Helen (AM) highlighted the need to support staff moving into delivering English and mathematics from vocational backgrounds:

> It's fab to contextualise but actually hard-core teaching English and maths, I do feel that if they had some development that was absolutely pertinent to them, not just sheep-dip development, I think that would help. (Helen)

Other development points highlighted by one or two members of academic staff included closer links between management and the teaching teams, a stricter disciplinary policy, greater support from the ESOL team, improved attendance, a reward scheme for student effort and increased additional support for students in lessons.

The above points to Research Finding 11: There was a degree of overlap between practices and strategies deemed by staff to be working well and areas for development, with a desire for even greater development of strategies deemed to be working well. One exception was setting by vocational course which all staff participants who mentioned it acknowledged was working well for many.

6.5 Staff perceptions of *enablements* and *constraints* faced by students

Academic staff were asked to consider factors that act as barriers or that support students in their studies. A summary of the coded data is provided in Table 28.

Table 28 Staff perceptions of *enablements* and *constraints* faced by students

Enablement	No. of staff (No. of references)	*Constraint*	No. of staff (No. of references)
Home life	2 (2)	Home life	5 (8)
Additional support	1 (1)	Health/mental health	5 (7)
Aspiration	1 (1)	Repeated failure	3 (6)
Effective learning strategies	1 (1)	Fear of being seen to fail	3 (5)
Employment and experience	1 (1)	Missing basics	3 (4)
Related interests	1(1)	Long journey to college	3 (3)
Wake-up call	1 (1)	Age and lack of experience	2 (2)
		Beaten down	2 (2)
		Competing priorities	2 (2)
		Digital culture	2 (2)
		Experience of streaming	2 (2)
		Hands-on/ not academic	2 (2)
		Molly-coddling	2 (2)
		Financial pressures	1 (2)
		Distractions	1 (1)
		ESOL	1 (1)
		Lack of role models	1 (1)
		Learning difficulties	1 (1)
		Missed education	1 (1)
		Mobile 'phone addiction	1 (1)
		Negative school experience	1 (1)
		Stigmatising additional support	1 (1)

As can be seen in Table 28, the lecturers and academic managers identified many more barriers than supportive factors. It is clear staff participants could identify a range of individual and social factors which they perceived as acting as barriers to students' learning. Whilst there were some common factors identified by staff and students, there were some barriers which lecturers and academic managers

perceived were faced by students, which students themselves had not alluded to. For example, five staff participants mentioned students' home lives as constraining with three referring to a lack of familial support, two referring to a lack of resources, and one each referring to a chaotic homelife and a lack of role models. In terms of a perceived lack of familial support, Michael (ML), Lucy (EL) and Belinda (ML) stated that they thought the parental experiences or attitudes may act as a barrier. Michael explained that some students may be *constrained* by a lack of parental engagement:

> we actually used to have parents' evenings, but it was hopeless because the only parents that would turn up were ones that you didn't want to see. There was no reason to see. The students were great, the kids were great, doing well. The ones that you actually wanted to see, didn't, maybe that's the connection. (Michael)

Lucy and Belinda stated that how parents viewed the qualification had an impact on students and reported students arguing that they did not need the qualifications because they knew relatives who had been successful without them. Helen (AM) similarly referred to it not being helpful for students when their 'role models' had apparently been successful without the qualifications. On a more positive note, Belinda also said that some students were *enabled* by encouragement to work hard from parents who were expecting their son or daughter to join them in a family business.

The importance accorded to supportive relationships was also evidenced in the interviews with academic staff in that many of the strategies which lecturers described as using to support students can be viewed as relational. Lecturers discussed building 'rapport' with students and Belinda (ML) highlighted the importance of getting 'to know students'. Michael (ML), Philip (ML) and Yvette (EL) described seeking to foster more equal, collaborative relationships with students. The importance of being encouraging was highlighted by Sandra and Belinda. Positivity was stressed by Michael and Belinda with Michael seeing this as required because of his perception of students being 'fragile'. Staff participants also viewed relationships outside of the classroom as important in impacting on learning and

teaching and outcomes. For example, they discussed relationships between managers and lecturers; vocational lecturers and English and mathematics lecturers; and academic staff and parents. In a lot of instances, mention of these relationships was in the context of the quality of communication.

Perceived psychological barriers were also highlighted as constraining by academic staff, with three referring to the impact of repeated failure and three mentioning fear of failure. Whilst students had expressed frustration with repeated failure, they had not recognised this as a potential barrier to future success. Missing basics and a long journey to college were both identified by three members of staff. The above discussion leads to Research Finding 12: Academic staff identified more *constraints* than *enablements* which they perceived students faced. There were similarities and differences between *constraints* and *enablements* identified by staff and those identified by students. In terms of a similarity, four students and five academics identified health/mental health issues as constraining for students. In terms of differences, five academics identified homelife, including parental support, as a *constraint,* and two identified it as an enablement. In contrast, eight students identified family support as an *enablement* and two students identified it as a constraint. Staff were more likely than students to identify psychological barriers and 'outside' factors, for example long bus journeys, as *constraints* and ten students, but no staff, identified *constraints* related to college delivery.

The areas of similarity and difference between the data from the staff and the students are discussed further in Chapter 7. The list of barriers identified highlights the importance of recognising context in that any programme needs to consider the *constraints* and *enablements* faced by the participants in that programme, in this case students on 16 to 19 Study Programmes who are resitting their GCSE English and/or mathematics. Many of these barriers and *enablements* lie outside of the control of the institution and those delivering the English and mathematics, although it may of course be possible to deliver and adapt the programme in ways which seek to enhance the power of *enablements* and mitigate against *constraints*. Again, there needs to be consideration of 'what works for whom, in what circumstances.' The mix of generative mechanisms in operation will differ across settings. The long journey to

college which was mentioned in this setting by three of the staff members as significant may not be as much of an issue in an inner-city college whose students live in closer proximity.

6.6 Summary of key findings from interviews with academic staff and lecturers

The research findings which emerged from the interviews with the staff include the following:

Research Finding 10: In identifying *constraints* to effective delivery, staff placed factors relating to students above those relating to policy, procedures or practices. Student behaviour was the *constraint* referenced most frequently by staff followed by student attitudes and then by factors relating to curricula.

Research Finding 11: There was a degree of overlap between practices and strategies deemed by staff to be working well and areas for development, with a desire for even greater development of strategies deemed to be working well. One exception was setting by vocational course which all staff participants who mentioned it acknowledged was working well for many.

Research Finding 12: Academic staff identified more *constraints* than *enablements* which they perceived students faced. There were similarities and differences between *constraints* and *enablements* identified by staff and those identified by students. In terms of a similarity, four students and five academics identified health/mental health issues as constraining for students. In terms of differences, five academics identified homelife, including parental support, as a *constraint,* and two identified it as an enablement. In contrast, eight students identified family support as an *enablement* and two students identified it as a constraint. Staff were more likely than students to identify psychological barriers and 'outside' factors, for example long bus journeys, as *constraints* and ten students, but no staff, identified *constraints* related to college delivery.

6.7 Conclusion

This chapter has considered the perceptions of lecturers within the College of the impact of structure in the form of government policy on the College, themselves and students, the *enablements* and *constraints* faced by students (Research Question 2) and the structural, cultural and agential factors impacting on GCSE English and mathematics outcomes (Research Question 3). Archer's model of the interplay of structure and agency mediated via the *internal conversation* (Archer, 2003) has been employed as a means of examining the complex interplay of structural, cultural and agential powers in operation within the College. The social realist approach alerts us to the complexity of social life as an open system within which the complex interplay of all these powers means that social outcomes will rarely, if ever, be predictable and that we are unlikely to be able to propose universally effective programmes or solutions, with the most that we can hope for being an understanding of what works for whom in what circumstances. The analysis in this chapter has highlighted some instances of members of academic staff responding differently to situations or of differentially viewing a situation as constraining or enabling. For instance, some lecturers have sought to engage students taking resits who are often viewed as disengaged by seeking to encourage deep learning and problem solving whereas others have focused on teaching to the test. Lecturers and academic managers generally viewed the grouping of students by vocational area as a positive development, but there was one dissenting voice concerning this. The examination of instances where the responses of individuals to similar situations differ and the exploration of possible reasons for this begins to shed light on potential mechanisms in operation.

Chapter 7 builds on the findings presented in Chapters 5 and 6. It also extends the discussion of similarities and differences between lecturers' and students' stated perceptions and viewpoints introduced above. This analysis, along with the analysis of the quantitative data, is used to highlight significant factors impacting on the GCSE outcomes. This is followed by a discussion of how these findings might inform both practice and future research.

Chapter 7. Conclusion

7.1 Introduction

This chapter revisits the key findings from the literature review and the analysis of the quantitative and qualitative data, summarising the ways in which the findings from previous chapters shed light on the research questions (Section 7.2). Key themes drawn from the data are more fully explored in relation to structural, cultural and agential factors impacting on GCSE resits within 16 to 19 study programmes identified in this research, thus providing a more in-depth response to Research Question 3. This is followed in Section 7.3 by a discussion of the contributions to policy and theory, in Section 7.4 by implications for practice of the findings and in Section 7.5 by implications for further research. Section 7.6 contains a personal reflection on my experience as a researcher and professional throughout this research project.

7.2 Summary of findings in relation to the research questions

The following research questions sought to facilitate the formulation of a social realist analysis of the GCSE English and mathematics outcomes within 16 to 19 study programmes, which prioritised *internal conversations* and highlighted the complexity and interplay of structural, cultural and agential factors. The conceptual framework adopted from Archer (2003) posits that individuals, via their *internal conversations,* develop projects based on their *modus vivendi,* which is shaped by their values, and take into account perceived *enablements* and *constraints*. Overall, the research found evidence supporting the key role of *internal conversations* in mediating the impact of structural and cultural factors. Specifically, data presented in Chapter 5, Section 5.3.6, points to students describing different behaviours around resits as related to different perceptions of their relevance, as well as the *enablements* and *constraints* they faced when doing resits. That a multiplicity of structural, cultural and agential factors were in operation, was evident from the interviews with both staff and students and the importance of taking this complexity into account was highlighted by examples of students responding differently to a method of teaching or a resource on the basis of other factors, for example social networks (Chapter 5, Section 5.3.6).

This section summarises the key findings of this research in relation to structural, cultural and agential factors, whilst implications for policy, theory and practice are discussed in Sections 7.4 and 7.5.

Research Question 1: What are students' perceptions of the value and relevance of GCSE English and mathematics resits as part of 16 to 19 programmes of study.

The government emphasis on improving literacy and numeracy as a means of addressing issues of skills shortages and social mobility was discussed in Chapter 3 (DfES, 2005b; DIUS, 2007; BIS, 2011a). Students who participated in this study were aware of the message that they would need their English and mathematics GCSEs to gain, and be successful in, employment. However, this message was treated with differing degrees of acceptance/scepticism. Whilst the College and lecturers generally sought to make English and mathematics vocationally relevant, staff differed in the extent to which they embraced the 'goal' of getting students through an exam in order to further their chances of gaining employment. There were alternative 'goals' of, for example, generally upskilling students or improving their problem-solving skills.

More students regarded studying mathematics as relevant to their future lives and careers than English, with all student participants reporting that they believed mathematics to be relevant and only ten out of fifteen perceiving English to be relevant (Research Finding 4) As discussed in Chapter 5, some students saw gaining the GCSE as an entry requirement to further study or employment and some focused on the skills they were learning. It was of note, however, that when identifying English and mathematics skills they were likely to use in their lives, students tended to identify lower-level skills, with only Level 3 Electrical Engineering students potentially identifying mathematical skills associated with 'good passes' at GCSE (Research Finding 5).

Research Question 2: What *enablements* and *constraints* do students face in relation to achieving 'good passes' in their English and mathematics GCSE resits?

The analysis of quantitative data in Chapter 5 presented a picture which, given the low rate of 'good passes' achieved in the resits (Research Finding 1), suggested that

students were facing barriers in achieving these. Interestingly, analysis of the quantitative data did not find significant differences in achieving 'good passes' by gender, ethnicity, LDD or disadvantage (Research Finding 2).

Students identified a range of *enablements* and *constraints* which they perceived they faced in relation to achieving 'good passes' in the English and mathematics GCSE resits as discussed in Chapter 5. Support from other people in the form of family, peers or personal tutors/classroom support was the key *enablement* identified by students (Research Finding 6). Students identified a range of *constraints* they faced in studying both English and mathematics. They identified more *constraints* to studying mathematics and two of the unique *constraints* they identified, lack of family support and the size of the curriculum, were also highlighted by mathematics lecturers (Research Finding 7).

As discussed in Chapter 6, the academic staff identified more *constraints* than *enablements* which they perceived students faced. There was some convergence between the staff and student data regarding this. For example, *constraints* resulting from health and mental health issues were highlighted by both five academics and four students. Staff and student perceptions diverged in that academics were more likely than students to identify homelife, psychological factors and 'outside' factors, for example, long bus journeys, as *constraints*; ten students but no staff identified teaching in college as a *constraint;* and more students than staff identified additional support as enabling (Research Finding 12).

This difference between staff and student perspectives on home life appears to be due in part to staff focusing on broader aspects of students' home lives such as resources, and a chaotic environment. Regarding additional support, only one member of academic staff highlighted it as enabling whilst another suggested it could act as a *constraint* if perceived as stigmatising. In contrast, eight students reported additional support as enabling. It appears, therefore, that academic staff may be underestimating the support which students receive both from their families and through additional support (some of which is in the form of private tuition paid for by families). As highlighted above, several staff referred to psychological factors as

constraints. Three staff participants referred to the negative impact of repeated failure, three referred to the fear of being seen to fail and two referred to the effect of being beaten down. While students may have referred to these and other similar feelings, they did not recognise them as potentially constraining factors. Academic staff were more likely to refer to 'outside' factors not directly related to studying English and maths whereas only two students mentioned outside *constraints* relating to limited time, one due to sporting activities and one to employment. Academic staff were more likely to take a broader perspective and mentioned several potential barriers that students did not highlight. Three staff participants mentioned the long journey to college for many students, two mentioned the digital culture and mobile phone addiction and financial pressures were both mentioned by one member of staff.

This divergence between the student and academic staff data, characterised by a greater tendency of academic staff to highlight contextual factors, could be related to Pawson and Tilley's (1997) observation that the experience of a subject of a programme, in this case a student, will be limited in terms of context whereas practitioners, in this case lecturers, are likely to have more insight into the impact of contextual variation. This reinforces the importance of investigating different layers of reality from multiple perspectives. The potential of exploring these divergences in terms of implications for practice is discussed in more detail in Section 7.3.

Also pertinent to a consideration of *enablements* and *constraints* is what was deemed to be working well in the College, and thereby enabling students, and what was deemed to require improvement. The staff perspective on this was discussed in detail in Chapter 6 and it was noted that there was a degree of overlap in that areas that were identified as working well were often also identified as areas requiring improvement as staff appeared to be expressing a desire for even greater development of strategies deemed to be working well. One strategy of note which all staff participants who mentioned it acknowledged was working well for many was setting by vocational course (Research Finding 11). Students also identified elements of teaching at the College that they felt were enabling and elements that they felt were constraining.

Research Question 3: What key structural, cultural and agential factors impacted upon outcomes in GCSE English and mathematics outcomes within 16 to 19 study programmes in a Further Education College over the years 2014/15 to 2019?

Structural factors in the form of *enablements* and *constraints* faced by students have been discussed in relation to Research Question 2. The literature review and staff interviews highlighted further structural constraints impacting on the College and academic staff. The literature review highlighted the impact on the FE sector of being subject to a 'tsunami of change' (Green, 2019) resulting from changes in the policy environment including regular changes of legislation, Secretaries of State, governing bodies and curricula amongst other things. Changes of curricula in particular were highlighted in the interviews with academic staff, with specific issues raised by participants pertaining to relevance, accessibility, difficulty and breadth of curriculum. The current focus on assessment by examination was also commented on by lecturers and students.

In general, the academic staff evaluated current government policy as limiting flexibility and professional judgement concerning what was best for individual students and as demoralising for students (Research Finding 8). De-professionalisation and managerialism (Randle and Brady, 1987; Hodgson, Edwards and Gregson, 2007) were themes identified in the literature review and the impact on students of repeated failures was an issue noted as being of concern in Ofsted's 2019 annual report (Ofsted, 2019). Four of the academic staff perceived a conflict between what they viewed as pedagogically sound and a focus on results and league tables. This conflict, in turn, appeared to lead either, to resisting this focus or different attempts to effect a compromise between this focus and sound pedagogy (Research Finding 9).

Concerns about the perceived need to upskill existing staff and recruit and retrain appropriately qualified staff were highlighted in Chapter 3 (DfE, 1999; DfEE, 2001; Roberts, 2002; Ofsted; 2003; DfES, 2004b; DfES, 2006; BIS, 2011a; Lingfield, 2012). Academics who participated in this study mentioned issues of staffing and the need to employ agency staff. Difficulty in recruiting and retaining staff may be partly

related to resourcing and the remuneration colleges are able to offer (Roberts, 2002; Ofsted, 2018). Difficulty in recruiting and retaining appropriately qualified staff, and the resulting use of agency staff, has a further negative financial impact on the College due to the high cost of agency staff. In addition, lecturers and students referred to the negative impact on students of changes in lecturers and the merging of groups to reduce the use of agency staff.

Individuals, as agents, are situated within a particular structure of relationships and this was a key theme which emerged from the research. The importance of relationships in enabling or constraining students was a clear theme in the data from the student interviews (as per Research Findings 6 and 7). As discussed in Chapter 5 (Section 5.3.5), a number of students described being supported by family either through general encouragement, direct help or the provision of tutors. Whilst no students directly mentioned relationships with family as acting as barriers in relation to English, Rebecca (HSC) and Marie (HSC) highlighted not having anyone at home to help them with their mathematics as constraining. Personal support outside of lessons emerged as being important to students.

In terms of teachers' perceptions of familial relationships enabling or constraining students' learning in English and mathematics, lecturers' perceptions were less positive than those of the students with three lecturers suggesting, as discussed in Chapter 6 (Section 6.5), that parental experiences or attitudes may act as a barrier. This difference in perception is interesting and worthy of further investigation. If parents are more supportive and engaged than lecturers believe them to be, it may be that this support could be more effectively harnessed. Parents not turning up to parents' evenings may be due to reasons other than lack of parental interest.

The impact of peer relationships also emerged from the data. As discussed in Chapter 5 (Section 5.3.5), four students described relationships with peers as enabling and one student highlighted relationship difficulties as a *constraint*. The impact of relationships also appeared in the data in students' descriptions of learning experiences where the behaviour of other students in the class impacted on their learning. There were some instances where students identified the behaviour of their

peers in the classroom as supporting a positive learning environment and other instances where they described disruptive behaviour which had constrained their learning. That students recognised the negative impact of disruptive classroom behaviour whilst in some instances nevertheless allowing themselves to be distracted and influenced by it, alerts us to the multiple influences that students are subject to. It points to the operation of norm circles (Elder-Vass, 2010) and their influence on behaviour through agents' considerations of the potential consequences of behaviours. Behaving in a particular way in a classroom may have social implications in terms of peer responses that students are more aware of or value more highly than organisational inducements to behave in a particular way.

Like the students, many of the lecturers and academic managers discussed classroom dynamics and the impact of these on learning. As discussed in Chapter 6, student behaviour was highlighted as the number one *constraint* facing lecturers. The conceptual framework employed in this research posits that reality is stratified, with the powers and properties of entities at one level not being reducible to those of entities at lower levels (Sayer, 2010). That the staff identified student behaviour and student attitudes as the two highest ranking *constraints* (Research Finding 10) necessitates them being taken seriously as structural *constraints*. Whilst lecturers experienced the behaviour and attitudes of the student body as a structural *constraint*, it is important to remember that these are emergent from, but not reducible to, the behaviour of individual students. Archer's (1995) morphogenetic model highlights the role of agency in bringing about structural change. An improved understanding of the beliefs of students and how these impact on attendance and behaviour may facilitate improved dialogue and co-operation between students and lecturers and ultimately effect structural changes leading to improved GCSE outcomes.

Six of the staff participants interviewed mentioned the impact on behaviour and classroom dynamics of the decision to group students with their vocational peers for English and mathematics as opposed to streaming them by ability. Five of these reported positively on this, and the sixth reported that whilst it had not worked as well for her, she knew that other academics felt that it had been an improvement.

These views are interesting in light of the students' comments about being placed with their peers discussed above, i.e. that they felt more comfortable in these groups. Perhaps Rebecca's (HSC) comment about feeling less judged in these groups could be linked to a reduced perception of a need to play to an audience.

That lecturers recognised the significant impact of relationships was evidenced by the fact that many of their strategies which they described can be viewed as relational. Lecturers discussed building 'rapport' with students, getting to know students and seeking to foster more equal, collaborative relationships with students. In addition, the importance of being encouraging and positive were stressed.

Whilst lecturers identified student attitudes as a structural constraint, this research found a divergence in the data between lecturers' perceptions of student attitudes to English and mathematics and students' stated attitudes, particularly regarding mathematics. As discussed in Chapter 6, eight out of ten staff participants highlighted student attitudes as a significant *constraint* to teaching and learning with seven of the participants expressing the opinion that students being unconcerned about failure presented a *constraint* to learning. The data suggested that staff participants assumed that students' attitudes were more negative towards mathematics than English. Three referred to the 'societal message' that it is okay to be bad at mathematics. It is, therefore, interesting that, as per Research Finding 4, students did not downplay the importance of mathematics with mathematics being viewed by more students as relevant to their career or life goals than English. This suggests that the notion of students being unconcerned about failure requires further investigation. The fact that the student data suggested that this perceived lack of concern about failure is not the result of a lack of recognition of the importance of the subjects, suggests that the lecturers' attempts to improve engagement by stressing how important it is to pass the subjects may be missing the point. In order to engage students, as agents, in productive dialogue with the aim of encouraging them to value the importance of English and mathematics and ultimately improve their attendance and effort it is important to understand how they feel about studying these subjects. It is crucial to accurately understand what the barriers are if

attempts to remove or reduce the impact of them are to be effective. This implication for practice is further discussed in Section 7.3.

The above highlights the importance of effective communication, and barriers and *enablements* in relation to this emerged as a second key theme from interviews with academic staff. Good communication and closer working were mentioned by most staff participants both in relation to practices and strategies that were perceived to be working well and as development points. A key area of communication highlighted was communication between English and mathematics lecturers and vocational staff, with seven of the academic staff arguing that improved communication between these groups had had a positive impact. The benefits of this improved communication and closer working were seen to be increased buy-in from vocational lecturers concerning the importance of English and mathematics within the Study Programme. This was seen as leading to consistent messaging regarding the importance of the resits; greater support for the English and mathematics lecturers; English and mathematics lecturers being able to make their materials increasingly vocationally relevant; vocational staff being able to embed mathematics into lessons; issues being dealt with more quickly; and the ability to celebrate student success.

It was clear that the English and mathematics lecturers valued feeling supported by vocational colleagues and being able to present a cross-college 'united front' supporting the importance of English and mathematics. This was further reflected in the fact that four of the academic staff felt that communication and closer working between English and mathematics staff and vocational staff was an area for further development. This raises the interesting question of why closer working and presenting a united front had still not been wholly achieved. Vocational lecturers were not interviewed in this research, but investigation into their beliefs and attitudes and the *enablements* and *constraints* they perceive in relation to supporting students with English and mathematics may prove fruitful. Social realism recognises the complexity of open systems where multiple mechanisms are in operation. It may be that competing pressures within the College, for example a concern with pass rates on core learning aims, deter vocational lecturers from encouraging learners to

attend less popular elements of their study programme. Other areas cited as important in improving communication and closer working were closer working between the Heads, collaborations within the English and mathematics team, links with parents, and consultation of staff by management.

In terms of cultural factors shaping English and mathematics GCSE outcomes, this research has focused on the messages students hear about the value and relevance of studying these subjects. This research identified a wide variety of 'messages' about English and mathematics being promoted by the College. The message that was referred to most frequently by the staff participants, being referred to by seven out of ten, was that around progress being more important than achieving a grade 4. Other messages identified by staff participants as being promoted in the College concerning English and mathematics, in descending order of the number of participants who mentioned them, were as follows: they are necessary for progression, if you 'pass' it you can drop it, literacy and numeracy are life skills, they are required for employment, they are vocationally relevant, a 'pass' is achievable, it's dictated by government, it's only an exam, mathematics is good brain training, you need to persevere, the resits are a new start, it's personal development and you learn from failure.

If students, as agents, are viewed as formulating courses of action based on beliefs and values, along with perceptions of *enablements* and *constraints*, it is important to seek to clarify whether students are hearing the messages that academics believe are being promoted and, furthermore, how they are responding to these messages. The students who were interviewed were asked what had shaped how they viewed studying English and mathematics, and whether certain people's opinions or certain messages had been important, and their responses were discussed in Chapter 5. Students did not generally provide very detailed answers in response to this question. It is nevertheless noteworthy that none of the students interviewed referred to the 'message' that making progress was more important than achieving a 'good pass'. This may be due to this being a message that is being promoted by the English and mathematics lecturers but not more broadly. It is a potentially important message given the concern that resits may be viewed as a punishment (Ofsted, 2018), which

may result from students being told, for example, that if they pass their English or mathematics, they will not need to study it anymore.

How student attendance and effort in studying for the GCSE English and mathematics resits were potentially shaped by students' beliefs about the value of studying these subjects, and their perceptions of *enablements* and *constraints* were discussed in detail in Chapter 5. It is worth noting here that the analysis of the quantitative data in Chapter 5 did find higher attendance to be linked to higher mean average progress in English and mathematics (Research Finding 3), thus confirming the importance of dialogue with students to encourage high attendance.

From a student point of view, they will confront how their mathematics and English are delivered as a structure. It needs to be borne in mind, however, that whatever strategies and approaches a college endorses, how individual lecturers teach is mediated by their *internal conversations*. One key area of intra-group divergence found in the data was regarding teachers' beliefs about, or approaches to, effective pedagogy. There were some areas which appeared to provide common ground for a number of the academics. For example, four lecturers highlighted the use of project-based work as an effective teaching method and three staff participants spoke about the importance of making the teaching relevant, with two explicitly relating this to vocational contextualisation. On the other hand, two lecturers recognised their approaches as being different to those of their colleagues with one refusing to teach students 'a method to pass an exam', choosing to focus instead on developing problem-solving skills, and the other focusing almost exclusively on getting students through the exam. Both of these dissenting voices clearly explained their approaches, which they both recognised as not common across the College, as being rooted in what they believed to be effective, and in one case what they believed to be the point of education. Differences of pedagogical approach rooted in beliefs and values are likely to be relatively long-standing. There was some evidence of lecturers changing their pedagogical approaches as a result of involvement in teaching initiatives. It was suggested by one academic manager, however, that changes in pedagogy adopted as a result of engagement in trials were short-lived. These differences and changes in pedagogical approach are potentially significant given the value placed on

consistency by lecturers and students, a third key theme. Potential implications of this finding for practice are discussed in Section 7.3.

The issue of consistency, or indeed lack of it, was an area of convergence between staff and student data cited in relation to a number of contexts by both students and academics, and not solely in terms of pedagogy. Staff participants provided insight into the issue, pointing to some structural factors leading to inconsistency. One issue that was referred to by both students and staff participants was changes in lecturer. Three students highlighted issues they had faced as a result of changes in lecturer. Lecturers and academic managers similarly recognised student experiences of changes of lecturer and/or group in year as constraining, explaining the merging of groups following the November resits as resulting from financial pressures and highlighting the lack of stability provided by a reliance on agency staff.

In addition to structural *constraint*s arising from a shortage of suitably qualified staff and financial *constraints* leading to students experiencing a lack of consistency in lecturing staff, one lecturer highlighted the impact of changes in the externally prescribed curriculum. Whilst students did not experience changes of curriculum in-year, those continuing to resit their GCSEs over a number of years may have experienced a change. Even for students who were not impacted in this way, however, the quality of the teaching they received may have been impacted by lecturers having to learn and teach a new syllabus. Helen suggested that 'it took the staff a couple of years to get their heads around the new GCSEs, and, you know, what they looked like, what they meant, to be sure that they teach effectively'. As discussed in Chapter 6, lecturer comments suggested that in some cases the changes to curricula were substantial.

Regular changes in curricula make it difficult to build on experience in delivering a particular syllabus and to refine and improve teaching strategies. This may relate to the observation, referred to in Chapter 6, that learning from pilot projects often appears to be lost. There are likely to be additional reasons for this, including financial and reputational incentives for colleges to become involved in new trials and projects

which leads to approaches currently being used being superseded. This is another expression of 'churn' in the sector.

7.3 Implications for practice: key themes

7.3.1 Relationships

The priority accorded to relationships by both students and the academic staff suggests that this is an area worthy of consideration in order to improve practice. Perhaps the first area to consider as potentially fruitful is 'human' support for students with their English and mathematics outside of lessons. Students spoke positively of support from the college staff, private tutors, family, and peers. In this context, it is worth remembering that lecturer perceptions were not as positive as student reports in terms of the support provided by families. Engaging with parents to empower them to support their sons and daughters may be an avenue worthy of further investigation. As mentioned in Chapter 2, the Behavioural Insight Team reported on the benefits of working with student-nominated supporters to encourage improved attendance (Groot, Sanders and Rogers, 2017). Students in this research suggested that they valued or needed support in the form of someone to support them in their studies outside of the classroom as well as support to persevere with their studies. One alternative may be to offer 'live' online support which would be available to students without the necessity of them making the long journey into college or facing arriving home late after a long bus journey home. Virtual classrooms have become more familiar to lecturers and students during covid-19 lockdowns. Another possibility would be to recruit volunteers to support students in homework clubs. Seven staff participants mentioned differences of attitude and behaviour between adult learners who came back to retake English and mathematics after a break in study and students on 16-19 study programmes, suggesting the adults were more motivated than the students on 16-19 Study Programmes. It may be that some of these students would be interested in supporting with homework clubs if they were looking to progress into careers in teaching or working with young people. It requires bearing in mind that, from an Archerian standpoint, the young people in this study will not yet have attained the status of an actor through the adoption of a role (Archer, 1995). Hearing the stories of young people who are slightly further forward

in their journeys may prove fruitful in informing their *internal conversations* and supporting their formulation of goals.

In terms of supporting the development of enabling relationships, this study did uncover one practice that appears to have been positively received by both students and lecturers and is therefore possibly worthy of consideration in other settings. This was the grouping of students for English and mathematics by vocational pathway. Six of the staff participants referred to this as having had a positive effect. It was perceived to be beneficial as it both enabled lecturers to make their content more vocationally relevant and had a positive impact on classroom behaviour. It was also referred to positively by two students, both of whom reported that studying for the GCSEs with their peers from their vocational course was more comfortable for them.

7.3.2 Communication

The data from this study suggest that if messaging about the value of engaging with the English and mathematics GCSEs is to be effective it needs to be more nuanced, and a two-way dialogue is needed to enable lecturers to accurately understand student perspectives and students to have their doubts and areas of scepticism addressed. The views expressed by the students concerning the retakes suggested their attitudes were perhaps not as negative as teachers perceived them to be. It does remain true that, as discussed in Chapter 5, whilst all students felt that continuing to study mathematics was of some relevance to their future life or career, only ten out of the fifteen students saw English as having some relevance. In addition, many of the students queried the relevance of certain elements of the curriculum or only highlighted basic level skills not required to achieve a 'good pass' as relevant. This assessment of the lack of relevance of some areas of the curriculum to students' lives and future careers was shared by some of the academic staff, as discussed in Chapter 6. The relevance of the curriculum to students will vary depending on their individual goals. The data showed, for example, that some Level 3 Electrical Engineering students were able to see the value of some of the skills required for the higher mathematics paper whereas none of the Health and Social Care students were. It may be that individual conversations with students in personal tutorials may be of value. For the Health and Social Care students, whilst they may not use the skills

required for a 'good pass' on a regular basis in careers in health, it remains the case that a 'good pass' is an entry requirement to many health careers. It may again be the case that students who have returned as adults to study their GCSEs in order to meet the entry requirements for degrees in the health care field, for example nursing, may have potential as positive mentors for these Level 3 students.

As discussed in Section 7.2 there was some divergence between *enablements* and *constraints* identified by students and those identified by lecturers and academic managers. This may be another area for fruitful dialogue. It may be that support would be available through, for example, hardship funds or general college support services, that could help to reduce or remove some of the barriers which lecturers identified students as facing.

7.3.3 Consistency

Consistency was a final key theme identified in this research. Consistency was viewed positively by both lecturers and students with consistency of lecturer being perceived as enabling and changes in lecturer as constraining. This is one area where structural forces over which the College has little power appear to play a large part. Changes of curricula and conditions of funding had dictated what the College delivered and to whom. In addition, the challenges faced by the College in recruiting and retaining suitable staff, which led to the use of agency staff and changes of lecturer for students, have been noted to be long-standing and characteristic of the sector (Roberts, 2002; BIS, 2011a). One area of (lack of) consistency over which the College may have more influence is in the area of pedagogical approach. Looking to embed learning from successful pilots before trialling new initiatives would appear to be potentially fruitful. Again, lecturer agency needs to be borne in mind and there were clear differences in approaches taken by lecturers relating to their own values and beliefs about teaching. Could this be managed in a way that does not impact on consistency for students and which meets student needs? This also relates to the question of 'what works for whom and in what circumstances?' Charlotte, the lecturer who most strongly favoured 'teaching to the test', worked mainly with students on the D/C border. An observation by Michael of students trying new techniques in sessions but being unwilling to use them in a mock exam may be of

relevance here. It may be, for example, that students who are nearer to the borderline would prefer to strengthen their use of familiar techniques but students for whom past techniques had been working less well may like to try new ones. Again, dialogue with students may help to inform practice in this area.

7.4 Contributions to policy and theory

As discussed in Chapter 3, the FE sector has been subjected to a 'tsunami of change' (Green, 2012, p. 58) in recent years and this shows little signs of abating. Furthermore, new changes that are introduced often resemble previous policies which proved unsuccessful before and are likely to prove unsuccessful in subsequent iterations. One example of such change is making a pass in a vocational qualification dependent upon passing literacy and numeracy qualifications as was introduced with the new diplomas (Isaacs, 2013) and is suggested to have contributed to their demise. During the initial roll out of the new T Levels, achievement of a grade 4 in GCSE English and mathematics was to be a requirement of passing the T Level qualifications (DfE, 2018b). However, in November 2021, the Secretary of State for Education announced that the requirement to pass English and mathematics GCSEs in order to achieve the T Level was being removed (Zahawi, 2018). The reason given was colleges reporting that this may act as a barrier to rewarding, technical careers for some students. This highlights that colleges are still struggling to achieve the goal of supporting all learners studying level 3 vocational qualification courses to obtain grade 4s in GCSE English and mathematics. This findings from research point to ongoing structural issues which need to be addressed by policy makers. One longstanding issue relates to the ability of the sector to recruit and retain appropriately qualified staff. Staff participants in this study discussed problems arising from the College having to use agency staff (Chapter 6, Section 3.1). Roberts (2002) linked the challenges in recruiting mathematics teachers to the more lucrative options available. The continued financial challenge faced by colleges, even in relation to other sectors of education, was identified as a structural constraint by staff participants. The resourcing of colleges, particularly in relation to delivering English and mathematics, requires further consideration by policy makers.

Issues relating to curriculum featured in Chapter 3 and were also identified as structural constraints in the interviews with academic staff (Chapter 6, Section 6.3.1). Constraints identified in this study, particularly in relation to the mathematics curriculum, included the size and increased difficulty of the curriculum, regular changes in curriculum, assessment by examination, and vocational relevance. Whether GCSEs are the best vehicle for improving the literacy and numeracy skills of vocational students has been more widely questioned (Ofsted, 2016; Smith, 2017). This is a further area of policy that requires consideration.

A further implication for policy development highlighted by this thesis pertains to the vital importance of recognising agency and the need to engage with academics and learners on issues relating to, for example, curriculum. Constructive dialogue in which perceived constraints are aired and addressed and lessons previously learnt are heeded may reduce the need for policy 'churn' (Norris and Adam, 2017, p. 3) and re-invention.

This research adopted a conceptual framework which prioritised individuals' *internal conversations* and sought to identify, amongst other things, students' beliefs and values regarding the GCSE resits and the *enablements* and *constraints* they perceived in relation to achieving 'good' passes in these subjects. It was clear from the interviews with students that they had, to varying degrees, engaged with the 'project' of working towards their English and mathematics GCSEs and had a perception of some *enablements* and *constraints*. This supports Archer's (2000) assertion that despite not having attained a fixed identity, young people are engaged in an internal conversation about the type of person they want to be and what is important to them. One might anticipate, on the basis of this conceptual framework, that individuals with more fixed identities and clearer goals may engage more fully with programmes in line with their personally formulated projects. This was supported in this study in that lecturers reported a marked difference in attitudes and behaviours between adult students returning to study English and mathematics and younger students on 16 to 19 study programmes (Chapter 6, Section 6.3). This highlights the need to consider carefully how we effectively engage young people.

7.5 Implications for further research

The research design for this project was a mixed-methods case study rooted in a social realist (Archer, 1995) conceptual framework. The focus was on students' *internal conversations* and their perceptions of *enablements* and *constraints* in relation to their English and mathematics studies and their GCSE resits. Whilst finding a degree of convergence around some key themes, for instance the importance of relationships and consistency, the study has largely highlighted complexity and the differential responses of agents based on a range of factors. It has highlighted that two students may respond to a situation differently as a result of different beliefs or values or the existence, or perception of, different *enablements* and *constraints*.

This research focused on one College and interviews were conducted with a small proportion of the students studying GCSE resits. The results, therefore, will not provide a complete picture of all the factors impacting on the GCSE resits within the College which, given the complex nature of the social world as an open system, would be an unrealistic aim. Furthermore, in terms of generalisability, different colleges will have a different mix of structural, cultural and agential factors in operation, and it is to be expected, therefore, that different themes would emerge as significant. Nevertheless, this research highlights the need to continue to conduct qualitative research alongside quantitative research to understand mechanisms in operation at various levels which may support or hinder the effectiveness of different programmes as well as quantitative research into 'what works'.

The importance of effective communication and positive relationships were highlighted by participants in this research. This suggests that future research could engage academic staff, including staff delivering vocational qualifications, and students in dialogue about how students could best be supported, with agreed suggestions for improvements and enhancements being piloted and evaluated through participatory action research.

7.6 Personal reflection on my research Journey

As a researcher, hearing the stories and thoughts of students and academic staff has been a privilege. The responsibility to accurately represent their positions and draw valid inferences is one which I have keenly felt. I have sought to enable their voices to be heard. Through conducting this research my sensitivity to differential impacts of policies and practices and unintended consequences has been heightened. This experience will continue to shape my practice through a strengthened commitment to understanding and responding to the voices of students and academic staff, and considering the *enablements* and *constraints* they face, in order to improve the experiences of students.

7.6 Conclusion

Improving literacy and numeracy skills remains high on the government's skills agenda. Against this backdrop, Ofsted have reported repeatedly that the government's policy on GCSE resits for students on 16 to 19 has not been leading to the desired outcomes (Ofsted, 2015a; Ofsted, 2016; Ofsted, 2017; Ofsted, 2018). This research has incorporated the views of lecturers on the policy and on barriers to its implementation. Most importantly, it has included the voice of students such as Marie:

> it's quite frustrating because I'm worried that I'm not going to get it because I find it so hard and I swear like every year the grade boundaries go up. Where this year I got like 126 and I was thinking, oh, well I remember, roughly, and like this year it was like 146 to pass. I was like, great, so it was still like that gap. And I think that's what I find frustrating because I know, like, you come away from doing an exam like, I've done quite well, you feel like you've done quite well, it's just a bit like, yeah…. (Marie)

It is not the case that students are not engaged with the GCSE resits. Some students, similar to Marie, are acutely aware of their past performances and feel worried and frustrated about their attempts to achieve a 'good pass'. Others, as discussed throughout, respond differently but are nevertheless making agential decisions and behavioural responses. It may be that we have not developed an adequate

understanding of students' values and beliefs about the GCSE resits, the *constraints* and *enablements* they face and how we can most productively support them. Whilst the condition of funding was relaxed from 2019/20, with students with a grade 2 or below in their GCSE who subsequently achieve a level 2 Functional Skill no longer being required to continue to work towards the GCSE, substantial numbers of students are still being required to resit their English and mathematics GCSEs. Students are agents, not passive recipients of educational programmes, and need to be effectively engaged if outcomes are to be improved.

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List of Acronyms

ACME Advisory Committee on Mathematics Education

AVCE Advanced Vocational Certificates of Education

BERA British Educational Research Association

BIS Department for Business, Innovation and Skills

BME Black and Minority Ethnic Group

CPD Continuing Professional Development

CTLLS Certificate in Teaching in the Lifelong Learning Sector

DBIS Department for Business, Innovation and Skills

DCSF Department for Children, Schools and Families

DfE Department for Education

DfEE Department for Education and Employment

DfES Department for Education and Skills

DIUS Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills

DTI Department of Trade and Industry

DTLLS Diploma in Teaching in the Lifelong Learning Sector

EEF Education Endowment Fund

ESFA Education and Skills Funding Agency

ETF Education and Training Foundation

EU European Union

FE Further Education

FEFC Further Education Funding Council

FENTO Further Education National Training Organisation

GCSE General Certificate of Secondary Education

GERM Global Education Reform Movement

GNVQ General National Vocational Qualification

IfL Institute for Learning

LA Local Authority

LDD learning Difficulties and Disabilities

LEP Local Employment Partnership

LLUK Lifelong Learning UK

LSC Learning and Skills Council

LSIS Learning and Skills Improvement Service

NART National Achievement Rates Table

NPM New Public Management

NVQ National Vocational Qualification

OECD Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development

PTLLS Preparing to Teach in the Lifelong Learning Sector

QCA Qualifications and Curriculum Authority

QIA Quality Improvement Agency

QTLS Qualified Teacher Learning and Skills

SET Society for Education and Training

SFA Skills Funding Agency

SfL Skills for Life

SpLD Specific Learning Difficulties

SSA Subject Sector Area

TEC Training and Enterprise Council

TLA Teaching, Learning and Assessment

Appendices

Appendix 1: Interview schedule for lecturers/ academic managers (semi-structured interview)

1. How do you view the current government policy with regard to GCSE English and maths within 16 to 19 Study Programmes?
    - Impact on the college?
    - Impact on teaching?
    - Impact on students?

2. Do you have a view on any previous policies with regard to English or maths for 16-19 learners?
    - Impact on the college?
    - Impact on teaching?
    - Impact on students?

3. What messages are currently promoted within the college to support student engagement with GCSE English and maths? (Differences by group, e.g. SSA, gender, BME, LDD?)
    - Effectiveness of messages?
    - More effective messages you have experience of or are aware of?

4. What do you think works well in the college in terms of teaching and supporting learners with developing their English?
    - Organisation and management? (Differences by group, e.g. SSA, gender, BME, LDD, SSA?)
    - Teaching, learning and assessment strategies? (Differences by group, e.g. SSA, gender, BME, LDD?)

5. What do you think could be improved in terms of teaching and supporting learners on 16-19 study programmes with GCSE English? (Differences by group, e.g. SSA, gender, BME, LDD?)

- Organisation and management? (Differences by group, e.g. SSA, gender, BME, LDD?)
- Teaching, learning and assessment strategies? (Differences by group, e.g. SSA, gender, BME, LDD?)

6. Are there any other factors which you think either act as barriers or support students on 16-19 programmes of study in terms of developing their English skills?
    - Individual factors?
    - Structural factors?
    - Cultural factors?

7. What do you think works well in the college in terms of teaching and supporting learners with developing their mathematics?
    - Organisation and management? (Differences by group, e.g. SSA, gender, BME, LDD?)
    - Teaching and learning strategies? (Differences by group, e.g. SSA, gender, BME, LDD?)

8. What do you think could be improved in terms of teaching and supporting learners on 16-19 study programmes with GCSE mathematics? (Differences by group, e.g. SSA, gender, BME, LDD?)
    - Organisation and management? (Differences by group, e.g. SSA, gender, BME, LDD?)
    - Teaching and learning strategies? (Differences by group, e.g. SSA, gender, BME, LDD?)

9. Are there any other factors which you think either act as barriers or support students on 16-19 programmes of study in terms of developing their mathematics skills?
    - Individual factors?

- Structural factors?
- Cultural factors?

10. Is there anything else you would like to add?

Appendix 2: Interview schedule for students (semi-structured interview)

1. Please tell me about the course you are on.
    - Main qualification.
    - Progress in relation to achieving English and maths GCSEs

2. Please tell me about your experiences of learning English.
    - Things that have helped (Past learning experiences/ expectations of others/ support from family and friends/ resources in the home etc.)
    - Things that have hindered (Past learning experiences/ expectations of others/ support from family and friends/ resources in the home etc.)

3. How do you feel about studying GCSE English as part of your course?
    - How well do you attend?
    - How hard do you work in and out of class?

4. How do you find the teaching and support offered by the college in English?
    - What works well?
    - What could be improved?

5. How relevant do you think studying English is to you?
    - Career goals?
    - Life in general?

6. Please tell me about your experiences of learning maths.
    - Things that have helped (Past learning experiences/ expectations of others/ support from family and friends/ resources in the home etc.)
    - Things that have hindered (Past learning experiences/ expectations of others/ support from family and friends/ resources in the home etc.)

7. How do you feel about studying GCSE maths as part of your course?
    - How well do you attend?
    - How hard do you work in and out of class?

8. How do you find the teaching and support offered by the college in maths?
    - What works well?
    - What could be improved?

9. How relevant do you think studying maths is to you?
    - Career goals?
    - Life in general?

10. What has been important in shaping how you feel about studying English and maths?
    - Have certain people's opinions been important?
    - Have certain messages been important?

11. Can you think of anything that would make studying these subjects seem more important or valuable?

12. Is there anything else you would like to add?

Appendix 3: Participant Information Sheet for students

University of East Anglia

Fern Jest

Research Student

15th November 2018

Faculty of Social Sciences

School of Education and Lifelong Learning

University of East Anglia

Norwich Research Park

Norwich NR4 7TJ

United Kingdom

Engaging *internal conversations*? The interplay of structure, culture and agency, and how they affect GCSE English and Mathematics results in *16-19 study programmes*

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION STATEMENT – Student

(1) What is this study about?

You are invited to take part in a research study about the factors affecting GCSE English and mathematics outcomes in 16 to 19 study programmes. You have been invited to participate in this study because I am interested in how you feel about studying English and/ or mathematics GCSE as part of your course, what affects how you feel about studying these subjects and what you think helps and hinders you in studying these subjects. This Participant Information Statement tells you about the research study. Knowing what is involved will help you decide if you want to take part in the study. Please read this sheet carefully and ask questions about anything that you don't understand or want to know more about.

Participation in this research study is voluntary. By giving consent to take part in this study you are telling me that you:

- ✓ Understand what you have read.
- ✓ Agree to take part in the research study as outlined below.
- ✓ Agree to the use of your personal information as described.

(2) Who is running the study?

The study is being carried out by the following researcher:

- Fern Jest, UEA Research Student

The study is being supervised by:

- Dr Agnieszka Bates, Lecturer in Education, School of Education and Lifelong Learning

(3) What will the study involve for me?

You will be interviewed about how you feel about studying GCSE English and mathematics; what factors you feel, now and in the past, help or hinder you in studying these subjects; and what factors have shaped how you view studying these subjects.

The interview will be arranged at a time convenient for you and will be held in a meeting/ tutorial room at City College Norwich.

The interview will be audio recorded.

(4) How much of my time will the study take?

The interview will take up to an hour.

(5) Do I have to be in the study? Can I withdraw from the study once I've started?

Being in this study is completely voluntary and you do not have to take part. Your decision whether to take part will not affect your current or future relationship with the researchers or anyone else at the University of East Anglia or City College Norwich.

If you decide to take part in the study and then change your mind later, you are free to withdraw at any time. You can do this by contacting Fern Jest on f.jest@uea.ac.uk

You are free to stop the interview at any time. Unless you say that you want us to keep them, any recordings will be erased and the information you have provided will not be included in the study results. You may also refuse to answer any questions that you do not wish to answer during the interview. If you decide at a later time to withdraw from the study your information will be removed from our records and will not be included in any results, up to 31st July 2020 when the data will have been analysed and written up.

(6) Are there any risks or costs associated with being in the study?

Apart from giving up your time, we do not expect that there will be any risks or costs associated with taking part in this study.

(7) Are there any benefits associated with being in the study?

Participating in this study will provide you with a chance to share how you feel about studying for your GCSE English and/ or mathematics and what you find helpful or not. It is hoped that this will help to make things better for future students.

(8) What will happen to information about me that is collected during the study?

By providing your consent, you are agreeing to us collecting personal information about you for the purposes of this research study. Your information will only be used for the purposes outlined in this Participant Information Statement, unless you consent otherwise. Data management will follow the 1998 Data Protection Act and the University of East Anglia Research Data Management Policy (2013).

Your information will be stored securely and your identity/information will be kept strictly confidential, except as required by law. Study findings may be published, but you will not be identified in these publications if you decide to participate in this study. In this instance, data will be stored for a period of 10 years and then destroyed.

The information you provide in the interview will be audio recorded and then typed up and used for analysis. Any quotes used would not have your name attached to them.

The results will be published in my thesis and may also be published in journal and/ or conference presentations.

Electronic data will be stored on a password protected computer or encrypted hard drive and hardcopy data will be stored in locked file storage. The audio recording of your interview will be deleted once the interview has been typed up. Only my supervisors at the UEA and I will have access to your interview.

You have a right to access the data that I hold about you and can request a copy of the interview transcript either at the time of the interview or by emailing me on f.jest@uea.ac.uk

(9) What if I would like further information about the study?

When you have read this information, I will be available to discuss it with you further and answer any questions you may have. If you would like to know more at any stage during the study, please feel free to contact me, Fern Jest, Research student, on f.jest@uea.ac.uk

(10) Will I be told the results of the study?

You have a right to receive feedback about the overall results of this study. You can tell me that you wish to receive feedback by ticking the relevant box on the consent form. This feedback will be in the form of a one-page summary of the findings. You will receive this feedback after the study is finished.

(11) What if I have a complaint or any concerns about the study?

The ethical aspects of this study have been approved under the regulations of the University of East Anglia's School of Education and Lifelong Learning Research Ethics Committee.

If there is a problem please let me know. You can contact me, Fern Jest, via email at f.jest@uea.ac.uk

If you would like to speak to someone else you can contact my supervisor:

Dr. Agnieszka Bates

School of Education and Lifelong Learning

University of East Anglia

NORWICH NR4 7TJ

agnieszka.bates@uea.ac.uk, 01603 592627.

If you are concerned about the way this study is being conducted or you wish to make a complaint to someone independent from the study, please contact please contact the Head of the School of Education and Lifelong Learning, Professor Richard Andrews, at Richard.Andrews@uea.ac.uk.

(12) OK, I want to take part – what do I do next?

You need to fill in one copy of the consent form and return it to me when we meet if you agree to participate in the study.

Please keep the letter, information sheet and the 2nd copy of the consent form for your information.

This information sheet is for you to keep

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM (1st Copy to Researcher)

I, ... [PRINT NAME], agree to take part in this research study.

In giving my consent I state that:

- ✓ I understand the purpose of the study, what I will be asked to do, and any risks/benefits involved.

- ✓ I have read the Participant Information Statement and have been able to discuss my involvement in the study with the researcher if I wished to do so.

- ✓ The researcher has answered any questions that I had about the study and I am happy with the answers.

- ✓ I understand that being in this study is completely voluntary and I do not have to take part. My decision whether to be in the study will not affect my relationship with the researchers or anyone else at the University of East Anglia or City College Norwich now or in the future.

- ✓ I understand that I can withdraw from the study at any time.

- ✓ I understand that I may stop the interview at any time if I do not wish to continue, and that unless I indicate otherwise any recordings will then be erased and the information provided will not be included in the study. I also understand that I may refuse to answer any questions I don't wish to answer.

- ✓ I understand that personal information about me that is collected over the course of this project will be stored securely and will only be used for

purposes that I have agreed to. I understand that information about me will only be told to others with my permission, except as required by law.

✓ I understand that the results of this study may be published, and that publications will not contain my name or any identifiable information about me.

I consent to:

- **Audio-recording** YES ☐ NO ☐

- **Would you like to receive feedback about the overall results of this study?**

YES ☐ NO ☐

If you answered **YES**, please indicate your preferred form of feedback and address:

☐ Postal: _____

_____

☐ Email: _____

.....

Signature

.....

PRINT name

.....

Date

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM (2nd Copy to Participant)

I, ... [PRINT NAME], agree to take part in this research study.

In giving my consent I state that:

- ✓ I understand the purpose of the study, what I will be asked to do, and any risks/benefits involved.

- ✓ I have read the Participant Information Statement and have been able to discuss my involvement in the study with the researcher if I wished to do so.

- ✓ The researcher has answered any questions that I had about the study and I am happy with the answers.

- ✓ I understand that being in this study is completely voluntary and I do not have to take part. My decision whether to be in the study will not affect my relationship with the researchers or anyone else at the University of East Anglia or City College Norwich now or in the future.

- ✓ I understand that I can withdraw from the study at any time.

- ✓ I understand that I may stop the interview at any time if I do not wish to continue, and that unless I indicate otherwise any recordings will then be erased and the information provided will not be included in the study. I also understand that I may refuse to answer any questions I don't wish to answer.

- ✓ I understand that personal information about me that is collected over the course of this project will be stored securely and will only be used for

purposes that I have agreed to. I understand that information about me will only be told to others with my permission, except as required by law.

✓ I understand that the results of this study may be published, and that publications will not contain my name or any identifiable information about me.

I consent to:

- **Audio-recording** YES ☐ NO ☐

- **Would you like to receive feedback about the overall results of this study?**

YES ☐ NO ☐

If you answered **YES**, please indicate your preferred form of feedback and address:

☐ Postal: _____

_____

☐ Email: _____

.....

Signature

.....

PRINT name

.....

Date

Appendix 4: Participant Information Sheet for academic staff

Fern Jest

Research Student

15th November 2018

Faculty of Social Sciences

School of Education and Lifelong Learning

University of East Anglia

Norwich Research Park

Norwich NR4 7TJ

United Kingdom

Email: f.jest@uea.ac.uk

Web:www.uea.ac.uk

Engaging *internal conversations*? The interplay of structure, culture and agency, and how they affect GCSE English and Mathematics results in *16-19 study programmes*

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION STATEMENT – Academic Manager/ Lecturer

(1) What is this study about?

You are invited to take part in a research study about the factors affecting GCSE English and mathematics outcomes in 16 to 19 study programmes. You have been invited to participate in this study because I am interested in how academic staff view current policy and practice in this area and what, if anything, you feel could be done to more effectively engage learners on 16 -19 study programmes with their English and mathematics studies. This Participant Information Statement tells you

about the research study. Knowing what is involved will help you decide if you want to take part in the study. Please read this sheet carefully and ask questions about anything that you don't understand or want to know more about.

Participation in this research study is voluntary. By giving consent to take part in this study you are telling me that you:

- ✓ Understand what you have read.
- ✓ Agree to take part in the research study as outlined below.
- ✓ Agree to the use of your personal information as described.

(2) Who is running the study?

The study is being carried out by the following researcher:

- Fern Jest, UEA Research Student

The study is being supervised by:

- Dr Agnieszka Bates, Lecturer in Education, School of Education and Lifelong Learning

(3) What will the study involve for me?

You will be interviewed about your views on government policy in relation to GCSE English and mathematics within 16 to 19 study programmes; factors which you think shape students' attitudes and engagement with these subjects; what you think works in engaging and supporting students in these areas and any ideas you have which you think would improve engagement and/or outcomes.

The interview will be arranged at a time convenient for you and will be held in a meeting/ tutorial room at City College Norwich.

The interview will be audio recorded.

(4) How much of my time will the study take?

The interview will take up to an hour.

(5) Do I have to be in the study? Can I withdraw from the study once I've started?

Being in this study is completely voluntary and you do not have to take part. Your decision whether to participate will not affect your current or future relationship with the researchers or anyone else at the University of East Anglia or City College Norwich.

If you decide to take part in the study and then change your mind later, you are free to withdraw at any time. You can do this by contacting Fern Jest on f.jest@uea.ac.uk

You are free to stop the interview at any time. Unless you say that you want us to keep them, any recordings will be erased and the information you have provided will not be included in the study results. You may also refuse to answer any questions that you do not wish to answer during the interview. If you decide at a later time to withdraw from the study your information will be removed from our records and will not be included in any results, up to 31st July 2020 when the data will have been analysed and written up.

(6) Are there any risks or costs associated with being in the study?

Aside from giving up your time, we do not expect that there will be any risks or costs associated with taking part in this study.

(7) Are there any benefits associated with being in the study?

Participating in this study will provide you with an opportunity to contribute to knowledge about the factors affecting outcomes in GCSE English and mathematics for students on 16 to 19 study programmes. It is hoped that this will inform the development of strategies for improving learner engagement and outcomes.

(8) What will happen to information about me that is collected during the study?

By providing your consent, you are agreeing to us collecting personal information about you for the purposes of this research study. Your information will only be used for the purposes outlined in this Participant Information Statement, unless you consent otherwise. Data management will follow the 1998 Data Protection Act and the University of East Anglia Research Data Management Policy (2013).

Your information will be stored securely and your identity/information will be kept strictly confidential, except as required by law. Study findings may be published, but you

will not be identified in these publications if you decide to participate in this study. In this instance, data will be stored for a period of 10 years and then destroyed.

The information you provide in the interview will be audio recorded and subsequently transcribed and used for analysis. Any quotes used would not be attributed to you.

The results will be published in my thesis and may also be published in journal and/or conference presentations.

Electronic data will be stored on a password protected computer or encrypted hard drive and hardcopy data will be stored in locked file storage. The audio recording of your interview will be deleted once the interview has been transcribed. Only my supervisory team and I will have access to the raw data you provide.

You have a right to access the data that I hold about you and can request a copy of the interview transcript either at the time of the interview or by emailing me on f.jest@uea.ac.uk

(9) What if I would like further information about the study?

When you have read this information, I will be available to discuss it with you further and answer any questions you may have. If you would like to know more at any stage during the study, please feel free to contact Fern Jest, Research student, f.jest@uea.ac.uk

(10) Will I be told the results of the study?

You have a right to receive feedback about the overall results of this study. You can tell me that you wish to receive feedback by ticking the relevant box on the consent form. This feedback will be in the form of a one-page summary of the findings. You will receive this feedback after the study is finished.

(11) What if I have a complaint or any concerns about the study?

The ethical aspects of this study have been approved under the regulations of the University of East Anglia's School of Education and Lifelong Learning Research Ethics Committee.

If there is a problem please let me know. You can contact me, Fern Jest, via email at f.jest@uea.ac.uk

If you would like to speak to someone else you can contact my supervisor:

Dr. Agnieszka Bates

School of Education and Lifelong Learning

University of East Anglia

NORWICH NR4 7TJ

agnieszka.bates@uea.ac.uk, 01603 592627.

If you are concerned about the way this study is being conducted or you wish to make a complaint to someone independent from the study, please contact please contact the Head of the School of Education and Lifelong Learning, Professor Richard Andrews, at Richard.Andrews@uea.ac.uk.

(12) OK, I want to take part – what do I do next?

You need to fill in one copy of the consent form and return it when we meet if you agree to participate in the study.

Please keep the letter, information sheet and the 2nd copy of the consent form for your information.

This information sheet is for you to keep

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM (1st Copy to Researcher)

I, ... [PRINT NAME], agree to take part in this research study.

In giving my consent I state that:

✓ I understand the purpose of the study, what I will be asked to do, and any risks/benefits involved.

✓ I have read the Participant Information Statement and have been able to discuss my involvement in the study with the researcher if I wished to do so.

✓ The researcher has answered any questions that I had about the study and I am happy with the answers.

✓ I understand that being in this study is completely voluntary and I do not have to take part. My decision whether to be in the study will not affect my relationship with the researchers or anyone else at the University of East Anglia or City College Norwich now or in the future.

✓ I understand that I can withdraw from the study at any time.

✓ I understand that I may stop the interview at any time if I do not wish to continue, and that unless I indicate otherwise any recordings will then be erased and the information provided will not be included in the study. I also understand that I may refuse to answer any questions I don't wish to answer.

✓ I understand that personal information about me that is collected over the course of this project will be stored securely and will only be used for purposes that I have agreed to. I understand that information about me will only be told to others with my permission, except as required by law.

✓ I understand that the results of this study may be published, and that publications will not contain my name or any identifiable information about me.

I consent to:

- **Audio-recording** YES ☐ NO ☐

- **Would you like to receive feedback about the overall results of this study?** YES ☐ NO ☐

If you answered **YES**, please indicate your preferred form of feedback and address:

☐ Postal: _____

_____

☐ Email: _____

.....

Signature

....

PRINT name

.....

Date .....

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM (2nd Copy to Participant)

I, ... [PRINT NAME], agree to take part in this research study.

In giving my consent I state that:

✓ I understand the purpose of the study, what I will be asked to do, and any risks/benefits involved.

✓ I have read the Participant Information Statement and have been able to discuss my involvement in the study with the researcher if I wished to do so.

✓ The researcher has answered any questions that I had about the study and I am happy with the answers.

✓ I understand that being in this study is completely voluntary and I do not have to take part. My decision whether to be in the study will not affect my relationship with the researchers or anyone else at the University of East Anglia or City College Norwich now or in the future.

✓ I understand that I can withdraw from the study at any time.

✓ I understand that I may stop the interview at any time if I do not wish to continue, and that unless I indicate otherwise any recordings will then be erased and the information provided will not be included in the study. I also understand that I may refuse to answer any questions I don't wish to answer.

✓ I understand that personal information about me that is collected over the course of this project will be stored securely and will only be used for purposes that I have agreed to. I understand that information about me will only be told to others with my permission, except as required by law.

✓ I understand that the results of this study may be published, and that publications will not contain my name or any identifiable information about me.

I consent to:

- **Audio-recording** YES ☐ NO ☐

- **Would you like to receive feedback about the overall results of this study?** YES ☐ NO ☐

If you answered **YES**, please indicate your preferred form of feedback and address:

☐ Postal: _____

_____

☐ Email: _____

.....

Signature

....

PRINT name

.....

Date

Appendix 5: Research Schedule – Interview dates and durations

Psuedonym and position	Date of interview	Length of Interview
Stuart (Academic Manager)	15.11.18	37 minutes
Michael (Mathematics Lecturer)	16.11.18	59 minutes
Sandra (English Lecturer)	22.11.18	33 minutes
Lucy (English Lecturer)	26.11.18	34 minutes
Phillip (Mathematics Lecturer)	26.11.18	47 minutes
Charlotte (Mathematics Lecturer)	26.11.18	32 minutes
Yvette (English Lecturer)	4.12.18	35 minutes
Helen (Academic Manager)	18.12.18	42 minutes
Belinda (Mathematics Lecturer)	18.12.18	45 minutes
Aileen (Academic Manager)	3.10.19	20 minutes
Faye (Health and Social Care Student)	25.2.19	10 minutes
Gemma (Health and Social Care Student)	25.2.19	10 minutes
Rebecca (Health and Social Care Student)	25.2.19	14 minutes
Emily (Health and Social Care Student)	4.3.19	8 minutes
Marie (Health and Social Care Student)	4.3.19	13 minutes
Sophie (Health and Social Care Student)	4.3.19	8 minutes
Charlotte (Health and Social Care Student)	18.3.19	8 minutes
Liam (Electrical Engineering Student)	30.4.19	10 minutes
Noah (Electrical Engineering Student)	30.4.19	15 minutes
Oliver (Electrical Engineering Student)	8.5.19	9 minutes
Lucas (Electrical Engineering Student)	8.5.19	7 minutes
Daniel (Motor Vehicle Student)	13.6.19	8 minutes
Haydn (Motor Vehicle Student)	13.6.19	11 minutes
Matthew (Motor Vehicle Student)	13.6.19	10 minutes
Owen (Motor Vehicle Student)	13.6.19	11 minutes

Appendix 6: Illustration of a section of the coding structure and examples of coded extracts from interviews with academic staff

Name of node	Number of interviews	Number of coded interview extracts
Structural Factors	10	283
Policy Framework	10	67
Institutional factors	10	216
Works Well	10	66
Enablements	7	10
Development points	9	37
Constraints	10	103
Timetabling & grouping issues	5	6
Student starting points	3	7
Student behaviour	9	24
Student attitudes	8	28
Staffing issues	2	3
Financial constraints	3	4
Curriculum	7	25
Lack of consequence of no effort	4	6

Key

Node

First level child-node

Second level child-node

Third level child-node

Coded interview extracts for 'Lack of consequences of no effort'

<Files\\Interview X> - § 1 reference coded [2.24% Coverage]

Reference 1 - 2.24% Coverage

there comes a point where we're saying, okay, if you're not attending English and maths, you're going to be withdrawn from your main vocational course. And it's where we back that up. And how much we back that up, because at the moment if we backed it up, we, you know, we might lose, I don't know, 25% of our GCSE

cohort. Erm, so, it's, it impacts on the other areas of their course but it's about how we follow that through and how it impacts.

<Files\\Interview X> - § 1 reference coded [1.03% Coverage]

Reference 1 - 1.03% Coverage

there is a friction between the people doing maths and English, it's not a friction exactly, but they have to be in our classes, they're not there for our classes, the people who run the main department, if they're causing trouble in maths and English, they'll do what they can to… they'll be very helpful some of them to try and nail them. But they won't throw them out the college, nor I think perhaps should they, because they are losing students who might be really good at their main course. And this is a problem.

<Files\\Interview X> - § 3 references coded [2.28% Coverage]

Reference 1 - 0.90% Coverage

But also perhaps, to back us up, you know, there's the threats that if your attendance isn't right then actually then they need to be threatened with being removed from the course, but they won't, don't do that because of funding. But the kids get to realise that.

Reference 2 - 0.96% Coverage

One student said to the other week, what is the consequence of not doing my homework? Having come from school, because at school I used to get detention, so what consequences is there here at college for not doing my homework? I said, well you won't pass. And they looked quite shocked.

Reference 3 - 0.42% Coverage

Behaviour systems – there doesn't seem to be any consequences for poor behaviour, for poor attitude and things like that, so…

<Files\\Interview X> - § 1 reference coded [0.41% Coverage]

Reference 1 - 0.41% Coverage

we don't have any direct, so I can't exclude a child from my class, I can't really do any kind of discipline.