

The experience of undergraduate mature students studying  
for a degree in a college of further education: a life history  
approach

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## Contents

### CHAPTER 1 Introduction

1.0	Introduction	10
1.1	The 'mature' student in Higher Education	14
1.2	Further Education College	17
1.3	Genesis of a thesis	19
1.4	Structure of a thesis	21
1.5	The presence of the researcher within the text	22
1.6	Theoretical context and framework	26

### CHAPTER 2 Historical Context

2.0	Introduction	31
2.1	The Robbins Report [1963]	32
2.2	The Binary Divide	40
2.3	Distance Learning and the Open University [Founded 1969]	
2.3.1	Vision and resistance	45
2.3.2	The Open University is born	47
2.3.3	The Open University and its legacy	52
2.4	The Dearing Report [1997]	
2.4.1	Purpose of the report	55
2.4.2	Increasing student numbers	56
2.4.3	Financing Higher Education	58
2.4.4	Criticism of the report and its legacy	60
2.5	Growth of Higher Education in Further Education	
2.5.1	Diversification of HE-in-FE and the introduction of the Foundation Degree	63
2.5.2	Further Education 'the country cousin'	66
2.5.3	The mature student in HE-in-FE: student perspective	70
2.6	The Wider Participation Agenda and Mature Students	
2.6.1	Widening rather than increasing participation	74
2.6.2	Widening participation of mature students	77

### CHAPTER 3 Life History Interviews

3.0	Rationale and Design	80
3.1	Gaining access and recruiting a sample	86
3.2	Ethics	92
3.3	Data collection – Life History interviews	96
3.4	Approaching the data – Thematic Analysis	100
3.5	Limitations of the study	106

### CHAPTER 4 - Group I

4.0	Introduction	108
4.1	Daisy	109
4.2	Danielle	111
4.3	India	115
4.4	Jake	117
4.5	Joe	122
4.6	Lily	124
4.7	Rowena	126
4.8	Conclusion	130

## CHAPTER 5 - Group II

5.0	Introduction	131
5.1	Aaron	131
5.2	Ben	136
5.3	Theo	143
5.4	Conclusion	145

## CHAPTER 6 - Group III

6.0	Introduction	146
6.1	Beth	146
6.2	Emilia	150
6.3	Florence	151
6.4	Conclusion	158

## CHAPTER 7 - Group IV

7.0	Introduction	160
7.1	Habbab	160
7.2	Isaac	165
7.3	Kassie	171
7.4	Katie	176
7.5	Sam	180
7.6	Conclusion	184

## CHAPTER 8 Discussion and Conclusion

8.0	Presenting the data	185
8.1	How and why HE-in-FE as much to commend it	187
8.2	Higher education and transitional space	193
8.2.1	Higher education as transitional space	200
8.3	Learner motivation, challenges and support	203
8.4	Geographical proximity	207
8.5	Financial hardship and rewards	209
8.6	Habitus and the shadow of previous educational experience	212
8.7	Health benefits of studying	218
8.8	Family and intergenerational matters	221
8.9	Identity negation and confidence, self-esteem and liberation	223
8.10	A return to the presence of the researcher within the text	230
8.11	A final personal reflection	232

References	237
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## Appendix:

- A. Participants who did not fit the research criteria
- B. Letter to Participants.
- C. Participants information sheet
- D. Informed consent

## List of tables

- Table 1. Age and gender of participants interviewed as part of this research.
- Table 2. Marital Status of participants.
- Table 3. Predetermined symbols used during life history interviews.
- Table 4. Fieldwork Grouping.
- Table 5. Percentage of mature students at HE-FE institution involved in this study.

## Abbreviations

AAT	Association of Accounting Technicians
AHE	Access to Higher Education
BAAS	British Association for the Advancement of Science
BSA	British Sociological Association
BBC	British Broadcasting Association
BIS	Department for Business, Innovation and Skills
CAT	Colleges of Advanced Technology
Cert. Ed.	Certificate in Education
Demob	Demobilisation
DVD	Digital Optical Disc
FdA	Foundation Degree
FEC	Further Education College
FETS	Further Education Training Scheme
FEFC	Further Education Funding Council
GB	Great Britain
GI	Government Issue
HE	Higher Education
HEI	Higher Education Institution
HE-in-FE	Higher Education in Further Education
HEFCE	Higher Education Funding Council for England
HESA	Higher Education Statistics Agency
HND	Higher National Diploma
IOE	Institute of Education
LEA	Local Education Authority
NCIHE	National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education
NUS	National Union of Students
OU	Open University
QAA	Quality Assurance Agency
TTC	Teacher Training Colleges
THE	Times Higher Educational
UCAS	Universities and Colleges Admissions Service
WEA	Workers' Educational Association
WP	Widening Participation
WWI	World War I
WWII	World War II
UK	United Kingdom

## ABSTRACT

Higher education in the United Kingdom has undergone considerable change following the publication of the Robbins Report (1963). One of the transformational changes that has occurred is a move towards widening participation, which has included an increase in the number of mature students as well as those from diverse backgrounds.

The opportunities that a degree-level education offers are well documented. However, returning to education following a break can be daunting, particularly for those who have had a long gap in their education or who have had negative educational experiences. Returning to education for mature students presents other risk factors both financial and social. Unlike traditional students, mature students have specific needs associated with maturity. At a personal level, an increase in confidence and self-esteem as well as changes in their sense of self may also impact on other members of their family. Nonetheless, for many, the decision to return to education can also be life changing, as my thesis will show.

Within the policy and political context of the expansion of higher education since the Robbins Report (1963), this study offers an interpretative analysis which explores, illustrates, interprets and illuminates the educational experiences of full-time mature students undertaking their first undergraduate degree in a college of Further Education.

The participant narratives begin with their early educational experiences and thence to their reasons for entering higher education, and the impact that this has had on their lives. The participants are all first-generation entrants to higher education who have entered higher education with an array of transferable skills and life experiences that they have accrued, without involving any form of academic accreditation.

A life history/narrative methodology was adopted because it generated in this instance, rich and deep data. The participants were interviewed in relatively open-ended ways, the aim being to build the confidence and trust (rapport) that is essential in eliciting personal, ingenuous responses. It is a process that enables the interviewee to tell their story in a thoughtful and reflective way, whilst the interviewer adopts a non-judgemental stance. The point about building confidence and trust in the interview relationship is that it creates a situation where people can be open and honest about their experiences - they can tell it like it is.

The completed interviews (vignettes) reveal a number of positive experiences, such as an increase in self-confidence and self-esteem, highlighting how many of the participants appear to shape and construct their own sense of identity, development and life-course. On the other hand, the data also emphasises a number of problematic areas, which include finance and the challenges of fitting full-time study in and around other commitments such as childcare and employment.





## Chapter 1 Introduction

Education is the most powerful weapon we can use to change the world  
(Mandela, 2003)

### 1.0 Mature Students: from Ethnography to Life History

The purpose of this research is to offer an interpretative analysis of the autobiographical narratives of thirty-two mature students studying for their first undergraduate degree in a college of further education (HE-in-FE) and the impact that returning to full-time study has had on their lives. It focuses on a small group of mature students who have chosen to return to education for a variety of personal reasons. Through the insights of the participants' deeply personal and powerfully significant narratives, this thesis highlights a small part of their experiences in the form of short and in some cases, emotive vignettes.

To some extent, this thesis grew out of my own personal experiences as a full-time mature student. In 2004, I had to rebuild my life as a single parent with two small boys. This prompted me to explore what options were open to me (if any) to retrain at my local college of further education. Like some of the participants in this research study, I was offered a full-time place on a combined honours degree course studying a BA (hons) Psychology and Sociology, following an interview.

Although initially the thought of returning to education was overwhelming, the experience was life-changing, not unlike some of the participants' narratives featured in this thesis. As a full-time undergraduate, I studied with a group of like-minded mature students (only 2 students in my cohort were traditional-age students). During my first year, I found life as a mature student was complex and challenging. A number of areas were particularly daunting: for example, reading academic literature, taking adequate notes that I could re-read at a later date and writing academically. These were all challenges I had to overcome whilst at the same time juggling single parenthood. In essence, like the majority of students, both traditional and non-traditional, I had to learn how to study at degree-level as well as engage with the course content itself.

My initial objective was to gain a degree classification that would enable me to undertake a Post Graduate Certificate in Education (PGCE). However, as the third and final year approached, I began to question my initial thoughts about teaching children. Fortunately, the Head of School (Social Sciences) approached me and asked if I would be interested in applying for a maternity position at the college. All thoughts of teaching children disappeared and the maternity post turned into a permanent position.

This inquiry was originally conceived as an ethnographic study to address the apparent lack of ethnographic studies within colleges of further education in the United Kingdom, specifically, their higher education provision. The gap appears to be more widespread. Writing in a Blog for an American publication, Thrift (2011:np) asks 'Why so Few Ethnographies'?

Ethnography is one of the standard research tools used by academics in the social sciences and humanities nowadays. Surprising then that academia often seems remarkably under-studied in ethnographic terms. One would have thought that universities would be fertile ground for ethnographers but there are surprisingly few studies available that I know of.

He goes on to suggest that even though ethnography is widely used by academics within the social sciences as a research tool, there are very few ethnographic studies of academic life available, especially situated within the United Kingdom. Thrift proposes three possible explanations as to why academia is under-studied in the twenty first century. The first is that it may be perceived as 'uncomfortable' - too close to home; secondly, it may be seen as 'indulgent' – academics are here to study other people; and finally, Thrift says, there is a 'distinct genre of Campus novels' that perhaps occupies the space.

The ethnographic approach was adopted initially because as a master's student, I had studied Rebekah Nathan's book *My Freshman Year, What a Professor Learned by Becoming a Student*. This ethnographic account of student life was written by a professor who registered as a student and went 'undercover' as an undergraduate freshman. Nathan conducted a participant observer study documenting the first-year experience in a college in the United States of America (USA). It was presented to us in the context of research ethics, since although

Nathan obtained permission from the gatekeepers, by going 'undercover', she did not have the informed consent of the participants in her narrative.

There are a few, though not many, published examples of ethnographic studies exploring student life, the majority of these are based on university life within the USA: Howard S. Becker, Blanche Geer, Everett C. Hughes & Anselm L. Strauss, *Boys in White* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961); Michael Moffatt's, *Coming of Age in New Jersey*, New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1989); Dorothy C. Holland and Margaret A. Eisenhart, *Education in Romance, Women, Achievement and College Culture* (Chicago: The University Press of Chicago, 1990) and, of course, Rebekah Nathan, *My Freshman Year, What a Professor Learned by Becoming a Student* (Ithaca, New York, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005).

With these ethnographic studies in mind and because of my own experiences as a mature student, my research strategy was to embed myself into the study rather than staying on the outside. In this way, I hoped to bring a measure of empathy to the research. Reay (1998:2) states that: 'all research is in one way or another autobiographical or else the avoidance of autobiography'. For example, not only had I studied at this particular college, I had also been employed within the HE-in-FE environment. I was also familiar with the framework of the college, its location within the local community and the surrounding areas, as well as the curriculum and the HE timetables. The college buildings, which include a lecture hall, classrooms and library, were very familiar to me, as were most of the staff. Not only had I lived through three-years of studying HE-in-FE and graduated as a mature student, I had enjoyed the experience and survived what Gordon and Lahelma (2003,246) refer to as the 'emotional side' of re-engaging with education.

The initial design was predicated on recruiting a core group of academically focused, self-selecting full-time mature students on a mixed gender basis, who were studying full-time for a standard Bachelor of Arts (BA) or Bachelor of Science (BSc) honours degree qualification, as opposed to those studying on a part-time, professional or vocational programme of study (for example a Foundation degree FdA). It was agreed that recruiting participants from a professional course such as nursing, midwifery or teaching could be problematical, due to what could have

been significant ethical problems. It was decided that the research should focus instead on full-time mature students studying for a degree in the social sciences and the arts and humanities in an HE-FE. Part-time mature students or those studying in a traditional university would also be disregarded.

Having gained permission from the gatekeeper to conduct the research, I used several different approaches to recruit participants, some of which were more successful than others. I found that the most successful approach was to present (with the lecturer's permission) the research study to potential participants at the beginning or end of their lectures. Despite explaining to each group of students I spoke to that taking part in the research study was confidential, a number of them discussed their involvement with other mature students, who then approached me volunteering to take part. Thus, a 'snowballing' effect was initiated (Lewis-Beck, Bryman and Futting Liao, 2004), ultimately leading to a larger sample group than was initially anticipated, and not entirely recruited by myself.

It became apparent that due to this larger than expected group and the complexity of obtaining ethical approval for an ethnographic study in this context, the initial research design was not viable within the projected time-frame. In discussion with my PhD supervisors, we decided that I had two choices. The first was to select a small group to shadow (as planned). However, by adopting this process, there was the possibility of 'missing out' on what could have been some very relevant data. The second option, which is the one that I chose, was to interview all the participants. Hence, I replaced the ethnographic research design with a life history story approach. This would involve exploring, by means of extended individual interviews, the life-history and narrative dialogues (Goodson and Sikes 2001) of a small number of mixed gender full-time mature students. This change in approach led me to Gordon and Lahelma's work (2003:249). They propose that ethnography meets life history in that they share the methodological principle of contextualization. Heyl (2010:369) too sees an overlap:

...life history interviewing fits comfortably within the ethnographic tradition since it is usually conducted over time, within relationships characterized by high levels of rapport, and with particular focus on the meanings the interviewees place on their life experiences and circumstances.

Bathmaker (2002:2) says that within life history research, the participants *choose* to narrate what can be deeply personal stories in their own words, whilst the researcher facilitates and supports the story-telling process, encouraging the participant to reveal their experiences.

However, in his book *Investigating the Teacher's Life and Work*, Goodson (2008:1) critiques the approach, warning of the temptation of simply choosing informants who appeal to one's own instinctive story lines or sympathies. This is a fairly common criticism of life history as research: that the life history interviewer chooses informants who are effectively telling his or her own story. I took heed of Goodson's words: because I had recruited more participants than originally anticipated, I could have easily chosen to interview those that I had identified with and not those who may have had a markedly different life history.

### 1.1 The 'mature' student in Higher Education.

Smith (2008:2) points out that in higher education, the term 'mature' student can include: 'non-traditional', 'adult learners', 'older students', 'non-standard' entrants as well as 'lifelong learners'. Those who are embarking on a degree through 'work-related routes' may be referred to as 'work-based learners'. Students who fall into the category of over 50-year olds may also be defined or labelled as 'Third Age' learners. The Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS: 2018) define mature students purely by age. Mature students are defined as any student aged 21 or over at the start of their studies. Higher education institutions use a variety of terms to identify, define and differentiate mature students as a group of learners from the traditional-age student who enters higher education straight from secondary education. Terms such as mature learner, adult learner, adult student, returning adult and/or adult returner are all used interchangeably ([www.hea.ac.uk](http://www.hea.ac.uk)).

Smith (2008:1) argues that the terms used to label mature students are 'ill-defined' because:

The term 'mature student' is not used exclusively by higher education. Older learners embarking on any education programme in adult education, further education and/or higher education are similarly categorised.

Regardless of the definition used to describe them, many mature students make a conscious decision to return to education. For some it is a conscious change to their career path, for others it is to increase their current employment prospects ([www.univeristies.ac.uk](http://www.univeristies.ac.uk)). Baxter and Britton (2001:88) state:

They have self-consciously made decisions about themselves and the future course of their lives. Often, these decisions involve a major change from or break with their past lives and identities.

The characteristics of mature students are varied and distinctive and they enter higher education with a diverse range of entry qualifications. Many of them have significant life experiences, typically established through, but not only, employment. It is a truism that the life experiences of a 25-year-old differs considerably from someone, say, in their 50s.

In recent years there has been a significant rise in the number of full-time mature students entering HE.<sup>1</sup> In 2014, UCAS reported that almost a quarter of full-time undergraduates were mature students. In the same report, Mary Curnock Cook, the UCAS Chief Executive, commented that:

This is a welcome reminder that higher education is not just for 18-year olds after leaving school. For many, the right time to get the most out of going to university is later in life.

In its 2018 report, UCAS recognised that

Higher education is for everyone – regardless of age. Every year, thousands of adults take the opportunity to develop themselves, and their careers, through higher education. They make up around a quarter of all full-time undergraduate applicants.

In that year, UCAS reports that just over a half of ‘mature students’ are aged between 21 and 24, 38 per cent between 25- 39 and 10 per cent are over 40 when they commenced their courses.

Lifelong learning has also been encouraged over recent years and this policy has supported and increased the number of applicants from wider participation groups, including mature students, many of whom choose to study within the further education sector. The number of mature students studying at degree level has increased considerably, and there has also been a significant rise in the number of

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<sup>1</sup> the number of mature part-time students has fallen ([www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/students/whos-in-he](http://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/students/whos-in-he))

female students entering higher education (Dyhouse, 2007:1-3, and Vernon, 2004).

Mature students are therefore a diverse group and vary in many respects. For example, a 22-year-old (defined by UCAS and HEFCE as a mature student) would not necessarily identify themselves as a mature student but may not identify themselves with the traditional 18-year-old university entrant either. A 30-year-old student, on the other hand, with family responsibilities such as a mortgage, children or a female student considering returning to work following a career break, would not necessarily identify themselves with, say, a 40-year-old student who may have undertaken higher education to coincide with a promotion or a change in their career. Older students may have taken early retirement and considered embarking on a degree-level course as part of a hobby or leisure activity, or indeed because they feel that they missed out on higher education at an earlier age. There is also a difference between students aged twenty-one who are returning to education after a short period to those students who are restarting their education following a break of several years.

Mature students will also enter higher education with a diverse range of entry qualifications. Many of them have significant life experiences, which have typically been established through employment – but of course, the life experiences of a 25-year-old differs considerably from someone say in their 50s. A further characteristic of a mature student is that many of them come from a family background where there is little or no previous experience of higher education (Wilson, 1997). Several researchers argue that the term ‘mature student’ should be re-defined as students who enter higher education aged twenty-five or over:

...as this puts a time space between those students who have recently left full-time schooling and those that are restarting their education. The suggestion is that there are different categories of learners such as 'young mature learners' i.e. those aged between 21-24 years on entry and 'older mature learners' categorised as those over 25 years (www.heacademy.ac.uk/evidencenet).

There is also recognition that mature students, through bringing their life experience, can make a significant contribution to the culture of higher education’ (Taylor, Mellor and Walton, nd:1) and to traditional students by helping ‘younger



members of the group to develop their organisational and presentation skills' (Ibid.) Moreover, Taylor et al. argue, society itself benefits from the increased education of mature students (Ibid:1).

Statistics charting the rise and in some cases the fall, in the number of mature students attending higher education courses are difficult to establish due in part to the age range of students considered for the purposes of the data collection (under or over 30) and whether distinctions are made between full or part time study. However, it does seem that an increase in the overall HE participation is associated with a dramatic rise in mature entrants:

Between the mid-1980s and mid-1990s the numbers of mature entrants to full-time undergraduate programmes doubled from 150,000 to just over 300,000 annually (Smith, 2008:2)

Taking 30 years old as a threshold, statistics published by Universities *UK Higher education in focus series – Patterns and Trends* (2014:13) found that:

Between 2003-04 and 2012-13 the number of undergraduate students aged under 30 increased by 250,000. ... and between 2003-04 and 2012-13 the number of undergraduate students aged 30 and over decreased by 159,000.

Despite this increase of mature students studying HE-in-FE, there has been little research on their experiences. I therefore thought that there was a pressing need to understand this diverse and significant cohort of students.

## 1.2 Further Education Colleges.

Further Education Colleges (FECs) have been long-standing providers of higher education and have been part of the expansion in higher education, contributing to the current diversity of higher education provision (Stewart, 1989; Parry & Thompson, 2002; Marks, 2002; Parry et al 2012). In addition to HE courses, colleges of further education offer the local community a wide range of short-term, full and part-time courses, which gives an element of flexibility and choice to students, meeting the changing need of a more diverse student population, specifically those mature students who study mainly for instrumental reasons (Tight, 2012:218). Many colleges also offer specialist subject courses, which

meet both economic and social needs of the local community by providing a unique and individual higher education provision to employers, differentiating it from the more traditional higher education institutions (Osborne et al., 2000, cited in Marks 2002:78, Parry and Thompson, 2002).

The expansion of HE-in-FE can be attributed in part, to the introduction of several diverse entry routes, which include the Access to Higher Education Diploma.

West (1995:np) states:

Access courses were a product, like the learners, of changing times. They emerged, as part of the move from the late 1970s onwards to expand opportunities to wider constituencies of learners.

Access courses prepare students who do not hold a traditional A-level qualification for study at university and is considered as a 'major pathway to higher education for adult learners' (West, 1996:4). In addition to access courses, many HE-in-FE colleges take into consideration potential learners' previous employment experience. Some of the participants in this study said that they were 'offered a place' to study at degree-level based on their work experience following a one-to-one interview with the HE-in-FE Course Director, rather than based on their educational qualifications

From the point of view of a mature student, studying HE-in-FE has several advantages (Burkhill, 2008:329). HE-in-FE, draws for the most part on local and/or regionally based-mature students. Many mature students attend Access courses before applying to HE and therefore the HE-in-FE provides a smooth transition from further education to higher-level work, by offering the learner the opportunity to continue their studies within a familiar environment in terms of location, ethos and approach to teaching and learning (Parry and Thompson, 2002). Many of the teaching staff who deliver these programmes have been trained in both the further and higher education sectors and often teach on both FE and HE courses, thus giving pedagogical continuity to those learners who progress onto degree-level study via an access course. HE-in-FE also provides mature students with the opportunity to study with likeminded people who are in structurally similar situations to themselves (class, educational background, family background, domestic responsibilities).

HE-in-FE provision is also offered for the most part on a much smaller scale than the traditional higher education institution (HEI), which some mature students may find less intimidating. For example, when I started my degree course as a mature student in 2004, there were twenty-one students in my cohort, all of whom were female and only two were traditional-age learners. says that the smaller HE-in-FE cohort may on some occasions be an advantage to mature students. For many of the mature students, the provision of HE-in-FE and the flexible accessible provision (geographical location) that it provides, is one of the most important considerations when choosing to re-engage with education. The importance of geographical location can be seen in statistics published by BIS 69 (2012:17):

The majority identified the following two reasons - their college offered the particular course/subject they wanted to study (63%), and the college was near their home/place of work (53%), which was especially the case for lone parents (65%), married students with children (61%), students aged 25 and over (58%), and those employed in part-time jobs (61%). Both these reasons also were most frequently identified as the most important ones by all student groups. This convenience factor was significant. The vast majority (80%) of students surveyed had less than an hour's journey to college, and most frequently (43%) their journey time was less than ½ an hour.

For some mature students it is the access to HE-in-FE and its proximity to their wider family support that is essential. Research undertaken in Scotland by Elliot & Brna (2009:114) with a group of non-traditional students suggests that studying HE-in-FE may be their only option to gain a degree-level qualification, because studying away from their home and in some cases, away from family responsibilities, may be impractical or impossible. Further restrictions such as financial and employment commitments may also impinge on their ability to live and study away from home. Burton, Golding Lloyd and Griffiths (2011:33) state:

Students, because of family and work commitments, may not be able to attend courses that are located at too far a distance from their residential base; HE based within an FE environment is more local and therefore a more attractive option, particularly for mature students with family commitments.

### 1.3 Genesis of a thesis.

It was during the initial phase of interviewing the participants that I discovered that for me, the most rewarding part of the research process was listening to and collecting the in-depth life history stories narrated by the participants. I found that

the life history interview allowed the participant to not only describe but gain insights into one or more specific events or experiences in their lives. I sensed as I was conducting the interviews that I was predisposed towards some of the participant's stories about studying for their degree, specifically, narratives of liberation. Many of them spoke of a feeling of freedom, being their own person and doing something for themselves rather than what they considered to be their usual label of a mother, father, husband, wife or even carer.

Whilst transcribing the interviews, I found the word 'liberation' and/or 'freedom' repeated on numerous occasions - I empathised with some of the participants when they spoke of these feelings of freedom. Perhaps in hindsight, I looked for comparisons in the stories of others with my own. Many of the participants said they felt that it was the experience of re-engaging with education and being part of a group of like-minded students who were studying because they wanted to. Several of the participants also said that for them it was the learning and thinking process that somehow freed them from the influence of the perceived educational failures of the past and lessened the grip or importance of their present domestic or occupational roles. Some of them also said that it gave them the opportunity to engage with like-minded people that they may never have met had they not had a common goal of graduating with a degree-level qualification.

Listening to some of the participants' previous experiences of education alerted me to their feelings of failure at what for some was a very young age. For many, it is at school that they learn to think of themselves as good or not so good, not very bright or not very important. Later in life, those early labels may reduce their self-esteem and may continue to shape their self-perception. The contrast between the experience that many of the participants had had of primary and secondary school with their experience of higher education was often acute and, in some respects, very poignant. Their experience of schooling was invariably one of failure and loss of self-worth; their experience of higher education, by contrast, liberated them from these past educational identities.

Several participants also highlighted that higher education had liberated or freed them from family and/or intergenerational constraints, which can also be considered as a loss of freedom, albeit of a different kind. The nature of these

constraints varied. For Beth, in her early 50s, the constraint was living with a controlling partner whilst Florence, also in her 50s, felt restricted in all that she did by her aged parents whose expectations and gender perceptions matched those that her ex-husband had pressed on her during their years of marriage. For Emilia, marriage itself provided little or no support: 'I felt that I was constrained, being strangled'.

In one instance, a participant described his re-engagement with education as a liberation from the day-to-day 'trials and tribulations' of suffering from a debilitating illness. The participant (Ben) said that whilst he was reading academic journals, and/or concentrating on the next lecture, assignment or exam, he was not feeling sorry for himself or frantically researching the internet for a miracle cure to his illness.

It was at this point in the research that I considered how I would respond to someone asking me 'why is that important'? Sikes (2006:10) says that the life-history researcher will have a 'unique emotional engagement with any particular project'. To me, it was important that the participants' voices were heard in their words and not my perception or interpretation of what they said. For this reason, I have included undigested interview transcripts. I have made an effort to present the data in a way that enables the reader to see how they were produced – an exercise in transparency.

#### 1.4 - Structure of the thesis.

To put these narratives into a broad policy and political context, Chapter 2 charts the expansion of higher education. I allude briefly to post war expansion before describing in detail the genesis and legacy of the Robbins report (1963) as the most significant policy in terms of widening participation in UK HE. Next, I describe the HE landscape in terms of two sectors: universities on the one hand and colleges and polytechnics on the other, the so -called binary divide. An entire section is devoted to describing the birth of the Open University (OU) because of its unique position in terms of mature student participation through the development of distance learning. In a largely chronological structure and overlapping with the end of the binary divide, the Dearing report is the next most

significant piece of legislation in terms of HE. The legislation is quoted from extensively to demonstrate how seemingly competing narratives of funding and widening participation permeate the legislation. The growth of higher education provision within further education is discussed in the next section. Finally, the chapter ends with the growth of the notion of 'widening participation' and within that, the participation of mature students.

Chapter Three chronicles the stages of the research process, from research design to ethical considerations, gaining access and data analysis. The subsequent four chapters present the findings. Arranged by theme, the voices of the participants dominate these chapters. Chapter Eight then discusses these narratives in relation to existing research on the mature student experience and presents the conclusions.

### 1.5 - The presence of the researcher within the text.

'...the process of research is also a space for recognition' West (2014:49).

When I embarked on this piece of research, it was not my intention to put myself as researcher into this thesis. However, whilst listening and transcribing the participants' (who agreed to collaborate with me) personal biographical narratives, it occurred to me that their narratives are to some extent co-constructed, and shaped by my own biography as the researcher.

Merrill and West (2013:2) point out that 'no relationships are perfect'; this made me consider that the narratives disclosed by the participants might be due to being in a 'transitional space', a space that some adult learners find themselves in when returning to education and that they, as learners might 'say and think, and may feedback' to 'powerful others, teachers and lecturers' – in this instance, a researcher like myself - what they think we want to hear. Whilst interviewing the participants, I was mindful of this unconscious psychological process (West, 1996) and paid careful attention to the quality of the relationship (although detached) between myself and the participants. West (2014:40) points out 'If the relationship becomes good enough, shared reflexivity is forged over time', and that having paid

attention whilst interviewing to the ‘importance of listening and respectfulness to avoiding judgementalism’ I considered that within the participants narratives there is evidence of a ‘shared reflexivity’ (West, 2014:40).

Merrill (2015:1859) states:

Returning to education as a working-class adult student is not an easy step to take, particularly if the decision is to study for an undergraduate degree in higher education.

In this regard, West, (2014:47) argues that ‘in a world full of boundaries between full and part-time study, work and university, family and student life’, student life can have a number of ‘blurred’ boundaries. It is within these blurred boundaries that I identified a number of elements of my own biographical narrative as a mature student and how they may have shaped the participants’ relationship with me as a researcher and indeed to some degree my interpretation of the stories that the participants chose to reveal to me.

In many respects, my past dictated my future, not only as a mature student, but also as a doctoral student. As a traditional age student, half-way through a degree course, I was recruited into a life that I considered to be far more exciting at the time than reading textbooks, writing essays and studying for exams. However, advance a number of years (which included marriage and two children) I found the reflection that stared back at me from the bathroom mirror was that of a single mother, with the sole responsibility of two young school-age children.

At the time, I was working part-time in a small company where my husband was a partner. Having parted a few months previously from my ex-husband, I had no idea what the future held for me or my two young children. I knew that at some stage, my (ex) husband would ‘tell’ me to leave the business, something that he had hinted at several times. I felt at the time that I was at a crossroads, not knowing which way to turn. What I did know was that I could not return to my rather exciting life before marriage and motherhood.

Whilst contemplating which direction to take, I reflected on the ‘here and now’ and how much I enjoyed being a volunteer parent helper at my sons’ school. Because I enjoyed this experience so much, I considered that perhaps teaching children

was something that I should explore in the future. Previously, whilst serving abroad, I had taught adults, and at the time, I recall thinking that I was privileged to be in a position to impart knowledge to others and to witness their determination to learn. Whilst reflecting on my past life as a tutor of adults, I recalled that there was a noticeable change in the adult learners I taught and that over a period of time the learners went through a discernible 'transformation of the self and identity' (Merrill and West, 2013:1). I also remembered that the learners also noted a change in themselves, in their confidence and their ability to try something that they thought was previously out of their reach. This was not dissimilar to the children I had been teaching to read at my sons' school; in both cases I witnessed a transition and change through learning.

I also reflected on the opportunities that seemed to open up for some of the adult learners I had taught and this encouraged me to reflect on my own learning process and the possibility of retraining. Merrill and West (2013:2) state that 'there are some links which can be made between transitional space and learning transitions'. Moreover, they say that there is 'potential for changing the self through learning' (Merrill and West, 2013:2). This change through learning is exactly what I had witnessed several years previously in the adult learners I had taught.

Having recognised that I was at a crossroads with no specific direction, I decide to explore the possibility of re-training and contacted the local FE College. Within a few days, I had spoken to a careers advisor who arranged for me to immediately attend an interview with an HE course director, and by the end of that morning I was enrolled part-time onto a three-year BA (hons) Psychology/Sociology degree course. As luck would have it, two weeks following my decision to return to education, I was, as I had anticipated, 'told' to leave my part-time employment position by my ex-husband. At the time I put a brave face on this directive; however, I was in actual fact elated. This is because this it is this unfair dismissal that allowed me to change my part-time student role to a full-time one.

Moving forward a few weeks, the image that I hold in my mind still today is one of walking through the front door of the college on my first day as a full-time student. I had no idea what lay ahead over the next three years, and I could not remember the last time that I had written an essay or sat an exam. All I was equipped with



was a notepad and a pencil case and the determination to enjoy this experience and succeed. I also recall that my mind raced with questions. How would I cope as a single mother who had been away from education for what seemed forever? Did I even know or remember how to write an essay? Would everyone else be younger than me, or would I be the oldest student in the class and the only one with children? In hindsight, I smiled at my fears because in the event, 80% of my cohort were mature students, all quietly voicing the same or similar fears to me. Holliday and West, (2010:np) point out:

Being and becoming a student in the many spaces of an increasingly diverse university system requires many different levels of understanding.

Moreover, I agree with West (1996) who says that many adult students leave university as changed people. Being a mature student and a single parent studying for a degree level qualification was for me a live-changing event. It also changed and improved the lives of my two boys, who observed the highs and lows of student life, especially when I received my results. It also gave them an appreciation of hard work 'paying off'. From a personal reflective note, having graduated, I returned to the confident person who once travelled and worked abroad – before marriage and children.

For me, completing a degree 'marked a new positive biographical transition' (Merrill, 2015:18601). This is because, ten years later, I returned to the same HE-in-FE college where I had gained my undergraduate degree as a PhD researcher. As I walked through the familiar front doors, I noticed that there was a visual change, new colour scheme, carpet, furniture etc. However, if I closed my eyes, which I did momentarily, the sound and the smell of the reception area made it feel as if time had stood still and I had just walked through the front door for the very first time.

In that brief moment with my eyes closed, the memories came flooding back: the sound of footsteps, some heavy (male) whilst others lighter declared that they were in a hurry, scurrying like mice across the entrance from HE- to-FE and vice versa. The voices of the students were still there, some sounded as if they were close at hand while others receded into the background like the footfall; some were pitched high, whilst others were low and urgent.

Everything within the first half a dozen steps seemed familiar, despite the visual changes. However, that same momentary thought that seemed to have stopped time brought me back to the present day. I was not the same person who had graduated in the summer of 2007; I had been on a long educational journey and was now a PhD researcher recruiting participants for my own research.

## 1.6 Theoretical context and framework

The theoretical framework for this study changed direction, due in part to the larger than expected number of participants who volunteered to take part. Moving from a small-scale ethnographic study of six to eight mature students to interviewing up to thirty-four participants was an opportunity to conduct explore an in-depth biographical narrative study of mature students, which could be seen as ‘an important and powerful way of seeing learning as a fundamental dimension of living’ (Field, Merrill and West (2012:80). Field, Merrill and West (2012:79) point out that biographical research ‘may have a particular appeal for adult education researchers who are also adult education teachers, identifying strongly and personally with their students. Although the participants were not my students, I identified with them to a certain extent (see 1.4 The presence of the researcher in the text). This was due in part to my own experiences as a mature student.

Moreover, Field, Merrill and West (2012:80) go on to say:

Biographical approaches thus allow researchers to explore the meanings and importance that people attach to particular changes in their lives, including those that have to do with transitions between different life stages, which we probably expect to go through at some time as we grow older, and those that involve significant and often unexpected challenges to someone’s status and role.

As part of the widening participation scheme, a number of incentives have been put in place in recent years to encourage adult students to return to education, to either increase their employability prospects or to improve themselves on a personal level. HE-in-FE has become an attractive place for the adult learner, and in recent years has been invested in accordingly by successive governments. For those adult learners who choose to return to education without having gained a

traditional qualification such as A-levels, the Access to Higher Education programme provided by a college of further education is an ideal route that prepares them for study and increases their chances of entering higher education.

The majority of Access to HE courses are delivered in Colleges of Further Education with no upper-age limit and in some cases, no specific formal entry requirements ([www.accesstohe.ac.uk](http://www.accesstohe.ac.uk)). The Access to HE Diploma is recognised by UK universities, many of them actively encouraging applications from students who have gained an Access to HE diploma.

Several of the participants interviewed had attended an Access course and gained a level three Access to HE diploma, but not all of them. Some participants talked about feeling at a disadvantage in not having attended an Access course, to some extent because they felt an 'outsider' compared with those students who had.

The narratives also revealed a number of complex reasons why some of the participants did not participate in tertiary education following their schooling, one of them being that re-entering education was seen as a daunting prospect. Formetti, West and Horsdal, (2014:39) argue:

...places are reminders of life's episodes; the researcher involves participants in revisiting such places. What we call 'place narratives' help to complete the subjective dimension, alongside biography and self-portrait; all are part of a quest for individuality but also for belonging and recognition in making identities.

Another view of 'place' and 'transitional space' comes from Merrill and West (2013:np) who point out:

Higher education institutions can provide a transitional space in the lives of non-traditional adult students. Studying for a degree may offer new and different biographical opportunities not only in terms of learning experiences but also in relationship to transformations of the self and identity.

As a mature student who did not attend an Access to HE course, space and place was important to me for a number of reasons. The 'place' itself, HE in FE gave me

as a single parent a purpose. The 'transition' of finding my student identity and the courage to negotiate 'a new way of interacting with this still-unfamiliar world', gave me a sense of 'belonging in this space' (Field, Merrill and West, 2012:83) with other mature students, embracing the community and the learning experience whilst studying; whether it was writing an assignment, attending a lecture or reading in the library, being a student was transforming my identity as a person and not that of an 'ex-wife' or single parent.

Space, place and transition draws me to Bourdieu, who provided the concept of habitus, which is not fixed or permanent and is considered a social process rather than an individual one. Habitus is deemed to be transferrable from one context to another but is created and recreated under different circumstance. I found this idea of habitus related to myself in a number of ways and my new forged identity as a mature student. Similarly, one of the participants, Theo, talked about how it was through education that he considered that he had forged a new identity and, in his words, 'found himself':

I feel that returning to education has helped me to find out who I am; it has given me an identity and a broader perspective on life.

In research conducted by Field, Merrill and West (2012:83), the language encountered in the educational setting is also seen as shaping identity:

Several students in our study reported that they had started to question their identity and behaviour more broadly while at university. One way in which this was experienced was through the medium of language.

This reminds me of Florence (see chapter 6) whose accent seemed to change from an 'Essex' to an 'upper-class' accent during each interview, depending on what she was talking about.

For many of the participants their early educational experiences are part of their habitus – and for some of them it was not an especially a happy one. We might say that this habitus was marked for a number of them by ingrained educational failure. Moreover, Bourdieu (1984) illustrates that an individual's habitus is both structured and entwined in the link between their educational experiences, both

past and present. Habitus embraces the invisible thread between an individual's past present and future, weaving a wand, evolving between the social and the individual, the objective and subjective, structure and agency.

Bourdieu (1984, 169-173), states:

Narration, and the experiences that we try to make sense of when we tell our story, is embedded in a particular habitus.

In terms of narrative as a form, Formetti, West and Horsdal (2014:47) argue that stories that are told are 'embodied' and that a life history and or narrative, whether fictive or autobiographical it is in itself a 'form of discourse':

The process of collecting a life story through a narrative interview is a collaborative process taking place in a potential space between the teller and listener.

This underlines the value of biographical narratives in their ability to draw out and represent life experiences (Formetti, West and Horsdal, 2014).

Field, Merrill and West (2012:81), drawing on Bourdieu's concept of habitus (1984, 169-173), state that:

Narration, and the experiences that we try to make sense of when we tell our story, is embedded in a particular habitus.

This has implications for the researcher who interprets these narratives, since 'the telling of stories and its interpretation, is a creative and generative process' (Formetti, West and Horsdal, 2014:30) which can be 'interpreted from different angles' (ibid:30). Formetti, West and Horsdal, (2014:35) argue that as researchers we:

'...are storied as well as storytellers, whether it is work, in our intimacies and or our aspirations, in our use of words and how discourse inhibits or liberates us.

All of the content and structure of the narratives portrayed within this thesis are bound by the participants and placed within their social context (time, history and place). Important elements from their narratives include: education seen as a

transitional space; identity as ongoingly negotiated; habitus; deeply ingrained habits and skills and dispositions that they have because of their life experiences, which for many of these participants is imbued by the experience of their educational failure. Finally, the liberation they begin to feel when not only gaining a place to study at degree level but also the feeling of increased confidences when passing assignments.

## Chapter 2 – Historical Context

Willetts (2013:9) states:

Inter-war Britain had fewer university students than most other western European countries. The intellectual stagnation this could have caused was offset by the migration of academics and thinkers, many of them Jewish, from Nazi Germany.

### 2.0 Introduction.

The expansion of higher education has been a significant concern to successive governments since World War II and has led to a number of reports, reviews and changes in higher education policy (Hillman, 2013:250). In the inter-war years, student numbers were low in Britain when compared to countries of Western Europe (Willetts, 2013:9). However, the economic expansion and substantial social change that followed World War II had a considerable effect on the way that people worked and lived, leading to changes in education too. Prior to World War II there were approximately 50,000 students; by the end of the 1950s, this figure had doubled to over 100,000 students (Anderson, 1992).

Large numbers of demobilised men and women had returned from the war with increased social expectations and aspirations for an improved lifestyle. Kogan (1978:35) points out that during this post-war period:

...education was seen as the agency through which people, pupils and parents would move towards participation in the benefits of a richer, fairer and more civilised society.

During this period, there was a 'new emphasis on equality of opportunity' (Anderson, 1992:24) aimed at breaking down 'class divisions'. In terms of higher education, post-war 'reconstruction plans accepted that university numbers would have to expand by at least 50 per cent' (ibid.). At the end of World War II, there was also an increased demand for undergraduate places from mature students (Dongerkerly, 1953; Campbell Stewart, 1980; Dyhouse, 2006). Many of these mature students were military personnel who had received training and education throughout the war years and were seeking further training on their return. Thus, the first increase in full-time mature students dates to post-war Britain, with established universities overseeing the education of war veterans and national servicemen.

The expansion in higher education was also in part a response to the sharp rise in the birth rate that followed the end of World War II, and crucially, to the increase in the number of pupils staying on at school following the 1944 Education Act, which stipulated that free secondary education should be provided for all pupils.

Nonetheless, it is the Robbins Report published in 1963 that is seen as laying the foundations for the expansion of higher education and the creation of higher education institutions such as the polytechnics and colleges of education, which were to play a crucial part in encouraging mature students to participate in higher education. Indeed, the report is seen as underpinning several of the changes in higher education in recent years, 'notably the great expansion of the system' (Barr, 2014: iii). For this reason, the first section of this chapter focuses in detail on the Robbins report, its importance at the time and its legacy today.

The second section discusses the development of the technical colleges and polytechnics. Intended largely to create the more educated workforce that Britain's economy needed, these alternative higher education institutions widened participation and created diverse opportunities for mature students. The next section is devoted to the founding and the development of the Open University, an institution whose target audience was primarily mature students. The Dearing Report, although ostensibly about the purpose of higher education, including widening participation, was most centrally a change in the funding of higher education and the introduction of tuition fees. This had a complex and, in some ways, contradictory impact on the participation of mature students. The next sections focus on the expansion of higher education provision with further education institutions, the development of the related concepts of lifelong learning and widening participation and, finally, the position of mature students in terms of their visibility in higher education debates and reports.

## 2.1 The Robbins Report (1963).

According to Campbell Stewart (1980:150), the 1960s was the 'decade for explosive growth' within higher education. Conservative governments under the leadership of Harold Macmillan (1957-1963) and Alec Douglas-Home (1963-1964)



recognised that significant advancements in technology were taking place globally and that due to a shortage of an educated work-force, post-war Britain was trailing behind the rest of Europe and the developed world, in terms of education (Dorey, 2014:243):

Economically, a more educated workforce was deemed essential to enhance competitiveness and efficiency of the British economy in an era when administrative and professional occupations were increasing and when technological advances were gathering pace (Ibid: 246).

The Labour Party (under the leadership of Hugh Gaitskell 1955-1963 and Harold Wilson 1963-1976) agreed with the Conservative government's views on higher education and was also 'strongly committed to the expansion of higher education' (Dorey, 2014:246) as can be seen in this report from the Labour Party Study Group (1963:8), which states:

Higher education should no longer be a privilege but a right for all able young men and women, regardless of their families, class, incomes or position... and Britain's economic stagnation is a direct result of the neglect of higher education... economic expansion is only possible if university and technological expansion expands rapidly and continuously to provide the necessary brain power and skills.

This higher education for the masses was intended to be 'a bigger and a fairer system' (Watson,2014:35), in a bold step towards defining the purposes of higher education (Shattock, 2014:123).

In February 1961, the Prime Minister, Harold Macmillan, appointed a Committee chaired by Lionel Robbins 'to review the pattern of full-time higher education' and in the light of national needs and resources to advise ... on what principles its long-term development should be based.' The Committee was also asked to consider 'whether there should be any changes in that pattern, whether any new types of institution are desirable and whether any modifications should be made in the present arrangements for planning and co-ordinating the development of the various types of institution' (Robbins, 1963: 1). The appointment of Lionel Robbins as Chairman of the Committee was considered shrewd – a 'masterly stroke' due entirely to Robbins' stature and background as a British economist (Williams, 2014:210). It was believed that he could provide hard evidence to back the recommendations of the Committee, and that his reputation as an economist (he

had previously been Churchill's wartime economic adviser) would also 'carry weight with the Conservative back benches' (Williams, 2014:210).

According to Shattock (2014:112), the 'Treasury was the driving force' in the creation of the Robbins Committee. Shattock argues that the Treasury was looking to solve four major problems. The first was to improve the long-term planning of the expansion of higher education. (www.parliament.uk) The second major problem was how to structure the higher education system. The third was that the Treasury was looking for clarity around departmental responsibility for higher education and finally, the Treasury was concerned with the proposed increased expenditure on higher education (Shattock, 2014).

Moser (2013:np) points out that the report was not expected to be progressive and given Robbins' political views:

...very few people would have expected him to write a progressive report"  
... ..and, my God, this was progressive – it changed the whole university world in the direction of expansion.

Robbins further defied expectations by arguing not just for expansion but also by taking a generous view of the wider public benefits of a skilled and educated work force (Ainley, 2014:226).

Following its publication in 1963, *The Higher Education Report* (commonly known as the Robbins Report) was backed up by the publication, in 1964, of twelve volumes of evidence and statistical data. The Robbins Report initially identified four main objectives, which were considered by the Committee to be essential to the expansion of the existing higher education system (Scott, 1988:33 & Willetts, 2013:15).

First was a focus on skills as necessary for 'the general division of labour'. This objective was placed first because the committee thought instruction of skills was 'sometimes ignored or undervalued' (para 25). The second objective was to create a higher education that produced 'not mere specialists but rather, cultivated men and women (para 26). The third objective underlined the importance of the advancement of knowledge as a fundamental function of higher education institutions, whilst recognising the need to strike a balance between teaching and

research. Finally, the new university system would provide 'places for students from all classes' and play a part in redressing inequalities 'of home background'. In addition to these four objectives, the Robbins Report also recommended several substantial, immediate and long-term changes to higher education policy. Although several of the Committee's recommendations were rejected at the time, 'few official reports in British history... have led to such immediate changes in government policy' (Layard, King and Moser 1969:22). The impact of the Robbins Report on higher education has not diminished with time. According to Willetts (2014:9), its contents are still recalled and revered by many educational historians today. Willetts notes that 'the Report set the course of British higher education for decades to come (2013:3) and argues that prior to its publication, higher education appeared to lack 'clarity' with little or no apparent relationship between higher education institutions (universities) and various colleges (Willetts, 2013:5 and 2014:10).

Against this, Bathmaker, (2003:169) points out that the proposed expansion in higher education, which included providing wider opportunities to those who had not previously had that chance, was in response to changes in the social and economic climate that were already taking place. As stated previously, the number of undergraduates applying to and attending higher education had been increasing considerably since the end of the Second World War. Willetts (2013:9) himself argues that

...what is traditionally regarded as the Robbins agenda – mass expansion of higher education – was already well under way by the time the Robbins Committee concluded their work.

On the other hand, Shattock (2013:np) points out that: "Until Robbins, no one had really asked the question: 'Why do we have higher education? Why is it important?'" So, it would seem that the report's importance may lie in its work defining the purpose of higher education rather than instigating expansion.

Further criticism of the report pertains to the funding of higher education. Given that Robbins was a leading economist at the time, Shattock (2013:np) views it odd that the Report did not fully tackle the controversial area of funding in higher education to any extent. In a book entitled *Higher Education Revisited*, published 17 years after the original report, Robbins (1980:35) argued that *The Anderson*

*Report* (1960), which is considered the predecessor of the Robbins Report<sup>2</sup>, covered amongst other things, the funding of higher education. ‘for and against’ arguments of student finance and ‘subsidies or loans’. It reviewed the arguments for and against student subsidies or loans, without making a definitive decision on either due to failure to reach a consensus (Research Report Loans fees etc. 1997:9 para 647). Maybe it is this indecisiveness that gave the Robbins Committee an excuse not to consider the subject of student finance in depth (www.hepi.ac.uk). Years later, Robbins (1980:35) expresses personal regret for not appreciating the Prest scheme, which favoured loans to higher education students rather than subsidies (Robbins 1980:34).

In terms of mature students in higher education, the Robbins Report (1963) was hugely significant. For example, it had important things to say in relation to the education of mature students (adult learners) and their role within the workforce. The recommendation that courses of higher education should be made available to all those who are qualified by ability and attainment to pursue them and wish to do so, proved a powerful justification for both the expansion of higher education and widening participation (Williams, 2014:211). Prior to the publication of The Robbins Report, higher education was equipped in the main towards educating a small and elite sector of the population and was generally aimed at:

...academically well-qualified recent school leavers: both part-time and study by mature students were comparatively rare in universities (Commission of Inquiry – University of Oxford, 1997: np). (www.admin.ox.ac.uk/coi/commissionofinquiryreport/chapter2/)

Although the Committee’s remit was to ‘review the pattern of full-time higher education’ with their attention focused on the traditional entrant-age students, the report also makes several significant references to non-traditional entrants such as adult students over the age of 21 (Dorey, 2014:6).

In addition to the expansion of university places, Robbins (1963:517) addresses what the report calls ‘liberal adult education’ and the importance and quality of the

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<sup>2</sup> According to Willetts (2013:9 and 2014) the contrast between the Anderson Report (1960) and the Robbins Report (1963) is that the Anderson Report appears to have not only been forgotten, but also broadly ignored by educational historians. Whereas, on the other hand, the London School of Economics hosted and marked the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the publication of the Robbins Report (1963) on the 22 October 2013 (Barr, 2014: vii).

full-time courses delivered in residential colleges, such as Ruskin College and College Harlech. Robbins says, 'the quality of their work is demonstrated by the fact that a successful student may secure admission to a university as a senior student'. Once again Robbins had anticipated a different kind of world and although he says very little about the mature men and women who have missed out on education for one reason or another, he made the following comment about previous opportunity:

The records of past students are an eloquent testimony to the value of the work they have done in providing a chance for those who in one way or another have not had opportunities earlier.

The report continues to discuss what was the current provision for adult students in the guise of activities for adult or mature students by the Extra-Mural Departments of the universities, and the Workers' Educational Association (WEA) as well as the 'provision made in this field by local education authorities':

All these bodies have contributed much to the general education of the community. Many men and women develop new interests in their mature years in such topics as problems of citizenship, economics, international relations, local history and archaeology, philosophy and science. The demand exists on a large scale and the response of the universities, of the local authorities and their partners has won for them the gratitude and respect of many whose experience has been necessarily far removed from the academic way of life. There is now much similar activity abroad, but in this field the country can congratulate itself on its pioneering work. We hope that the universities and their partners will cooperate in this task. If this country is to maintain its proud record, further support for this kind of study will be needed in the future.

Robbins' vision for higher education was not just for its immediate expansion, but also for a vision of long-term development and growth (Bell and Tight, 1993:95; and Willetts, 2013:32). The Robbins Report (1963) states:

Although nearly as many girls as boys pass the General Certificate of Education at Ordinary level, many fewer stay on beyond this stage to take Advanced level. Of those who do stay on and obtain passes in the Advanced level of the General Certificate of Education, the proportion going into full-time higher education is as high for girls as for boys (para 50).

The report also alludes to the idea of lifelong learning. Robbins Report (1963, para 516) states:

To enter a course of adult education a student is not necessarily required to have advanced qualifications, nor does he normally obtain any qualifications on completion of the course. His purpose is primarily to

broaden his understanding and, judged in this light; work in adult education must clearly form part of any survey of higher education not bounded by technicalities of definition.

Moreover, the Report (1963, para 513) recommended that higher education was not a 'once for all process' and that adults may want to 'take courses at intervals to bring them up to date in their subjects':

At present a wide variety of courses for graduates and others in industrial employment is offered by technical colleges as well as Colleges of Advanced Technology but, even so, there are far too few students taking refresher courses and courses of further training.

Robbins (1963, para 513) looked at the relationship between higher education and employment and noted that the pace of technological change and discovery meant that there would be a greater need for training and refresher courses for adults. This had implications for women. Prior to WWII, it was considered incompatible for female nursing and teaching staff to marry and continue to work within their chosen profession. In this regard, Robbins (1963, para 514) states:

It is particularly important that such courses should be available for married women. Before the war over three quarters of the women in employment were unmarried; now more than half of them are married.

This is significant, not least because it is clearly about potential mature students and, to my mind, speaks to the experience of some of the participants in this research. Higher education is seen as important to women not only in instrumental terms, for the "many if not most married women who have already enjoyed higher education will need refresher courses before they can return effectively to professional employment" but for women who may simply "desire opportunities for higher education" as their family responsibilities diminish. The Report also challenges the traditional full-time degree:

The most economical use of existing resources will be made by organising such courses in existing institutions, but it is important that the arrangements should be both flexible and varied to suit varying needs. Not all the education of married women needs be on a full-time basis: it may often be easier to arrange part-time courses and more convenient for married women to attend them.

However, it is the proposal to widen the types of higher education institutions that is most relevant to the narratives in this thesis. The recommendation that the Committee made to expand university places was qualified with a rarely cited 'condition', namely, 'that the expansion should involve a much greater provision of

broader courses' (Robbins,1980:23). Robbins argued that this condition was fundamental to the expansion of higher education. Robbins' recommendation to expand higher education culminated in the founding of several new universities:

We therefore recommend the foundation of six new universities in addition to those now in process of formation. One of them will be a Special Institution for Scientific and Technological Education and Research.  
Robbins Report (1963, para 476)

Robbins Report advocated a return to the McNair Committee's (1944) ideas that several Teacher Training Colleges should be renamed Colleges of Education:

The McNair Report offered two alternative schemes for closer association between the colleges and the universities. The varying arrangements made by the universities did not follow either of these precisely. What they did, however, was to bring the colleges of the region together with each other and with the University Department of Education in a federation under a University Institute of Education. They stopped a little short of the McNair Report's conception of such federations as Schools of Education of a university. We recommend a return to this basic conception, with some further features that seem to us called for by the new stage on which the colleges are entering. In recognition of this new stage, and of the arrangements for degrees that we have proposed, we also recommend that the colleges should be known in future as Colleges of Education.

These renamed Colleges of Education were encouraged to 'partner' universities, thereby introducing a teaching qualification with degree status (Robbins, 1963:1; Layard, 2014:20). In addition, Layard (2014:20) points out that the delivery of undergraduate degrees at Colleges of Education and the incorporation of teacher training courses into universities was considered 'a more unified system', which developed into what was later known as the binary divide.

To further support the expansion of higher education, the recommendation that Colleges of Advanced Technology (CAT) should have degree awarding powers began the process of widening the types of institutions able to provide higher education, granting them the power to award both first and higher degrees (Robbins Report, 1963:271). The reclassification of both CATs and Technical Colleges to higher education status immediately increased the number of students studying at degree level (Layard, King and Moser, 1969; Stewart, 1989). Although perhaps unintentional, Robbins' comment on 'further development, in conjunction with the television services, for example, and other new media of communication'

was prescient when one considers the Open University was founded some six years later.

The Robbins Report (1963) thus 'marks a watershed in UK higher education' (Shattock, 2014:123) and 'history has tended to see expansion as the major accomplishment' of the Report (Calhoun, 2014:67). However, the report has been not just in terms of expansion but in terms of transformation from an elite system to a state funded, public system of higher education. This transformation and expansion created a period of optimism and growth within higher education and saw the charter of several new universities, including the Open University as well as technical and teacher training colleges with innovative approaches to teaching (Calhoun (2014:67-71).

## 2.2 The Binary Divide.

The binary divide (1965-1992) was established following several recommendations made by the Robbins Report to expand the number of university places available in Britain. It was a framework that aimed at bringing universities and colleges who delivered higher education courses, closer together. Its purpose was not only to 'stabilise' higher education but also to advance the rapid expansion of students studying in the higher education sector (Pratt, 2001:21). This was achieved by conferring university status on several Colleges of Advanced Technology and Technical Colleges and consisted of shifting degree-level courses being taught in the traditional academic universities to the 'autonomous sector' and the Colleges of Advanced Technology and Technical Colleges in the 'public sector', whose emphasis had been on the delivery of technical and vocational education and qualifications (Robbins Report 1963, and Pratt 2001:19). These institutions came to be known as polytechnics and 'went on to transform higher education in the next quarter century', making possible a system of 'mass higher education' (Pratt, 1997: np.). Though intended as an alternative route for traditional students, these institutions, by their nature, opened up opportunities for mature students to pursue vocational and professional education.



The idea of the binary divide can already be seen in the publication of the government White Paper, 'A Plan for Polytechnics and other Colleges' (1966), which addresses the expansion of higher education places:

...the designation of colleges with the most potential as regional polytechnics to form a nation-wide network for technical education. The polytechnics would be 'large and comprehensive' providers of full-time, part-time and sandwich courses of technical and vocational higher education ([www.nationalarchives.gov.uk](http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk)).

The government's commitment to provide further and higher education to 'late developers, early school leavers and those with no family history of higher education' can also be seen in a further speech given by Crosland at Lancaster University in 1967 when he said that this sector of the community 'could still take a full-time degree course when the time was right for them' (Pratt, 1997:24).

When the Robbins Report was published, there were nine Colleges of Advanced Technology (CATs) that had been separated (in 1956) from other local authority colleges and granted 'advanced status'. These nine colleges largely focused on full-time students studying for diplomas and degrees of the London University. They were then transferred in 1961 from Local Authority control to become directly funded by the Ministry of Education. The Robbins Committee recommended that the nine CATs should be immediately upgraded to university status (Axelrod, Trilokekar, Shanahan and Wellen (2013).

The original purpose of the colleges was to deliver courses that were directly related to the provision of a more highly skilled workforce. Their aim was to meet the 'vocational, professional and industrial-based demand' for vocational qualifications (Pratt, 1997:1). This had included the delivery in some colleges, of undergraduate degrees as well as postgraduate education in academic, professional and vocational subjects (Dorey, 2014:7; Calhoun, 2014:71).

Although on the surface, the two higher education sectors were deemed to be equal there were a number of distinct contrasts, which included funding and organisations that regulated the respective sectors. The creation of the binary divide established a well-defined demarcation between universities and polytechnics. Whilst universities maintained their independence as self-governing institutions, with the autonomy to appoint their own vice-chancellor and staff, as

well as construct their own courses, and award their own degrees, polytechnics were presented as 'the public sector' of higher education, which at the time of the creation of the binary divide was overseen financially by the Local Education Authorities (LEA) (Neave, 1985:349). In addition, although polytechnics were conferred with university like status delivering the equivalent of a university degree, their courses were scrutinised by external assessors and validated and awarded by the Council for National Academic Awards (CNAA) (Walford, 1991 and Silver, 1990).

The distinctions were not solely funding related. Brosnan (1972:46) argues that there were 'dimensions of difference' between universities and Colleges of Advanced Technology and Technical Colleges: 'Universities stand for the nurturing of apprentice scholars' whilst 'polytechnics stand for the nurturing of apprentice industrialists'. Furthermore, 'Universities stand for the preservation of learning' whilst 'polytechnics stand for the application of education'. Pratt (1997:np) states that '...polytechnics made possible the system of mass higher education...' and with the emergence of the binary divide, the scale of demand in several further education colleges for degree-level courses was considerably higher than had been originally anticipated (Feather, 2010:189). The weight of the evidence in the increase in student numbers suggests that the emergence of the binary divide was a success. This was due in part to the increase in the number of mature students who had enrolled on degree-level courses offered by polytechnics. Moreover, Pratt (1997:69) says that since 1971 the number of students studying a 'full-time or sandwich course' at a polytechnic has more than doubled to 83,000 students. Additionally, since the beginning of the 1990s, the number of students that were studying at polytechnics has doubled at more than 'twice the rate of students' that were studying in universities in England and Wales, with polytechnics emerging as the largest sector in higher education (Pratt, 1997:2).

Pratt (1997:69) argues that several universities were 'affected by the rapid expansion' in the number of students who applied to study for an undergraduate degree within polytechnics, which 'resulted in a convergence'. What is more, Pratt (1997:2) states that due to this 'convergence', a number of universities adopted the polytechnics example by 'developing modular courses and encouraging recruitment from non-traditional students'. Saunders (2002:2) says that this

change in university policy is a significant achievement for former polytechnics.

Pratt (1997:np) says:

The polytechnics showed how to expand access to new kinds of students. They were particularly successful in increasing numbers of women, students from ethnic minorities, mature students and those without traditional entry qualifications.

Kennedy (1997:1) states that historically, CATs and Technical Colleges have been a 'significant alternative' for young people who have chosen not to enter traditional higher education. Pratt (1997:1) sees the transformation of higher education from an elite to a mass system as 'one of the country's major education success stories'. Nevertheless, the creation of polytechnics also brought about a segregation of the two bodies, traditional universities and polytechnics. This binary divide came to an end with the introduction in 1992 of the Further and Higher Education Act which retitled former polytechnics as 'new universities' ([www.gov.uk/government/FullReport\\_Chap2.pdf](http://www.gov.uk/government/FullReport_Chap2.pdf)).

The end of the binary divide coincided with a rapid expansion of institutions in the higher education landscape (Mayhew, Deer and Dua, 2004:66)<sup>3</sup>. University status with full autonomy and degree-awarding powers was granted to forty-eight polytechnics, forty-four in England and four in Scotland and one in Wales (Higher Education Act 1992, and Wyness, 2010:9).<sup>4</sup> Polytechnics changed their names to incorporate the word 'university' into their title to reflect this change in their status (Stewart, 1989:108; [www.hefce.ac.uk](http://www.hefce.ac.uk)). Although the number of students studying at degree level did not increase, there was a distinct increase in the number of students who were deemed to be studying at degree level (Higher Education Act, 1992 and Greenaway and Haynes, 2003). Marks (2002:77) argues that although there was not an immediate increase in student numbers, the abolition of the binary divide 'did however disseminate much of the 'mystique' of traditional universities'.

The Further and Higher Education Act 1992 also created a national unitary financial body to fund higher education in England, known as the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) and Further Education Funding Council

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<sup>3</sup> It has been pointed out that the end of the divide coincided with the fall of the Berlin Wall (

<sup>4</sup> There is a known error in the total number of universities which was published by Wyness (2010:9)

(FEFC) for further education. Individual funding councils were also created to oversee the funding of higher education in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Finally, the Act removed further education colleges from local government control and created quality assessment arrangements.

The initial aim of further education was to fulfil the demand for vocational, professional and industrial-based higher education. It has historically delivered an extensive range of full-and part-time sub-degree level qualifications (a qualification higher than schooling but not degree level), in addition to offering undergraduate and postgraduate education (Feather, 210:189). The sub-degree level courses that are now offered cover academic and vocational subjects, higher diplomas as well as sub-degree programmes, from examining bodies such as: Edexcel, City and Guilds, the Association of Accounting Technicians (AAT), Legal Executives or Higher National Diplomas (HND) to name but a few (Robbins Report, 1963; Silver, 1990 and [www.hefce.ac.uk](http://www.hefce.ac.uk)). Pratt (1997:2) argues that the delivery of these new courses established a distinctive non-university sector within education, which increased and improved the opportunities for mature students, as well as being popular with other non-traditional learners, for example women, ethnic minorities and those without traditional university entry qualifications such as 'A' levels.

Marks (2002:77) points out:

...the historical separation of the university from the outside world is certainly changing. For better or worse (mostly better) the expansions of the late 1980s/early 1990s and the removal of the binary divide in 1992 did much to remove the 'mystique' of academia, but there is a long way to go before any genuine 'university of lifelong learning' can become a reality.

## 2.3 Distance learning and The Open University

### 2.3.1 Vision and resistance

Distance learning both past and present, in other words, learning that happens outside of traditional classrooms and educational institutions, has been central to increasing the participation of mature students in higher education. The Open University, founded in 1969, and referred to by Bell and Tight (1993:133) as ‘a child of the 1960s’, was not the first distance-learning centre of its kind. However, its contribution to widening participation in UK higher education, particularly for mature students, is unique and it has been at the forefront of the technological developments that have transformed both educational resources and pedagogy.

From its foundation in 1836, the University of London had operated as a distance learning examining facility (Bell and Tight. 1993:28). Prior to and despite the outbreak of World War II, the University of London continued to hold examinations in forty-three colonies and fourteen countries around the world. Following the outbreak of the war, the university continued to facilitate distance learning examinations, some of which were held in German prisoner-of-war camps, as well as on board naval ships (ibid: 123). Several other British higher educational institutions have also offered distance learning examining centres; these include Birkbeck, The Royal University of Ireland and the University of St Andrews to name but a few (Bell and Tight. 1993:1).

Technology had been part of the open learning vision since the 1920s when the idea of a ‘wireless university’ was initially advocated by the educationalist and historian J. C. Stobart, whilst working for the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC). Following his original suggestion that a university of the airwaves be developed; several proposals were considered but discarded over the intervening years. In the early 1960s, R.C.G. Williams of the Institution of Electrical Engineers argued:

for a ‘tele university’, which would combine broadcast lectures with correspondence texts and visits to conventional universities (www.open.ac.uk).

In 1962, as part of an overall education review, the Conservative Minister of Education, Sir David Eccles, examined, in conjunction with the BBC, a suggestion for a 'wireless university' based on the sociologist Michael Young's vision for a 'College of the Air'. The following year, the idea of a wireless university progressed further when a Labour Party study group was convened under the Chairmanship of Lord Taylor. Its remit was to consider proposals for a distance learning system utilising both radio and television broadcasts, thus creating a 'University of the Air' ([www.open.ac.uk](http://www.open.ac.uk)). The study group recommended that there should be several trial broadcasts, which would link academia to the technological revolution. The initial project was aimed at encouraging adults (mature students) who were situated in the 'lower income' bracket to update their educational qualifications (Dorey, 2014:1 and [www.mcs.open.ac.uk](http://www.mcs.open.ac.uk), p.1). It was deemed that there were still many individuals, specifically mature students, who would like to attend a full-time, three-year course at a traditional university but were unable to do so due to barriers such as financial, family or employment commitments (Dorey, 2014:7/8). There were also ex-service men and women, who, at the outbreak of World War II, had been obliged to 'abandon university'. Following the end of the war they were unable to resume their studies due to their military service and had been 'precluded from attaining the requisite university entrance qualifications' (Dorey, 2014:8/9).

According to Dorey (2014:8), the education of women was very much at the heart of this vision:

...it was recognised that there were many older adults whose post-school education had been terminated either by familial financial hardship, and thus a necessity to pursue paid employment at the earliest possible opportunity, or particularly in the case of women up until the 1960s, societal or family pressure to get married and have children...

The concept of distance learning itself was seen as inherently political and encountered considerable political opposition from both the left and the right of the Labour cabinet. The views to the left of the party were contradictory: some considered that 'such a project would muddy the university skirts' whilst others suggested that it was 'not being sufficiently working-class in terms of the students it taught' (Dorey, 2014:12). Meanwhile, several right-wing ministers of the Labour

Party were also unenthusiastic, including the Secretary of State for Education and Science, Anthony Crosland who argued that:

... the expansion of higher education, and the resulting widening access to socially disadvantaged, mature or part-time students could readily be achieved through the planned development of polytechnics (Dorey,2014:12).

Dorey (2014:2) and Weinbren (2014) point out that the idea of 'education' for the masses was not only considered radical, it was also potentially considered a public and political disaster. Perhaps for this reason it was not used by the Labour Party as part of their election manifesto in the run up to the 1964 general election.

Additional opposition to the distance-learning project came from Richard Crossman, another Labour cabinet minister. Crossman could not visualise a university where students did not attend lectures and seminars in person or have full-time lecturing staff. Indeed, Crossman said that he was 'utterly opposed to the use of the word "university" for the proposed new institution, and argued strongly against it' (Short, Whip to Wilson, 20, cited in Dorey, 2014:11). The Conservative MP Iain Macleod, went further, describing the idea of the Open University as 'blithering nonsense' ([www.politics.co.uk](http://www.politics.co.uk)). In addition, a few sexist comments were made on the recruitment of women into education, one of which referred to the recruitment of 'middle-class women in hobby education' (Dorey, 2014:12).

Finally, the Treasury was 'reluctant to provide the additional sums required, even though these were relatively small' (Dorey, 2014:18). This disapproval was in part because, unlike undergraduate students in the twenty-first century, the cost of attending university at the time was covered by the government and the taxpayer (Dorey, 2014:18).

### 2.3.2 The Open University is born

What both the Labour and the Conservative Parties were in agreement with was the idea of expanding higher education through 'increasing the number of universities' or increasing the 'number of student places in extant institutions of higher education'- not the development of a new distance learning, open learning institution (Dorey, 2014:6). Furthermore, despite the extensive opposition outlined

in the previous section, the project had the support of Prime Minister Harold Wilson, who was 'determined that it should be accorded the same respect and seriousness as any other university' (Dorey, 2014:20). Wilson saw the conception of the Open University as a Labour Party commitment to educate a workforce who would in turn, continue to aid the growth of the country's economy as well as increase social mobility.

In the 1966 Labour Party Manifesto, Wilson, referring explicitly to the Open University, stating that its purpose would be:

...to provide an opportunity for those who, for one reason or another, have not been able to take advantage of higher education, now to do so with all that TV and radio and the State-sponsored correspondence course, and the facilities of a university for setting and marking papers and conducting examinations, in awarding degrees, can provide . . . I believe a properly planned university of the air could make an immeasurable contribution to the cultural life of our country, to the enrichment of our standard of living (Labour Party Manifesto, 1966).

To assume responsibility for and create his vision of, the 'University of the Air', Wilson appointed the socialist politician Jennie Lee, Minister for the Arts, who then went over to the Department of Education and Science (DES) (Bell and Tight, 1993:134). Jennie Lee is referred to as 'the architect of the Open University' (Willetts, 2013:11) and was considered by many in the government as the ideal candidate to champion the project because of her enthusiasm, which she attributed to her own upbringing and education. She was brought up in a working-class environment in Scotland and both her father and grandfather were miners. Reminiscing about her transition from school to university, she recalled that so many of her school friends had left school at fourteen to work in a factory or at the pithead (Lee, 1980:63). With encouragement from her parents, Lee worked extremely hard at school and was awarded an undergraduate place at Edinburgh University. Lee admitted that she worked 'every night, cram, cram, and cram' (Lee, 1963:56) and that in her final year at school she had 'worked harder than any other time in her life' to gain a place at university (Lee, 1963: 57).

As a politician, Lee remembered what it was like to be a woman undergraduate student from a working-class background. Because she came from a working-class background, Lee attended university through a combination of support from



her local authority, the Carnegie Trust, which paid half of her university fees, and her parents who were then expected to pay for the other half. Her parents were also expected to support her financially for everyday essentials such as clothes, food, books and lodgings. Lee's mother would send food parcels to Edinburgh on a regular basis, supplemented by a very meagre allowance. To support her daughter, Lee's mother also 'pocketed her pride' and asked for 'take on' from the local drapery store to buy her daughter suitable clothes (Lee, 1963:62). She even risked a shilling each way on a horse in the Derby (Lee, 1963:62 and Willetts, 2013:11).

One of the benefits of her working-class background was that Lee understood the meaning of financial hardship. Indeed, she was asked on several occasions 'how it was possible for a working miner to pay for university training for his daughter' (Dyhouse, 2002a:1 and Lee, 1963:60). Her upbringing gave her a greater understanding of Harold Wilson's vision of a university of the air and she was instrumental in turning this brainchild into a reality. With her strength of character and her commitment to widening access to higher education, she was determined to ensure the success of the university of the air (Weinbren, 2014).

To establish a comprehensive plan for an Open University, as outlined in the February 1966 White Paper, an Advisory Committee was created, chaired by Sir Peter Venables. The remainder of the Committee were recruited from among university vice-chancellors, educationalists and television presenters, who were there to advise on and overcome any technical difficulties that might arise. The Committee's remit was to establish and to prepare a draft Charter and Statutes ([www.open.ac.uk/researchprojects](http://www.open.ac.uk/researchprojects); Bell & Tight, 1993:135 and [www.mcs.open.ac.uk:2](http://www.mcs.open.ac.uk:2)).

Despite having the 'full support' of the Prime Minister, Lee encountered considerable opposition from a variety of quarters. Indeed, her commitment to the project may not have been sufficient had she not enjoyed Wilson's 'full support' (Dorey, 2014:20). Defending various criticisms from both left- and right-wing politicians, Lee argued that 'the most insulting thing that could happen to any working-class man or woman was to have a working-class university (Hollis, 1997:320). Several years later (at a public meeting in Cardiff in 1971) Lee was

called upon yet again to defend the Open University, which she did by simply emphasising:

It is *not* a working-class university. It was never *intended* to be a working-class university. It was planned as a *university*. It is an Open University (Dorey, 2014:12).

Finally, in 1969, The Open University was established as a 'fourth network', an extension to the existing provision of higher education ([www.mcs.open.ac.uk](http://www.mcs.open.ac.uk):p:3). In the first instance, it was a university in the full sense of the word. It was designed to be 'independent, autonomous, awarding its own degrees of comparable standard to any others' (OU, 1994:4). It was also designed to be 'open to all, without entrance qualifications' (OU, 1994:4). It was structured and designed in conjunction with broadcasting presenters and academics alike, to broadcast specific academic television and radio programmes, which were to be broadcast for a period of approximately fourteen hours each week, for forty weeks throughout the year (Dorey, 2014:15). The scheduled timings of the programmes were aimed to meet the needs of all learners who were employed, which included those workers who were engaged on a shift-work basis. It was anticipated that the programmes would be broadcast at peak viewing times and then repeated for individuals who were not able to view at those times (Dorey, 2014:15). Additionally, correspondence and residential courses were also constructed in conjunction with the specialist television and radio programmes to re-enforce the students' learning (Lee, 1966:172).

In June 1970, during the Open University's foundation year, the Labour government suffered a defeat at the general election. This is significant because the incoming Conservative Party's commitment was to reduce public expenditure. However, the newly appointed Education Secretary, Margaret Thatcher, supported the Open University project, arguing that

...it was an inexpensive way of giving wider access to higher education, while also providing people with a second chance in life (Thatcher, *Path to Power*, 179).

Thus, the Open University accomplished the Conservative government's 'commitment to widening opportunities for self-improvement and social mobility' by

making available a university education to learners who had previously been denied the opportunity (Dorey, 2014:25/26).

As touched on previously, prior to the 1960s, attending higher education would not have been a priority for many people, particularly women, whose traditional societal role was considered to marry, followed by bearing children:

...the patriarchal sexual division of labour and socially constructed gender roles decreed that most women were first and foremost housewives and mothers (Dorey, 2014:8).

The Open University was a means of providing increased equality of educational opportunity for women as well as working class mature students. In addition, students with a disability also had the opportunity to study with the Open University, influencing their lives in a way that could not be envisaged on its initial conception. (Dorey, 2014:8; Weinbren, 2014).

By August 1970, the Open University had received more than forty thousand applications, with the first twenty-five thousand students starting their studies in January 1971. These first students were offered the freedom to study at a pace, place and cost that was almost at their own convenience (Calhoun, 2014:72 and Dorey, 2014:20). Over forty per cent of the initial intake were practising teachers, many of whom had aspired to convert their Certificate in Education into a full honour's degree within one of the four multi-disciplinary courses on offer: in the arts, social sciences, science or mathematics. A further thirty per cent of the intake consisted of learners who held less than two 'A' levels or their equivalent. Amongst these learners were also twenty-two inmates who were incarcerated in Her Majesty's Prisons across England ([www.open.ac.uk](http://www.open.ac.uk)).

Applications to study at the Open University increased throughout the 1970s and soon reached more than seventy thousand, with approximately six thousand graduands each year. Further expansion in the 1980s saw the conception and opening of the Open University business school and as its development continued into the 1990s, further changes to the curriculum were made. The 1990s saw the introduction of 'named degrees' as an alternative to the 'open degree' that had previously been awarded ([www.open.ac.uk](http://www.open.ac.uk)). The Open University also offered courses that allowed learners to gain professional and technical qualifications,

including a 'plethora of professional, technical refresher and conversion courses' which would support their career development (Dorey, 2014:14).

Supporting the first 'university of the air', the BBC started broadcasting specific course-based programmes for Open University students on the 3 January 1971 and continued to broadcast until December 2006. As modern technology, such as the internet, disc-based software and specific learning programmes on DVDs became developed, access to teaching and learning and modes of delivery developed accordingly. However, there are still a number of TV and radio programmes which are co-produced by The OU and the BBC. Technology itself has transformed the distance-learning environment and many of the Open University's resources and materials are now published and available to use free of charge, on the Open University's iTunes and Open Learn site (Stewart, 1989 and [www.open.ac.uk](http://www.open.ac.uk)).

### 2.3.3 The Open University today and its legacy

The aim of the Open University was to make a contribution to the country's educational and cultural development. Since its inauguration, it has played a significant role in expanding access to higher education to learners from all walks of life, specifically mature students, many of whom have family and work-related commitments as well as financial constraints ([www.open.ac.uk](http://www.open.ac.uk), Hillman, 2013). Its commitment to 'inclusivity' is reflected in its provision of flexible, part-time and distance-learning. Testifying its contribution to widening participation Bell and Tight, (1993:136) state:

The Open University has recruited large numbers of students during the last twenty years, far more than any other British university. Most of them would probably not have been able to experience higher education otherwise, with a large minority coming from relatively poor educational backgrounds.

Today, the profile of the Open University student differs in several ways from the conventional campus-based university student. In the first instance, their ages range from eighteen to sixty-plus years, with over sixty per cent of the students enrolled aged between the ages of twenty-five and forty-four years ([www.open.ac.uk](http://www.open.ac.uk)). Secondly, most of its learners as mentioned previously, study part-time and have in some cases, considerable work experience. Finally, the

learners have more diverse entry qualifications and once they are registered, they are entered onto courses under the guidance of qualified tutors ([www.open.ac.uk](http://www.open.ac.uk)).

Although there are a wide variety of courses to choose from, approximately sixty per cent of the Open University mature students choose to study vocational subjects. The flexibility in learning and in terms of paying the fees per module studied provides students with the opportunity to develop their education and skills, whilst fitting their studies around their family, employment and other commitments. As well as giving them the opportunity to study to improve their employment prospects or to change their career path, this flexibility also allows students to study for the pleasure of acquiring knowledge, ([www.open.ac.uk](http://www.open.ac.uk)).

In comparison to 'A' level entry requirements demanded by traditional campus universities, the Open University is renowned for having an open entry policy, allowing students to register for most undergraduate courses without any previous formal academic qualifications. However, one of their requirements is that some students study a foundation-level course, prior to embarking on a degree-level qualification (Stewart, 1989 and [www.mcs.open.ac.uk](http://www.mcs.open.ac.uk)).

The Open University of the twenty-first century is hailed as one of the 'greatest innovations' of the Labour government of 1964-1970. Its conception is said to be its 'most notable success' and 'enduring legacy' and the one that Wilson himself was 'most proud of' (Dorey 2014:2). When Wilson resigned as the leader of the Labour Party and Prime Minister in 1976, he cited the Open University in his valedictory speech as his 'most proud achievement' (Dorey, 2014:8).

The Dearing Report (1997) refers to the opportunities the Open University gave to mature students with minimal or no prior educational qualifications to return to study:

3.20: Not surprisingly, given that they are, on average, older and have work experience, part-time students have more diverse entry qualifications. The Open University, in particular, has shown that many mature students, with few or no prior educational qualifications, are capable of benefiting from higher education (NCIHE, 1997:24).

Although the Open University was not part of Robbins' vision for higher education, it benefitted from several of his findings and recommendations – 'crucially that there was a great deal of talent in the United Kingdom which was being neglected by the existing higher education system' (Calhoun, 2014:72). The Open University is the world's first successful distance-learning teaching university and it was established with the belief that high-quality degree courses could and should be delivered to those students who did not have, or had not had in the past, the opportunity to attend traditional universities ([www.open.ac.uk](http://www.open.ac.uk)). Regardless of the opposition it initially faced, the success of the Open University since its initial student intake in 1971, 'has managed to convince sceptics that academic excellence need not be compromised by openness' ([www.mcs.open.ac.uk](http://www.mcs.open.ac.uk):3). The Open University is now the largest academic institution in the United Kingdom.<sup>5</sup> As it stands today, it is a fundamental part of not just of the national but of the international higher education environment (Weinbren, 2015: xiv). It is worth noting that OU students, by definition part-timers, had paid tuition fees since its inception (Andrews, 1997:20) and so would not have experienced a dramatic change as a result of the Dearing Report, discussed in the next section.

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<sup>5</sup> The 'total number of students taught since 1969 is 1.94 million' (<http://www.open.ac.uk>).

## 2.4 The Dearing Report (1997).

### 2.4.1 Purpose of the report.

The Dearing Report (1997), formally known as the Report of the National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education (NCIHE), was the first 'officially-appointed' national, comprehensive review of higher education in the United Kingdom since the Robbins Report (1963). Although central to the further expansion of higher education within further education, the report paradoxically limited the development of widening participation (NCIHE, 1997; Bill, 1998:280; Bathmaker, 2003). Indeed, the report is most remembered for recommending the introduction of student fees, which led to a decline in opportunities for part-time study. This had a significant impact on mature students, the most likely cohort to seek part time study.

The report is useful historically in that it documents the state of play with regards to mature student participation in higher education in the 1990s. Sir Ron Dearing, who at the time was the Chancellor of the University of Nottingham, and was appointed the Chairman of the Committee (Bill, 1998:279), was overheard at a conference declaring that he 'believed the needs of young people were more pressing than those of mature students' (Times Higher Education 01.08.97).

The report was commissioned (with the support of the Labour Party) by the Conservative government under the leadership of John Major (Wyness, 2010:9). The Committee's remit was to look at the long-term future of higher education within the United Kingdom as well as resolve a number of immediate problems that had arisen since the Robbins Report. The committee was assigned the following terms of reference:

To make recommendations on how the purposes, shape, structure, size and funding of higher education, including support for students, should develop to meet the needs of the United Kingdom over the next 20 years, recognising that higher education embraces teaching, learning, scholarship and research (NCIHE, 1997:3).

The committee was tasked to examine specific areas within further and higher education that included: 'teaching, learning, scholarship and research' as well as report on the purpose, shape and structure of higher education (NCIHE, 1997:3). Choice is central to the terms of references: '*students should be able to choose between a diverse range of courses, institutions, modes and locations of study*'. There is a strong instrumental and economic focus in the mention of value for money and that 'learning should be increasingly responsive to employment needs' and 'HE has important roles in local and regional economies'. However, there is also recognition of a broader aim of contributing to the nation's social, moral and spiritual life. The Committee also raised the 'proliferation of the use of the title 'University College' and variants of it' as a concern. The Committee considered this could be 'misleading' and studied several options. Recommendation 65 states:

We recommend to the Government that it takes action, either by clarifying the legal position or by ensuring that conditions can be placed on the flow of public funds, to restrict the use of the title 'University College' to those institutions which are in every sense a college which is part of a university under the control of the university's governing body; and to those higher education institutions which have been granted taught degree awarding powers (NCHIHE, 1997:257).

#### 2.4.2 Increasing student numbers.

Dearing's vision was not dissimilar to Robbins' in terms of increasing access to higher education and widening participation. In his vision, the commitment to 'open learning' had become a commitment to the 'learning society' and to 'lifelong learning'. There is recognition of both national need and individual demand that would require 'a resumed expansion of student numbers, young and mature, full-time and part-time'. Reference is made to challenges and opportunities, stating that '[T]he effectiveness of its responses to these, and its commitment to quality and standards, will shape its future (NCIHE, 1997:7). Reference to mature students is made in annex A to the terms of reference, specifically that:

there is a growing diversity of students in higher education with a growing number of mature entrants, part-timers, and women students; ... (NCIHE, 1997:3).

Parry and Thompson (2002:23) argue that the Dearing Report (1997) supported the increase in student numbers and the growth in widening participation by introducing several recommendations that would encourage the number of



students attending higher education from under-represented groups. These recommendations were imperative if past gender and ethnic inequalities were to be challenged (Gorard and Smith, 2006). Moreover, seemingly in contradiction to Dearing's comment on young students being more important than mature students, the report criticises the Robbins report for mainly focusing on young entrants. It points out that by 1995/96, 58 per cent of entrants to higher education were mature students and welcomes:

7.5 the way in which the expansion of higher education during this period has been associated with increased participation by women, by mature students, by students from socio-economic groups...

The report also highlights the increase in the number of mature students from ethnic backgrounds studying at HE level:

3.13 In aggregate, students from ethnic minorities are more than proportionately represented in higher education, but their profile differs from that of white students: a greater proportion of them are mature students, and they are particularly concentrated in a few of the 1992 universities (NCIHE, 1997:22).

The Dearing Report also recommended that there should be an increase in student places to allow for widening participation that included young people from economically disadvantaged groups, ethnic minorities, mature students, women and students with disabilities.

Paragraphs 7.11, 7.12 and 7.13 of the report analyse the participation in higher education of mature students and the fact that they are 'particularly strongly represented among part-time students' (NCHIHE, 1997:104). Paragraph 7.32 of the report goes on to recognise the complexity of studying at degree level and states:

7.32 The factors which encourage students from traditionally under-represented groups to enrol and subsequently to succeed in higher education are complex (NCHIHE, 1997:110).

This then leads to a concern with the financial implications of this expansion, arguing that if non-traditional students are to 'succeed in higher education', the cost to institutions is likely to increase (ibid 7.33:110):

7.33 ...Research commissioned by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) from the Institute for Employment Research into the costs of teaching different groups of students found that 'certain groups of students are held to incur higher costs than others, particularly mature

students, those with non-traditional qualifications and students with certain disabilities, although such costs tend not to have been quantified'.

Statistics published by HEFCE (2016:14) give a clearer picture in that they distinguish between the steady increase of mature students (aged 21 or over) over the past decade to a high of 68,000 in 2014-15 whereas the number of part time mature entrants fell sharply, following the introduction of higher tuition fees and 'has continued to decrease in the years since'. Given that many mature students choose to study part-time due to their financial, domestic or employment commitments (Rogers, 2002; Burton Lloyd and Griffiths, 2011:26), this decline in part-time study is probably having a disproportionate impact on mature student statistics.

#### 2.4.3 Financing higher education.

By the time of the Dearing report, rapid expansion in higher education from an elite sector in the 1960s with a five per cent attendance, to a mass sector in the 1990s with a thirty per cent attendance (Watson & Taylor, 1998 and Barr & Crawford, 1998:1) had led to a financial crisis in both the further and higher education sectors (Parry and Thompson, 2002:23). Part of the Committee's remit was to address the question of student support and the introduction of tuition fees as well as generate additional finances within the higher education sector (Barr and Crawford, 1998; Dearden, Fitzsimmons and Goodman, 2004). Hillman (2013:250) argues that prior to the Dearing Report (1997) the growth of higher education and not just the impending financial crises had been a significant concern to a number of successive governments (1990, 1998, 2006 and 2012). This concern was also due in part to the changes in the labour market (Bathmaker, 2003:173) and the demand for a more educated and flexible workforce, due to economic and technological changes.

The report consisted of ninety-three recommendations. In contrast to the Robbins Report (1963), Dearing reviewed the payment of university tuition fees by students and identified the need for a 'student support system' in significant detail (Ainley, 2014:226). The report recommended that students themselves should contribute financially towards the cost of their degrees and states:

We recommend to the Government that it shifts the balance of funding, in a planned way, away from block grant towards a system in which funding follows the student, assessing the impact of each successive shift on institutional behaviour and the control of public expenditure, with a target of distributing at least 60 per cent of total public funding to institutions according to student choice by 2003 (NCIHE, 1997:297, recommendation 72).

Apart from financial concerns, the report raised four other points, including the quality of provision of higher education in further education colleges. Dearing recommended that the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) should include:

- quality assurance and public information;
- standards verification;
- the maintenance of the qualification's framework;
- a requirement that the arrangements for these are encompassed in a code of practice which every institution should be required formally to adopt, by 2001/02, as a condition of public funding. (Recommendation 24)
- Furthermore, the Committee recommended that the QAA should also include:
  - to work with institutions to establish small, expert teams to provide benchmark information on standards, in particular threshold standards, operating within the framework of qualifications, and completing the task by 2000;
  - to work with universities and other degree-awarding institutions to create, within three years, a UK-wide pool of academic staff recognised by the Quality Assurance Agency, from which institutions must select external examiners;
  - to develop a fair and robust system for complaints relating to educational provision;
  - to review the arrangements in place for granting degree-awarding powers (recommendation 25). (NCIHE, 1997:163).

Comparing the report to the Robbins Report (1963), Ainley (2014:226) points out that the report shares the wider purposes of higher education with Robbins', but its main distinction was to advocate a system whereby students should be responsible for part of the cost of their own tuition fees. Dearing says:

We conclude, therefore, that graduates in employment should make a greater contribution to the costs of higher education in the future (NCHIHE, 1997:288 para.18.24).

Moreover, the report states:

20.40 We do not underestimate the strength of feeling on the issue of seeking a contribution towards tuition costs: nor do we dispute the logic of the arguments put forward. A detailed assessment of the issues has, however, convinced us that the arguments in favour of a contribution to tuition costs from graduates in work are strong, if not widely appreciated.

They relate to equity between social groups, broadening participation, equity with part-time students in higher education and in further education, strengthening the student role in higher education, and identifying a new source of income that can be ring-fenced for higher education.

Smith (2008:2) points out that following the introduction of student tuition fees in 1998, it was expected that there would be a significant fall in the number of students applying to study at degree-level, specifically applications from widening participation groups, which included mature students. This anticipated reduction in mature student numbers was because, compared to the traditional-age students, it was argued, many mature students have additional responsibilities and commitments, which may include family, employment and financial responsibilities (Bowl 2003 and Million +NUS, 2012). However, Thomas and Quinn (2007:69) state:

... that a study of the participation rates between 1994 and 2000 (HEFCE 2005) found no evidence that the introduction of tuition fees and replacement of grants with loans had significantly affected entrant behaviour.

#### 2.4.4 Criticisms of the report and its legacy.

A central criticism of the report is that, despite rhetoric about increasing non-traditional students, its funding recommendations led to the opposite. For example, Bill (1998:294) argues:

All in all, the Report makes some useful noises, but the analysis and recommendations on aims and role and on lifelong learning and a learning society, are disappointing, tend to reinforce the full-time traditional starting point, and do not envisage the extent of cultural change which is needed. This is not surprising, since the main problem to be solved by the Committee was financial, and its solution is for full-time students to pay more.

Similarly, the American sociologist Martin Trow, who had evaluated a number of changes within British higher education over the years, criticised the Dearing Report (1997) for its 'lack of insight into how the United Kingdom's higher education system works' (Trow, 1997:26). Moreover, Bill (1998:279) agrees with Trow and argues:

...the Report is found wanting. All in all, the report makes some useful noises, but the analysis and recommendations on aims and role and on lifelong learning and a learning society, are disappointing, tend to reinforce

the full-time traditional starting point, and do not envisage the extent of cultural change which is needed. The Report's recommendations as a whole lack force and understanding of which 'levers' have to be moved.

A critique by Barr and Crawford (1998:74) of the Report and the government's response, single out two of Dearing's recommendations, 78 and 80, as by far the most important in the report. These are quoted below:

Recommendation 78 - We recommend to the Government that it introduces, by 1998/99, income contingent terms for the payment of any contribution towards living costs or tuition costs sought from graduates in work.

Recommendation 80 - We recommend to the Government that it looks urgently at alternative and internationally accepted approaches to national accounting which do not treat the repayable part of loans in the same way as grants to students.

The report does not deny the concerns and arguments regarding the introduction of student fees, but on balance argues for contribution to fees in the name of equity and broadening participation:

We do not underestimate the strength of feeling on the issue of seeking a contribution towards tuition costs: nor do we dispute the logic of the arguments put forward. A detailed assessment of the issues has, however, convinced us that the arguments in favour of a contribution to tuition costs from graduates in work are strong, if not widely appreciated. They relate to equity between social groups, broadening participation, equity with part-time students in higher education and in further education, strengthening the student role in higher education, and identifying a new source of income that can be ring-fenced for higher education (NCHIHE, 1997:288 para. 20.40).

With regards to FE, the Dearing report (1997) recommended that HE-in-FE should be made accessible and affordable to everyone, thereby meeting the needs of individual learners as well as those at local and national levels (NCIHE, 1997:260 and Parry and Thompson, 2002: v). However, criticism of this recommendation comes from Parry and Thompson (2002:26) who argue that as with 'previous recommendations' made by the Dearing report, there was little, if any, discussion regarding whether these 'institutions' were appropriate to perform 'this distinctive mission' (NCIHE, 1997:259).

Although not to the same extent as the Robbins Report (1963), the effect of the Dearing Report on higher education is still felt today, specifically, its enduring legacy with regards to student access, quality and tuition fees. Notably, the

Dearing Report is remembered for establishing a student loan scheme where graduates contribute to the costs of their education. Once this had been established, it opened the possibility of steep rises in the cost of tuition fees. Haxell (2018:1) states that the impact of this increase on part-time and mature students has been relentless, with a fall of 20 per cent in the number of mature students studying at degree level since the new fees structure was introduced in 2012.

Feather (2010:189) says that the Dearing Report (1997) with its proposed 'dramatic changes' to higher education, propelled Further Education Colleges (FEC) into the spotlight, one of the proposed changes was the expansion of provision of HE-in-FE. This expansion marked a significant change by promoting further collaboration between FECs and HEIs in England, thus conceding that the expansion of higher education in the further education sector was essential to the future provision of higher education. By lifting on undergraduate degrees, there was no target set for the two or three years, the expansion of sub degrees in further education colleges was also largely in response to the report, leading to the introduction of foundation degrees.

## 2.5 The Growth of Higher Education in Further Education.

### 2.5.1 The diversification of HE-in-FE and the introduction of the Foundation Degree.

The rapid expansion of HE during the late 1980s and early 1990s led to the sub-contracting (indirect funding) of teaching to colleges through the setting up of partnerships with HEIs. According to Parry and Thompson (2001:4), by 1994, around one in eight of all higher education students in England were studying in FE colleges, with close to a sixth of this number taught under franchise arrangements.

As indicated in the previous section, the Dearing report had a huge impact on further education by increasing the number of undergraduate places, which in turn increased the number of higher education courses being offered within FEC. Unlike the 'new' universities of 1992, these institutions are to a large extent satellites of traditional universities who provide accreditation and quality assurance. Although access courses had been available, the Access to Higher Education diploma, based in FEC, also contributed to the growing partnership between traditional universities and the colleges. In a white paper titled *Access Courses: Higher education, Meeting the Challenge* (1987), the government identified access courses as a link into higher education.

Alongside the development of Access courses was the introduction of the Foundation degree:

In order to meet its 50% participation target, the Blair Government launched a new short-cycle qualification, the Foundation Degree. By involving employers in its design and operation, by enabling students to apply their learning to specific workplace situations, and by guaranteeing arrangements for progression to the Bachelor's Degree, the new qualification was intended to tackle the historic 'skills deficit' at the intermediate levels. The new degree was expected to be 'delivered' typically (but never exclusively) by FECs (BIS, 2012:42)

The importance of a local learning provision and the need for intermediate higher education qualifications that were vocationally as well academic in character was recognised in two reports: *Choosing to Change* (1994) and the *Dearing Report* (1997). To facilitate this increase in learning provision, David Blunkett, Secretary of State for Education and Employment at the time, introduced the concept of the Foundation Degree in his speech on Higher Education at the University of Greenwich on 15 February 2000 (Blunkett, 2000). Blunkett (2000:5) says that the initial purpose of the Foundation Degree was to offer learners an alternative higher education qualification to the conventional three-year full-time undergraduate degree by providing an 'accessible and flexible building block' that would 'provide graduates needed within the labour market to address shortages in particular skills' (QAA, 2015:2). The QAA (2015:2) says:

Foundation degrees may also aim to contribute to widening participation and lifelong learning by encouraging participation by learners who may not previously have considered studying for a higher-level qualification or prefer a more applied curriculum.

It was, however, the Labour Prime Minister, Tony Blair, who initially revealed the new vocational-orientated degree in his Romanes Lecture at the University of Oxford on the 2nd December 1999. Blair pointed out that the aim of the Foundation degree was to aid the changing face of post-industrial economies, widen participation and bridge the skills gap at intermediate level (Foundation Degree Task Force Report to Ministers, 2004:5). The new qualification would encompass a wide range of learners, who were perhaps unsure of embarking on a full degree. Blair said that it would give the learner the opportunity to gain professional and technical skills – within a shorter time frame than a full degree. The proposed new degree was described by Blair as akin to the 'US associate degree', which is an undergraduate academic degree which usually lasts two years (Blair,1999). (Blair, 1999) said:

for all these reasons – to meet the shortage of people with technician level qualifications, to develop in students the right blend of skills which employers need, and to lay the basis of widening participation and progression – we need a new qualification (DfEE 2000c:6).

Struthers (2009:1) states that the Foundation Degree was initially aimed at the 'middle third achievers' and was conceived in conjunction with employers. It was designed as a two-year full-time or four-year part-time, vocationally-orientated higher education qualification, focusing on the student's specific employment or



profession. It is distinctive in that students are awarded academic credits for learning through their engagement with employers and was originally designed to encourage those students who came under the 'wider participatory groups' with employment experience which included mature students. The objective was also to redress the skills deficit which was acknowledged by the National Skills Task Force (2000), empowering the learner with a work-related qualification whilst addressing shortages in specific professional and technical skills within a profession, thereby meeting the 'needs of industry' (Wagner, 2004).

Although the Foundation Degree was initially designed to be delivered within the further education sector (HE-in-FE), the degree was also validated and delivered in higher education institutions and was subjected to the same quality assurance as traditional university degree programmes (DfES, 2000; DfEE, 2000:6; HEFCE, 2000; Barr, 2001; Parry and Thompson, 2002:55; DfES, 2003:57; Parry, Calendar, Scott and Temple, 2012:10; Rapley, 2012:31).

Since their launch, the number of students that have enrolled on Foundation Degrees has grown considerably (The Foundation Degree Task Force, 2004:10). This growth in numbers was aided further by the Further Education and Training Act (2007), which fulfils an educational demand for a vocational route into higher education. Burke, (2010:9) argues that although the development and provision of Foundation Degrees has had a positive effect on recruiting 'under-represented social group' into higher education such as mature students, it has also had a negative effect by contributing 'to inequalities among institutions, courses, academics and students'. Clarke (2003:36) states:

Foundation courses provide an opportunity to gain credit for work experience and it is thought that these degrees could help mature students gain entry into higher education rather than having to rely upon taking A levels.

But the growth of higher education in recent years is not without its critics. Feather (2011:447) who argues that colleges of further education and universities are in danger of becoming commercial, by producing graduands on demand. What is more, delivery of HE-in-FE today 'is seen more as a factory churning out students with bits of paper' (Feather, 2011:447). Parry, Calendar, Scott and Temple (2012:11) even question the notion that there has been an expansion of HE-in-FE:

There is little evidence of overall growth in college-taught HE. Some individual colleges have seen a growth in undergraduate numbers but expansion in the post-Dearing years has proved difficult to achieve (ibid:11).

Further observations on the growth of HE-in-FE come from Mayhew, Deer and Dua (2004:78) who argue that 'in economic terms, it is far from clear what the true private and social returns to the expansion of higher education have been'. What is more, they have questioned whether 'the incentive structure applied to universities is leading to insufficient diversity? Has quality and delivery been damaged by inadequate financing and by the specific forms of incentive structure applied?'. In the light of these issues, what are we to make of the government's intent to expand still further to reach a 50% participation rate? As importantly, due to the increase of graduates within the job market are they going to be under-utilised? Additionally, Mayhew (2004:78) argues that Charles Clarke (Dfes,2003 para 1.22) was misleading in stating that 'the demand for graduates is strong'. Mayhew believes further expansion should be achieved by increasing the number of students studying for a Foundation Degree 'rather than a three-or four-year' undergraduate degree.

### 2.5.2 Further Education – 'the country cousin'?

As discussed in section 2.3, traditionally, higher educational courses in the United Kingdom had been delivered in institutions that have been seen as two separate sectors, higher and further education (Bathmaker and Thomas, 2009:112).

Although the provision of HE-in-FE had a long-standing history, with some colleges tracing their delivery of degree-level work back to the 1950s and 1960s (Scott 2009), they had been primarily known for their delivery of vocational and adult education.

The *Dearing Report* reversed this (BIS 69, 2012:41) by introducing a policy that was to direct future HE expansion to the FE colleges (Parry and Thompson, 2002:2). This focus on higher education teaching being provided in colleges was underpinned by four arguments that can be summarised as 'securing increased growth, broader participation, greater diversity and more work-focused forms of higher education' (BIS, 2012:42). The Dearing Report (1997) 'proposed a dramatic change' to the provision of higher education in England, recommending that the

delivery of HE-in-FE should be increased by advocating closer 'collaboration between HE institutions and FE colleges' (Parry and Thompson, 2002: 28 and Feather, 2010:189).

As a result, these two ordinarily quite distinct sectors coalesced to create a new HE hybrid; that of Higher Education in Further Education (HE-in-FE). Today there are more HE students in FE colleges than there were in the whole HE system at the time of the Robbins report in the 1960s (Scott, 2012:1). Yet the FE sector remains, according to Panchamia (2012:1) poorly defined, embracing a wide variety of courses - everything else that is not 'delivered in higher education institutions'. Kennedy (1997:1) argues that 'further education is everything that does not happen in schools or universities' while for Rapley (2012:30), HE-in-FE 'is typically vocational in nature with a largely localised/regional pool from which to draw students'.

For others, it is precisely the heterogeneity of Colleges of Further Education and their long tradition of providing higher education at local level (Parry and Thompson, 2001:1) that are their strength. Research by the Department for Business Innovation and Skills (BIS 69, 2012:174) concurs and states that:

heterogeneity is closely linked to the flexibility and responsiveness of FECs in planning their HE provision. FECs respond quickly to changes in student demand, employer needs and the wider policy environment (such as the availability of student numbers, whether directly from HEFCE or via a partner HEI, or shifts in regulatory regimes); they have no choice but to respond in this manner.

The position of FECs in terms of the local community and the local economy, however, distinguishes it from traditional universities, as found by a study by Parry, Calendar, Scott and Temple (2012:179):

Employers are more likely to be involved with FECs than HEIs as providers of elements of courses. FECs are also more likely than HEIs to be providers of continuing professional development for employers. Employers also stress the need for flexibility, which may tend to favour FECs. On the other hand, HEIs are more important in terms of recruitment than FECs, especially of Bachelors' level students who are regarded by employers as normally being produced by HEIs.

Against the tendency for higher education in further education colleges to be perceived as the 'country cousin' to its 'more sophisticated and prestigious university neighbours', Rapley (2012:30) argues that FECs are:

...carving out an increasingly significant and strategic roles for themselves in terms of HE provision.

This is confirmed by the 157 Group (2009:6) who argue that 'HE-in-FE is a burgeoning sub-sector with 90% of FECs now delivering HE compared to just 20% in 2001'. The degree-level courses that are delivered in further education colleges are considered theoretically to be the equivalent in both quality and standards to those which are delivered in traditional universities (Feather 2009; Rapley, 2012:29).

This provision is argued to be 'complementary' to the provision of degree-level courses delivered in universities rather than being in direct competition' (Scott, 2012:1). Colleges of further education offer different training opportunities that complement the provision of higher education in a traditional university setting. This provision includes a wide range of short-term, full-and part-time tertiary educational courses, with an emphasis on the delivery of vocational, technical and adult qualifications to those who may have underachieved at school, the unemployed and low-skilled workers. FE is also considered as an 'alternative educational route', specifically for young people who have chosen not to enter higher education (Kennedy, 1997:1) as well as providing English language skills to International students and facilitating rehabilitation with ex-offenders.

Parry and Thompson (2001:4) state:

...many colleges also entered into franchise relationships to teach undergraduate courses (in part or in whole) on behalf of partner HE institutions. For the latter, especially those recruiting to the limits of their existing capacity, this was an opportunity to expand student numbers as well as extend their local and regional accessibility. For the colleges, on the other hand, franchising was a way of increasing and diversifying their funding, developing their curriculum, enhancing teaching and professional development opportunities for their staff, and building new progression pathways for their students.

Yet they are in some senses still seen as compensating for the gaps created by the absence of more prestigious institutions:

Colleges are especially well-placed to support stronger partnerships between higher and further education in 'cold spots' - or parts of the country where HE provision is weak – and pathways from apprenticeship and foundation degrees to more advanced levels of technical education (HEFCE, 2016: 22).

By contrast, Vince Cable MP, Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills and President of the Board of Trade at the time (24 April 2014) highlights the value of competition between universities and colleges of further education. During his speech, Cable quotes Anthony Crosland in 1965, almost fifty years previously:

...we believe in the dual pattern. The University sector will continue to make its own unique and marvellous contribution. We want the public sector to make its own equally distinguished but separate contribution. And between them we want – and I believe we shall get – mutual understanding and healthy rivalry where their work overlaps.

Parry, Callendar, Scott and Temple (2012:177) also see HE-in-FE provision as forming a distinctive sector, but not in competition with traditional universities:

This view of HE-in-FE as a distinctive sector is shared by HEI managers responsible for links with FECs. This is especially so in the case of 'pre-1992' universities which see a sharp distinction between their on-campus provision – more 'academic' and aimed at students with 'standard' entry qualifications (often chosen on a highly selective basis) – and courses they validate in FECs – largely 'vocational' and aimed at more local students who had non-standard entry qualifications.

Returning to the speech given by Vince Cable the Secretary of State for Business in 2012, which was mentioned at the beginning of this section, Cable said that the 'HE-in-FE issue is an important one' and argues that the blurred boundaries between higher and further education and academic and vocational subjects should be 'broken down' which indicated that the Conservative/Liberal Democratic coalition government (2010-2015) considered the growth of HE-in-FE to be an important one. Rapley (2012:30) concurs and states that the 'significance of HE-in-FE to the UK HE sector cannot be underestimated'. On the other hand, despite the growth of HE-in-FE, universities are still considered to be more 'sophisticated and prestigious' in comparison to further education colleges, which will make the blurring of any boundaries between the two challenging. Moreover, in his Public Policy Lecture given in Cambridge on the 23 April 2014 (Original script may differ from delivered version) on the future for higher and further education institutions, Cable argues that there is:

...an awareness of the continuing gulf between the 2 systems, whether in terms of funding, of perceived esteem, of adequate pathways for students between the 2, of practical collaboration between HE and FE, or in terms of awareness among young people, their teachers and their parents.

In the same speech, Cable also argued that by reclassifying CATs and polytechnics 'we gained some excellent universities' forging connections with businesses and affording students the opportunity to 'live and study locally'. Despite the optimistic approach to his speech, Cable went on to say that he considered a stronger bond between colleges and universities was required, if only to 'facilitate progression' between the two ([www.gov.uk](http://www.gov.uk)).

From surveys and reports, one can compare universities and colleges in terms of student satisfaction and reviews. According to the National Student Survey from 2008, 2009 and 2010, many students studying HE-in-FE were dissatisfied in a number of areas, including the quality of the courses, as well as the organisation and management of the courses. (Parry, Calendar, Scott and Temple 2012:11). By contrast, a report in the Times Higher Education (T.H.E) (Havergal, 19 December 2014) wrote that 'nearly one in three English further education colleges offering higher education that were reviewed last year have been told to make room for improvements'. However, although several areas were identified for improvement, many colleges of further education were also considered to have done 'extremely well' (McClaran, 2014, cited in T.H.E. 19 December 2014):

College higher education is very diverse... it does a great job at widening participation and increasing the range of courses students can to study. Still, we have found that a few colleges need to focus more strongly on developing the robust higher education ethos that we rightly expect from all UK providers (McClaran, 2014).

### 2.5.3 The mature student in HE-in-FE: student perspective.

Successive lifelong learning and widening participation policies arguing for a 'better skilled workforce' had helped to increase the number of mature students studying HE-in-FE, which has traditionally drawn for the most part on localised and/or regionally based-mature students (Bathmaker, 2003:175). Rapley (2012:30) points out that there is a stark contrast between the traditional-age university entrant who has elected to live and study away from their home, to the demographic profile of an HE-in FE student. This is because many HE-in-FE students are mature students who live within commuting distance of their place of study and have both family and financial constraints. Their motives for returning to education are primarily instrumental: many of them are looking to improve their career prospects or change their career and begin by studying on a vocational

program part-time. Bowl (2003:65) argues that many students also choose to study HE-in-FE because 'some students clearly felt that they would be more comfortable and less conspicuous and isolated'.

Evidence for the contribution the growth of HE-in-FE has made to mature student participation can be seen in a Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) (2013) report which suggests that the number of mature students studying at degree-level has increased significantly. Research undertaken by Million+ (2012:3) into the increase in entry numbers of mature students studying at degree-level concludes that:

the expansion of opportunities for students who chose to enter higher education later in life has been driven by modern universities that share a real commitment to social mobility...

Furthermore, the introduction of the Access to Higher Education Diploma, considered a natural progression from FE-to-HE, is considered a 'major pathway to higher education for adult learners' (West, 1996:4 and [www.accesstohe.ac.uk](http://www.accesstohe.ac.uk)). The gradual rise in the number of mature students who are undertaking an undergraduate degree has also been accompanied by a considerable increase in the diversity of students. A typical HE-in-FE student tends to be mature (over the age of 21) often residing in the local community, many of whom have family responsibilities and employed with financial commitments (Cockburn, 2006).

One of the benefits of studying HE-in-FE is that in many further education colleges, the courses are more flexible in some respects, but more stringent in others, offering a more nurturing ethos within a secure and supportive environment. Cockburn (2006:14) and Burkhill (2008:329) point out that in many FE colleges, the HE-in-FE cohort are usually smaller groups as opposed to the larger numbers found in many traditional universities, giving students a more personal learning experience. Burkhill (2008:329) points out that some HE-in-FE lecturers offer students 'relatively generous contact hours', which blurs the boundaries between the traditional lecture and 'other teaching activities'. All of which lends itself to HE-in-FE being a more conducive learning experience to the mature student. Parry, Callendar, Scott and Temple (2012), Hudson and Berzins (2011) and Parry, Davies and Williams (2004:22) point out that the provision of HE-in-FE tends to have smaller class sizes than traditional university courses.

Furthermore, Tight (2003:25), says that it is possible that many mature students consider the 'image' of the traditional universities' as a remote place to study and that they were almost exclusive places of learning for well-qualified teenagers and not mature students. Marks (2002:76) concurs and says:

Regrettably, UK universities can appear remote and other-worldly to those who have experienced the schooling process as at best a boring endurance test and at worst a soul-destroying encounter which colours the rest of their lives. The great seats of learning in the UK carry with them, to varying degrees, the sheen of elitism, which serves to intimidate those who stand outside of the system.

Thus, for mature students, local provision, small class sizes and flexibility of HE-in-FE are seen as strengths. A study by Elliot & Brna (2009:115), conducted in Fife, Scotland, on a group of 'non-traditional' learners with a wide range of qualifications found that:

...flexible and local-learning provision is a practical way of supporting non-traditional or hard-to-reach learners for whom family or work are often their first priority.

Likewise, this flexibility allows greater opportunity for part-time study, considered both a 'cause' and an 'effect' of mass higher education (Daniel 1993:197). The importance of flexible learning is reiterated by Marks (2002:75) who states that colleges of further education have the potential to engage learners, specifically adult learners, who have not yet ventured into higher education by offering them a more flexible learning provision at local level. Research by BIS-69 (2012:155) into the understanding of HE-in-FE says:

...some of most common reasons for studying at a college rather than a university reflected students' attraction to a supportive learning environment. A college milieu was familiar because they had already studied at a college and felt a comfortable place to study.

This flexibility also allows those learners who consider the geographical location of the learning environment to be a conceivable barrier due to family and employment commitments and therefore, choose to study at local level (Burton, Golding Lloyd & Griffiths 2011:26). HE-in-FE not only broadly meets the local and economic needs of the community, it also bridges the social needs as well. This is achieved by providing a unique and in some cases specialist higher education provision to local employers which are often the only means by which the local population can access higher education (BIS.69,2012:11; and [www.157group.co.uk](http://www.157group.co.uk)).



The geographical location of the college or university is one of the most significant factors that many mature students take into consideration when they elect to return to education, because a 'local' university or college of further education maybe their only option to study at degree level and is indicative of the majority of mature students who chose to return to study. This may be due to financial and/or family commitments. Parry, Callender, Scott and Temple (2012:155) says:

students who selected their college because it was near their home or place of work or because they had progressed from another course at their college or previously studied at the college were far less likely to apply elsewhere to study. So, colleges were a 'safe' place for these students although such decisions may limit students' opportunities.

Burton, Golding Lloyd and Griffiths (2011:33) state:

Students, because of family and work commitments, may not be able to attend courses that are located at too far a distance from their residential base; HE based within an FE environment is more local and therefore a more attractive option, particularly for mature students with family commitments.

Another interpretation with regards to geographical decisions that mature students make are discussed by Archer, Hutchins and Ross, (2003); Parry, Davies & Williams, (2004); QAA, (2006) and Beaney, (2006) who say that many mature students choose to study in a smaller familiar learning environments HE-in-FE, because if they were to apply to study in a traditional university environment, they might experience a sense of intimidation, which could in turn affect their overall learning experience.

Regardless of age or gender, it is not uncommon for first-year undergraduate students to experience feelings of anxiety this may be due to their lack of self-confidence in their ability to live away from home and to study and achieve at degree level. Many mature students may also view their previous academic experiences as a barrier to achieving their academic goal (Thorpe et al., 2007). Stevens (2003:251) argues that this lack of self-confidence and doubt in one's ability to achieve can be said for all students' not just mature students. He says mature students have to contend with:

...a legion of hitherto unknown experiences; engagement with academics and academic discourse, division into home and college self-identities, epiphanies of self-development, and shifts in relationships.

## 2.6 The Widening Participation Agenda and mature students.

### 2.6.1 Widening rather than increasing participation

Although interests in the 'social composition of the universities probably emerged alongside the antecedents of Oxford and Cambridge in the twelfth century' (Kettley, 2007:333) p. 334), the notion of 'widening participation' as we know it can be said to have begun in October 1940 when the Board of Education met and discussed 'a state of society where the advantages and privileges which hitherto have been enjoyed only by the few shall be far more widely shared' (Gillard, 2013:403). This meeting, which took place in a Bournemouth hotel, was part of the Churchill war ministry Conservative-led coalition government proposals which was ultimately to lead to the 1944 Education Act (Gillard, 2013:403). Tight (2012:211) says:

Widening participation – though it has only recently been labelled as such – has been a continuing concern for policy makers and higher education institutions in the United Kingdom since 1945 (and before).

However, as much of these developments have already been covered in other sections, this section focuses on developments since 1994, when a committee specifically looking at widening participation was set up, chaired by Helena Kennedy QC. The Widening Participation Committee was to address recruitment patterns within further education for those who 'do not participate in education and training, but who could benefit from it' (Kennedy, 1997: iii). The report makes a number of proposals, presenting a strong message to the government. However, according to Burke (2001:33),

the key proposals made by the widening participation committee [were] largely overlooked, particularly in terms of collaboration, raising entitlement of free education to level 3, redistribution of resources to the poorest sectors of society and the concept of new learning pathways.

It is four years later, in 1997, with the 'New Labour' government under the leadership of Tony Blair, that preoccupation with widening participation of under-represented groups within higher education really took centre stage.

The widening participation agenda was put at the 'centre of their policies' (Parry and Thompson, 2002: 36). Charles Clarke, the Labour Secretary of State for Education and Skills (Oct 2002 - Dec 2004), said in his opening statement to the House of Commons on the 22 January 2003, that not only was the 'Labour government firmly committed to the widening participation policy, they were also cognisant that a number of entrance impediments need to be lessened' (www.parliament.uk). In addition, the Labour Government's White Paper on Higher Education (2003), set out their plans for radical reform and investment in higher education. The aim of the White Paper was to not only encourage and support mature learners, but also those from 'under-represented' and low socio-economic groups who may face barriers when attempting to access and participate in higher education (DfES, 2003).

Crucially, widening participation policies engaged with university policies, with the Labour government and HEFCE working closely with higher education institutions 'to develop more sophisticated widening participation policies' (Greenbank, 2006:160).

Tight (2012:211) says that both the 'survival and growth' of higher education has depended over the years 'upon maintaining and increasing participation'. He argues that to survive the economic climate, universities and colleges should not only continue to appeal to and recruit traditional-age students, they should also try to attract participation from students from within the wider participation groups. He goes on to say that the principles of widening participation are not 'simply increasing student numbers by enrolling more students from a similar background, it is about going beyond this approach to appeal to different kinds of students to those 'traditionally' recruited'. Gorard (2013:20) like Tight (2012:212) says that the stratification of HE is predominantly the stratification of prior attainment results. Which is another way of saying that the problem is not a problem of university admissions but of previous school performance? Gorard (2013:20) says:

There is something that seems intrinsically unfair about the current set-up, with higher education intakes that are disproportionately young, female, and from relatively high socio-economic status backgrounds.

Views about the success of the widening participation are divided. Connor and Dewson (2001: v) drew attention to the continuing social inequalities, arguing that despite an increase in the number of students from wider participation backgrounds applying to study at degree-level, students from lower social-class backgrounds were still under-represented. A few years later, Greenbank (2006:160) wrote that 'there is little doubt that policy has progressed', Jones and Thomas (2005:627) were less than optimistic about the potential for widening participation, arguing that there would be little or no variation to 'social divisions' within higher education institutions. What is more, they argued, any changes made within universities would be guided by the economy and employer requirements and not by 'regulation of access'. Baker, Brown and Fazeya (2006:169) wrote that 'higher education is still dominated by students from wealthier socio-economic groups'. Nonetheless, they argued that regardless of the inequalities between traditional and non-traditional students 'widening participation has had a considerable effect on the higher education system'.

More recently, Wilkins and Burke (2013:1) write that:

Widening participation (WP) has acquired an increasingly important role in redressing the under-representation of certain social groups in universities.

Gorard (2012) and Tight (2012:212) argue very much about the same thing – that to widen participation in higher education you need to look at what happens at school and in the home and within the community. Gorard (2013:20) says the aspiration to attend higher education is 'usually set earlier in life and embodied in their school-level and immediate post-compulsory qualifications'. Furthermore, he goes on to say that those traditional-age students who do not enter university usually do not have the requisite qualifications 'that would allow them uncomplicated entry'. Moreover, Gorard (2013:20) argues:

It is important to keep in mind the distinction between this WP aspiration and grade reduction approach and any direct attempts to improve the prior qualifications of disadvantaged pupils. The majority of non-participants and of the most disadvantaged young people are not close to attaining the qualifications needed to consider entering HE.

A decade later, HEFCE (2016:2) appraises the success of the widening participation agenda:

While there have been substantial improvements in widening participation and fair access over the past decade, significant disparities between groups remain. Widening participation addresses the large discrepancies in the take-up of higher education opportunities between different social groups. Under-representation is closely connected with broader issues of equity and social inclusion, so we are concerned with ensuring equality of opportunity for disabled students, mature students, women and men, and all ethnic groups ([www.hefce.ac.uk/widen](http://www.hefce.ac.uk/widen)).

Finally, contemporary research on widening participation, unified by its concern for 'the relationship between higher education (HE) and social justice' (Kettley, 2007:333) continues to question an agenda that can seem to be more a tool for social control than social justice (Archer, 2007).

### 2.6.2 Widening participation of mature students.

As Thomas (2001) argues, the widening participation agenda should not just be an exercise to increase student numbers, but a strategic priority to expand student diversity, whilst addressing the discrepancies in the take-up of higher education opportunities between social groups. It also aims to provide a 'diverse section of society with the opportunity to study in higher education' by increasing the number of students from under-represented backgrounds, which includes mature students (Taylor, Mellor and Walton: nd).

As discussed in previous sections, the introduction of a number of diverse entry routes into higher education has assisted and encouraged an increasing number of mature students to study at degree level. These diverse entry routes include Access to Higher Education Courses, and two-year full-time or four-year part-time Foundation Degree. However, Neave (1985), Trow (1987:21), and Marks (2002:75) argue that it is since embracing the 'wider participation' policy that the education sector has improved its mature student provision, a 'final opportunity to gain educational qualifications and improve their life chances'.

Although the national discourse on access to higher education and widening participation has largely focused on the socio-economic status of school leavers, there has been an increasing focus on the recruitment and retention of mature students. Taylor, Walton, Mellor and McCarter (nd:1) state:

If we are to make universities more representative of the communities in which they are based, it is important that we recognise the value of mature students both as potential graduates and in terms of what they can bring to the learning experience of staff and students.

Under the widening participation policy, a greater number of mature students have been encouraged to enter higher education. Many of them have different priorities to 'traditional' students and some of them lead complex lives, some of them are career focused and sensitive to financial matters, some have significant family responsibilities, some find the transition to 'the higher education environment a difficult one in which to participate' (Chapman,2007:15). Burton, Golding Lloyd and Griffiths (2011:25) discuss the complex barriers mature students are often faced with when they consider returning to education:

...these can range from the simplistic to the more complex; from having the courage to phone the college to enquire about the course, to financial issues related to returning to learning. Previous experiences in education may also colour the way they perceive future engagement with education.

Based on an analysis of research literature on mature students and widening participation, Baker, Brown and Fazeya (2006: 170) find the experience to be by and large, 'profoundly negative' in that mature students experience a number of difficulties and face several 'barriers and inequalities' (ibid, 2006: 181).

Furthermore, Baker, Brown and Fazeya (2006:170) and HEFCE (2006) stated that the 'dropout rate' at the time was higher than among traditional students. Ten years later, there seemed to be little change, as HEFCE (2016:14) reports that:

mature students are more likely to leave after one year of a first degree than young students. ...according to the most recent data, mature students are twice as likely as young students to drop out. The rates in 2013-14 were 12 per cent for mature students and 6 per cent for young students.

In conclusion, over the last two decades there have been a number of government policies that have supported and encouraged the growth of widening participation in the United Kingdom. In terms of participation statistics, due to several changes made in recent years, the 'definitions and coverage of national statistics have changed on a number of occasions and it is only recently that higher education has been treated as a single sector'. These changes have therefore limited 'the ability to make historical comparisons' with regards to the achievements of the widening participation agenda (Tight, 2012:211). However, the widening

participation agenda has come to embrace not just entry statistics but also retention. More recently there are attempts to quantify 'experience' 'engagement' and 'success' for all groups of students, but particularly 'non-traditional' students, including mature students.

Through exploring the experiences of mature students through life history research, this thesis sheds light on what 'engagement' might look like and how 'success' might be framed in mature students' own accounts of higher education.

## Chapter 3 Life History Interviews.

### 3.0 Rationale and design.

This chapter aims to describe the research design of this small-scale research study about first generation mature students. Life history as a research method is a specific type of qualitative research that is participant-orientated and allows the researcher to systematically gather and analyse people's narratives as told by them. One of its key strengths is the opportunity it provides to explore the participant's detailed biographical story, providing an individual reflection and self-expression of a person and their culture that may hitherto have been silenced or invisible (Goodson, 2000).

West (1996:10) argues that 'Stories evolve over time'. Merrill (2015:1861) says that this method of conducting research also highlights 'transitions and change in the life course'. The advantage of using life history biographical narratives is that they offer 'first-hand' material which envelops 'the individual's recent history as well as social, cultural, family and educational experiences' (Formetti, West and Horsdal, 2014:214). Furthermore, Merrill and West (2009:1) argue that this type of research method 'offer[s] rich insights into the dynamic interplay of individuals and history, inner and outer worlds, self and others'. This is significant because life history interviews allow the participant to reveal to the researcher not only a description of, but also an insight into, one or more specific events or experiences in their life. It provides participants with the opportunity to tell their story in a specific way for a specific purpose, portraying their identity in a way that they want to present it. Conversely, as West (1996:10) points out:

People may repress and exclude aspects of lived experience, because this is either threatening or considered inconsequential and of little interest to others.

It is also important to remember that in biographical research, interviews undertaken are not between equals West (1996:12) but between a participant and a university researcher and that there may be a 'danger consciously or unconsciously, of imposing a script on others as a result'. In addition, biographical researchers also bring their values, feeling and their own biography to the research process (Merrill and West, 2009). With this in mind, I felt that on a



number of occasions, whilst listening to the participants narratives, the stories they recounted 'resonated deeply with those of my own' (West, 1996:12).

Plummer (1995:34) argues that when people tell their story as participants of life history research, they are turning themselves into 'socially organised biographical objects'. Life history, therefore, is an autobiographical account, obtained from participants through oral communication or through written accounts (Detzner, 1992) that "examine[s] how experience is assigned meaning" (Wallace, 1994:137).

Formetti, West and Horsdal (2014:29) point out that in any research that involves the telling of stories, such as life history, narrative and or biographical research, participants may 'wish to theorise moments of significant agency and personal transformation'. Moreover:

The telling of a story, and its interpretation, is a creative and generative process, with multiple implications and dynamics, to be interpreted from different angles (ibid, 30).

In a similar vein, Bathmaker (2010:2) argues that as social beings, the stories that we choose to tell can be deeply personal. As individuals we choose to tell what stories we want to tell, in our own way. However, as we repeat each story to a different audience, we use different words to fit the purpose of the story. Sikes and Etherington (2001:13) says:

...interpretations and stories may change as different details are remembered or forgotten and as different perspectives are taken, and new information is acquired.

When interviewing we must take into consideration the participants memory or in some cases selective memory. This is because as human beings we remember some things and yet forget others. Sikes and Etherington (2001:15) say: Being asked to sift through one's memories, to tell one's story as part of a life history research project brings the relationship between the story, the life as lived, and methodology into acute focus. People have particular notions of what it means to be involved in research. These notions influence what they tell and how they tell it, and their ideas about the information they consider they should make available to the researcher. As Formetti, West and Horsdal (2014: 35) put it, 'we are storied as well as storytellers'.

Life history interviews depend entirely on human memory and participants may alter their interpretation of a specific event as they recall its details, responding in the moment. It is the conception and perception that an individual may have of specific events in their lives that blurs the boundaries between reality and truth (Goodson and Sikes (2001:42). Certain interview questions may prompt a response, which might reveal the participants' emotions and feelings to the researcher, which in a more structured interview might not be disclosed. The challenge of this is that although everyone has a story to tell, not everyone wants to tell his or her story and/or reveal his or her emotions and feelings.

The nature of life history narratives is that it provides the researcher with an emblematic account of an individual's past. It permits the researcher to reconstruct, through collaboration with the participant, his/her past personal and professional life, hopefully with sensitivity and respect. One of its drawbacks, on the other hand, is that it does rely on the cooperation of the participant to enter into a conversation about their personal experiences.

For Germeten (2012:612), drawing on Foucault's theoretical discourse perspectives, narratives are 'seen as ways of positioning oneself as a subject—both by the teller and the researcher'. Goodson and Sikes (2001:17-18) emphasize that the role of the life history researcher is to 'situate' the narrator's life story within an appraisal of wider social and historical contexts. Sikes and Etherington (2001:10), as life historians themselves, make a similar point, arguing that life historians take the view that the stories people tell about their lives can provide insights into the interaction between the individual and their social worlds and, thereby, give some clues as to how the latter work.

Tierney, (2000:550) says:

As one undertakes a life history, one needs to consider (a) the purpose of the text (What is the author trying to do and why?), (b) the veracity of the text (How does one deal with the truth of what is presented?), and (c) the author of the text (Who pens a story?) ... one needs to consider these issues as one interprets, constructs, and reads texts.

It is the researcher's role to facilitate and support the story-telling process and encourage the participant to reveal their experiences. Each researcher will adopt his or her own approach, interpreting and presenting the data in their own way.

However, as a researcher I hope to demonstrate that the re-presentation of the narratives told in the field is a true portrayal (Tierney 2002).

Life history tends to be used in research for a number of reasons, summarised by Sikes and Etherington (2001:10) as follows:

- it explicitly recognises that lives are not hermetically compartmentalised into, for example, the person we are at work (the professional self) and who we are at home (parent/child/partner selves), and that the things which happen to us in one area of our lives have implications and repercussions for other areas too;
- it acknowledges the crucial relationship between individuals and historical and social circumstances;
- it provides evidence to show how individuals experience, create and make sense of the rules and roles of the social worlds in which they live.

In addition, as Clandinin and Connelly (2000:18) state, 'narrative is the best way of representing and understanding experience' even if that experience is temporal (ibid 19). Life history has been used in several different research fields, including feminist research, social class history, as well as the holocaust and reminiscence research (Thompson, 2000). Sykes (2006:3) points out that although the initial focus of life history tends to be on 'interpretations and understandings' it is also used 'within projects alongside quantitative methods' (Sikes, 2006:3).

The origins of written life history can be found in a few informal classic biographical studies, which date back to the beginning of the twentieth century. A seminal example is the study of Polish immigrants to the USA, *The Polish Peasant in America and Europe*, carried out by sociologists Thomas and Znaniecki in the 1910s, who claimed that such 'life records constitute the perfect form of sociological data' (Sikes and Everington, 2001:9). Other autobiographical accounts include the life history narratives of Native Americans told to or recorded by Barrett (1906) and later, Radin (1920). There are also a number of such narratives written prior to the 1930s. These include slave narratives (Douglass, 1855) *My Bondage and My Freedom*) as well as accounts of poverty and working-class experience (Mayhew, 1851) *London Labour and the London Poor*.). It was, however, the Chicago School of Sociology that pioneered 'a range of innovative life history studies' in the 1930s (Goodson, 2009:129). with Clifford Shaw's (1930) *The Jack-Roller* (ibid:7), which reflect the 'sociology of life stories'

approach developed within the Chicago School (Plummer, 2001:104). In addition, the life story approach has also been used by the psychologists Freud and Erikson (Atkinson, 1998), Freud used them as a basis for applying psychoanalysis using secondary sources, whilst Erikson used a life history approach to create a new methodology known as psychohistory (Atkinson, 1998, Binion, 1981).

The life history interviews undertaken within this study focus on the 'temporal dimension' of the experiences of mature students studying at the time for a degree in an FE college. My aim was to give a holistic view of the participants' responses (Wallace, 1994). Biesta, Hodkinson and Goodson (2004: 5) state that life history 'research is basically retrospective', although not 'exclusively interested in the past'. It provides a useful account of how and why a life course took a specific form, because it outlines a person's travels through their life from past to the present with an occasional snapshot of their future (McMullen and Braithwaite, 2013:93). So, although I was interested in their experience as students in the present, inevitably that experience was shaped by their stories of the past, both educational and general. The responsive researcher may gain valuable insight into individual lives that allows us to 'come to understand and give meaning to our lives through story' (McMullen and Braithwaite, 2013:93).

It is important to recognise that the 'construction of the narrative' within life history interviews is a 'joint project between researcher and informant' (Lewis 2008:573). Goodson and Sikes (2001:20) argue that not everyone has the right personal characteristics for this type of research. Conducting life history interviews can be laborious, time-consuming and complicated but they allow the researcher to establish a personal contact with the participant, sharing a form of common ground and what they call 'listening beyond' (Goodson and Sikes, 2001:32). Adriansen (2012:42) is explicit about what makes a good life history interviewer: it is someone who remains for the most part silent throughout the interview process and does 'not take over the interview with too many questions', allowing for a mutual trust and collaboration to develop between both the researcher and the participant (Clandinin and Connelly 2000). The key to the conduct of such interviews is the ability, competence and resource management of the researcher to elicit the information. Furthermore, it requires skills of restraint from the researcher to ensure that they establish an informal, positive and trusting one-to-

one relationship that encourages participants to reflect and communicate (Goodson and Sikes 2001:28).

Atkinson (1998) focuses on the narrative dimension of life history, one that is constructed by the interviewer and the interviewee and that places a great emphasis on eliciting personal experiences. As Bathmaker (2010:2) points out, life history interviews can provide detailed engagement, greater understanding as well as a wealth of rich data and in some cases, opens people's lives for scrutiny to the satisfaction of those who read life history accounts.

One of the differences between a conventional and a life history interview is that a conventional interview typically draws on a set of pre-determined questions. In contrast, life histories interviews encourage the participants to present an in-depth personal narrative, which encompasses their past and present lives, allowing for spontaneous subjects to emerge and be explored. Adhering to this process enables the researcher to facilitate and support the participant throughout the interview process, encouraging the participant to share his or her experiences. The life history interview searches for information as well as insights and aspects of participants' lives, encouraging the participant to answer the 'big' questions (who, what, where, why and when) (Goodson and Sikes (2001:1). This approach provides a platform for the interviewees to communicate their life stories and recount events in their own words, which empowers them to arrange their experiences and relate them to other life events in a relaxed environment.

These aspects are what drew me to life history research. However, my focus was intended to be not on the totality of their lives but on their educational lives. Inevitably, these intermesh, but I wanted them to focus on their education and not on the wider social, cultural and contextual factors. For the most part, the participants focused entirely on their former educational experiences, which is why I considered it important that the participants' voices be heard in their words and not through my perception or interpretation of what they said. For this reason, their accounts are presented as a series of vignettes and much of the transcript data is left intact, which gives the reader a better sense of how they were produced – an exercise in transparency to avoid any bias (Attia and Edge, 2017).

Sikes (2006:10) says that the researcher will have a 'unique emotional engagement with any particular project'. A disadvantage of this is that each individual participant may make a 'snap judgement about the interviewer' deciding whether they want to share their life stories or spend time with them. Sikes, Troyna and Goodson (1996:43) point out that embarking on a life history research study relies on 'intensely idiosyncratic personal dynamics', a 'defining characteristic of the approach'. However, the more the interviewer is 'approachable' and 'personable', 'the more likely it is that an interview will be granted' (Arksey and Knight 1999:38). To build rapport and common ground with the participant (I was a mature student too) my aim was to listen to their stories without judgement and through the process, to create rapport and interaction. My interpretation of life history interviewing as a method is that it seeks to promote a reflective dialogue between myself as the researcher, and the participant. It is essential to avoid acting like an interrogator and to adopt a collaborative approach. The objective therefore was to give the participant the opportunity to reflect on, elaborate and build on their life history as the interview unfolded.

### 3.1 Gaining access and recruiting a sample.

Cresswell (2007:138) argues that approaching and negotiating entry to an organisation, as well as approaching participants, 'are all-important access challenges' to the researcher. It was therefore important to negotiate on-going access with the relevant HEI, normally referred to as the gatekeeper (Burgess, 1991). Merrill and West, (2009:109) says:

The aims and objectives of the research will need to be explained, as will issues of confidentiality and anonymity, which can relate as much to institutions as individuals.

With this in mind, negotiation of access with the gatekeeper commenced in January 2014 and was finalised by the end of the month; recruitment and subsequent interviewing started almost immediately. The research context was chosen in the first instance for its large number of full-time mature students. For identification purposes, I have chosen not to give the gatekeeper a pseudonym, referring to it throughout the thesis simply as the gatekeeper.

The research design was predicated on recruiting a core group of academically focused, self-selecting full-time mature students on a mixed gender basis, who

were studying full-time for a standard Bachelor of Arts (BA) or Bachelor of Science (BSc) honours degree qualification, as opposed to those who were studying on a part-time, professional or vocational programme of study (for example a Foundation degree FdA). Prior to recruiting any participants, I was mindful that not everyone might want to tell his or her life-story. I therefore considered carefully the pathway that I would travel from recruitment to interview and finally the transcription and analysis phase of the research study. Becker, (1998:67) argues that:

Sampling is a major problem for any kind of research. We can't study every case of whatever we're interested in, nor should we want to.

This is because interviewing participants for research purposes requires both the participant's and the researcher's time, as well as a high level of organisation and concentration. This can be particularly relevant when a participant offers to take part in an interview 'there and then – at that precise moment'. Merrill and West (2009:107) state:

One person who volunteers willingly to tell their life story can be preferable to any number who are reluctant: better one enthusiast than an army of the press-ganged!

Many of the participants who volunteered to take part in this research study were recruited through word of mouth, from one mature student to another, a process known as opportunistic sampling:

...researchers' take advantage of situations to interview individuals through luck, chance, the right word being said or because people offer themselves (Merrill and West, 2009:107).

The initial research design was ethnographic, as it would have enabled me to observe and/or interact with a small number of mature students (8 to 10) in the HE-in-FE environment. However, many more students volunteered to participate. Bearing in mind that opportunistic sampling involves taking advantage of situations to interview individuals (Merrill and West, 2009:107), rather than choosing to interview one participant over another (with the risk of missing out on potentially significant data), I chose to interview all the participants who volunteered to take part in the research. It was essential to me as a researcher 'to explore, in all their complexity' (West, 1996:1) not only what had motivated the participants to return to education, but also their motivation for volunteering to take part in the research. From a research point of view, it was important to take into consideration and

discover what all the volunteers had to offer as participants and ‘...how rich their stories might be...’ (Merrill and West, 2009:107).

At the same time, I was mindful, in using life history interview, of the threats to its validity as a research method. As West (1995:np) argues,

There remains the danger of scripting others, consciously or unconsciously, of leading the unconfident into supporting what they suspect we think, of research becoming a kind of Self-fulfilling process.

Because those being interviewed were mature students, they may not have realised at the time that ‘the process of change and personal agency is reinforced and embodied in the narrative process’ (West, 1995:np). I was inviting them to retell their life and doing so could ‘actively reconstitute that life’ (West, 1995:np).

Merrill and West (2009:124) do suggest conducting pilot interviews to perfect one’s interviewing skills but because I had recently conducted a similar life history/narrative piece of research for my Master’s degree with mature students, I chose in this instance not to conduct pilot interviews. Although my Master’s research had been conducted on a much smaller scale, the process itself gave me an insight into time management, which I considered to be a significant factor.

Time management was also an important factor whilst transcribing the digital recordings that were made during the interviewing process. This is not only because I was interviewing a larger than planned diverse sample, but also because a number of the participants were interviewed on more than one occasion. The nature of the interviews developed over a period of time. Put simply, in this research study, some of the participants were interviewed in their first and second years, whilst others returned for a third interview in their third and final year of full-time study. During these interviews, ‘material and insights were shared in what was an increasingly collaborative and participatory project’ (West, 1995:np). On the other hand, West (1995:np) argues that regardless of the number of interviews that we conduct with each participant ‘Despite time and encouragement, individuals may still struggle to find their voice’. Conversely, in this research study, I was not aware of any of the participants struggling to engage within the interview or to find their voice. Their enthusiasm to take part in this research study enabled me to capture the stages of their higher education journey



and any impact that it may have had on them. On the other hand, it also generated a larger than expected amount of data to transcribe.

Returning to recruiting and sampling, to engage the participants, I used three different modes of recruitment. The first approach was to explain and negotiate my research with several HE tutors who agreed to publicise the study to their students on my behalf [January 2014]. The second approach was to present the research study myself (with the tutor's permission) to the students at the end of their lectures [February to May 2014]. Finally, I presented my research study during the incoming [first-year] students' induction period in August and September 2014. Although not part of the initial recruitment process, I found that word of mouth between participants and other members of their cohort was an important factor. I found that the most successful recruitment approach was presenting my research study to potential participants, followed by word of mouth through participants. As far as I am aware, recruitment via the first approach did not generate any participants. Following the first wave of interviews between February and May 2014, I negotiated and agreed with several participants that I would contact them via email on an ad-hoc basis to arrange second and in some cases, third interviews during the following academic year. This approach did not always go smoothly as one or two of the participants changed internet provider. During my initial approach to participants, I identified myself as a PhD researcher and explained that the focus of my research was to explore the experiences of full-time mature students who were studying for their first undergraduate degree.

Merrill and West (2009:109) point out:

...it is important to involve participants from the start and to be honest and explain clearly and comprehensively what the research is about and what is being expected.

Thirty-four full-time participants elected to be interviewed from a variety of degree-level courses over the course of three academic years. The two core groups consisted of the following:

- the first cohort of participants was recruited from a group of full-time mature students studying in the second semester of their first, second or final year of studies;
- the second group of participants was recruited during the HEIs induction week from a group of first year mature students.

Second and third subsequent interviews were then negotiated with the participants from both groups.

Although the initial research criteria were to include all possible voices, I was mindful that within life history research, large participant samples are 'unnecessary and inappropriate' and that it is the richness and depth of the research that is significant and not necessarily the quantity of participants that are interviewed (Goodson and Sikes, 2001:22). Merrill and West (2009:106) agree and state: 'Large is not necessarily good: small can be beautiful, sometimes more so'. On the other hand, Merrill and West (2009:136) emphasise 'the importance of working with subjects, over time, to analyse as well as generate material'. Due to the larger than expected size of the opportunistic sampling, it has not been possible to include all the participants and their generated narrative data within this research study. Selecting which participant to include or not was a difficult one. In my opinion all the data collected was rich and should be represented within this thesis.

To narrow down the selection process, I analysed and coded the data thematically in the first instance (see 3.4). Initially, I used my own judgement to determine which themes/groups were relevant to each other, and then, due to the complexity and large amount of narrative data involved, I arranged and re-arranged the groupings on a number of occasions before deciding on the final group headings. The ultimate aim was to include themes and groups that other potential mature students might identify with or be influenced by. Once the final decision was made on the groupings, participants and narrative data, it was anticipated that any narrative data not used within this thesis might still be used in published papers at a later date.

Goodson and Sikes (2001:23) say that life history interviewing is not about perfection and that 'negative and discrepant' examples should be included within the research. I have therefore included in the appendix two participants Ellis and William who did not comply with the research criteria. In both instances, it was not until the interviews had commenced that I realised that this was the case. The biographical data which was generated from both interviews was significant and in the first instance Ellis who was in her final year of study did not fit the criteria of a

mature student (she was under 21 years of age when she started her degree). In my opinion, her interview is significant because she was one of only two traditional-age students who studied alongside what was a predominantly mature student cohort. William, although a mature student, had previously studied for a degree as a traditional-age student, but his dialogue was sufficiently interesting to warrant its inclusion.

Table 1: - Age and gender of participants interviewed as part of this research.

AGE	MALE	FEMALE	TOTAL
21+	2	2	4
30	4	5	9
40	5	5	10
50	1	6	7
60	2	-	2
	14	18	32

As can be seen from the table above, one of the most notable characteristics of this sample is that 60 per cent are in the age bracket 30-49 years and the median age of participants within this research was 31.5 years.

One of the most prevalent areas of identity that emerged from the transcriptions was marital status. It was interesting that there was an almost equal split between married or co-habiting participants and those who considered themselves to be single. However, the number of participants who described themselves as single could be misleading as several of the participants, when interviewed, indicated that they were involved in long-term relationships but considered themselves to be 'single' because they were unmarried and did not co-habit with their partner. These details are significant in subsequent discussions about identity and self-identification.

Table 2: Marital Status of participants.

Married or Co-Habiting		Single	
Male	Female	Male	Female
6	9	9	9

### 3.2 Ethics.

Burton and Bartlett (2009:29) argue that ‘ethics should be a central consideration for all educational researchers’. Ethical considerations were fundamental to this research study, underpinning the way in which the research was constructed and how the data was collected, used and stored (Arksey and Knight, 1999:126).

Permission to conduct this research study was sought from and granted by, the University of East Anglia’s School of Education and Lifelong Learning Research Ethics Committee [22 August 2014], which was there to ‘help maintain the confidence of both the academic and the non-academic community’ (Bartlett and Burton, 2009:30). The research also followed The British Educational Research Association’s (1992, revised 2004) guidelines, which state:

The British Educational Research Association believes that all educational research should be conducted with an ethic of respect for persons, respect for knowledge, respect for demographic values, and respect for the quality of educational research (1992:1).

Prior to the life history interviews taking place, a signed informed consent form was obtained from all the participants who had volunteered to take part in the study. With any participant-based research, the researcher, should be ‘sensitive to ethical considerations’ (Cresswell, 2007:44) and participants should be treated ‘in a sensitive manner’ with their rights and welfare considered at all times (Bartlett and Burton, 2009:29). At the beginning of each interview the participants were reassured that their identity and any information given throughout the course of the interview(s), would remain confidential and anonymous (ibid:29). None of the participants were offered or received any remuneration or incentives in direct return for their participation in the research.

Taking part in a life history research project can be time consuming and put considerable emotional pressure on the participants (Pole and Morrison, 2003:37). Indeed, Goodson and Sikes (2001:91-92) argue that both participants and researchers may encounter sensitive issues during the interview process, which may be traumatic or present personal risks. Against this backdrop, I was conscious of and responsive to, any indications that the participants might be encountering sensitive issues whilst taking part in the research study. Had there been any identifiable signs in their facial expressions, tone of voice or body language I would have recommended that they seek support from the relevant support services within the HEI. I would also have notified both my supervisors as well as the ethics committee of any 'serious or unexpected adverse events' that may have had an impact on the welfare of the participants or the conduct of the project. However, to my knowledge, none occurred. Bartlett and Burton (2009:29) point out that whilst collecting 'data and knowledge' researchers may have a 'sense of power over others'. Although I was not aware of a 'sense of power' during the participant interviews, in hindsight, there was an element of creating a relationship that was based on a mutual trust between myself and the participant.

The purpose of obtaining informed consent from participants was to provide them with information that would allow them to make an informed decision about whether to take part in the research. It is a voluntary agreement that participants sign prior to taking part and is a prerequisite to any participant-based research study. It is an indication that participants have been informed of his or her rights and that they understand any perceived risks and/or benefits of taking part in the research. This is particularly pertinent in life history research, as their identities are intrinsically linked with their experiences and the stories that they choose to disclose Smythe and Murray (2000:321).

If we decided to focus on qualitative life story or narrative research, we learned how to listen attentively and empathetically. We are comfortable with ourselves, intuitive, and self-aware. We are very interested in people and intensely curious about how they make sense of their lives. We are motivated by our passion to learn, change things, or make a difference for people, as well as by the more mundane needs of earning a living. When we began this type of research, we read about qualitative research from the perspectives of a variety of disciplines

including psychology, sociology, anthropology, and education. We know there will be ongoing ethical concerns.

At the beginning of each interview, I explained to the participants in detail what the research entailed, how the data would be collected, [via life history interviews] analysed and written up. I explained to each participant that appropriate measures would be taken to remove any identifying features from their transcripts and field notes as well the thesis, to ensure that all data pertaining to them would be anonymous and confidential. I also made it clear that they could stop the interview at any time and did not have to give a reason.

Additionally, participants were informed that taking part in this research study would not affect their learning experience and/or their assessments. Each participant who agreed to take part in the study was provided with a 'Letter to the Participant' (Appendix A) and an 'Information Sheet' (Appendix B), which stated clearly the research background and its aims. The information sheet covered the requirements of the participants, their anonymity and the confidential storage of the data. All the data that was gathered during this research study complied with the 1988 Data Protection Act. Moreover, all the audio recordings and hand-written field notes compiled during the research were stored securely in locked cabinets. Similarly, digital devices that were used such as computers, laptops, I-pads, hard-drives and digital recorders were also password-protected.

At the beginning of each interview, each participant was asked to sign two copies of an 'Informed Consent Form' (Appendix C). One copy was for the participant to keep for his/her records and the second copy was to be kept securely by myself, the researcher. (Where disability prevented a participant from providing written consent, verbal informed consent would have been obtained on an appropriate form of digital recorder). However, Arksey and Knight (1999:113) argue that participants may not always 'appreciate where the life history interview may eventually lead and the extent of what they might reveal' during the interview process. Clandinin and Connelly (2000:73) state:

One of the things narrative inquirers do is continually negotiate their relationships. Research lore would have it that negotiation of entry is a step completed at the

beginning of an inquiry and over with once the researcher is ensconced in the field. This is not the way it is for narrative inquirers.

With this in mind, the consent form explains the participant's right to withdraw from the research at any time without giving a reason for their withdrawal (Wengraff, 2001; Rafferty, 2004). Elliot (1984) argues that the right to withdraw at any time gives participants a level of control of the data that they provide to the researcher during the research process. Stenhouse (1980:14) says, "All informants own and have rights to the information that they give to a fieldworker"

It is fundamental to any participant-based research study to ensure that the participant's identity remains anonymous, as well as any data that they may provide (Crow and Wiles 2008:1). Similarly, it is imperative that the identity of the place of research, in this instance a higher education institution (gatekeeper), is protected, as this will also assist in the anonymity of the participants (Clough, 2002:8).

Within social science research, it is traditional to assign participants or communities a pseudonym to protect their identity. I therefore gave the participants the opportunity to choose their own pseudonym if they so wished. If they were not forthcoming with their own, I allocated my own to conceal his or her identity (Goodson and Sikes, 2001:27). In addition to a pseudonym, each participant was issued with a code number starting with the letter 'Q', which resulted in a degree of amusement to some of the participants who were familiar with the role of 'Q' in the James Bond films. I felt that this comic element helped to overcome any apprehension or awkwardness on the participants' part at the start of the interview. Although the identity of all the participants has been concealed, I have not changed any of their individual characteristics or their gender within the data chapters.

Crow and Wiles (2008:1) argue that some participants may hold conflicting views concerning the anonymization of themselves and the data they provide as part of a research project. Whilst I was conducting the life history interviews, I found that several participants had not only discussed taking part in this research study with friends, they had also introduced other mature students to me who were potentially

interested in taking part in the research. I therefore found it problematic at times to maintain the anonymity of all the participants, specifically those students who held the view that they were happy to be identified with the research project.

A final concern that may emerge in terms of anonymity, is the concealment of the research location. This may depend on the individuality of the research study and may, in some cases, be difficult to achieve, depending on the distinctiveness of the location, or perhaps the social context of the research study (Crow and Wiles, 2008:1). On the other hand, the exclusion of any visual material within the study will limit and/or reduce the research location being compromised. Nonetheless, I shared the feeling of anxiety that some researchers experience on behalf of their participants when their research is published, leaving a feeling of 'something that is private [being released] into a public domain' (Bourdieu, 1999:1).

### 3.3 Data collection – Life History Interviews.

Interviews are commonly used within the social sciences and in most cases, they allow the researcher to explain the research criteria in detail, whilst building a rapport with the participant at the beginning of the interview (Bryman, 2008). This may increase a sense of openness between the interviewer and the interviewee and encourage self-reflection on the part of the participant. As part of the interview process, my aim was to encourage the participants to relate their story in an unconstrained way as it 'unfold[ed] over time' (Cresswell, 2007:43). Merrill and West (2002:1) point out:

Biographical research methods offer rich insights into the dynamic interplay of individuals and history, inner and outer worlds, self and other.

With this in mind, whilst listening to the participants narratives I also considered that it was as important to be 'alert to the stories not told as to those that are' (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000:110).

Holliday and West (2010:np) argue:

The aim is to rebuild replicability and reliability into the process, and to minimise researcher bias: the nature of the narrative would, or should be, more or less similar regardless of the interviewer.



Holliday and West (2010:np) suggest that,

Some researchers, in the interests of being more scientific and objective, initially ask a person to tell their life story – and nothing else...

However, the life history interviews that were undertaken for this research were intentionally focused on the participants' previous educational experiences. These participants have, as it were, other lives, as mothers, fathers, sons and daughters, brothers and sisters, grandparents, lovers and friends, football supporters, readers and a host of people who also have other past lives that intersect with the life story that was told to me. My aim as a researcher was to gain insight into my participants lives and with this in mind, my prime aim was 'to build rapport, to minimise anxiety and build confidence; to create, in other words, a 'good enough' space for more open, honest and creative storytelling' (Holliday and West, 2010:np).

Cohen and Manion (1989:37) argue that life history interviews should be conducted in private to minimise any perceived effect of 'power'. Therefore, during my initial discussion with the participating institution (gatekeeper), I negotiated the use of a tutorial room for the interviews. The tutorial room that was allocated for my use was in the FE section of the institution rather than the HE area, which enabled me to conduct the interviews with an element of privacy. The aim was to win the trust of the participants as well as to promote a sense of safety. It also minimised any possible interruptions and/or distractions (Howitt and Cramer, 2008).

At the beginning of each interview, I ensured that each participant was at ease with the use of a digital recorder. I used a battery-operated digital recorder, which allowed me to give my full attention to each participant; it also minimised any loss of participant data. The usefulness of this procedure is that it allowed me to make field notes where I considered it appropriate. Denscombe (1999) says that although some participants may initially register their discomfort at the use of a digital recorder, many tend to ignore or forget its presence once the interview process has commenced. When given the option, none of the participants interviewed objected and it seemed, they too soon forgot about it. However, one

participant, Zoe, said, 'is that a recorder? Last time I used one of those it was as big as a house brick'.

The interviews themselves were informal, varied and yet simple. They were minimally structured to encourage frank and open responses from the participant. They were more like 'informal conversation type encounters' (Goodson and Sikes, 2001:28) as I wanted the participants to feel relaxed throughout the interview process. I tried to follow a consistent open-line of questioning throughout the interview process, while trying to make sure that I did not lead the participant with any pre-set questions (Burton and Bartlett 2009:86). Cohen and Manion (1989:119) argue that this approach allows the participant to discuss their experiences openly with a degree of accuracy. As each interview appeared to come to a natural conclusion, I considered it important to ask whether the participant would like to discuss anything further. I felt that this not only elicited further information from the participant, but it also allowed them to contribute additional information if they so wished.

There were a few key issues that I tried to keep in mind whilst I was interviewing. In the first instance, I was conscious to use 'appropriate language' at intervals to indicate that I was listening. I was also aware of my own facial expressions and body language, ensuring that I used 'appropriate eye contact' and body language, adopting an 'open rather than closed' position throughout the interview (Burton and Bartlett 2009:87).

Cresswell (2007:131) suggests that during an ethnographic study, the researcher 'collects descriptions of behaviour', and although this research study was not conducted as an ethnographic study, as previously mentioned, I found the use of a notebook an essential alternative form of recording data whilst the life history interview was taking place. I used this notebook for field notes, line drawings and doodles that I considered relevant to the participant's life history interview. These notes reminded me of things I had observed throughout the interview, such as the participants' facial expressions, body language and changes in the tone of their voice. Denscombe (2014) points out that 'you should not confine your notes to things that were written down during the interview'. Facial expressions and body language convey visual information to even the casual observer; for example,

many of us make gestures with our hands and as we speak our arms and legs may also show emotions, as do the movements that we make with our shoulders. I therefore devised a series of predetermined symbols, letters or line drawings to record such details in my notebook of participants' facial expressions as well as their body language whilst they conveyed their life histories. This was a technique that I had used previously when interviewing and felt that it was an asset, because, in this instance, it meant that my hand-written notes were anonymous and yet almost as effective as the digital recordings.

Table: 3 Predetermined symbols used during life history interviews:

SYMBOL	REPRESENTS	SYMBOL	REPRESENTS
L	Legs	LX	Legs crossed
A	Arms	AX	Arms crossed
(	Sad Face	O	Pensive
:	Tears	)	Smiling
))	Laughter	VC	Voice change
H	Hands	SH	Shoulders

Following each interview (once the participant had left), I made comprehensive hand-written notes. I found these post-interview notes invaluable when carrying out back-to-back interviews and therefore, was unable to transcribe the digital recordings immediately (Emmerson et al., 1995). Goodson and Sikes (2001:32) say that listening to life history interviews requires an enormous amount of attention to detail and concentration. Combining observation and listening attentively in this way, allowed me to 'Listen beyond', thereby achieving a far greater insight into the lived experiences of these mature students than I had initially anticipated. Throughout the interview process and beyond, I kept a journal, to chronicle my daily activities as well as being a simple way of summarising my thoughts and feelings during the course of research.

In terms of my role as the interviewer, the balance between detachment and engagement is a delicate one. In his research on motivation and why mature students return to education specifically higher education at a particular stage in their lives, West (1996:32) says:

...an understanding of these learners and such experiences requires more of an imaginative empathy than a cool detachment: an ability to immerse oneself sympathetically in another's world in all its messy and contradictory confusion.

The task in a life history interview is not to drive towards some kind of objective truth of the matter, but to understand the interviewee, to identify their experiences and what they mean in the context of their lives. At the same time, the role of the interviewer is not passive but rather involves active and thoughtful intervention. Alvesson and Deetz (2000:113) state that 'no research can be free from the taint of the researchers' own knowledge'. Given my relationship with the topic itself, as a mature student myself, I endeavoured to be 'clear about the limits of [my] detachment from and involvement in [this] area of study' (BSA, 1996:1). On the other hand, Perry, Thurston and Green (2004:140) argue that semi-structured qualitative interviewing is by definition an 'interdependent relationship that involve[s] interaction between the researcher and the participant'. Finally, I followed Bell's (2000:45) advice to researchers when arranging and conducting interviews, which is that 'common-sense and courtesy go a long way to establishing good practice'.

### 3.4 Approaching the data - Thematic Analysis.

The life history interviews in this research study were conducted with thirty-four volunteer participants over the course of two academic years [February 2014 to January 2015]. At the beginning of each interview, I sought permission from the participants to use a digital recorder to obtain and keep a record of the interview. One participant warned me in advance that he tended to repeat himself, leave things out and starting at the beginning again (Theo). A number of participants talked in fragments, it was almost as if they were expecting me to know what they were talking about, whilst others talked in circles, telling the same story out of chronological sequence. Finally, deciphering from the audio recording what a participant was saying was made harder when one participant's voice was almost inaudible due to her mumbling into her hand (Danielle) or when background noises drowned out some of the interview (Habbab). I found the process of analysing these recordings to be biographies to be time-consuming yet important and

rewarding; it helps bring coherence to material and facilitates the development of theoretical understanding' (Merrill and West, 2009:128).

This is significant because all digitally recorded interviews have to be transcribed and, in this instance, they were transcribed by hand, in their entirety - verbatim. For the most part, to ensure that I transcribed the participant interviews as soon as possible after the interview had taken place, I used a pair of headphones to listen to each individual recording; I felt that this afforded me the opportunity 'to listen more attentively' (Merrill and West, 2009:124) to the transcripts as I transcribed them. Whilst listening, I used a laptop to transcribe the data, backing each and every interview on to a USB flash drive for storage and data back-up to ensure safe keeping. However, there were two participants whose recordings I chose to 'play back' without headphones (Florence and Habbab), because of the changes in the accentuation of their voices. To ensure anonymity of these two participants, I transcribed their interviews in the privacy of my own study.

As previously mentioned, the transcription process was time-consuming; according to Merrill and West (2009:124), '... it can take upwards of nine hours to transcribe an hour of recording'. Some qualitative researchers are selective in 'whether to transcribe any particular audio- or video-recording, and if so, how much of it to transcribe' (Hammersley, 2010:6). Despite time constraints, I chose to transcribe each and every interview in full, rather than transcribing certain sections of the interview or even selected extracts. I made no attempt to change or correct any grammatical errors or repeated words (which happened often). I did, however, use some punctuation and I also indicated within the transcripts what I considered to be long periods of silence or pauses. This is because I wanted to focus on the form and content (what is being said) and on the telling (how it is told). During this process, I used a number of abbreviations to indicate where the participant for example paused for any length of time, this was indicated by three dots (an ellipses). I also included punctuation where I thought necessary, as a natural pause in the text. Merrill and West (2009:124) say:

Use is also made of some punctuation, in order to break the text, but this is done in ways consistent with the rhythms and patterns of speech.

I considered Hammersley, (2010:6) who argues: 'should silences and pauses be included in the transcript, should they be timed, and if so how'? Moreover, I had to decide whether I was going to include in the transcription process the 'non-word elements: such as back-channel noises (for instance 'uhuh'), laughs and other sounds that may be expressive' (ibid:6). In this instance, I chose to include everything in the initial transcription as I thought it may help to recall areas that may be important during the analysis process. Guidelines on transcribing life history interviews by the University of Leicester state:

You could transcribe every pause, every 'um' and 'ahh' but this makes for clumsy reading. It's probably best to only include those that convey something of the interviewee's speech (www.le.ac.uk/emoha/training/no15.pdf).

The decision to transcribe in full was made for fear of missing some relevant data if I transcribed only part of the interview. As mentioned previously, the transcription process was completed soon after the interview was concluded, in some instances, before I conducted the next interview, but this was not always possible. Merrill and West (2009:124) argue that an interview should be transcribed 'in its narrative form and no attempt is made to force the speech into a written or grammatical correctness'. With time and practice, I found that whilst I was listening to and transcribing each individual narrative, I learnt to be 'flexible and reflexive' (Merrill and West, 2009:11).

As I transcribed the interviews by hand, I used a wide margin similar to a playscript format, which allowed me to make notes in the margin, although I did not use the margins for identification purposes. The notes that I made in the wide margins helped me to consider how I could 'generate what can be called rich description or 'good stories'' (Merrill and West (2009:113). This led me to reflect and compare myself in the research process to the children's book 'The Very Hungry Caterpillar' by Eric Carle, a caterpillar who devours everything in its wake (participants, interviews and transcription), turns into a chrysalis (analysis and writing up), with my thesis emerging from the chrysalis (the butterfly) as my research came to its final conclusion.

Merrill and West (2009:129) says that you 'begin analysis as soon as you have a transcript', they also say that during the transcription process 'You will start to live

the material and be engrossed by it' (Merrill and West, 2009:129). At times, I found that the transcription process became a journey of self-discovery, that as I transcribed the participants narratives, I relived my past as a mature student through the narratives while at the same time witnessing the emergence of myself as a researcher. Thus '... doing research is a journey for the researcher as much as the researched' (Merrill and West (2009:111). At the time, I was mindful to ensure that the 'act of interpretation' was from a participant's point of view and not from an autobiographical one, although Merrill and West (2009:113) state: 'the researcher shapes the process and its qualities'.

It was during the transcription process that I became aware that we do not always speak in complete sentences, but move, from one subject to another without any warning and because of this, I found the transcription of some interviews more complicated than I had anticipated. In some respects, this was due to understanding and reflecting in the transcription, certain voice intonations, pitch, dialect and pace and in one interview (Habbab), the background noise.

Hammersley (2010:7) says researchers must elect when transcribing:

whether to aim at capturing distinctive forms of language use, such as dialects. And, if pronunciation is to be represented, there is then the question of how to do this...

However, the field-notes that I had made of voice inflection or body language were invaluable to me during this process. On the other hand, I found transcribing the interviews with headphones on, shutting out the rest of the world an isolating process.

Merrill and West (2009:128) state:

The process of analysing can be confusing for those new to research, especially as there are different ways of doing it and varying perspectives on the nature of narrative material.

There is no specific or 'correct' way of analysing data; for me, it was simply a way of examining themes within the data presented, evaluating and developing the relationship that might lie beyond the word and phrase in the text, with the aim of capturing and developing any nuances that might generate insights and help in the accurate representation of these accounts. Because I analysed the data by hand, in the first instance, I organised and summarised the data and material facts on

excel spreadsheets. However, there are a number of computer-generated software programs that assist with the analysing/coding process. One of the well-known data analysis software packages on the market is called Nvivo, which is a qualitative analysis software that aids researchers to organise and analyse word frequencies and key-words, allowing patterns in the text to be identified, thereby assisting with the coding process.

Merrill and West (2009: 144) says that there are many different approaches to analysing data and that it is about trying to understand the participant and what is happening at the time and the place in their life. Then again, it is also about the researchers who chose to collect the data and 'how we make sense of another's life and of the role and reliability of storytelling' (Merrill and West 2009:129). Within the field of social research, computer-aided coding, involving the use of a qualitative software package, is often used as an analytical process in which data is categorized to facilitate analysis. However, this process can be performed manually by highlighting different concepts with different colours. In the first instance, I transcribed the participant recordings verbatim, and cross-referenced any specific areas of interest in the transcription with my hand-written field notes. I then examined the transcripts in depth, 'by hand' rather than using a computer-generated programme to 'locate text or image segments' (Cresswell, 2007:168).

As mentioned previously, because I interviewed a number of the participants on several occasions over a period of time, I chose to analyse the data by hand rather than using a computer-generated program. Using this approach enabled me to examine the interviews in-depth, focusing on themes in an inductive rather than a deductive way. Moreover, because I found the analysis was on-going and overlapping, by coding paragraphs and in some instances, sentences, I was able to construct and reconstruct 'what seemed an endless play of possibilities' (Merrill and West, 2009:136). This enabled me to situate myself back in the interview room with the participant. In some cases, I contacted the participants for further clarification 'about particular experiences and their meaning' (Merrill and West (2009:136). The significance of this is that it allowed me the flexibility to familiarise myself with the data comprehensively, drawing out themes as they emerged, without a 'danger of losing some of the contextual meaning or wholeness of the material' (Merrill and West (2009:136). It was for me a necessary tool to facilitate



and to identify the individual characteristics that constituted the interactions that I had observed. I was able to scrutinise and interpret the transcripts for areas of similarity and uniqueness, as well as for any inconsistencies and/or contradictions. During this part of the process, I found that my hand-written field-notes helped my recall each participant's emotions and experiences. They also provided a basis on which to code and group themes together, according to conceptual similarity, as well as offering me the option to use first-second-and third order-coding (Open University, 2007:291), which allowed me to identify specific issues and ideas that extended beyond the specific case shown by the data. Thus, it provided a bridge between descriptive and theoretical accounts. The commonalities that I identified were then constructed into themes that I considered significant within the overall context of the research, focusing on 'identifying repeating themes and patterns of living and/or behaviour', that emerge from the data collected (Aronson, 1994:1). As mentioned previously, I developed a proforma, similar to one used by West in Merrill and West (2009:137) using an excel spreadsheet, which I used to analyse, interpret and understand the collected data. This form of analysis provided a visual interpretation 'which might provide clues to how a life had been lived' (ibid, 2009:137). For me, a visual interpretation was a way of documenting key issues 'in relation to a specific person, in a standardised format' (ibid, 2009:138). The themes themselves to some extent were guided by the analysed data, encompassing significant moments in the participants lives, some of which I 'explored further with the participants in subsequent interviews' (ibid, 2009:138). Formetti, West and Horsdal (2014:37) state:

The analysis of a life story narrative is an inquiry into the interpretation of selves and existence, from the context of the present. The analysis of the interview encompasses much more than the issue of themes.

Therefore, whilst coding and interpreting the data, I was mindful that each participant's narrative 'may open the text for a much more careful interpretation acknowledging the complexity of a life story narrative' (Formetti, West and Horsdal, 2014:57). However, I was also aware that in some ways their narrative was filled with the voices of others (he said, she said), and to some extent, the participants' life events were caught up in other people's lives (husbands, wives, children, parents etc). I was listening to an individual telling their story with little or no corroboration – a standard methodological weakness. There was as far as I

could ascertain, little motivation for any of the participants to deliberately deceive (as distinct from self-deception) but, of course, memory is selective. At times we all hesitate, find it difficult to express the right word for our thoughts, even more so with a stranger and a digital recorder sitting in front of you, listening to your every word and waiting with bated breath at every hesitation. Mindful of how I would feel if I was to narrate my own life history, I asked myself several questions: What are the failings of the human memory? Are the participants sitting in front of me reliable witnesses to their own lives? What, if any, are the inaccuracies that may steal into the meaning when transcribing the spoken word? Is there a sense in which limitation on the accuracy and depth of understanding of these participants is limited to their mono-vocal characteristics?

I carefully developed a series of themes that emerged as I summarised the transcripts and interpreted key words and phrases that appeared to fall naturally into categories, without any sense of hierarchy. The emerging coding seemed to capture the essence of the data, although some of the richness and detail was inevitably lost, and I used this essence to generate further analyses. Finally, although in my mind there is never an end to analysing data, several distinct themes emerged, relating directly to the participants' experiences of higher education. These themes were then used to create short vignettes, snapshots of the participants' educational lives before, during and after accessing higher education.

### 3.5 Limitations of the study.

One of the limitations of the life history approach is that it is highly personal and individualistic. Although it gains in insights into individual experiences, it tends to be weaker on social context, in the case of this research, on the learning, academic and social cultures. Further limitations in this research stem from the small sample under discussion, which inevitably limits any claims from the findings.

It can be said that the sampling approach may have its limitations, this is because the participants were an opportunistic or convenience sample and to a significant

extent, self-selecting. The participants are not representative in any formal sense and this limits the extent to which generalisations can be made from the specific study to the wider population of mature students. A further limitation concerns the location, this is because the study was conducted with a group of mature students who were studying, HE-in-FE. Studying locally and in a familiar setting has several considerable advantages for mature students, as has been discussed in Chapter 2. However, their experience in this setting may well have little to say about mature students studying in a traditional university setting.

Other limitations derive from the interview process and the practical constraints of the PhD research. Ideally, each of the life history cases should have been based on richer, more extensive interview data arising from several interviews over the course of several years, including interviews from post-graduation. However, constraints of time, both for me and the participants, meant that some individuals were only interviewed once, whilst others were interviewed two and in some cases three times. The resulting data for each participant is therefore incomplete and this perhaps limits the capacity to make judgements about the longer-term impacts of higher education on mature students and can be considered a restriction on the range and complexity of the participants' individual stories.

## CHAPTER 4

### 4.0 INTRODUCTION.

The aim of the fieldwork chapters is to present the data in the form of individual vignettes that illustrate the participants' experiences using their own detailed dialogue (verbatim). This is important because there are a number of things missing that they do not tell, and I do not ask about. If I had had the time to interview the participants on a number of occasions – or spent longer on individual interviews, then maybe a different life story might have emerged. I could argue that in order to get a life story from a person, you need to go beyond their own account of themselves. I don't do this.

Instead, my approach within the following chapters has been to group the participants under various themes. I consider that there are a number of different variations or approaches that I could have drawn upon to present the data. However, I have chosen to present the participant vignettes under what I consider to be the most pertinent themes. For example, many of the participants viewed their journey through higher education as a form of liberation or freedom, whether it was from their past educational experiences or a medical condition. For some, studying at degree-level gave them relief and/or release from 'intergenerational labelling or family constraints' as was the case for Florence and Beth. Liberation for Habbab, a former refugee, was in the form of freedom from tyranny and violence. Other types of liberation emerge more implicitly, as for Andy, in his late twenties, who felt liberated from immaturity: 'I seemed to have grown-up suddenly'. Ben identified very early on in his first year that immersing himself in academic study was very much an escape from a debilitating disease. The table below shows how the life histories were grouped through the analytic process in terms of this theme.

Table 4: Fieldwork Grouping

Group I	Group II	Group III	Group IV	Group V
<b>Liberation from previous educational experiences</b>	<b>Liberation from a medical condition</b>	<b>Liberation from the past - family or intergenerational constraints</b>	<b>Education as a positive distraction</b>	<b>Participants who did not fit the research criteria.</b>
Daisy	Aaron	Beth	Habbab	Ellis
Danielle	Ben	Emilia	Isaac	William
India	Theo	Florence	Kassie	
India			Katie	
Jake			Matt.	
Joe				
Lily				
Rowena				

The participants whose narratives are presented in this chapter said that for them, returning to education was a form of liberation or release, stemmed from their previous educational experience of rejection or their perception of being 'educationally deprived'. Many of them spoke of feeling empowered by their undergraduate experiences, due to the increase in self-confidence and self-esteem, which had extended across all areas of their lives. Many of the participants said that they now sensed that they had a 'voice' and that their views were taken seriously; they did not feel humiliated or 'put down' when offering a viewpoint in and out of the classroom, all of which for them correlates with a form of liberation/freedom and/or transformation.

#### 4.1 DAISY.

Daisy is in her twenties and she is the youngest participant that I interviewed. The first thing that she said to me when we met was: 'regardless of what I attempted to do my parents always criticised me':

I was always told, 'you are not clever enough to do that kind of thing', or 'you are punching above your weight'. So, at school I kinda thought that I would never be good enough to do anything with my life, because that is what my parents have always told me. I think I shocked them when I actually completed and passed the access course and they are even more shocked that I am studying at university.

Daisy said that she suffered with an anxiety disorder, which had affected her as far back as she could remember, which is why she feels her parents were never encouraging in anything that she did:

...no matter what situation I have been in, whether it is school or recently within the workplace it has always been a constant struggle.

Daisy had always dreamed of being a teacher, 'a nice teacher', one that didn't shout and who inspired the children to learn in the classroom:

I have been told on more than one occasion that I am not intelligent enough to become a teacher. But I know I want to be a teacher I want to be able to give children a nicer experience than the one I had at school.

She feels that motherhood has changed her life and given her a strong sense of responsibility as well as a sense of purpose. This gave Daisy the confidence and determination to enrol on a level three Humanities and Social Sciences Access to Higher Education Diploma at her local college:

...having enrolled, I went away in a bit of a panic. I began to relive in my mind the memories of my past educational anxieties. I suddenly felt overwhelmed at the thought of leaving my son at a nursery whilst I studied. I had never been away from him before; it was a big step for of both us, but I knew it was the right decision.

Daisy described how she felt when she started the access course:

I just loved the whole learning experience; it was so different. I realised that I also enjoyed not being a mother for a little while, my son loved going to nursery and playing with the other children. To start with, I found the assignments daunting, I worked hard and surprised myself by achieving good results. I was so surprised when I realised that I had earned enough UCAS points to apply for a university place.

Having completed the access course with good results, Daisy was unsure of her next step. Feeling daunted by the thought of studying at a higher level, she chose to enrol with the Open University (OU), thinking that it would be less pressure. However, she said that she soon realised that this was not the right decision for her, because she missed the support from the tutors and other students that she had experienced whilst studying on the Access course. She said that she also felt isolated and with little or no motivation to study alone, Daisy contacted one of the tutors from the Access course to ask their advice. With guidance from the tutor,

Daisy applied to transfer her studies from the OU back to her local college of further education. Daisy said:

When I walked into the lecture room as an undergraduate for the first time, it was like walking back into the Access class.

My initial interview with Daisy was at the end of her first year of study and she said that she felt the first year had gone well and that she had been guided into the concept of self-directed learning, which was in contrast the isolated sink-or-swim feeling she had whilst studying with the OU. Daisy says:

I initially applied to study with the OU because I felt that studying at degree level was almost a step too far for me. I was still anxious that I might fail, and I thought that I would be able to cope with studying at home on my own.

Although Daisy said that her anxieties returned whilst studying with the OU, they soon lifted when she started, HE-in-FE:

The hours I am studying are very similar to the access course, which helps with nursery timings for my son. Studying here is a comfort zone really. So far, the workload has been manageable; it seems very similar to the Access course, just a step, a big step up. I also know it will get harder and harder in the second and third year.

Daisy reflected that as the first person in her family to study at university, she would have loved to have had the confidence to have gone away to study at university following tertiary education, but she thinks that due to her anxiety disorder it was never offered or suggested. On the other hand, Daisy said that if it had not been for her son, she would not have come this far either.

#### 4.2 DANIELLE

Danielle, like Daisy had always wanted to be a teacher but never thought that she was 'clever enough' and had settled for second best, working as a teaching assistant. However, she had become disillusioned with her current role and had been encouraged by the Headmaster to return to education and train as a teacher:

I have been a teaching assistant for years and recently the role has changed direction and was no longer stimulating me. Rather than assisting the teacher, I feel that all I am doing is babysitting other people's children. I am not really helping or improving the children's education, which is what I am supposed to be doing. I am not supporting the children anymore because of their diversity, and their individual needs. As a teaching assistant, I feel that the school is not interested in the children who do not

have the ability to achieve results; they are only interested in those children that are capable of improving the school's results. In my opinion, many teachers consider the children that cannot achieve are failures, even at a young age, without asking the question why, why they are not achieving. In addition, I feel that the way I am viewed in the classroom by some of the younger teachers is not something I am comfortable with. I feel that my skills could have been utilised in the classroom in many other ways – more positive ways.

Having studied A-levels at school and in her words, 'failed miserably', Danielle considered herself to be a 'late learner'. Her view of herself was that she was not and still is not 'academically capable'. However,

...during the access course, I was really pleased with my grades and although I had done A-levels at school, it had been so many years since I had written an essay. I found that I loved the learning process, I had a passion for it. Towards the end of access, the tutors start talking about the possibility of going on to do a degree, so I signed up, and was accepted.

Coming from, in her view, a working-class background, Danielle said that she was amazed that she had been accepted onto a degree course:

...the word degree you know, it is up there isn't it? When I was in the sixth form at school studying for my A-levels, I was told by a teacher that I should not be studying for my A-levels, because I was not bright enough. This particular teacher's words have never left me; I will never forget her name or her face. She made me feel a failure for years and thirty years later, I am only just beginning to deal with her critical words in a positive way. I am not sure that any teacher actually understands just how much of an influence they have on their pupils. That particular teacher has made me feel so inferior; I have carried this burden around with me for years.

Danielle said that she is the only person in the family to study at degree level and although they do not understand what she is doing, her parents have been incredibly supportive, looking after her children and allowing her time for her studies:

I think I would say that the main reason I am studying for a degree is the satisfaction of the actual achievement. I also hope that I am a good role model for my boys. My aim is to become a teacher as I am hoping to not only increase my own job satisfaction but also make a difference to other children's experiences in the classroom. Of course, one of the other reasons for doing this degree is to catapult me into a higher earning bracket.

Danielle said that she considered herself to be lucky because her husband supports her change of career while many of her cohort who are also mature students are single parents with little or no support:



...some of them have families and some of them work as well as study. For most of us, life is a juggling act. There are a few young students, you know traditional-age students who have started a degree straight from school. They seem to manage their time better than the mature students do, but then they do not have the added pressures that we have. They have no idea or even understand exactly how we cope as parents and study at the same time. They openly admit that they go home to their parents who cook for them, do their washing etc. nothing has changed for them since they were at school. I am a wife; a mother and I also work one day a week.

Danielle went on to say that higher education has changed her entire outlook on life and her personality has changed beyond recognition. The most noticeable change has been the increase in her self-confidence and self-esteem:

I have changed so much as a person during the last four years of study. Umm, I am a lot more confident and this has changed my relationship at home. The increase in confidence has also been noted in my work – there have been a few positive comments in the staff room because the role that I have as teaching assistant is quite limited in how much we become involved. It is a case of doing as we are told and not using too much initiative.

Having embarked on her degree course via an access course, she found that many of her peer group have travelled the same academic pathway:

...we have all supported each other and some of the group have talked about continuing with our studies - a masters and a PhD are just a dream to me. Realistically, the only way that I can continue to study is through the OU. I am trying to persuade my husband that it will not be a bad as the last four years I would only be studying one module at a time. My husband has started to complain this has left me feeling guilty and torn, and sometimes I feel that I am being selfish. Although I know my husband would not feel guilty, he would just do what he wants to do. He has already said it is time that I went back to work and that I cannot expect him to continue to support me and pay for my Masters.

Danielle was almost at the end of her third year of studies and admitted that she was very tired. However, she was on track to achieve a 2:1 classification and had applied for and been offered a place on a Graduate Teacher Programme (school-centred teaching post known as SKITT) at a local school; which was dependent on her attaining a minimum of a 2:1 classification. She said:

Studying has been a huge part of my life, and will be for a very long time, it is not just the studying, it is also the friends that I have made, they will be my friends for life. I know this sounds sugary, but I have really loved every minute of it. Even though it has been stressful the experience has changed my life.

I interviewed Danielle again a year later. She said that there were so many things that she had wanted to do following her graduation but was frustrated because personal circumstances had got in her way:

This will probably sound like War and Peace to you – but my life has not been straightforward. I think the degree has made me hungry to continue studying, I know that I can achieve more but my husband won't allow me to. I thought my husband was brilliant during my studies, but in hindsight, not anymore. He says that it is time that I gave something back to the household and that I should forget about training to be a teacher – more expense.

Danielle continued to talk about what had happened since her graduation:

So much has happened I don't know where to start. Against my better judgment, I followed the crowd and started a Professional Graduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) post 16 teaching degree and realised after the first two weeks that that was not what I wanted to do. I had already been offered a place on a SNITT teacher-training course, so I started that, and then I could not concentrate on the secondary school training because of what was going on at home – my husband disagreed with further training. I am now back where I started, working as a teaching assistant at a school and I hate it. My husband expects me to contribute to the house financially as well as everything else.

Pausing, Danielle said:

I feel as if everything has gone wrong for me. I graduated with a first-class honour's degree. But without going into too many details – I have my own war and peace at home. I feel that I have made so many mistakes since graduating. My husband says that I have to work full-time and that he does not want me to teach he says, 'that I am good at support and that is what I should focus on'.

Danielle went on to say that the opportunity and the drive to go to university was not there when she went to school. But she now feels that she has the academic drive:

I want to learn more, but I have to contribute to the household financially. I just feel that something is missing from my life. I do not really know where I want to go, or more to the point, what will my husband allow me to do.

As an interesting aside, Danielle is one of four participants who when I initially interviewed them, shared an email address with their husband or partner. This has now changed, and she and one other participant have their own private email addresses. Although I have no evidence, I surmise that both the participants who have indicated that they have grown in confidence and self-esteem during their studies want to take this newfound sense of identity into their private lives.

### 4.3 INDIA.

India says that she is almost a single parent of four boys because her husband works abroad for long periods at a time. She admitted, somewhat embarrassed, that she is the first person in her family to go to university, although she studied A-levels:

The head of sixth form told me that university was for clever people and that my O-and A-level grades did not reflect that I had the ability to go to university. If only that teacher could see what I have achieved at my time of life.

India was a full-time stay-at-home mother until the youngest son went to school. She then started work as an administrator at her local college. It was during this time that she felt inspired to update her qualifications:

I used to sit at my desk and listen to the lecturing staff talk about their lesson plans etc. before their lectures. I used to think, I would quite like to do that, mmm, actually, I am sure I could do that, I know that I could do that.

Whilst trying to gauge the right time to approach her husband about her thoughts of retraining, she said that her personal life went 'awry', and that her husband was made redundant. Although this initially appeared to be a disastrous occurrence for the family financially, it gave him the opportunity to obtain work in the United Kingdom, which meant that he would spend more time at home with the family. At the same time, India's own job role/description changed dramatically:

...my immediate thoughts were 'yay' this is my chance to make some changes in my life, maybe even study for a degree.

With four children, she did not get a lot of time to herself because her life revolved around her children and it was difficult to balance everyone's commitments:

I knew that the only way that I could update my qualification was to study locally. There was no way I would be able to travel even though there are several universities within traveling distance.

She eventually found the courage to discuss her thoughts with her husband who encouraged her to apply: 'I was offered a full-time place to study on a humanities degree following an interview with the course director' - 'I then panicked'. India said:

I prepared myself in advance of the degree by attending an evening course at the college called the Bridge to Higher Education course. At the time, I doubted my ability because of my sixth form teacher words that I am not clever enough to study at A-Level. I was always told that university degrees were for clever people and I do not see myself fitting into that category. I

felt that I should be working and not wasting everyone's time by trying to study.

Although India had prepared in advance by attending a pre-degree study skills course, she was still not prepared for the hard work that a degree demands:

The self-directed learning, the amount of reading that we were expected to do on top of everything else. I think I spent most of the first-year crying, thinking, what am I doing here? These negative thoughts about my ability did not change until the end of the first year when I achieved my first decent mark. This was the turning point when I thought that maybe, I can actually do this. From that point in time, it seems that I went from strength to strength.

With time and effort, India's grades continued to improve and according to India so did her self-confidence and self-esteem:

I took on board everything that I had been advised to do, I listened because I knew this was my only chance and that my time studying was precious. On a Sunday, I used to take the boys to play football and instead of standing on the side-line watching them play I would sit in my car and read textbooks, make notes and draft out my essays.

India said that the increase in her self-confidence and self-esteem was mirrored in her personal life and that this can be seen in the way that she negotiated extra study hours for herself with her sons and husband by delegating household chores. On the run-up to assignment deadlines and exams, her husband took over the school runs, after-school clubs and the ritual of all four boys playing Sunday football in different leagues when he could. She said that she felt that the change in her self-confidence also had a positive effect on her children:

I feel that I am a good role model for my boys by studying for a degree. It has been a good experience for them to watch me studying. I have noticed a change in all my children's attitude towards their schoolwork and homework. My eldest son is on the Autistic spectrum and his work ethic has improved at school since I have been studying for my degree.

Sighing, India said:

I feel that I have been fortunate that my husband and the children have supported me during my studies. I now feel a sense of freedom, perhaps liberation from my role as a wife and mother. I do think that there are times when my husband wishes that I had not started this path of self-improvement. He is an alpha male and can be quite outspoken and very self-assured, whereas I have never had any confidence until now. In hindsight, I was completely dominated by my husband, I was never ever confident enough to put forward my opinion.

Pausing briefly India continued:

My life is very different; my confidence has increased. I do not sit back and keep quiet anymore; I meet him halfway in conversations and quite often disagree with him. At times I think he is taken quite taken aback. My husband will say 'where has my meek wife gone'? I feel that for the first time I have a voice, my own opinion. I also think that my husband sometimes feels threatened by my newfound confidence. Studying at degree level definitely makes a difference to your relationships, for me it is now more of an equal partnership. It certainly never was before.

In a follow-up interview with India just over a year later, she told me she had started a master's degree at a nearby traditional university as opposed to the HE-in-FE establishment where she initially studied. However, she withdrew after a few weeks for two reasons:

... the first reason was because I realised that it was a big step up from the undergraduate degree. The second reason is that my eldest son had applied to same university and my husband said that it would not be fair to my son if I was studying at the same university. Personally, I think that was just an excuse, as my husband did not really want me to continue studying; he thought that it was time for me to go back to work.

Although India said that her husband supported her decision to study for a degree, his jocular comments such as 'where has my meek wife gone' suggest a certain amount of insecurity. There may also be a certain amount of disapproval now that his wife has grown in confidence from studying at degree level. It is also interesting that India uses humour as a defence mechanism against her husband's remarks.

#### 4.4 JAKE.

When I first met Jake, he made very little eye contact, and said: 'I am not sure that anything I have to say will be interesting to you or useful to your research, but I am happy to talk to you'. I reassured him that this was a very informal life history interview and that he could withdraw from the interview at any time. Jake is in his late forties and is a full-time carer for his mother. He is also the youngest of eight children:

My eldest brother is in his seventies and I have several nieces and nephews that are of similar age to me and older. I think that I was a bit of an after-thought as my mum was quite old when she had me.

Jake paused and then added:

Shall I talk about school? I suppose you could say that my problems if you call them that, started when I was in primary school. I used to sit in the

classroom with the rest of the children, but I never really understood what was going on and what I was meant to do. I just copied the others; it was all very confusing to me.

Jake looked at me for what I thought was reassurance, I nodded, and he continued:

It got to the point that I did not want to go to school. By the time I got to the upper school, I was fed up with the way that everyone was treating me that I think I just decided that okay, if you are going to treat me like an idiot I am going to behave like an idiot. Looking back, I think I felt that I was labelled from the very beginning. I had started being disruptive in class because of the way I was being treated by everyone. Looking back, I am sure that I behaved the way I did because I did not understand what was going on and no one was prepared to stop and help me or explain anything to me. I used to just get up from my desk and walk out of the room. I would wander around the school looking for my friends who were in other classrooms. Instead of people laughing at me because I could not read properly, I got them to laugh at me because I was misbehaving or acting funny. Class clown I suppose. I was always kept in school at the end of the day; I was always in trouble in detention because I did not understand what I was supposed to do. No one would help or explain anything to me –they just shouted at me all the time?

Jake looked at me again and then continued:

When I was in secondary school, I was put back a whole school year, which made things worse for me. To block it all out I started drinking heavily and by the time I was able to leave school at sixteen, the school said, 'we don't want you here anymore'. I left with nothing, no qualifications. Looking back, I think they wanted me out of the way and out of their statistics.

During the school holiday, Jake said that he was employed doing odd-jobs in a local hotel. He recalled that he felt that he was 'fortunate' when he left school as the hotel employed him as a full-time porter and assistant to the odd-job man:

They were very good to me at the hotel, they were going to teach me to work in the office on the computer, but I could not read. My mum, who worked there as well, could have had a job doing the breakfasts in the morning, but because she could not read or write. Yep, my mum cannot read, and neither can any of my brothers. I think one of my sisters can.

At this point in the account, Jake began to cough prolifically and said that he needed to go and re-fill his water bottle. Jake returned apologising rather sheepishly, saying that not only had he filled his water bottle, but he had also gone outside to the smoking area for a quick cigarette. Looking more relaxed than previously, he launched straight back into the interview:

What was I talking about – working at the hotel. I enjoyed the work, but I got into trouble there as well as at school. I was young and immature, and I just wanted to fit in somewhere. I got in with the wrong crowd, drinking and stuff, you know, then I got into trouble with the police.

Jake paused:

Because of all the trouble I was in I moved and went to work in London with some friends. I lived in a Camper-Van working in a scrap yard with cars, just manual stuff. Then I received a telephone call from my mum, to say that my Dad had been taken ill. so, I came home to become their full-time carer until my dad died twelve years later. During this time, I became, what is it? a recluse? I did not have any contact with anybody else other than the family. Socially I think that I went backwards.

Jake paused for a drink and then continued:

...when Dad passed away, it was almost a release for me, I had some freedom then almost a liberation, because I only had my mum to look after. I started going out a bit more, going to the gym, where I lost a lot of weight. I then got the idea that I wanted to be a gym instructor, so I went to the local LEAP Centre, to find out about what I should do. ...the person that I spoke to was fantastic; she gave me lots of advice and guidance. One of the questions that she asked me was could I read and write, and I said, 'of course I can'. I remember being embarrassed and defensive about it.

Instead of completing the enrolment form, Jake made an excuse and went home and asked a neighbour to help him complete it. The next day, there was an IT class that Jake wanted to join:

I just sat in front of the computer for the first hour; it was embarrassing, as I could not do anything, as I did not understand what was going on – just like school. I eventually plucked up the courage to tell her that I was going to have to leave, as I could not do it, I was honest and said I did not understand anything. It sounds silly, but I was almost ashamed to say that I could not read. For the first time in my life I was totally honest.

The tutor was very patient and asked him lots of questions. Eventually, she tried different coloured overlays over the writing and found that it was the colour pink that helped to straighten the words and sentences out and stopped them from moving around the page. Although he said that he felt embarrassed at the time, he also said that he felt a sense of relief that he was perhaps not 'as thick as school had made me out to be' and that there was a reasonable explanation as to why he could not read and write like everyone else.

Once it had been established that Jake required a coloured overlay to help him to read, Jake recalled his progress:

I started on the level one I.T. course, which I passed. The ladies then suggested that I have a go at the level one English and then once I had passed that I could try level one Maths. I was amazed that I managed to pass both. The ladies were so patient with me, spending lots of time explaining things that I did not know or understand. They persuaded me to go onto the next level in English, which helped my confidence.

The manager of his local LEAP centre nominated him for the 'learner of the year' award, which he won. Following the award, his teachers arranged for him to be assessed by the disability officer at the local college:

When I went to the college, the assessor stood behind me watching whilst I completed the assessment on the computer. I was so engrossed in what I was doing that I did not notice that I was being watched.

Jake was diagnosed with severe dyslexia:

...when I was told, I felt a huge sense of relief that I was not as stupid as the teachers at school had continually told me. I do not see myself as disabled, not like my mum, I just do not see things in the same way as everybody else does. Even my mum did not know I was dyslexic,

Following his assessment with the disability officer, Jake went on to complete and pass all the functional skills courses at the LEAP centre as well as a Level 3 Humanities and Social Sciences Access to HE Diploma. Changing the subject without any warning, Jake said 'I can drive':

I passed the driving theory test first time. I could not learn to drive before as I could not read the road signs or take the written test. There are so many things that I can do now that I can read. I did not start to drive until I was over forty years old. Like education, driving has given me so much freedom.

Jake returned to the subject of education:

... the trouble is I can be my own worst enemy, my own worst critic. Whilst I was on the access course, even though I was doing my best and trying really hard, I was constantly comparing myself to everybody else. But what I do not do is take into consideration the fact that unlike the others, I had only learnt to read the year before.

As the access course was coming to an end, Jake said that he did not understand what everybody was talking about – going on to university - until the tutor explained that if his marks were high enough, he could continue onto a degree course. Jake said that he didn't really understand about universities but decided to 'give it a go':



...by the time that I had finished the Access course I had enough UCAS points to get me into university. I do feel that now I am here I have progressed. I have been allocated a mentor as well as having a program called 'dragon' installed onto my laptop. I have also been given extra time in exams as well as someone to write for me in the exams. I also have a note-taker in every lecture to help me take notes. It is good here; the tutors are fantastic, I do not have to keep explaining myself to them, as most of them have taught me on the Access course and understand that I could not read and write five years ago. I think my confidence is coming on, I am sure that I am continually improving. I keep on surprising myself as I am still passing assignments. I was so surprised when I achieved a 2:2+ grade for a recent assignment that I did not really like or enjoy, so it was a good mark.

Jake said that he would like to help other people like himself who have been diagnosed with a disability like dyslexia:

When I learnt to read, and use a computer, it opened a completely new world that I really did not know existed, I felt totally liberated from my old life. I still find it hard to believe that when I first started at the LEAP Centre, the ladies kept saying to me how impressed they were when I was learning how to use a computer and read. I thought that if I get that kind of feeling learning to read, what about those that have helped me.

Jake said, 'do you know what I mean? This is a two-way thing'. The stigma of not being able to read at school is still prevalent for Jake. He is having cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT) to help him face some of the more unpleasant aspects of his time at school, as well as covering other areas from his past.

Jake went on to talk about how he felt when he started to study his degree course. He said that at times he did not feel comfortable because the learning process was so different from the supportive atmosphere that he had experienced at the LEAP Centre and during his access course. However, he felt that he had achieved so much in such a short space of time that he did not want to give up or let anyone down that had supported him:

When I started university, I was frightened, I was frightened I was going to have to speak in class and that I would give the wrong answer. But everyone was lovely. We are all the same I think, all a little frightened, it is not just me. I almost went back to the old thoughts that I had when I was at school. Sitting in a classroom sometimes brings back bad memories. The CBT has been good and has helped me understand so much.

#### 4.5 JOE.

My initial impression of Joe was that he was self-assured and confident; this was because of his body language, the way he walked, asked questions about the research before committing himself – he had an air of self-assurance. However, first impressions can be misleading. On the day of the interview, Joe was very quiet and once the interview process had started, I realised that the change in Joe's persona and body language was because his background was ex-military and he was processing what level of information he should reveal within the interview. He later explained 'old habits die hard, think before you speak'.

Joe left school at the age of fifteen without any formal educational qualifications. Like Jake, he said that he had struggled at school and recalls being placed in what was then a 'remedial class' where he spent most of the day playing around with the other children with no specific direction from the teaching staff. Joe said, 'I always had this notion that I was more intelligent for want of a better word, than shall we say my school reports indicate, the teachers just did not want to listen to anything that I had to say'.

On leaving school Joe applied to join the Armed Forces where he served his Queen and country for twelve years. Following the mandatory six weeks basic military training, Joe was posted to a large military base in Southern Germany where he trained as a Firefighter. Joe said:

I have had a fantastic life so far, I have travelled the world probably twice over, whilst serving with the Armed Forces. I met my wife who is German whilst serving in Germany and we now have two children. However, military life was not all a bed of roses. Some of the experiences and sights that I have seen and dealt with during the course of my work as a Firefighter were traumatic. With a wife and young family, I felt I wanted a change, to move away from the dangerous situations that I sometimes found myself in during my duties.

On leaving the military Joe continued to live and work in Germany. However, the European economy was beginning to fail, and Joe's employment prospects were in jeopardy, so he returned to the United Kingdom (UK) with his wife and family. Joe said that he also felt that the children would benefit from an English education. With no formal educational qualification, Joe found himself working in a

supermarket, drifting from one department to another with no goal in sight. Joe recalls:

Due to my lack of educational qualifications, I found it very difficult to find employment that would provide a similar standard of life style that we had experienced in Germany. I ended up working in a supermarket when my manager happened to say, 'you are an intelligent guy what are you doing working here in a supermarket, why don't you do a degree'?

Recalling his previous education experience as a child, Joe said:

...do I really want to submit myself to more negativity, I was a slow child with messy writing. I knew the answers to so many things, but no one would listen to me because I struggled to read and write. Mentally I knew I could answer the questions, but no one was interested in what I had to say.

Whilst serving in the Armed Forces Joe had gained a number of military educational qualifications, which had increased his self-confidence and self-esteem, however, they did not correspond with anything in civilian life:

...I felt that I was wasted – my life was wasting away, I felt that I would be stuck in a supermarket stacking shelves for the rest of my life, and I knew that I was better than that, and that I was capable of achieving more.

He thought about what his manager had said and despite his feelings of apprehension, he decided to enrol on a full-time level three Humanities and Social Sciences Access to Higher Education Diploma and within the first two weeks of starting the access course, it was suggested that he might benefit from a dyslexia evaluation:

The results of the dyslexia evaluation were a huge relief. I am no different to anyone else in this world, I just see things differently, and there are certain pathways in my brain that are wired differently to other people.

Following the diagnosis, strategies were put in place to accommodate his dyslexia and once he had passed the access course he was encouraged by friends and tutors to apply for a place at university. Joe said that even though he now knew that he was dyslexic it was still a big decision for him to take:

At the end of the access course, I mentioned to my wife that I was thinking that I would like to continue to study at degree level. I felt it was a decision that I could not take alone. However, it got to the stage that my wife said, 'if you want to do it – just go and do it as long as you do not give it up when the going gets tough'.

Joe was coming to the end of his first year of study when the interview took place and he said that for the first time since he had left the Armed Forces, he had a career plan, he had decided that he wanted to be a teacher:

I am really enjoying the whole learning process and would like to continue by studying for a master's qualification. My problem is my writing, but I am hoping with the aid of special computer software this will improve. I have had thoughts about where I want to go after this, people have often said that I would be a good teacher as I can communicate with others. Ideally, I want to help adults who have been in the same position as I was at school.

Joe was the first person in his family to attend university and until recently, he had always felt that he was in the shadow of his younger brother who not only attained good A-levels result but had held the rank of an officer in the police force. However, because of Joe's enthusiasm for learning later in life, his younger brother who had retired from the police force had followed Joe's example and had enrolled on a degree course at his local university in Business Management.

#### 4.6 LILY.

When I first interviewed Lily, she apologised and said, 'please ignore me if I keep repeating myself, my husband says it is a bad habit of mine'. Lily said that she was in her late forties 'going on twenty-five' and that she is married with a daughter who is in her first year at university and a son who is studying for his A-levels.

Lily is the first person of her generation in the family to go to university (being in her third year) followed closely by her daughter. She was very emphatic in saying that she would never have considered studying for a degree anywhere other than locally because she is firmly rooted in the town where she was born and brought up. Lily said:

My daughter has only gone away to university because it was expected of her, she really did not want to leave home. If she could, she would have studied here with me. But, because most of the students here are mature students, I know that it would not have suited her. I feel guilty encouraging her to study away from home, but it was the right decision for her. We have very different aspirations for our children these days than our parents had for us.

Lily comes from a working-class background and her parents have no idea what she is doing at university, why she is doing it, or have any awareness of the current need to update qualifications in the workplace today. Her parents' views

when she was growing up and now is that university was for upper-class snobs. Lily compared her own educational experiences with that of her son. She said that her final couple of years in secondary school 'was a nightmare':

...school, it is not a subject that I particularly like talking about. You could say that a group of girls bullied me in my GCSE year. I was thrown down the stairs as well as other things that I would prefer not to remember. At the time, bullying was not recognised or dealt with by the school. So yeh, I did dreadfully in the exams, I turned up for my exams, struggled and got poor results. I hated school.

Continuing to reflect, Lily said she felt that she was lucky to get a job, there was no expectation or mention of further education, 'In those days, you found yourself a job, a boyfriend, got married and had children - a career was not an option':

I was lucky; I worked for the same firm for ten years. Whilst I was there, I was encouraged to study for several different qualifications. Some of the qualifications that I studied in the workplace were not necessarily specific to the actual job that I was doing. I did French and maths just because they offered it.

Lily continued to work part-time in the same company following the birth of her daughter. However, when her son was born, she had no choice but to become a full-time, stay-at-home mother, this left them in a financial predicament, which gave her no option but to return to work. The only job that was open to her was as a nursing assistant at the local hospital working the night shift:

I have been working nights at the hospital for the last thirteen years and I decided that now they are older I wanted to study for a nursing degree.

Lily went on to say:

... nothing in my life is ever straightforward. Because I had no recent educational qualification, I had to complete a Level 3 Access course in Health and Social Care before I could enrol onto a nursing degree course. However, once I had started the access course, I had a complete change in direction. I loved studying psychology and sociology, they were different, they made me question my decision to train as a nurse. In fact, I decided that I wanted to teach. I would never have considered teaching as a career before I started the access course; I was quite content to study for a nursing degree.

Lily said that full-time study had been stressful and that it had been 'an undertaking for all of us'. Nonetheless, Lily said that her husband and children had supported her unreservedly. She said:

I feel that in myself I have grown, grown so much as a person and grown in confidence. I am different; I feel that I am more confident, and I can honestly say that the experiences here are life changing. I am definitely

more questioning; I drive everyone crazy at home with my questions. I do not take anything for granted, and I will not be taken for granted myself. I am more assertive; I know what I want in life now. I do not just accept everything that I am told.

It was at this point that Lily stopped talking, she checked the time and said, 'oh gosh, have I a rambled on too much, repeated myself? My husband is always saying that I talk too much and repeat myself'. Without waiting for an answer, Lily continued:

Everyone has seen a change in me, in my views, my attitude, there has been a huge change in my home life. I said that my husband has been very supportive; he has, but he has also said that if he had known that the change in me would have been so drastic, he is not sure that he would have been so encouraging at the beginning of the degree. Oh, gosh, this interview has been so emotional [silence] it has made me think, think about areas in my life that...

Just under a year later, I met up with Lily to conduct a follow-up interview. The first thing she said when we met was, 'I got a 2:1 and I am now training to be a teacher' and... Lily continued to recount (almost without drawing breath) what had been happening in her life since we last spoke. She said that she had had a serious health issue during her last year of study but had managed to complete all her assignments on time:

As always, the staff here were brilliant. I felt that they were always at the other end of an email and the rest of my cohort made sure that I had all the relevant notes and handouts that I needed from any of the lectures that I missed.

Lily went on to say that her final classification gave her a sufficient grade to enrol onto a Post Graduate Certificate in Education (PGCE):

I am at present enrolled on a PGCE course to teach post-sixteen years. I am about halfway through the course and I am teaching on the same level three access course to Health and Social Care that I studied on at the start of my educational journey. It has been a long road that I have travelled I have had to sacrifice a reasonably active social life as well as miss events with family, but I love teaching a class!

#### 4.7 ROWENA.

Rowena described herself as 'sort of married' with three grown-up children, two of whom are at university. She considers herself to be working-class but says that she comes from a middle-class background and that although her birth certificate

says that she is in her late fifties, she said that mentally, 'I feel so much younger, especially now that I have started a degree'.

Rowena went on to say that her husband's employer had relocated to the South of England three years ago, which meant her husband lived away all week, returning to the family home most weekends – hence her comment about being 'sort of married' because her husband was away most of the time. Rowena said:

Because we are not getting any younger, I recently volunteered to give up my job for the greater good of the family and move south to be with him. Surprisingly he agreed, and we bought a little house. I did not move in totally, because our children's lives are here, and I did the commute in reverse.

Pausing Rowena laughed and said:

... it was a disaster as far as I was concerned from the very beginning. Although it was a very interesting psychological experiment, I very soon came to realise that it is impossible for a human being to have two lives, at least this human being. I seemed to have a suitcase permanently attached to my hand travelling backwards and forwards torn between my husband and the children.

Once she had admitted to herself that the arrangement was not working, she was 'at a crossroads in no-man's land' wondering what to do:

I felt that fate had dealt me a rather hard blow. There I was, in my fifties, with this little window of nothingness going on in my life, I had no idea what I was I going to do with it. I had no job; the children were on the verge of leaving home and there was I with this somewhat backwards-forwards thing between two houses with no purpose.

Having worked for the same employer for the past fifteen years, Rowena contacted them in the hope of some part-time work. She discovered that their recruiting criteria had recently changed so that despite her previous experience, she now lacked the required qualifications. Rowena said, 'I felt rejected, lost and isolated and I was unsure of what to do next - I was in my fifties and unemployed for the first time in my life'. It was whilst she was grumbling about her predicament that her youngest son said, 'well, why don't you go to university and study for a degree?'

Rowena said:

The thought of returning to education sent shudders down my spine, I suppose in some way my educational history is another reason why I am here. The easiest way to explain it is that I have had a teacher sitting on my

shoulder forever, telling me constantly that I am an idiot. I can remember as if it was yesterday. I was nine years old and a teacher whose name was Miss O'Leary had pet hates in the classroom and I was one of those pet hates.

Rowena said in a quiet voice that it did not matter what she did, she was made to stand up in front of the class on a daily basis and Miss O'Leary would say:

...you are an idiot Rowena, what are you? I would have to repeat aloud – I am an idiot Miss O'Leary.

Her desire for financial independence from her husband led Rowena back to her youngest son's suggestion that she should consider studying for a degree. She recalled how initially, she had rejected the idea as 'ludicrous', and then following further discussions with her son, thought 'what have I got to lose?':

... without telling anyone, I explored the possibility of studying for a degree. Initially by telephone and then an interview at the college - initially I thought the interview was for an exploratory chat. [Pause.] However, I was so entranced about the whole thing that I found myself agreeing there and then to study for a combined honours degree in English and History. Later that evening when I spoke to my husband on the telephone his initial reaction 'well they are obviously desperate', my heart sank, and I thought – thanks Mr O'Leary...

Feeling very deflated from her husband's remarks, she thought 'what have I done' and said that she was hesitant to tell her children and the rest of her family in case she encountered the same derogatory remarks. Rowena said that she had even considered making an excuse to back out. However, according to Rowena, 'common sense kicked in':

When I told both my sons, they were lovely and supportive. My daughter was away in Brazil at the time and we talked about it on Skype, she was also positive about it. Once my husband heard the children's positive reaction, he changed his initial opinion and has since been supportive on the surface, although I do consider that it is reluctant support.

For the rest of the summer, Rowena said that 'it seemed as if Miss O'Leary was sitting on her shoulder taunting her', bringing back all her fears and uncertainties that she felt when she was a child at school. Her emotions were yo-yoing between a mixture of high elation and low anxious concern 'with the ghost of Miss O'Leary drifting in and out of her subconscious'. It was not until Rowena told one of her older sisters her plans that she finally aired her fears aloud. Rowena recalls her sister's reaction:

...agh. Rowena stop right there worrying about the O'Leary thing. You have taken a big step, you are doing this degree for you and if you feel that,



you are not doing it for you, then do not do it. That teacher has had a profound effect on you all your life.

Rowena said that her plans spread 'like wildfire' amongst the rest of her family and in the space of a few hours, the rest of them had telephoned to offer their support, which left her with mixed feelings of angst and a fear of failure, mingled with emotions of joy and excitement: 'I really did not think that anything at my age could excite me as much as I have been since starting this course'.

Rowena went on to say that despite her perceived failure at school she had always tried to succeed at everything else she had done:

... generally, in my adult life I have tried to succeed at almost everything I have done. This is to satisfy myself as much as anything that I am not a complete failure. I know that for me this degree is a learning curve and I do not expect to receive top marks in the first year.

Similar to other participants, Rowena said that being able to take out a student loan gave her independence and replaced the income that she would have received had she been working:

...if I had not been eligible for a student loan, I would not have been in a financial position to pay the fees. I could not have justified the expenditure, and my husband would not have supported the expense either. Although, when I walked through the front door of the college on my first day, I thought that this is the first day of the rest of my life and if this is how I feel on the first day, what is the next three years going to feel like?

Before she started, her one concern was that she was going to be the oldest person in the class. However, she found that:

...age doesn't make any difference in the lectures; it is a supportive atmosphere regardless of age. I consider myself to be lucky that I have this wonderful opportunity to experience the academic circuit at the same time as my children.

Rowena said her feelings of enthusiasm for learning have not ebbed and that every day she walks into college she 'feels like a child that has just been given a new toy to play with'.

A year later, Rowena was still full of enthusiasm for learning:

I have found that studying for a degree is one of the most interesting and exhilarating things that I have ever done. The experience, well, it has been totally life enhancing. I am not sure how, but I have managed to achieve much-better-than-I-expected results, which has boosted my confidence and

increased my self-esteem hugely. I know that I mentioned my unfortunate school experiences last time we met, I have not told anyone other than the family how she treated me at school and how in my view she has totally blighted my life. I now feel vindicated in saying in a very loud 'Up Yours, Miss O' (blinking) Leary - you can get off my shoulder now...

Breaking off mid-sentence, Rowena paused and then continued:

Quite clearly, I am not the idiot that she labelled me all those years ago. [Silence]. I have somehow managed to achieve 'firsts or 2:1s' across the board. This wonderful amazing experience has changed my life totally. I hold my own in a conversation instead of sitting in a corner nodding in agreement to everyone else's opinion. I am confident, and I feel that I walk everywhere with my head held high instead of looking down at the pavement. I have not ruled out studying further - a masters perhaps...

#### 4.8 Conclusion.

Dewey (1938) argues that a good education should not only have a societal purpose but also a purpose for each individual student and that education should provide the student with an enjoyable learning experience, in the hope that these learning experiences will motivate them sufficiently to continue with their learning. He also points out that it is the educators themselves who should be responsible for providing the students with experiences that are not only valuable to themselves but experiences that enable the students to contribute to society.

The participant life history interviews presented in this chapter indicate for the most part, that these participants perceive higher education as giving them some form of freedom or liberation from their past educational experiences. Some of the participants agree with research by Pye, (1991), which looks at the experiences of mature students that 'schooling cheated most of them' (ibid:3) and that they have had a second chance and 'discovered abilities that they never knew they possessed' (ibid:3). Some of them indicated that they would like to continue this new-found learning experience into further studies. However, often financial implications for them and their family life preclude them from gaining further pleasure from education.

## Chapter 5

### 5.00 Introduction.

The three participants in this fieldwork chapter have all suffered from a variety of medical conditions at one time or another in their lives. The first is Aaron who is a self-confessed, self-inflicted illegal drug abuser. Aaron has received medical treatment to not only aid his recovery from drug abuse but also to repair damage to his body following his long-term drug habit.

Ben was diagnosed a number of years ago with Parkinson's disease (PD), which is a degenerative disorder that attacks the central nervous system and predominantly affects the way in which your brain coordinates your body's movements.

Finally, I interviewed Theo who in his words 'has been the victim of a mental illness for several years'. Mental illnesses which is quite often known as an invisible illness can affect a person's thinking and behaviour and in severe cases, it can cause a reduced ability to function in everyday life.

### 5.1 AARON.

Aaron volunteered to take part in this research study providing that I had the time to conduct the life history interview there and then:

...if you do not have the time to conduct the interview now, I may change my mind about talking to you if I have time to think about it.

Intrigued by this approach, knowing that I had no other commitments I promptly sat down with Aaron in what was by then an empty lecture room. Without any hesitation, Aaron said 'where do you want me to start, with school?':

I left school when I was fourteen. I was bored and was just mucking about in the classroom all the time. I am not making excuses for my behaviour, but looking back, I had so much stuff going on at home. So, I phoned all the local builders I could find in the yellow pages and got a job for a £1 an hour. I should not paint such a black picture, but I loved school and I loved reading. I don't know what happened, I just lost interest in learning. I did go back to school to take the exams, but the school said my attendance was not high enough to warrant me sitting exams and sent me away. Even

though I was not given the opportunity to sit any exams, I was awarded a 'U' in every subject.

Aaron said that he progressed from working on building sites to a market stall, from there he said that he had earned enough money to go into partnership with a friend in a discount shop:

I was only twenty-one and having quite a bit of money was well different. I guess, at the time I really did not know what to do with it. So, yeh, I just spent it, I got into drugs, drinking, fighting you name it and I did it. I then somehow lost everything that I had worked hard for through over-indulgence in drugs and drink.

I recognised that this was a sensitive area of his life by the tone of his voice and his body language. Aaron said that his parents were constantly fighting and arguing at home until they eventually divorced. However, within a short space of time they ended back together again:

It was confusing, even at my age - they could not live together, but they did not want to live apart. At the time my father tried to give me advice about saving, putting my money away. But I had problems trusting either of them. I found it difficult to listen to what they had to say because of their behaviour. I did not listen, and now I really wish I had kinda thing.

Although he didn't want to blame his mistakes on his parents, he was by this time heavily reliant on drugs:

Drugs took over my life and that addictive behaviour continued for the next eighteen years. Looking back, I made money just to feed my drug addiction and my addiction was fed by my ability to earn money. I would start up a company, become relatively successful then use all the money that I made to buy drugs. My life would then spiral out of control and I would lose everything again. Sabotage is the word that I would use, sabotaging my body and my life, up to the point where my drug issues were getting really bad.

At this point in time Aaron said in a quiet voice:

I was in and out of hospital a lot, umm, [silence]. My need for drugs was spiralling out of control; I was becoming psychotic and paranoid mainly because I was using cocaine by this time. I would not eat or sleep for days on end and I lost all concept of reality, there were times when I thought that I was being followed. You know (Aaron sighed) there were more than a few instances when I thought that I was going to kill myself with an overdose, or I was going to kill someone else because I thought they were stalking me.

Aaron hesitated and then said:

...at the time I did not want to admit to anyone that I needed help with my drug addiction. The admission of being an addict and that I needed help umm came about when I was arrested and charged for possession by the police, this broke my mother's heart. She said 'look I have heard about this

drug rehabilitation place not too far away; it has good results'. The centre was about fifty miles from where I lived, it had a good reputation and had been used by a few celebrities in the past. It also had several high-profile members on their board. At the time, I did not know what to do with myself, I was experiencing what is known as 'the gift of desperation' so to please my mum I agreed to give it a go. [A very long silence was followed by a big sigh]. That was over five years ago, although it seems a lifetime ago. I was very scared... I think, but I really cannot remember very much at all. I was there for about three months and when I left, I managed to stay clean for a few months, but I eventually ended back on the drugs.

Aaron paused and said:

Do not worry, this has a happy ending. I am totally free from all drugs and drink and enjoying the experience of studying at university. [Long pause]. Because of the drug abuse, I was in and out of hospital, I was admitted into critical care for about a week with a 50/50 chance of survival. The doctors put me into a drug-induced coma, because my body was going into spasms, and releasing toxins into my liver, I was in a phase that is called 'the madness'.

This final near-death experience terrified him and cost him the only friends that he had left as well as his long-term girlfriend, it was also the turning point in his life. Aaron said that when he looked into the mirror, he did not recognise the worn, grey, haggard reflection that stared back at him, he said that his eyes looked red raw but were black as coal dust. At the time the hospital consultant had told him that any further bouts of drug abuse could and would be fatal. This brought him back into reality and he agreed to go back into rehab'. Aaron said, 'this time, I was determined to succeed'.

This was also the turning point in the interview where Aaron made eye contact for the first time, his posture also changed, he sat up and said:

Rehab and withdrawal seemed to be easier the second time around because I knew what to expect and when I was ready to venture out into the big wide world, I knew that I was not ready to go back into a working environment. I also knew that I did not want to drift back into that cycle of earning money and buying drugs. So, I looked at trying something different by returning to education. That is when I started the level three access course. I surprised myself by engaging totally with the learning process. I did not realise that when I started the access course that it would lead me to apply to study for a degree, this decision came much later.

Further reflections on this second visit to the rehabilitation centre; saw Aaron admitting that he mixed with people from all walks of life; from those who were homeless and living on the streets, to others who were endowed with celebrity

status. However, he said 'what goes on in rehab' stays in rehab' - people that he met will always remain nameless to the 'outside world'. In the rehabilitation centre, everyone was considered an equal, we were all there for one thing and that was to recover from substance abuse.

Returning to education was a in many ways a lifeline for Aaron, he said that on the first day that he attended the access course he was terrified. He had not been out of rehabilitation very long and the thought of interacting with people was scary. Aaron said that his confidence was 'rock bottom' and that he had forgotten how to communicate with people and make new friends:

Once I was through the classroom door, I will not say I relaxed, but I had made a deal with myself. First, I had to get through the front door and then into the classroom, keep my head down and take everything in. I did not want to get close to people because I did not want to feel rejected due to my past. I felt awkward, alone and aloof, afraid to let the barriers down. I would sit in the coffee area on my own and the rest of the group would say 'come and sit over here with us'. I felt that I was worthless and needed the reassurance of others.

Aaron continued to talk in a more positive manner and was very complimentary about the support that he had received from the teaching staff. He said that they were all aware of his drug-riddled background and supported him accordingly. He spoke of how they encouraged and reassured him that his work was not only of an acceptable standard, but also that he was improving with each piece of work he submitted. He said that on occasions he was complimented that he had produced work of what the tutor considered to be of an excellent standard. Meanwhile, in terms of his recovery:

During the access course, I was still going through what is known as the 'recovery bubble'. That is when you attend recovery and wellness meetings and umm well, if you look at it from the outside, it is not the 'real world' everyone is very nice to each other. It is called 'the pink fluffy cloud' because those that attend these meetings have all experienced this feeling of desperation and humiliation. It is a surreal time when everyone is kinda of umm, really compassionate to each other and kinda trying to show that the world is not a hostile place.

For Aaron the access course was in many ways a new beginning; he defined it rather succinctly as a 're-birth'. However, as the end of the course approached, he was apprehensive about his future especially when others around him were beginning to talk about going on to study for a degree. Aaron said he did not

realise that the access course he had been studying on was an acceptable stepping-stone to apply for an undergraduate degree. Initially, Aaron said that he had dismissed this route for himself because he still felt riddled with self-doubt, low self-esteem and self-confidence. He was also afraid that failure and/or rejection of any kind could set his recovery back.

The alternative to continuing with his education was scary because it would involve employment, which in turn would put money in his pocket. However, it was a one-to-one conversation with his tutor that forced him re-consider his decision and that applying to study at degree level maybe the way forward for him:

...returning to education has been a very exciting time of my life. University not only teaches you about your chosen subject it also teaches you about yourself and life. Education has, well in many ways transformed my life. There are days when I take so much in in the lectures that I go home mentally exhausted. I do not feel that people are judging me here, everyone accepts me and knows me for who I am and not for the drug addict that I was. Education seems to take away all the pre-judgement that people have.

Although in his third and final year, studying at degree level has not been a straightforward process. Aaron said that in his second year he considered 'dropping out' because his partner was expecting a baby (unplanned). He felt that he should be responsible for his actions and that he should be out earning money to support his child:

...I know it was a very old-fashioned thought, which stems from my background - my parents. It was hard for me to comprehend that for the first time in my life I have someone more important to think about than me. Being a parent was overwhelming and having the responsibility for a child made me immediately think I must earn money. However, my tutors were amazing, and I realized that I would be giving the wrong message to everyone by just dropping out. I want to be a good role model for my partners children as well as my own child. I feel that I am very privileged to have had this opportunity, as I am the first in my family to go to university – to me getting a degree is such a big thing. For the first time in my life I am doing something that I enjoy. I am now in my forties, my partner has just had my baby, and I am a student. I am in a better position both mentally and physically, than I have ever been in my life. At this exact moment in time I do not know what I am going to do or where I am going to go from here. I have considered applying to study for a master's and looking ahead could I do a PhD I do not know.

As the life history interview came to a natural conclusion, Aaron said:

It was a very spur-of-the-moment decision to talk to you. I am surprised with myself that I have spoken to you so intimately, as I have never met you in my life before. Thank you, I think that this has helped me to talk aloud about my life. I hope this research helps other mature students that may be in the same position.

## 5.2 BEN.

My initial contact with Ben was via email, he said that one of his lecturers had suggested that he may find taking part in my research an interesting. Ben's email said:

I am willing to participate in your research study. However, I am sixty-one years old and therefore not a typical BA mature student. So, I may not be an ideal participant. But if I can be of assistance then please contact me.

Intrigued by Ben's view of himself, I posed the question, what is a 'typical mature student'? I therefore asked a number of university lecturers what they considered a 'typical BA mature student' to be.

Toby replied:

...for many mature students it is a second chance at education and some of those guys can make the best students even though academically they have to work a lot harder.

Scott answered without hesitation:

Mature students tend to come because they want to, as opposed to traditional-age students whose expectation is that they should go to university. In my opinion, mature students have greater commitment and motivation.

Bella replied, now that could be quite a tricky question to answer:

My experiences of mature students versus the eighteen-year olds straight from school is that mature students nearly always come with additional baggage, families, children, dogs and work issues, specifically those that work part time whilst studying. I consider that there are many advantages to teaching mature students:

- they want to be here;
- they know which direction they are going in;
- their work ethic is much better than the 18-year olds.

Finally, Sienna summed it up with what she considered to be a typical mature student:



It is not an easy journey for many mature students, some of them comment on the stress and the lack of confidence that they feel initially. For many returning to education is a huge life-changing event.

In reply to Ben's email, I arranged a life history interview the following week.

Unfortunately, I received another email from Ben which said:

I perhaps should have mentioned in my initial email to you that I suffer from Parkinson's disease and have periods in my life where I am quite unwell. When I first emailed you, I was having a run of reasonable days, but the last three days have reminded me just how ill I can be. In discussion with my wife, we have concluded that I should save all my 'well' days for finishing my BA. There are only four weeks of lectures left and I have two assignments, and an exam outstanding, and my dissertation to finish off. I am so very sorry to mess you about.

Ben went on to say that if the timescale for my research allowed, we could meet at the end of the semester, which was only four weeks away. Ben's email said:

Thank you, Frances, for your understanding reply. I do feel awful for letting you down. Today is a history lecture on World War II and I want to answer the second assignment question. I will need to feel a lot better than I do now if I am going to make it into university by mid-day when the lecture starts. Studying at university has been an experience that has transformed my life. I have spent the last few years, well, since I was diagnosed, obsessively researching Parkinson's disease. Providing my results stand up, I hope to continue with this education thing and go on to do a master's in history via the Open University starting in October.

He also wrote:

You may be also be interested to read a blog that I write periodically about my life living with Parkinson's disease for a drug company's web site. I blog every two or three weeks when I have something to say and have done so for the past three years, so it regularly features my illness in relation to my studies at university. I have attached my latest blog, which I wrote this weekend as well as the link to the last three years blogs that I have written. I hope you find it interesting and useful.

Having reassured Ben that we could meet at the end of the semester, with the proviso that his health allowed him to, I researched Parkinson's disease prior to meeting him to equip myself with a greater understanding of the disease.

Parkinson's disease is a debilitating condition, which appears to be gender biased affecting more men than women. Although Parkinson's disease is not considered a life-threatening illness, medical research has shown that most people who are diagnosed with the disease have a near-normal life expectancy.

([www.nhs.uk/Conditions/Parkinsons-disease](http://www.nhs.uk/Conditions/Parkinsons-disease)).

With Ben's permission I downloaded and read several of his blogs about his day-to-day life living with PD. The blogs also included some of his experiences as a full-time mature student:

I was in my fifties when I was initially diagnosed with Parkinson's disease (PD). On reflection, I feel that I had experienced a few undiagnosed symptoms of the disease for at least four years prior to that. Following the diagnosis, it was impossible for me to continue with my career. The medication makes my everyday life bearable; as well as masks some of the symptoms but it does not stop its progression. I have dedicated much of my time over the last few years to researching all aspects of PD, not only trying to support others who suffer with this illness but also trying to raise the profile of PD at the same time. I have been writing a blog on a website for a drug company, which you are welcome to access and use for your research if it would help. I also administer an internet patient forum for people with PD, which I set up in September 2008, which currently has over one hundred and fifty members. I also administer the PD forum's Facebook page as well as Friends Reunited and Twitter pages.

Like many of the other participants Ben said that he could not wait to leave school and start earning - 'It's was what was expected of us'. He said that as far as he could remember, no one in his class or his immediate group of friends went on to study and take Advanced level (A-level) exams or went to university. Ben said:

I left school at fifteen, to train as an apprentice engineer in a local company. I then spent the next seven years attending my local college on a day release as part of my apprentice training and then as part of the company's wider training programme for staff. I continued to work for the same company until I was diagnosed with PD.

Ben recalled that during this period of further education 'I never managed to reach the higher echelons of studying at degree level', he went on to say, 'it is something that I've always regretted', although going to university was never an option when he was at school. He recalled how his career changed direction at the age of twenty-two when he was unexpectedly promoted into a managerial position which involved working long hours and a considerable amount of travelling. Ben said, 'at the time, I was too busy being 'important' and travelling the world to think about educating myself further':

I had stopped travelling and feeling important immediately prior to the diagnosis of Parkinson's disease and once I was officially diagnosed, I kept myself busy trying to find a cure. I set up an internet forum for sufferers, organised 'get-togethers', became an advocate for a national PD charity, bought and read every publication I could find. As the disease progressed

and I became unable to pursue my favourite physical activities like golf and swimming, I devoted more and more of my time on the internet looking for a cure. My life seemed to revolve totally around the subject and in hindsight this was not good; my mood was spiralling downwards, and urgent action was needed to find something non-PD to engage me.

This 'something' came in the guise of a friend, who suggested that Ben should investigate the possibility of enrolling onto an undergraduate degree course at a local university. Ben said that he initially rejected the suggestion as 'a ridiculous idea'. However, secretly he admitted: 'the idea was somewhat appealing, but very unrealistic'. Ben recalled how the friend 'very wisely' did not try to persuade him, she just said 'think about it'. What was interesting in this conversation is that Ben was more concerned that PD would be a precursor to commencing an undergraduate degree and not his age or previous educational qualifications.

Ben admitted rather sheepishly that he had reflected on the conversation and found himself unconsciously looking on university websites. He admitted wryly that the suggestion had given him more than one sleepless night:

...my subconscious mind mulled over the possibility and inevitably, my soul-searching concluded eventually that I had nothing to lose to make a few enquiries.

Having researched potential courses at his local college, Ben said that he was pleasantly surprised to find that following a telephone call, he was granted an interview. Ben said, 'panic set in'. What was the worst thing that could happen, 'rejection, due to Parkinson's'? Following the interview with the head of school Ben said that he was offered a place immediately and 'the rest is history'.

Following his first week as a mature student Ben wrote in his blog: (All extracts taken from the blog are verbatim):

I am very pleased to report that my first week as a mature student went extremely well. In fact, I could not have hoped for much better given that I am over seven years post Parkinson's disease (PD) diagnosis. Monday was the first day and it was an induction day with the morning covering general induction and the afternoon covering the course subjects. This was always going to be a big challenge for me as I would be at university for at least eight hours. That is long enough for me to suffer from probably two major fatigue attacks, plus the likelihood of my dopamine producing medication to wear off due to the stress of the situation. But amazingly neither manifested itself at any point during the day. In fact, it was probably my best PD day in some time. I was extremely tired by the end of the afternoon but probably no more than any other fifty-eight-year-old would be

who is suddenly back in an educational establishment for the first time in thirty-six years and way out of his comfort zone! But it was just tiredness, and not the brutal fatigue that my PD can deliver, often with little warning.

Ben continued to write in his blog about his experiences at university over the next few weeks, in the hope that his experiences of university life from a disabled person's practical point of view would encourage other like-minded people who may be looking for 'life' outside PD. Ben's blog said:

From a practical viewpoint, my first day at university went well from the start. When I arrived at 8.30am, well ahead of the 9.15am start time, I managed to park at the front of the university entrance. This was crucial for me, as the car park is usually full by 8.30am. The three classrooms we used throughout the day were also at the front of the building as was the cafeteria, so very little walking was required all day. Thankfully the library was also nearby as are the toilets. I am not totally sure if I was shuffling when I walked at all during the day or if I had bradykinesia (slowness of movement) as I tend not to be aware of it. But if I did, no one mentioned it to me, which is good, as I want to keep PD off the agenda as much as possible with my fellow students, if not totally. So far, I am still fired up and full of enthusiasm for my degree course, although I am not underestimating the challenges that lie ahead. After I finish writing this blog, I have my first piece of History homework to address. I apologise if I have been slightly indulgent about my new course but, as I hoped, I am currently totally and completely absorbed by it and wonderfully distracted from the usual daily reality of life with PD.

Further blog extracts written during Ben's first few weeks at university, show his enormous willpower to overcome some of the restrictions that PD has had on his life, such as chronic fatigue. It also showed Ben's strength of mind to succeed:

I have made it to the relative tranquillity of reading week. But, whilst I do not have to travel into university for lectures this week, I am by no means free from university work as I have essays to research and write. My Parkinson's disease (PD) has attempted to interfere with my studies on occasions, but so far, I have the upper hand and I think I have coped with the workload okay. My brain seems to have woken up sufficiently to deal with the intellectual demands. The biggest problem that I have encountered at university so far has been finding a car parking space close enough to the building. I have to get to college over two hours before some of my lectures start on two of my three days at university to be sure of a car parking space and this is making those days too long. Consequently, fatigue rears its ugly head and I have annoyingly had to miss a couple of lectures. Overall, it is all going as well as I could have hoped for and I am enjoying the content of the modules and the interaction with the other students. Also, I feel like I have a real purpose to my life again with challenges and targets. Probably the most important thing to come out of my course is that I have lots of distraction from PD and so far, that is worth the extra fatigue.

A further extract revealed the following:

It is almost Christmas and I have submitted two essays (1,000-words each) in the past month and I have two more to write and submit before we break for the Christmas holiday period. Over the holidays, I have another 2,000-word essay to write and 1,000-word book review. Then there is a two-hour exam in early January as well as a portfolio of work to be completed and submitted in January as well. Even if PD would allow me to climb ladders to nail hundreds of Christmas lights to the outside of my house, the demands of my degree course would have to take priority. But as I said in my last blog, “nobody said it was easy”. I wait nervously for the marks and feedback for my first two submitted essays.

Several of the participants commented that initially they felt that they were too old to return to education or that they would be viewed as ‘old’ in a group of traditional-age students. However, the following extract from Ben’s blog highlights how age is in many cases irrelevant in higher education and that this group of students exhibits a sense of unity when a common goal is shared:

There is a forty-year age gap between the oldest (me) and the youngest student on my undergraduate course. It is however, wonderful how the shared adversity of these first few essays have brought us all together regardless of age. There is a sense of working as a team to support and assist each other that is independent of any social, economic or age differences. One of my fellow students has set up a private group - Facebook page, which I have found so far invaluable. I was concerned when I first embarked on this course that I would be seen as just an old man with PD and that I would feel isolated by this feeling. In reality, this is totally the opposite. For example, PD struck me brutally at college one day earlier this week, with my back going into a very painful spasm. It was impossible for me to concentrate on the lecturer or study and I was forced to go home halfway through the lecture. Later that evening one of the other students scanned and emailed numerous handouts to me, totally unprompted. She also emailed me clear instructions on the homework from the other two lectures that I missed that day. To me this was such an amazing act of thoughtfulness and kindness. To a lesser extent, I have helped some of the younger students with their IT issues. For me there is no doubt that helping each other is wonderfully cathartic. My university degree course is bringing far more good than just distraction into my life.

Ben commented that academia appeared to be timeless and that regardless of age his cohort had bonded even though they came from a range of backgrounds:

I have made so many new friends at university from a very diverse range of backgrounds. Some of my cohort are single parents with young families and some have part-time jobs. I still find it incredible in the way that we have all bonded as a group. Six of us meet on a regular basis to talk through lectures, swap lecture notes and revise for exams. All thirty of us try and have lunch together on a regular basis. Most of us share a private,

closed group Facebook page where we all help and support each other. My only sadness is that I cannot join them all on the workshops and trips that are available to us. Sadly, but realistically, PD has won that one!

Ben reflected on the friendship and support that he had experienced in his blog.

Ben said:

The only concern that I have in my life is that I have PD, I am fortunate to have a wife that supports me in everything that I do. However, many of my friends and colleagues have so much more to cope with in their private life than me. Some of them have young families to support; many are single-parent families, coping with their children all alone, struggling with financial constraints as well as a heavy workload from university. Whilst others in my group have part-time jobs, they juggle childcare, school runs, running a household and still managing to maintain their attendance at university and meeting assignment deadlines.

Moving away from the support and friendship of his cohort Ben said that when he realised what others live with daily, some of the 'hidden' PD symptoms that he copes with were minor in comparison:

Fatigue is by no means the only PD symptom that makes my university life difficult, although for me it is by far, the most disabling. It has easily been the biggest challenge for me since I started this degree course. Thankfully, I am finding the course very absorbing and mentally stimulating, and I am sure the distraction the course provided from my PD helped me to cope with the long days at university. Parkinson's disease is medically known to affect the memory of some sufferers. My strategy is simple: use it or risk losing it. As my illness has progressed over the past 10 years, I have mentally pushed myself by reading more, doing crosswords and Sudoku puzzles, and engaging in newspaper and pub quizzes. I consider that I have significantly improved my memory and knowledge base over the past 10 years.

The distraction of studying for a degree over the last three years has been for Ben what he calls a 'lifesaver'. He admitted that prior to embarking on his degree he spent 'almost every waking hour' researching a cure for PD. This emotional declaration of distraction is corroborated in Ben's blog, which he wrote and posted as he approached the end of his degree:

It seems amazing to think that it will be three years in August that I signed up for this degree. The time seems to have gone so quickly. But it has served its purpose, and both engaged my brain and distracted me from Parkinson's disease (PD). It has also got me out into the world amongst people who are young, vibrant and ambitious. My career may be long gone but I had my moments and it is lovely now to be working alongside others that are just setting out on their careers. For some of my cohort it has been a long academic journey for them, starting with a two-year Access course, which was followed by the three-year BA. Some of the group as I have

mentioned before have young children and part-time jobs, which have competed with their study time. The pressure on them has been enormous. I am full of admiration for their individual achievements. For me it has been hard enough at times studying for a degree without the distraction of children and employment to contend with. I do not think I can begin to fully appreciate how tough it has been for some of my classmates. But I envy them now in that it would have been lovely to use my BA, for something more than a diversion from PD.

A further extract from his blog recalls how he has managed to keep most of his PD symptoms to himself whilst studying and not 'share or burden' his fellow contemporaries unless they specifically asked:

Parkinson's disease made it impossible for me to continue with my career and has taken my leisure pursuits – golf, fishing, swimming and hiking – but I can walk my dog when I am at the peak of my medication cycles. On a positive note, I have selfishly devoted the last three years making the brain cells work hard on a full-time degree level course. I am slightly sad that it has come to an end, but then all things do!

A few months later, I received an email from Ben, which said:

I missed the stimulation and routine of studying so much that I applied to a different local university (this time a traditional one and not HE-in-FE) for a place on an MA course. I will be studying on a part-time basis over two years. There are hurdles for me to personally overcome but I am determined to complete the course.

### 5.3 THEO.

Theo is in his early thirties and started the interview by talking about his experiences at school, recalling how he was a 'sporty student' and as part of a team, he had helped his school win several sporting trophies. Theo said that the school had led him to believe that he was good enough at sports to gain a sports scholarship abroad:

...unfortunately, it did not happen. In hindsight, I feel that the school wanted to win trophies as a kind of kudos for the school and as part of a team, I was a means to an end. My schooling suffered because I was constantly playing sports and following some very disastrous GCSE results, I was just sent on my way by the school with very little or no guidance.

On leaving school, Theo thought, that his only option was to enrol on a Business and Technology Education Council (BTEC) course at his local College. He chose to study graphic design because he felt that he was good at art at school and did not know what else to do. However, a year later, he had not settled and did not

enjoy the course and so decided to leave the college. Theo said that part of the reason that he left the course was that he was always running the 'what if' he had achieved a sports scholarship in his head and dreaming about the 'recognition and big bucks a professional sports person could achieve'. However, with no plan 'B', Theo said that his father, offered him a job on a building site and against all his instincts, he accepted and started work as a labourer. Over the next fifteen years, Theo said that he had undertaken various training programmes on day-release schemes and worked his way up to become a fully trained Civil Engineer:

I worked hard all week, drank excessively at the weekends and slept in a drunken stupor, until it was time to return to work on Monday morning and that was the beginning of my mental health issues. I was extremely well paid and felt that I was wasting my time working in an environment where I felt unhappy and unfulfilled. Things were so bad that following medical advice and to avoid further deterioration of my mental health, I resigned.

To earn enough money to pay his mortgage and feed himself Theo started to work in a local supermarket, stacking shelves. He said: 'I had no purpose in my life and no pressures from anyone or anything' and because he had enjoyed the concept of studying as a day-release student he decided to enrol on a level 3 Social Science Access Course at his local college:

The access course was the turning point in my life, I had a purpose, and I wanted to achieve something for my own sense of satisfaction. I felt that I was in a learning environment because I wanted to be there, and not because I had to be there.

Following his change in employment Theo's mental health issues began to abate; and on doctors' advice, he reduced his medication:

I feel that returning to education has helped me to find out who I am; it has given me an identity and a broader perspective on life. I feel I was institutionalised, working in a male orientated trade for over fifteen years. For me, education is a very different environment and has been a lifesaver. It has opened my eyes to other people and their wants and needs and I am not so wrapped up in my own mental health problems.

Theo said that he would like to train as a physical education teacher, however, he has also considered teaching in a primary school, especially if the current financial incentives are still in place for male primary school teachers when he graduates.

A further meeting with Theo at the end of his first year revealed that he had not enjoyed one of the subjects of his joint honours degree and that he had decided to



change subjects. He was still free of medication and although he felt vulnerable when he changed subjects, he had had considerable support from the tutors and other students that he had met on the course. He said that he had stayed strong and was working towards passing his exams and completing his assignments.

Theo said:

Had I been working on a building site I would not have had the friendship or the support that I have received here. My confidence is growing which has enabled me to focus on my studies and keep looking forward to the future free from medication.

#### 5.4 Conclusion.

The three participants included in this fieldwork chapter have all said that they recognise the positive impact that studying at degree-level has had on their health issues. They have all said that they not only attach importance to the considerable change in themselves, the increase in self-esteem and self-confidence which they feel is due in part to their studies, they also acknowledge the positive effect that their return to education has had on their families and friends. Attwood (2010) points out that 'all students need to feel part of a community' and for these three mature students the support that they have received from both their fellow students and outside influences comes across very strongly within their narratives.

Returning to education has encouraged all three of these participants to consider something other than their medical condition. In addition, it has given them a form of freedom/liberation and according to all three of them education has transformed their lives.

## Chapter 6

### 6.0 Introduction.

Like for many of the participants in this research study, for the three participants who are included in this fieldwork chapter, being a mature student had not only improved their self-esteem and self-confidence, it had also freed them from some form of family and/or intergenerational constraints.

Research undertaken by Wray (1997:np) with a group of second-year undergraduate mature students 'reported problems within those relationships caused, at least in part, by their entry to university'. The research suggests:

...two possible, though not mutually exclusive, explanations for this phenomenon. These are personal development and growth, and the conflict caused within a relationship when the consequent re-negotiation of roles take place when one partner takes on the additional, and time consuming, role of student. This second explanation recognises that study is not undertaken in isolation from other aspects of life and that integrating the role of student into existing roles within a relationship requires adjustment from both the student and the partner.

### 6.1 BETH.

Beth described herself as 'fifty something going on twenty-five' and that she 'sort of' lives with a long-term partner. Beth said: What do you want to know? And without stopping for breath, she said:

Well, school, not much to tell really, it was something that you had to do whether you liked it or not. I stayed on at school to study A-levels but, I left without taking any exams because I found out that I was pregnant. That was the beginning and the end of my education experience.

Moving swiftly forward Beth said that as a young mother, she had joined the local mother and toddler group:

I spent the first session talking to the manager of the youth club, which was held in the same building. Somehow, I volunteered to help and because I enjoyed the work so much, I trained as a youth worker, from there I moved into social services, but still working with young people.

Beth said, that the next few years was 'a grey area of her life' because she had contracted Myalgic Encephalomyelitis (M.E.), which is commonly known as chronic fatigue syndrome (CFS or M.E) ([www.nhs.uk/conditions/Chronic-fatigue-](http://www.nhs.uk/conditions/Chronic-fatigue-)

syndrome/Pages). This debilitating illness affected Beth for many years and as she was beginning to recover, her aged mother began to deteriorate with age and needed full-time care. She therefore found herself looking after her mother as a full-time carer until she passed away:

...that for me was real life changing [silence]. When she died, I realised that I must do something with my life. I knew that I did not want to go back into youth work or the care industry.

Beth said that she really did fall into education because not long after her mother had died, she tripped up on the pavement outside the local learning centre and one of the tutors came to her aid:

Prior to this fall, I had not even considered returning to education, but once I realised what the centre offered, I decided that I would like to try to improve my maths. I could not physically work and at the time I didn't know just how much the M.E. had affected my mental capacity. So, I started the level one functional skills course and very quickly went on to level two. My partner was not amused because I had taken on something without consulting him and things between us have developed into a silent standoff most of the time.

Beth enjoyed returning to learning so much that she decided to continue with the functional skills course in English and IT despite the problems that this was causing with her partner at home. After completing the functional skills courses, Beth said that her confidence had improved so much that she was encouraged to enrol on the Level 3 Access to Humanities and Social Sciences course, which she was told was a natural succession to the functional skills. However, what Beth did not realise initially was that the access course was actually a 'fast track' course, which was scheduled to run for three nights a week from January to July. The course had been specifically designed to accommodate those students who were planning on embarking on a degree course in the following September/October:

On the first night of the course I had a very scary moment, knowing that I had committed myself to what was a fast track and very intensive course. I would say that studying at this level changed me completely. It is not something that I can explain. For me, I found the whole learning process - awe-inspiring. If someone had said to me that returning to education would change me, I would have laughed. But it has been the biggest confidence boost that I have ever experienced. I am not a boastful person, but every access assignment that I handed in to be marked I somehow managed to achieve a distinction. I was completely surprised at my ability, and what I had managed to achieve. I did not have any plans to go any further than the access course, but with encouragement from the tutors I eventually agreed that I would and could go on to study for a degree.

Although Beth felt pleased with her access course results, her home life was continuing to go through what she called a 'difficult phase'. She said that her relationship with her partner was 'strained' and:

...once I started to seriously consider going on to study at university, I started to think of all the wonderful places across the country that I could study. In my view, mature students have no choice but to study where their home is. They cannot get up and move halfway across the country when they are established with a home, and a mortgage and a family. The upheaval for everyone would be too much.

Beth hesitated before continuing to give an account of the relationship and the impact that university study has had on her and on her ability to stand up for herself in the relationship:

My partner did not take kindly to me doing the access course and once I started this degree course, he chooses not to speak to me for days on end...

Once I had made my mind up to apply for a place at university, I somehow found the courage to tell him that I was going to do this degree with or without him. Before I returned to learning I would never have stuck up for myself, nor would I have done anything without his approval. I think for him, it is a general feeling of him feeling threatened, not just the relationship, but, from a psychological point of view. During the time that we have been together, I think I had reverted into this shell, mainly because of his controlling behaviour. I know I do not have his support at home. I would say for mature students having family support is one of the most important things. However, I must face the fact that I do not have his support, so as I have said, I am going to do this degree 'with or without him'. Education has given me so much confidence.

Beth went on to say that this life history interview had made her think about her life and her educational journey. She said that if anything, it had reinforced her thoughts that education had woken something up inside her that had been lying dormant for a long time. She said that she felt that she seemed to have lost her confidence 'perhaps it was just buried, but it is definitely fighting its way to the surface now'.

Beth continued to reflect on her current personal circumstances:

It is important to me that I have someone who has faith in what I am doing instead of behaving childishly towards me, if this relationship survives this year, let alone the next three years of the degree, I will be very surprised. I have told him in no uncertain terms... [Silence] ...I do not know what your problem is, but this degree is going to take me three years and I am going to do it with you or without you.

Beth went on to describe her student life as a roller coaster. There are times when she enjoyed the whole learning process and then her confidence would fail her, and doubts about her ability would creep into her subconscious thoughts:

One minute I am so inspired, and feel that I can do this, and I leave here thinking what a wonderful day, I have learnt so much, and then, the doubts creep into my subconscious and I tell myself I do not want to do this, because I cannot do this.

When the doubts began to creep in, Beth said that she tried to reflect positively on the marks of distinction that she received whilst studying on the access course, although she realised that studying at degree-level would be very different to what she had been used to:

I am not worried about the actual writing of the assignments; it is more whether I understand the content of the lectures. I do feel that the staff are supportive and approachable and if I have a problem, they are there to listen to me.

Beth really enjoyed taking part in the seminars where she had the opportunity to debate with others. There were times when perhaps she was a little too vocal, but the tutor reassured her that he was happy with her input.

Just over a year later, Beth and I met for a follow-up interview. Beth immediately launched into her home life:

My home life is improving. I have hardened myself against my now ex-partner and I have decided that if he cannot support me in what I am doing, then he really is not the person for me

Beth said that she had recently reconnected with an old friend who understood what she was doing and was supporting her:

...it has made a hell of a difference to me, to my life, I feel like a teenager at school again. I just cannot believe what a difference it has made to my uni work, just having someone who wants to talk and listen about what I am doing, that is apart from my classmates.

This support had helped Beth think ahead and plan and organise her oral history dissertation project. Because Beth had planned to conduct several face-to-face interviews in another part of the country over the summer break the universities' ethics committee had already approved her research and provisional title. She said that the project had grown from one of the history modules. Looking to the future, Beth said:

Not only am I ahead with my dissertation project I have even considered what I am going to do at the end of my degree, even though I am only coming to the end of in my second year. I would love to stay in education, continue studying for a masters' degree, unfortunately, I must be realistic, I do not have the money to continue so; employment it is.

## 6.2 EMILIA.

When her youngest child started primary school, Emilia volunteered as a 'parent helper' at the school, initially to listen to the children read. However, as her confidence with the children in the classroom grew her involvement in the classroom increased.

At the end of her first-year of volunteering, Emilia said that the head-teacher had discussed the possibility of starting a 'Forest School' within the school and asked Emilia whether she would like to be involved. Over the summer holidays, Emilia researched the concept of Forest Schools and at the beginning of the new school year she had an interview with the school board of governors to discuss the idea. Following a successful interview, Emilia embarked on a specific program of training. It was whilst she was watching the children flourish and develop in an outdoor environment, that she thought that she would like train as a teacher. This interest in education came as something of a revelation to her because she had started full-time work before she sat her General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) exams:

I started my GCSE study leave on the Friday and on the Monday, I started full-time work. My boss allowed me time off work to sit the exams - the grades I received reflected the fact that I did absolutely no revision. I was not interested in school or taking exams, all I wanted to do was work and to earn money.

During the time Emilia started volunteering as a parent helper she was also running a small business with her husband from home. Their busiest time was during the school holidays, which kept her and the children tied to the house.

Emilia said:

It took him longer than me to realise that the business was a tie. I could not go out with the children in the school holidays; we could not have family days out or even a family holiday. The business was therefore having a huge impact on my children as well as my relationship with my husband.

Emilia said that without any thought or concern for the consequences, she gave her husband an ultimatum:

I said to my husband, 'we go, I go with the children or the business goes, it's getting me down'. By this time, I had realised that I wanted to train as a teacher. We are living in the most stimulating time of our lives, yet we still make children sit in a classroom in a way, that we have always taught them, children's minds have evolved, and children's minds do not want to sit in a boring classroom learning boring stuff...

Because of her lack of educational qualifications, Emilia said that returning to education was very challenging for her. Despite this, Emilia completed and passed a level 3 Access to Humanities course with little or no support from her husband:

Ok, so, from being a mum and wanting to help my children at school, I have gained an educational qualification and I now have a direction and purpose in my life. When I was on the access course, one of the tutors said, 'education is like an elastic band it keeps stretching and stretching the more you do it the more you want to continue'. My long-term aim is to complete my degree, then a PGCE, perhaps teach for a year or two and then I will consider applying to study for a Masters.

Emilia reflected on leaving school at the age of sixteen:

...if someone had said to me when I left school that I would be back enjoying education at my age I would never have believed them. I am convinced that I would never have coped with this level of study at the age of eighteen let alone at sixteen. I can honestly say that I am really enjoying the experiences of learning myself and I am looking forward to achieving the qualifications, which will allow me to teach.

When I met Emilia almost a year later for a follow-up interview, I found that she had recently been refused a place on a full-time PGCE course. However, she had been offered a place on a SKITT teaching programme providing she attains the desired 2:1-degree classification.

### 6.3 FLORENCE.

I have described Florence's appearance in detail in this thesis because I consider that compared to some of the other participants that I have interviewed, her appearance is an important part of how Florence wants to portray herself.

Florence arrived to take part in the interview with another mature student (Harriet), who also wanted to take part in the research (who does not feature to any great

length in this thesis). Florence's rather pristine appearance gave one the impression that she was a little older than her years. Petite in stature, she was casually dressed in jeans, with a crease down the centre of each leg, and she was carrying what looked to be a smart blazer style jacket. She wore a bright orange patterned silk scarf draped around her shoulders and a large string of pearls around her neck, which poked itself through the folds of the scarf. Despite their tiny size in comparison to her necklace, the pearl earrings that she wore in her ears matched her outfit perfectly.

When she spoke, Florence spoke in what I can only describe as an 'upper-class' accent, which I had not been aware of when we had initially arranged the interview. However, by the time we had completed the interview, I noticed that the upper-class accent was occasionally replaced with what appeared to me to be a rather broad Essex accent. The emergence of the Essex accent was confirmed by Florence herself, who said that she had been born and brought up in Essex. Abrahams and Ingram (2013:np) point out: 'The adapting of the habitus is characterised by a change in accent and also behaviour...' They go on to say that 'These modifications are not conscious...' Therefore, it is only after the event that he/she are able to analyse their behaviour if they chose to, and admit that they are speaking differently.

Support for this comes from Ashton and Shepherd (2013) writing for the British Council who say:

Accents define us the moment we meet others. They pass on information about our lives – where we are from, our age and even our parents' histories – and they form an identity that gives us immediate membership to an oral tribe.

On examining my hand-written field notes against the digital recording, I became aware of several changes in Florence's accent from the 'upper-class' accent to the more relaxed Essex dialect. In my view, the upper-class accent appeared when she was less comfortable with what she was saying. Like her clothes, Florence used her upper-class accent as part of her identity process; using the 'posh' accent, perhaps subconsciously as a shield.

Florence began the interview by talking about her decision to return to education:



I have never had the freedom to make any decisions of my own. This is the first time in my life that I have no one telling me what I should or should not do – although my mother still tries. I can choose to do exactly what I want to do, where I want to go, what I want to eat, and what I want to wear. Really, at my great age, it is quite frightening being allowed to make decisions for oneself for the first time in one's life.

Although it is something that she has always wanted to do, Florence said that applying to study at degree-level was a big decision. Once she had applied and been accepted onto her degree course, she was worried that she was going to be the oldest person in the class and 'luckily for me I am not'.

Defying her parents' old-fashioned views 'that women should stay at home to look after their husband and children', she has been labelled by them as something of a rebel. She is also making family history, as she is the first person in her family to attend university:

I have always had this thing about education, but my sister and I were not encouraged to stay on at school. My parents' opinion was that you left school, found some sort of employment, met a man and then got married, motherhood followed. To me, it was, well it was, an important need, I wanted to see the bigger world out there because I grew up in this tunnelled environment. Against my parents' wishes, I went to a college where I trained as a secretary, from there I started work as a legal secretary in a local law firm. Once I had saved enough money, I left home and went to London where I worked in a big law firm and trained as a legal executive.

Although her parents eventually acquiesced with regards to her past decisions, Florence admitted that she had never really been happy in her chosen employment. In her mind, it was a means to an end, almost an escape...

Florence said:

... to my family, employment, well, it was a way of making money and meeting eligible men. To my parents' relief I eventually met and married an eligible bachelor who was a fully trained solicitor.

Within a year of her marriage, she was expecting her first baby, and bowing to pressure from her husband and parents, she became a full-time, stay-at-home mother. For her, being a wife and a mother was a bit of a prison sentence:

...when the children come along you lose your identity and your confidence and almost everything else, even the will to live at times. I love my son, but I felt no satisfaction as a mother, only a sense of duty. I guess that is the way I was brought up; being a wife and mother is your duty. To me, it was a prison sentence. I felt at the time, that that the longer you are out of

education and employment, the harder it is for you, as a mother to return. You do feel very thick and stupid - I did anyway. I am a mother, and that is all I am - or was. Nobody sees me as anything different and it is time for that to change. I want to be me, even just a few hours in a day.

In Florence's mind, it was the breakdown of her marriage that gave her the strength to start making her own decisions, decisions not just for herself, but for the children as well.

Florence said that she had always enjoyed going to school and that as a child she can remember constantly asking questions that exasperated her parents. She felt quite sad that no matter how hard she had tried to engage her parents in her achievements, they were never interested. They occasionally listened politely and then changed the subject. Florence said in her upper-class diction:

When my ex-husband left us – me, for someone else, I felt a sense of shame, embarrassment and loss. I also felt for the first time in my life that I was going to be my own person, no parents or husband controlling me. Prior to that, I was stuck at home with the children and I was beginning to feel more and more demoralised. As much as I love my children, they are my world; I felt that I had to do something for myself. Returning to education to update my qualification was something that I have always wanted to do. Something for me - for the first time in my life. I do feel that going to university is also for my children's benefit as well as for my own, in a strange sort of way. I feel for the first time in their lives that I am a role model for them.

Florence's accent continued to fluctuate and as she became more relaxed, she spoke confidently about her plans and it was as if her confidence and ability to embrace the world shone through her speech:

Passing the access course was my stepping-stone; it led me to enrol as a mature student on a degree-level course. I am halfway through my first year and I am loving every minute of every day. Life is exciting on a daily basis. I achieved my first first-class mark this week and I was so excited. I do not know why, but I think I should be achieving good grades, better than anyone else, whether it is because I see myself as much older, I don't know.

Florence went on to say that she had always known that there was a different way of life to the one she had been brought up to live – 'as a doormat' and that education provided an 'open door':

and once you step inside you very quickly realise that anything in life is possible. I know that I am capable of studying at this level, it is hard at times as a single mother. I know that I am struggling at times with a guilt

thing, especially concerning the children. I feel that the children must come first, and I want to put my uni work first.

For her, studying for a degree is just the beginning. Until now she feels that she has lived most of her life in the shadow of other people and at times, has felt jealous of their achievements and their freedom:

I feel that I have lived in this box with the lid pushed on so tightly for many years. It is time that I had the confidence to climb out of it. I was always trying to live a life that my parents would approve of. At times, I thought that my whole life was going to pass me by. I never had the chance to travel or do anything exciting when I was younger. Yes, I admit I do get jealous, especially when I hear my ex-husband talking about what he has done and where he has been. I have always felt that I have lived in his shadow. I have never had the opportunity to do what I want to do, never had any freedom, so this degree is my way of trying to become my own person in a way.

Florence went on to say that she is not sure who she is, only that she has a new sense of freedom and has learnt so much about herself as well as the subject that she is studying. As the interview came to a natural close, Florence said:

...I am so fortunate to have this opportunity, if only I had my time over again, although I really do not think anything would change, my parents would never have allowed me to do this.

In a second interview that took place at the end of the first semester of her second year, Florence told me:

The first year for me was a year of confusion. Despite all the changes that was going on in my life it went well, I am really pleased with the results I achieved. However, then came the very long break over the summer and in my case, I lost my new-found identity. I ceased to be a person in my own right, a mature student. I was back being a mother and occasionally a wife...

Florence said that she started the summer full of good intentions, with plans to get ahead by reading some of the books on the next year's reading list, in her words, 'to keep the little grey cells going'. However, the summer went by in a blur and she had not achieved anything that she wanted to because it had been full of 'trials and tribulations'. With her 'posh' accent prominent, she explained that she had had to move to a new house due to the breakdown of her marriage and that her sons had had to move schools:

My life is so complicated and before I realised it, year two was beckoning me and I had not prepared myself for it. I feel that I am struggling with so much at the moment. However, I did well in my first-year results,

surprisingly. I never thought that I would achieve so much. I thought that they would be asking me to leave at the end of the year because I am an idiot.

Florence continued on a positive note, her voice and body language appeared to relax, considering that she had so many external factors in her life that were creating problems and 'do not allow her to escape into her studies'. Ranting a little, Florence said:

As a mature student you must take into considerations all the other aspects of your life, you cannot just pack your bags and leave home to go to university, leaving all your troubles behind you. You must carry on in so many roles a mother primarily, a daughter, an ex-wife and at the bottom of the list a mature student and that is it. It is so hard and at times not fair.

For Florence, it sounded as if nothing had really changed from her first year of studies. She still felt as if she was trying to be everything that everyone else wanted her to be - trying to juggle a home and children, with little or no time for herself or for her studies. Florence went on to say that she was trying to compensate in so many ways, because her marriage had broken down and that the boys had not had much chance to 'come to terms with things':

...I am constantly at their disposal. My boys are inherently selfish; they do make me feel so bad at times. I know that I should make the parameters clearer to my boys, but I do not, and they just expect me to be there all the time. Unfortunately, I know that I feed their need by giving in.

Florence said that at times she felt that she was the child and that they were the parents telling her what to do all the time: 'I know I should make time for them when it suits me, and not when it suits them, but it is hard when you have a heavy feeling of guilt hanging over you'.

Florence's concerns for her children whilst she was studying are very similar to other participants with school-age children and not just single parents. However, overall Florence believes that by studying, she is providing her sons with a good role model:

...in a funny way, although they do not understand it now, but my degree will affect them in the long term, as this is as much for them as it is for me. I know that my studies have helped my eldest with his schoolwork. He sees me sit down to read or write an essay and he comes and joins me to do his homework. I think it is almost a case of well homework isn't that bad, mum is working hard. I am sure it is making him think more, spend more time on his homework. It is setting parameters for them by being a role model.

However, she laments the lack of support she is getting from her own parents:

There are times when I feel that I am struggling with the children and my studies; everything is merging into one and there needs to be more boundaries because I am scrabbling to do everything. Because my family really do not approve of what I am doing, I cannot talk to them, or even hint that I am struggling. Their view is a case of 'oh well what do you expect'. I have no childcare support from my ex-husband, yes, he wants me to do this, because if I can get a good job when I have graduated then he won't have to support us so much financially...

At this point, Florence apologised 'for ranting' and said that 'having someone to talk to has been a relief because studying for this degree is not just for me but for the children as well'. Like some of the other participants, Florence appeared to be battling with her spilt identity.

I interviewed Florence for a third and final time at the beginning of the second semester of her third and final year. This time she looked and sounded relaxed, with an air of self-assurance, her 'posh' accent had all but disappeared. Unlike in the first interview, Florence was dressed in a sweatshirt, jeans and trainers; gone were the accessorised pearls and scarf and in their place was a more casual version, with a rucksack, which fell to the floor. Florence said:

It is so good to have this opportunity to talk to you again; I cannot believe that I am coming to the end of my third year; I think I can say that the third year is so hard, partly due to the realisation that I am almost at the end of my educational journey. Although I would love to continue with my studies and enrol on a masters, finances will not allow that indulgence. I just hope that I am going to get a decent job at the end.

At this point, Florence laughed and said that she feels she is always whinging when we meet:

I think it is because you understand what we are going through as mature students. My life has been put on hold until I finish my dissertation. I know that I have said this before but doing a degree is hard, especially when you have children.

On the one hand, Florence said that finding some form of employment still seemed to be a long way off, but the realisation that it was imminent was causing her some anxiety:

I want to prove a point to my family, because so many of them have said that I am being selfish and indulgent, they are very dismissive of what I have been doing. To me, it has been heart breaking at times, especially when they have a go at me.

Florence reiterated that over the years she had had very little support from her parents and more recently, from her ex-husband:

...there is one problem that I have had; the one thing that I think has held me back and that is that I have had no one to proofread my work for me. My family are still dis-engaged in what I am doing. Their view is that I am selfish and that I am self-indulgent and there is no way that my ex-husband would help me. Sometimes you go blind at the end of proofreading your essay, you read and re-read it and it sounds ok, that is until you get your feedback from the tutor.

Despite the lack of family support, Florence was pleased that she had continued with her degree and not given in to pressure to call a halt to her studies:

For me, the last three years have been an amazing journey. I have learnt to question things. I am much more confident, and I feel that I have freedom and that I have broken away from what I can only describe as a very tunnelled life, constantly being told that this is what you should do, and this is how you should do it. I have in my own way, internally questioned things, about the way I was brought up, but it is not acceptable to question it aloud. My ex would never allow me to question anything anyway. Now I see things in a very different way and my boys will have a very different upbringing to what I had.

#### 6.4 Conclusion.

All three participants in this chapter said that they had had to make role adjustments with partners and in Florence's case both her ex-husband and parents because they found 'it difficult to reconcile the new role of student with existing responsibilities within the family' (Wray, 1997:np). Wray, (1997:np) argues:

The problems experienced in these relationships tend to be generated by the failure of the non-participating partner to come to terms with the inevitable changes in the pattern of the relationship brought about by study patterns determined by such things as essay deadlines, seminar preparation and examination revision.

Studying at degree-level has empowered all three participants to take control of their own lives and make their own decisions rather than be controlled by others. They all speak of freedom from constraints in one form or another. In comparison to other participant interviews, specifically Beth and Florence, it is my opinion that Emilia's narrative lacked emotional content. She appeared very cold and calculated throughout the interview, though this may have been a front and her way of coping with the content of the interview. Although there is more than a twenty-year age gap between Emilia in her thirties and Beth and Florence in their

fifties, the interviews that I conducted with both of them were far more relaxed and, in my opinion, full of emotional content. On the other hand, education has shown Emilia that there is more to life than money, which was her catalyst as a teenager.

## Chapter 7

### 7.0 Introduction.

The five participants that I have included in this fourth and final fieldwork chapter all spoke of the knowledge gained as undergraduates and how it had far exceeded their expectations. As with other participants interviewed, liberation and/or freedom seemed to be key words and were used throughout their interviews. In Kassie and Katie's case this perceived freedom/liberation was from the way they had viewed themselves prior to embarking on their degree. For Habbab, liberation was a 'two-fold' process, while liberation in Sam's view of education took a completely different form. This could be due to his age, because his previous view on education as a 'self-educated and self-made man' was that you did not need an education to be successful. For Sam, in his sixties, education liberated him from the boredom of retirement, providing instead, stimulation and pleasure.

### 7.1 HABBAB.

Habbab is the youngest male participant that I interviewed and he started his life history interview with his arrival in the United Kingdom (UK) as a refugee from the Middle East. He arrived in England in search of refugee status because he already had close family living in this country (mother, sister and her children). He said that when he first arrived in England, he had little or no knowledge of the English language. He grinned and said, 'that was three years, six months and ten days ago'.

As the interview progressed, I was mindful that Habbab hesitated occasionally before he spoke, as if he was searching for the correct terminology or language to use:

I wanted to learn English as soon as I arrived in England, I enrolled and attended an English language class three or four times a week at the local college. The classes were designed to help me and other foreigners who had come to this country to work to learn English, they were very good and helped me a lot.

Pausing, Habbab apologised and said that he does not always pronounce some English words correctly:



There are not that many Arab people living here, so I am forced to speak English if I want to (Habbab hesitated and looked at me before saying) comm mmm I think I mean communicate, is that ok? I try to improve my spoken English by speaking English as much as possible. I have made English friends who have helped me quite a lot. They have also helped me to develop an accent as well as understand the different regional accents that are spoken here like Welsh and Scottish. It is my experience living here in England that people from Wales and Scotland talk very fast. I sometimes have some problems understanding every word that they say when they speak to me.

Habbab asked me what I wanted him to talk about. I explained that the interview was about his life history and therefore, that it was his decision:

I have family living here in England, my sister was born in England and she is a British citizen. She lives here in England to avoid the troubles in our war-torn homeland. My mother is also here, she arrived in England just before me and she is here to help my sister who has just had twin babies.

Apart from joining his mother and sister here in England because of the civil unrest in his country, Habbab said that his grandparents wanted him to continue with the family tradition of studying at an English university:

The reason that I came to the UK, was to work and study. Well actually, it was to study, but you must work here to be able to afford to study. You cannot study in this country without working. It is considered in my country that the UK has the best educational system and is the best place to study and gain a degree in the world. An English degree is recognised anywhere in the world, and it will look good on my CV.

Habbab paused and then continued in a very proud voice:

My family have a history of studying in the UK. My sister was born here in London when my father was a student here. Both my grandfather and my grandmother studied at university here in England and so did my father and my older brother. We have always had family living and studying here in England through the years and then returning to our country when their studies have been completed. I knew from a very early age that I would study here in England. My grandfather and my father studied engineering. My father studied in London and then went to Newcastle to do his Master's in mechanical engineering. My older brother studied computing when he lived in England and is now studying for a master's degree in the US.

Habbab went on to say that it had taken him over two years to gain refugee status to join his mother, sister and her children here in England. By the time he arrived, he was eighteen years old and considered too old to go to school here:

When I arrived, it was very confusing. I was told that if I wanted to go to university, I would need to study A-levels. I went to a college that taught A-levels and they would not accept me as they said I was too old to study. It

happened for the best though, as I then went back to the college where I was learning English as a second language and they accepted me to study for my GCSE's in Maths and English. I also started to study extra English lessons in the ESOL classes which helped me a lot with both my spoken and written English as well as improving my confidence.

Habbab asked me if I wanted to know anything about going to school in his own country. I considered my reply carefully to avoid offense: I did not want to offend him by saying no, nor did I want to encourage him to talk about a period in his life that may have been difficult or painful. After careful consideration I said, 'I will leave the decision to you to talk about whatever you want to, as this is your life history interview'. There was a long silence before Habbab said:

School had many interruptions, and when my mother came to England to help my sister, my grandparents who I lived with at the time were concerned for my safety. The high school curriculum in my country included studying local dialects as well as English, although I personally did not have the opportunity to study English at school. We also studied normal things like geography, history and maths a little science, but we did not have science laboratories to use like here in England.

Whilst he spoke about his educational experiences in his own country, Habbab's body language was stiff and his speech was stilted. Changing the subject rather abruptly, Habbab said that it was very important to him and his family that he had some form of paid employment whilst he studied:

When I arrived in England to find work, I used an employment agency, which is near to where I live. They knew I wanted to learn English and be able to study at the same time. They found me full-time work when I arrived and now that I am a full-time university student I work part-time. I have worked with the same employment agency now for over two and a half years. They know that I am reliable and a good timekeeper and that I need to work

Habbab said: 'I researched several courses at a number of different universities around the country', but, 'my family must come first', and once he had started to narrow down the search he chose to study locally:

The college that I had been learning English suggested that I contact the local university for information about the course that I was interested in. The staff at the college were helpful and gave me the name and the telephone number of the person that I should speak to. When I first spoke to the guy on the telephone, I found him difficult to understand, I thought that maybe because of his accent that he was Asian; instead when I met him in person, I found out that he came from Wales.

Habbab continued to talk about his interview with what he described as the 'Welsh professor':

When I first walked into the university, I felt very nervous. Once the interview was over, I decided that it was an interesting experience. I think I learnt a lot from the interview, especially from the questions that I was asked by the professor. At times, I had to concentrate very hard on the questions that he asked me because he spoke very quickly. My first impression of the university was not what I expected, although, I am not sure what I expected. I think I had imagined that it would be a bigger, older maybe and that it would be more formal. I also thought that talking to a professor face-to-face would be more daunting than it was.

Habbab spoke enthusiastically about his experience:

... my experiences at this university have been very interesting. I have learned a lot in my first year. There are some quite interesting people here. The tutors are very motivating people and very passionate about what they teach. They are equally passionate about their students and you can learn a lot from them, if you want to. When they see that, you as a student, are willing to learn they will do anything that they can to help you. If someone is not working to their expected standard, then they try to help them, but if the students do not help themselves then there is not anything that the tutors can do about it.

Habbab said that he did not think that he had had any problems with his English, although the academic terminology was difficult to understand at times:

I think it is hard to understand even for an English student. I think I would have difficulty even in my own language at the beginning. One of the lecturers focuses specifically on helping us to understand the academic terms.

Habbab emphasised that the lecturers were very helpful, patient and understanding with him, as he was always asking questions. He said that the cohort was very diverse and that some students never asked questions, which he interpreted as a lack of commitment to learning:

There are some students in my group who are employed, and their work is paying for their tuition fees, many of them do not seem very keen to learn. If I had a job and my employer said go and do a degree, I would work twice as hard for the opportunity. I would dedicate most of my time to do it. I did not mean to be rude or ungrateful about the other students; many of them have helped me to understand things that I have found difficult.

Changing the subject to the completion of assignments, exams and revision strategies, Habbab told me:

I do find reading quite hard because I get distracted easily. I read for a short period of time, then change my focus to something else and then I go back to reading my books and then I read some more. I find that I learn more that way, working in short bursts. I am reading as much as I can, not only to improve my English, but to ensure that I pass my written assignments and exams. I have been downloading books from the

computer about the different subjects that I am studying, because I do not like reading from a computer screen. Some of the others in my group do not like books, whereas I prefer a book to hold, something that I can highlight the important paragraphs with colours as well as making notes. I have also been using stickers on pages to remind me of paragraphs of interest in the books that I have read.

He said that he was scared of failing the end of year exams even though he had devised an extensive revision timetable and spoke of his hopes and plans:

I would like to get a high mark, but I will be happy with whatever I achieve as long as I pass. I will wait for the results. I have taken a week off from everything, from work and my studies. I want to be prepared for the next academic year, so I have asked my tutors if they can let me have the new reading list. I miss my studies already - I feel a little lost and I am really looking forward to going back to university and my second year. I want to get ahead in my studies over the summer, this first year was hard for me and I think that next year will be harder still. I think it will be quite demanding and I do not want to start next year unprepared.

Habbab was deeply appreciative of the English university system and had already decided that he would like to continue his studies and study at master's level 'that is, providing I make the grades'. He said:

My brother, who is studying for a master's degree in computing science in America, says that I am lucky, because in his university he is just a number. My brother also says that I am lucky to be able to study in small classes, and that the lecturers can hear you; they know your name and they listen to your questions. I want to stay here in this university and progress, continue my studies and do a master's degree.

For Habbab, studying at degree level had not been as easy as he thought it would be:

I found that I did not understand as much English in the lectures as I thought I would. That is why I want to ensure that I am ahead with my reading during the summer holidays, as I do not want to feel at a disadvantage during my second year.

I met Habbab a year later and he said that his family were very proud of him because he had passed everything first time. He felt that he was progressing well with his studies and that he was now surprisingly, thinking in English first during the lectures rather than translating in his head from his home language. Habbab also mentioned that he was looking at his options to study at master's level although he was considering 'taking a year out to work full time' to ensure that he had sufficient funds to continue with his studies. He had decided to look at universities that were a little further away from his home, but close enough to

be able to continue living with and helping to support, his mother and sister as much as his studies allowed him to.

## 7.2 ISAAC.

Isaac had been employed as a civil servant for all his working life and as part of the government's widening participation programme, had been encouraged by his employers, the Ministry of Defence, to update and improve his qualifications. He was in his late forties and was married with two school age children. As with other participants, he was the only member of his family to study at degree level.

Isaac started his new educational journey approximately five years before the interview, when he was part of a group of mature students who enrolled on a Bridge to Higher Education programme at their local college. The Bridge to Higher Education was an eight-week course aimed at mature learners who were considering returning to education to update their qualifications. The course offered those students attending an opportunity to increase their understanding of research and improve and finely hone their study skills prior to enrolling on either an Access to Higher Education Diploma Course or applying directly to a university to study at degree level.

Isaac said that from the outset of attending the Bridge to Higher Education course he felt that that he was a demanding albeit somewhat reluctant student. He felt that he was constantly asking questions, wanting to know the 'why' and the 'what if'. He went on to explain that when his employers had initially suggested to him and other members of his team that there was an opportunity for them to update their educational qualifications, he said that he had been concerned about taking on another obligation. This concern was not only due to his heavy work commitments but also because he was already struggling to find a balance between spending time with his wife and young family and his work commitments. Isaac said that at the time, the project he had been working on had overrun on budget as well as timescale and that he was struggling to keep on top of his work responsibilities, let alone spend quality time with his wife and young children. The last thing that he really wanted to do was to increase the pressure on himself as well as his family, by attending an evening class. However,

it was something that I had always wanted to do - just not at that time. ...on reflection, once I had started the Bridge course, I enjoyed the experience, far more than I had expected to. I was also surprised to feel at a loss when the course finished, it was for me the beginning of what I call my educational journey.

It was because Isaac had achieved a distinction on the FdA that he decided to negotiate with his employers a reduction in his working hours to allow him to study full-time and convert his FdA to a full BA (Hons) degree whilst working part-time. Isaac paused, before saying that immediately prior to our interview, he had just received notification of his last assignment results, which confirmed that he would graduate with a first-class honours classification.

Comparing his degree results with his secondary education results, he said:

There were elements of comprehensive school that I really enjoyed, like Music, Maths and Physics. I hated other subjects with a vengeance, such as English and Physical Education. At the time, I took ten CSE exams and four O-levels. I failed miserably at exams and only managed to achieve a Grade 4 CSE in English. [Silence] ...my English result has proved to be the biggest barrier for me in so many ways over years.

Isaac was 'born and bred in the North East of England' and his father had been a staunch unionist and had worked underground in a colmine all his life. His parents had no formal education qualifications and his father was adamant that he wanted his son Isaac to study computing at his local college rather than follow him down the mines. He said that his father considered computing to be the 'in thing' to study and was convinced that studying computing was the way forward if you wanted to do 'something with your life':

My dad was adamant that he did not want me to work as a labourer on a building site, down a pit, or in the shipyards, let alone in a dead-end job on a production line in a factory like so many generations of our family had before him. My father was ambitious for me, he was not prepared for me to follow in his footsteps, and he wanted me to be the first one in the family to break away from family tradition and continue with my education and go to college. He wanted what he thought was best for me, although I did not necessarily agree with him at the time.

Isaac described how he had attended an open event at the local college (albeit reluctantly) with his father and to his father's disappointment, the local college demanded an A-grade in English Language to enrol on a computing course. Isaac

said that his father was devastated that his 'grade 4 CSE English qualification' had precluded him from studying computing. However, in retrospect, Isaac considers himself fortunate, as the college offered him an alternative place on a three-year full-time Business and Technology Education Council (BTEC) course in electrical engineering, which was fully funded by the Local Authority. The electrical engineering course included an Ordinary National Diploma (OND) in Telecommunications, as well as a Maritime Radio General Certificate (Ships Radio Officer Licence). Isaac recalls that once he had completed the BTEC course, he continued to study at the college to gain a Higher National Certificate (HNC) in electrical engineering, which was also funded by the Local Authority.

However, on completion of the HNC course, Isaac discovered that although he had good post-secondary qualifications, employment in the area where he lived was scarce:

...unemployment was the norm in the mid-1980s and I spent well over a year on the dole. I was unable to find work anywhere, I trudged around the job centres in the area as well as scouring newspapers looking for and applying for every vacancy that came my way, but to no avail. My father was adamant that he did not want me to give up the search for a meaningful job and not waste my hard-earned qualifications. He did not want me to resort to working on the factory floor or even worse, labouring down the pit or in the shipyards.

Isaac said that despite his lack of success at securing a job, his father was convinced that there was employment out there somewhere:

As time marched on and feeling rather despondent about my lack of success in finding employment locally, I decided to widen the search area for suitable employment and started to apply for vacancies further and further afield from my beloved Tyneside. Most of the employment applications I made were written by hand, in the form of a hand-written letter and posted via the Royal Mail to prospective employers.

Isaac said that the only time that he had left his hometown was on a day trip to the seaside. It was a life changing decision for him to apply for employment in other parts of the country, a decision encouraged by his father, although his mother was not too happy. Against all odds, he received two offers of employment on the same day in the post, situated in two different parts of the country. The first offer of employment was in Bedfordshire, and the second offer was for a job that he had applied for weeks or even months before, in Gloucestershire:

Without any thought or hesitation but with a feeling of relief, I accepted the vacancy in Bedfordshire because it was the closest to my home in

Tyneside, although, it was still over 230 miles away! Feeling rather scared and somewhat apprehensive I travelled south by train with only a suitcase full of my belongings to my name.

Describing how he had never been away from home before, let alone without his parents, Isaac said:

I found myself employed as a public sector civil servant working for the Ministry of Defence and living in what I thought at the time to be in the deep south. To me, leaving my family, friends and my beloved Tyneside was a wrench; I may as well have landed on the moon for all I cared - it certainly felt like it to me at the time.

Isaac paused before he said:

Although, I have changed jobs and relocated to different parts of the country several times, I have now been with the same firm for almost thirty years. I do not regret my decision to search for employment away from what was then my home in the north. However, I still have the occasional feeling of homesickness for the North even after all this time.

Isaac said that it did not take him very long to settle into the routine of employment and his new way of life, although initially he went home to his parents on the train as often as he could afford to.

With what he called 'ambition and competitiveness' instilled in him by his father Isaac said that to gain promotion he had to apply for posts in other military installations across the country, which meant moving from one military installation to another. Although he occasionally hankered after his former home in Tyneside, Isaac has remained devoted to his work in the south of England, returning home to Tyneside intermittently for high days and holidays, and has been rewarded with promotion:

In the last twenty odd years, I have moved around the south of the country from one government installation to another. By doing so, I have managed to work my way up the promotional system. Up until ten years ago, promotion prospects in the communications arena were good. However, technical advancements were being made on an almost daily basis; these advancements were making the communications work force smaller and in less demand. At this point, I thought that I would diversify into something different, but I wanted to stay at the same location.

With a wife and a family to support, Isaac said that he has remained employed at same military establishment for several years, this time applying for and obtaining promotion by changing direction in the work place:



Following a large communications project, which I was running, I was fortunate to diversify and relocate into the civil engineering department. This was a radical change for me and a long way from my normal work in communications. At the time of the transfer, I obviously had significant transferable skills; however, the pressure to perform was more prevalent than ever.

Isaac recalled how his employers approached him with a proposal to update his educational qualifications almost immediately following his interdepartmental transfer. This was a decision that put him under additional pressure both at home and in the workplace:

Within a short period of starting in the new position, it became apparent to me that many of my co-workers were either signing up for or were already attending further educational progressive routes. At this point I thought that if my employer was willing to pay for me to study for a degree then I would be crazy not to grab the opportunity to better myself, if only to remain competitive with my colleagues around me. Although the department was under pressure, pressure to perform and complete projects on time, a work colleague and friend was also contemplating signing up for a degree and once the opportunity was offered, between ourselves, we talked each other into signing up. The discussion with my colleague was the little push that I think we both needed to start our return to education. For me, it came sooner than I had hoped or planned. However, once I had started the process there was no turning back.

In the initial stages, Isaac had many doubts about his ability to study at degree level and about whether he would cope with the large amount of reading and essay writing that he thought studying at this level demanded. Because he questioned his ability, Isaac decided that the best route was for him to take things one step at a time. As he was sponsored by his employers, Isaac chose to enrol on an eight-week Bridge to Higher Education course, which he followed with a two-year full-time Foundation Degree, (FdA) and then a one-year full-time progression route to attain a Bachelor of Science (BSc) degree. Isaac said:

At the beginning of my educational journey I found that once I had started the studying, I enjoyed the experience so much that I felt that there was no turning back. I just concentrated on the problem at hand, which was passing each assignment and exam during each semester. At times, I was full of self-doubt and to be quite honest a bit scared, even though I had completed the Bridge to Higher Education course. I was however, determined at the very beginning to do my absolute best, as it was highly unlikely that I would get a second chance to do something like this again.

He went on to talk rather animatedly, about how he had developed a firm friendship with several other mature students that he had met, which he was sure would continue beyond graduation. He described in detail how spurring each

other on throughout the lectures and the pressures they felt when completing assignments and sitting exams, was part of the camaraderie. He spoke of the great sense of relief once all the assignments were completed and the results published, and a sense of reprieve when the results came out. Isaac said:

I felt at times that my interpretation of the question was sometimes different from some of my classmates. I was often concerned that I could have interpreted the question incorrectly. Fortunately, my interpretation was sound most of the time.

Isaac chose to update his educational qualifications for several reasons: apart from the fact that his employers were willing to sponsor him, he also had a very strong sense of competitiveness, which he felt that his father had instilled in him:

Firstly, it was peer pressure; I felt that I really did not want to fall behind my work colleagues in educational attainments, many of them, younger than me; either had a degree already or were in the process of studying for one as part of the government widening participation initiative. Secondly, even at my age, I have always wanted to prove to myself, prove that I was smart enough to get a degree.

The completion of the BSc progression route has changed his promotion and career prospects, and, he says, it has also changed his life as he has achieved far more educationally than he had initially considered possible. Prior to attaining his degree, Isaac felt that he had a strong sense of personal identity but did not feel that he had a corresponding social identity in the workplace, which he considers in hindsight, was due to his lack of formal qualifications. Thus, studying for a degree had not only improved his employment prospects and status but given him a stronger sense of a social self:

...studying for a degree has improved my employment prospects considerably. Although the remuneration packages that are on offer to graduate entrants into the civil service is typically a lot less than my current salary. It is the status of having a degree that matters to me. I truly believe that the university experience has given me an inner strength and confidence and changed my perspective on how I view the world, this in turn has helped to build my confidence. Interestingly, I feel that others interact with me differently in the workplace and I think this is because of my higher academic status.

When Isaac and I met for a further interview, he told me that he had recently been nominated and awarded by the HEI as the 'best professional student - for my hard work, visible progression and excellent dissertation'. He went on to say that his research project (dissertation) was work-related and the results had had an impact within the workplace. His employers had also nominated him for a prestigious

global award, which he was subsequently awarded at a ceremony in Washington DC. His employers' view is that his research findings will save them millions of pounds globally and Isaac was immensely proud of this:

...I am convinced that it is the results of my dissertation research project that has made a difference to me on both a professional and personal level. When I chose the research project, it was a very relevant topic within my workplace. How was I to know that my employers would consider adopting the results not only at local level, but also on a worldwide basis? I was just trying to do my job to the best of my ability. If you are determined in life, then nothing is insurmountable.

On a personal level, his employment achievements have been recognised and he has been invited to the Queen's Royal Garden Party at Buckingham Palace where he was introduced to the Queen:

It seemed as if it was one celebration after another. No sooner had I attended the Queen's Royal Garden Party at Buckingham Palace, I was duly informed that I had once again been nominated and had won for the second year running the same prestigious award that I had won the previous year, for a further piece of work that I had completed.

Isaac said he would like to continue with his education and that he was disappointed that there was no funding available to study at master's level:

Although at this moment in time, there is currently no funding available to pursue any personal higher qualifications. I hope that this may change in the future, as I would like to progress further up the academic ladder. ...I think you will agree that it has been an amazing journey for me and I cannot wait to see what happens next. I think that I should write my memoirs, as I am sure it would make a good book and a movie...

There was a moment of silence and then Isaac added:

From penniless humble beginnings on a deprived council estate in the North East to sipping tea with the Queen as well as being presented in the White House with a prestigious energy reduction award – not bad for a miner's son.

### 7.3 KASSIE.

Kassie is tall, almost six feet in height, slim and elegant, with long wavy hair, which was loose at the time of the interview. However, halfway through the interview she tied it up in a ponytail, which flicked around occasionally whenever she moved her head. Kassie laughed as she said that she is biologically in her late forties, but not mentally: studying for a degree had given her more energy and made her feel

very much younger 'apart from when I am stressed out with assignment deadlines'.

Kassie is a single mother with three daughters with a very large age gap between her middle and youngest daughter. At the time, the youngest was at primary school and her two oldest daughters who are only two years apart were both employed. Kassie said that she felt quite fortunate that both her older daughters would encourage her to experiment with the latest fashion trends and did not mind if she occasionally borrowed their clothes, as they often helped themselves to things that they liked out of her wardrobe.

Kassie was studying for a combined honours degree in social sciences and was coming to the end of the first year. Although a single parent, she felt fortunate because her two oldest girls took an enormous amount of pressure away from her, looking after their sister, especially when assignment and exam deadlines were looming.

She described her school days as 'complicated and not straightforward':

I have a bit of a history, when I first started school; I lived in Wales and went to a 'free learning school'. I then moved at the age of eleven to a massive comprehensive school in South Wales and because I had had so many infections in my ears, my hearing has been damaged, which gave me problems at school at times.

She recalled how at the age of twelve she moved from her home in South Wales to the other side of the country, because it was discovered that she had been abused from an early age. According to Kassie, the move was a huge culture shock for everyone:

The new school was very different; the education system when I moved here was a three-tier system and the school that I was enrolled in was a very small in comparison to the large comprehensive school in Wales. It was also a completely different style of education from what I had been used to. Coming from Wales, my accent was different, and I think that I was bullied because I sounded different from everyone else. I spent most of my time hiding in the toilets and the library, anywhere that I get away from the girls that were bullying me. That really dented my confidence and from then on, I could not wait to leave school; although I always had a feeling that I could do better, if only I could start again.

Saying nothing more about her secondary school experiences, she went on to describe her working life, which, she said, was 'as much as a disaster, as my education':

I left school at sixteen and started a hairdressing qualification at the local college, because the careers lady at school told me that I would be good at it as I had an artistic flair. It was not the right thing for me, so I transferred to a secretarial course at the same college. Once I had completed and passed, I found work as a secretary. Looking back, I still did not consider that I had found my niche. It was so boring at times that I felt that I would rather eat sawdust.

Kassie said, 'ugh, all this reflection makes me sound like a spoilt child, never content'. She smiled and assured me that things did improve:

...I decided to change direction again and started to work as an auxiliary nurse at the local hospital; I loved the work and stayed for the next ten years or so. I worked in several different departments, which included the mental health department as well as occupational therapy.

Marriage and the birth of two babies in close succession put financial constraints on the family, so Kassie decided to return to work. She continued to work for the same company for the next fifteen years until she was made redundant. During this period of her life, Kassie 'stepped in and out of education' attending evening classes and enjoying the learning experience:

Looking back, I felt as an adult student, I had come into my own. I felt that I could really achieve something. It was this feeling of contented satisfaction that made me think that redundancy was going to be a life-changer for me. I decided that I was not going to pick up what I considered was another dead-end job. I was going to make the most of the opportunity of being made redundant. I still have those same thoughts and feelings when I walk through the doors of the university now as I experienced all those years ago. This time though, I feel that I have a sense of purpose and that is to complete my undergraduate degree and I want to go on and train as a teacher – that is my aim and my long-term goal.

Kassie said education as a mature student has been a very personal journey, 'almost a liberation of my mind and soul', and that she felt that she was only just beginning to find out who she is:

I am single parent in quite a diverse household of women and it can be very hormonal at times. It is ironic, but I think that education is for me a very personal journey as well as an educational one. My daughters are really proud of me, but they do not understand the pressures that I am under especially around assignment hand-in dates and exams, but they support me. They look after my youngest daughter as much as they can to free me up to read, write or revise. It is a good thing for them to see me study and to know that you are never too old to go back to education and that it is

never too late to learn something new. So, with exams and essays yes, I have been really stressed – there have been a few tears, and I will be honest, I know that with me, it is as always, a confidence thing.

Kassie went on to say that returning to education has affected all areas of her life in a positive way. She feels that she has finally conquered her past, and that she is now free from the many nightmares that her experiences seemed to have left her with. Living alone as a single parent with three daughters, Kassie said, 'education has not only given me knowledge, it has also given me the strength and understanding to identify these areas of my life as garbage and I am slowly moving on'. A long silence followed before Kassie added:

I feel that all the things that I have experienced, well, they all add up. There have been times when I have found it hard to shake off thirty years of crap and start anew. However, this degree course has increased and improved my confidence and my self-esteem as well as improving many other areas of my life. I feel that I am slowly shaking off not just the abuse that I have experienced in my life, but it is also addressing my low self-confidence and self-esteem. I now have the strength to stand up for myself and I will not let myself be bullied or taken advantage of anymore. I stop and think and say no, I can't do that, it won't work for me, I feel that I have become so confident in so many ways. I have erected barriers in my life that I would never have considered before. I am not so readily available, if someone rings up and says can you come and give me a hand, I now feel that I can say no, but I can help another time that is convenient to me.

Kassie compared returning to education to a 'mid-life crisis':

...if studying for an undergraduate degree is like having a 'mid-life' crisis then I am happy to concede that that is what I am going through – a mid-life crisis and I love every minute of it.

She laughed and said that she feels that studying for a degree has given her so much confidence in herself, that somehow, she feels that it has also lifted an enormous weight off her shoulders and for the first time in her life, she feels that she is her own person and...

...I feel that I have always been someone else and never just me, my own person. I have always been a mother, a wife and a daughter. I think because of what I have gone through in my life, my own mother would say that sometimes in the past I have been a needy daughter as well.

She hesitated, before she continued:

This degree has made me realise that this is my life and not anybody else's. By studying for a degree, I am not offending anyone, not hurting anyone; I can do what I want, when I want within reason of course. Education has shown me that there is a very different role out there for me.

Moving on to assignments and exams, Kassie said that her cohort were feeling the strain of looming assignment 'hand-in' dates and exams:

...as mature students, I feel that the assignment hand-in dates affect every part of our lives, not just in the classroom but within our home-life as well. I manage my time very carefully to achieve good results and that this is part of the learning curve. I feel that I am growing on a weekly basis, not only as a person but as a mother as well. I am growing in confidence and self-esteem; I am sure that I can do this degree and do it well. For the first time I feel that I can really achieve something with my life. I think that it is your confidence that affects your performance, and for me it is having the confidence to let go of all the garbage that has been stored inside me for what seems to be ever.

Just over a year later, I met Kassie for a follow-up Interview when she was in the second semester of her second year. She seemed genuinely pleased to take the time to talk to me again. She said:

...is it really a year since we last met. It has been an eventful year in so many ways. I feel so pleased with myself as I have managed to pass all the assignments and the exams with no resits and I want to ensure that I keep that momentum going.

Pausing, Kassie then said:

Well, where shall I start? I feel content; I think that this is mainly because I have very little time to myself, as my studies are all consuming. I am pleased, that having left school with zero qualifications when I finish this degree, I will have the initials BSc to put after my name to show for my three years of hard work. I feel that I am really beginning to achieve something with my life. Although, this second year of study has been quite hard, it has been a very steep learning curve and I have had to prioritise my time carefully. My girls will always come first and then my studies, which leaves me with little or no time for myself.

Kassie laughed and said because of the heavy workload that the second year has sprung on them, 'I think that nearly all my family and friends think that I have become something of a recluse':

Most of my friends understand to a point, but I have said this to so many people that this is my degree; I will never have the opportunity to prove myself educationally in this way again. Therefore, I have had to prioritise my time and myself carefully, which is no mean feat as a single mother.

In the last year, Kassie said that she has had to deal with so much in her home life that she is surprised that she has managed to continue with her studies as well as pass all her assignments and exams first time. She said again that having the

opportunity to study as a mature student has increased her confidence and inner strength in so many ways:

...mmm, I think that I have said this before, but I do feel that studying at this level has increased my self-confidence and self-esteem. The other thing is that this degree has given me a greater understanding of my inner self. I am now aware just how strong a person I am, not physically but mentally. Over the years, I have sought counselling and as a Christian, I pray even harder and more directly about my fears [Silence]. At the end of the day, I do feel that it is studying for a degree that has given me the most strength and understanding of who I am and what I can achieve.

Kassie reflected on what it was about higher education that gives many mature students the strength to achieve as well as the ability to cope with their hectic home life on a day-to-day basis:

If you had told me at the beginning of the course that, I would not only cope with my studies as well as support family members through major surgery, who in normal circumstances would have had to support me, I would probably have laughed aloud. I am amazed that I have not only coped I have somehow, not sure how, supported others. I feel that I have managed my time effectively and put in coping mechanisms to not only succeed with my studies, but also cope with everything else that life has thrown at me. [Silence] In hindsight, having come from a background in which I was abused as a child, beaten and emotionally abused as a wife, I consider that as a person, I am doing well. My confidence and self-esteem seem to improve daily.

Laughing, she said that the rest of her cohort view her as something of a mediator in the group:

...as a group, we are quite close and in general, we all get on well together. We all support each other through our studies as well as our private lives and there have been occasions when life has got the better of one or the other of us. Stress makes us snappy with each other, but the group have realised that I am a pretty good mediator. Our biggest problem has been the assignment hand-in dates and the fact that all the assignments both last Christmas and this Christmas seem to have the same submission date. Most of the cohort are mature students, and the hand-in dates are a major factor that increases our stress levels. I have to start work on the assignments early and instead of bottling everything up and feeling all alone, I now communicate with my peers and my tutors more openly. I have now learnt to my benefit that communication is a key to coping.

#### 7.4 KATIE.

Katie describes herself first and foremost as a military wife. She arrived somewhat flustered for her life history interview because she thought that she was running



late. She has two teenage children who attended a local boarding school to ensure that their education was not disrupted too much by their father's military service requirements of postings every two or three years. Katie was elegantly turned out in a little black dress topped with a vivid red jacket and shoes, with full make-up, red lipstick and long, red, manicured nails to match. She explained that she had come into the university that afternoon to attend a seminar and the life history interview with me and then she was going straight to the Officer's mess for an early cocktail party. She said:

As a military wife, we move on a regular basis due to my husband's work commitments. There have been times when I am alone with the children for months on end as my husband is on secondment abroad or on military exercises somewhere. We therefore decided to ensure that our children's education remained stable and enrolled them as full-time boarders for continuity. My youngest child started boarding school two years ago when I started my degree course.

Katie moved the subject away from life as a military wife to reminiscing about her past. For Katie, school/education was boring and not something, that she recalls enjoying at the time. On leaving school she trained and then worked as a hairdresser right up until the birth of her second child:

My journey into education really began when my son was in the reception class at primary school. I quite liked going into the school as a parent helper to listen to the children as they learnt to read. I thought to myself, I quite like this and was quite fortunate that the school asked me if I had the time to go into school and help on a regular basis. This opportunity led me to being employed by the school as a Teaching Assistant (T.A) which continued for 7 or 8 years.

Once again on the move due to her husband's military commitments, in their next posting she was fortunate not only to be offered a T.A. position in a military school but was also given the opportunity to train as a higher teaching assistant, which she accepted. It was at this point that she knew that her husband's military commitments would be reasonably stable for the next three to four years:

I began to think, rather than accept the higher assistant training role that I had been offered, why not look at studying for a degree and train as a teacher whilst I had the chance of a stable home life. [silence] When I initially enquired about updating my qualifications, I was asked how long it is since I had been in education, and at the age of forty something, it was quite a considerable amount of time. So, it was suggested that I enrol on a Bridging to Higher Education course, to give me some sort of study skills and get me back into studying. I had already recently completed and passed an Adult Teaching Certificate, which gave me sufficient UCAS

points to enrol straight onto a degree course without going via the Access route. So, I signed up for the Bridge course. I realised at the very beginning that this was a much higher step than I had anticipated and that my academic skills were quite appalling. The bridging course was a massive learning curve. I have never ever been so stressed in all my life, not even when my husband was serving in Afghanistan.

There was a further period of silence before she said:

...I found the whole experience of returning to education nerve-wracking. Over the last three years of studying for this degree there has been many up and many downs, probably more downs than ups. ... umm, I kept thinking, next year, it will be easier. I will get the hang of writing essays and researching stuff. Nevertheless, I have muddled my way through and I have passed each semester with a few resits.

At this point Katie smiled and in a confident voice said:

The last year has not been any easier, but it has been more enjoyable, I have passed everything first time, I think it is because the units that I am studying seem to relate more to my subject knowledge. As I was progressing, something seemed to click. The tutors were supportive, and I began to think I would enjoy doing this, maybe I could teach Access students. Although my initial plan was to go onto primary school teaching, I was beginning to think that I could be of more use teaching mature students like myself, or those coming into college from school.

As a military wife, a mother as well as a mature student, Katie said that the last three years had been a traumatic experience:

One of the problematic areas that I have experienced since I started this degree is that as a military wife, I have had to deal with my husband going away for long periods of time on deployment to Afghanistan. This has been stressful, not just for me but for my children as well; I feel that I have been a single parent for months on end. Because of the circumstances, both children needed my support more and more, which, on reflection, is no different to the other single parents that I have been studying with. I was just experiencing part-time what they have been experiencing on a full-time basis. Most of them are of a similar age to me, in their forties; we just support each other, on a personal basis as well as throughout the degree process.

Though her husband has been deployed away from home on two separate occasions whilst she has been studying, he has still been supportive throughout her studies:

... I think it is because I have supported him and his career over the last twenty years. I have travelled extensively around the world as a loyal military wife without question. Now it has been his turn to listen to me rant when I did not understand stuff, wiped away my tears when I have failed as well as proofread all my essays. I have even sent him my essays in an

email whilst he was serving in Afghanistan; I feel that I am very fortunate to have had his support regardless.

Reflecting on her final year of study, Katie said:

I feel that I have managed to conquer all those little sticky hurdles; I do not feel so embarrassed by my grammar, or my sentence structure or even the lack of them. I consider that if you have an understanding tutor and you learn from the feedback on your assignments that you can achieve regardless. It may be a long hard struggle, but it is worth it in the end. I am now beginning to think that I am not that bad at this.

Katie told me that because of her previous insecurities she would never have agreed to have taken part in this research study in her first and probably not even in her second year of study, and that it was only now in her third and final year that she realised she would graduate. She said she could not believe how much she had changed and how much her self-confidence and self-esteem had grown:

In the beginning, I really did not think that I could do it, all I wanted to do was pass, pass each assignment and every exam. For me, it has been a huge success story. I feel that I have been very competent in my presentations and this has helped to increase my confidence, not only in myself but also in my ability to learn and impart knowledge to others. I feel at times that I have conquered all, I still have my moments, but I now know my strengths. I have realised that confidence in yourself and your ability is one of those things that only you can recognise. To be honest, studying at degree level has increased my confidence enormously and providing you put the hours required into your studies, you will reap the rewards. You really must work at your studies and in my view as a mature student; we must work harder than the traditional entry students do. I think that it is because our brains are just not used to working academically. I am convinced that if it wasn't for the 'Bridging' course that I attended I would have given up before I had even started, that course opened my eyes and gave me the initial skills that I needed to start to study at degree level.

She continued to talk about her growing self-confidence and self-esteem:

I am a very different person now than when I started my degree. For example, I read different books and newspapers and I have very different opinions that I am no longer afraid to voice. In addition, in the past, I would always go to the Officers' mess with my husband. Now, when he is away on active duty, I do not hesitate to go to functions alone. In my opinion, I interact with people on a different level. I consider that I have something to say, something of interest. I used to chat to other people about general stuff, but now I will get into a debate, hold my own views, and not back down all the time. I am far more confident in my surroundings; like walking into a room alone. I do not feel as if I need my husband by my side all the time the way that I used to. I now feel that I am invited to functions as my own person and not because I am someone's wife.

For Katie studying for a degree has not only increased her confidence in her academic abilities, but also in her personal life as well.

## 7.5 SAM.

In his late sixties, Sam was the oldest participant that I interviewed as part of this research. He said that when he started the course he was 'pleasantly surprised to find that he was not the oldest student in his group by just a few months'. Sam said, with a certain amount of pride in his voice, that he had been married to his wife for over forty years and that they had three grown-up children, as well as grandchildren. His wife had a certificate in teaching but none of his children had studied at degree-level. Sam referred to himself as 'semi-retired' because although he had retired from full-time employment, he enjoyed and was committed to working for, several different charities on a voluntary basis and had done so since his 'forced retirement'. Sam found working as a volunteer a 'worthwhile cause'.

Sam described himself as 'self-educated':

I left school at the age of fifteen in 1964 and went out into the world of work with only one qualification to my name and that was English. I suppose that you could say that I have basically made my own way in the world through my own efforts, energy and enterprise – self-educated. After a lot of hard work, I ended up running not one but two businesses. This is where the 'self-education' bit comes in in as much of what I have learnt was whilst I was running my own business. I have always read a lot and I consider myself to have an enquiring mind, more from a general knowledge point of view. I read a wide variety of books not just fiction; I read autobiographies, biographies and that kind of thing.

Pausing for a brief moment, Sam said:

Well, not being educated, it has never bothered me. To me, it is having that challenge to do well, to do something that I have never had the opportunity to do before. Going to university, well, it was never mentioned by anybody when I was at school, neither parents, teachers or friends. [Pause]. When I left school, the emphasis was to go out and get a job to help your mum with the housekeeping money. I went to school in the east end of London and looking back and reflecting on my life, I suppose I wish that maybe my parents had been a little bit more attentive to what I was doing. Maybe even encourage me to train for career perhaps, rather than expect me to go and find a job that would bring some money into the home. It was a case of get on with it. [Long Silence]. At the time, I am not sure, if there was such a thing as careers advice. Nobody ever said, how about training for this,

that, or what about an apprenticeship. [Pause]. I consider myself to be a practical sort of person, but looking back, I am sure I could have done more with myself had I been encouraged to do so. Perhaps some kind of evening course, or further education course when I left school. But it was never suggested or encouraged, I am not laying any blame - it was after all over fifty years ago.

Sam gave a big sigh and said:

When I left school, I started work as a messenger boy, working in the east end of London. Then I moved into the sales department, which I did not like. I then went to work for a firm of solicitors, in the City of London, which was a disastrous move on my part, as I felt like a square peg in a round hole. The firm itself was so antiquated we had to work all day every day in silence, almost like Bob Cratchit in Dicken's Christmas Carol. We were only allowed to speak when we were spoken to; it was very definitely a "them and us" situation. I hated it.

Sam paused again and said:

At the time, there were more jobs than people, and I was lucky because I was asked if I would manage a business on someone else's behalf, which I did for a few years. [Silence]. Both my father and grandfather had had their own businesses; I have grown up with them as my role models, watching them being their own boss so to speak. In many ways I just wanted to be like my father and grandfather and run my own business. I just wanted to be my own boss.

Sam went on to say that to be his own boss was, to him, one of the most important things in his life. He had been married for a few years when he and his wife decided to move out of London. This move was part of the London overspill which was created as part of the government policy of rehoming residents from Greater London into other parts of the country. It gave Sam the opportunity to run his own business and be his own boss, as well as give their children the opportunity to grow up in a rural area outside of London:

When I was thirty-five, I was married with three young children all under the age of five, when my wife and I decided to buy a village shop. We managed this business between us but unfortunately, we did not make enough money to make it work. [Silence]. To cut a long story short, we sold the shop and a few months later I went into partnership with a friend and for the last twenty-odd years, I have been supplying and fitting parquet flooring. Regrettably, the recent recession hit the business hard and my employees were earning more than I was, so I thought it was time to pay everyone off and retire rather than keep losing money.

Retirement was not something that Sam or his wife had prepared for. Sam said that if it wasn't for the recession, he had planned to continue 'to work until he dropped'. Once he had been forced into early retirement, he looked around for

things to keep himself occupied, which is how he became involved in volunteering. He said that missed his business and to keep his mind occupied, he embarked on an Open University Access course:

...a couple of years ago, I did, an access course with the Open University, which fuelled my interest in English and History. I then looked around on the internet and saw advertised an IGCSE course, which was free and designed for those who had left school at the age of sixteen and who had not achieved a grade 'C' at school. I thought I will tag onto this, and to my surprise there was quite a few adults there around the same age as me. [Silence]. I really enjoyed the experience and said to the tutor what do you think about a degree as I had been achieving good grades. The tutor said 'just go for it'; she was so supportive. So, I came here to the college for an interview, that was in the May and I was immediately offered a place to begin at the end of September.

Sam said that he had always had a thirst for knowledge and self-improvement, but as the start of the degree course approached, he began to feel apprehensive about his age and questioned his decision to study for a degree, in case he stood out 'as the old man'. When he mentioned his plans to his children, he was surprised at their support. Although his wife supports him too, there is, according to Sam, a hint of 'what about me':

My children think that going to university is a great idea. My wife is concerned about the time for 'me' and 'us' now that we have both retired. [Long silence]. We have been married for forty years and I must ensure that I keep my promise to her and manage my time effectively for 'us' now that we have retired.

Sam paused briefly and then said:

I consider myself to be very lucky that I am retired and that I have the time to plan and manage my time at university. I take my hat off to some of the single mothers in the class; I really do not know how they do it. [Silence]. For me, studying for a degree is not a career-change this is a personal challenge. For many of my fellow students it is a career changing opportunity. When I was their age, I am sure that studying for a degree is not something that I would have contemplated. I have always relished the idea, but I have always considered that it was slightly beyond me, and now I can't believe that at my age, I am going for it.

Sam reflected on his experience as a mature student:

...the whole student experience is teaching me to look at things in a different way. The subjects that I am studying are interesting. I know that I could not have done computing or law, as both of those subjects are worked-based type of learning, whereas this is for my own pleasure and enjoyment. I see it as being no different to having a job. I won't work beyond eight o'clock at night, although I do know that some of the younger ones in my group have no option but to work at night, as many of them are

single parents. For me, this has been a wonderful, experience. I find the lectures stimulating and I enjoy debating in the seminars. I consider that at my age I understand so much more than some of the youngsters in the group as I have more life experiences. [silence] ...I like English, mainly because I have always read a lot. History has always been interesting to me, as we live in a country that has a long-documented history. There is also the social side to history that I find fascinating. It must be good for the tutors, to have a balance of age groups across the classroom engaging on the subject. I consider the experience here to be far more rewarding than if I was studying in a big university with hundreds of other students aged between eighteen and thirty-something. There is a tremendous amount of engagement in smaller groups and I really would not want to be lost in a crowd.

Because of his age Sam really did not want to think about what he would do when he completed his degree:

As you know, I am in my late sixties and when I left school, there was more jobs than people. Now there are more people than jobs, and it is a tough world out there. Where I go from here at the end of this degree I do not know. I may go on and embark on a master's degree, I just do not know.

I contacted Sam just over a year later and was surprised to learn that he had decided not to continue with his studies:

I decided that the time that I spent studying for the degree was beginning to spiral out of control, even though I was enjoying the experience. The hand-in date for five assignments was all in the same week. How can you have a home life, especially as a mature student with the run-up to Christmas and study for a degree? It was not that it was impossible, but the hand-in dates were not conducive for one to do their best and gain a good mark. It was in my view a ridiculous situation. I was also beginning to get outside of my comfort zone as I could not continue with my voluntary work, I felt that I was letting people down.

Sam said that it was not a decision that he had made lightly. He also said that his wife was also instrumental in his decision to withdraw from the course because she was not very happy with the amount of time that he was spending on reading books and writing essays. Because of the assignment hand-in dates, organising the Christmas festivities fell entirely on his wife and he felt guilty:

I also think that embarking on a degree was too big a jump for me. In hindsight, I wish I had been advised about the Access course that was available here prior to starting my undergraduate degree. In addition, I do quite a lot of volunteering for various charities, which means a lot to me. I would like to think that the degree has just been shelved temporarily and that I will return to it later hopefully with my wife's blessing.

## 7.6 Conclusion.

One of the main points that the participants in this research study agreed on is that the knowledge that they had gained as undergraduates increased their self-confidence and self-esteem. However, some participants suggest that they have developed so much more. For example, Kassie speaks movingly about how studying for a degree has given her a greater understanding of her inner self and how studying has given her the most strength and understanding of who she is and what she can achieve. In fact, she implies that somehow through immersing herself in her studies, she has found something more than self-confidence: she has found empowerment and a resilience to move above and beyond her traumatic past. Higher education has presented her with a gateway to embrace and control her future, as well as an opportunity to move on and not dwell on her past. Similarly, the increase in self-confidence that Katie has found through her studies has led to her becoming a person in her own right, and not, as she had previously viewed herself, as an extension of her husband and his career. She no longer viewed herself as primarily a military wife.

As the oldest participant interviewed, the pleasure of gaining knowledge for Sam has come much later in life. He said that 'he always felt that he did not need education' and yet once he had retired, he turned to education. Indeed, Sam said that he would have continued with his studies if his wife had not protested that 'he owed her his time in retirement', as she had always supported the long hours that he had worked whilst running his own business. For Sam, returning to education and gaining knowledge in a subject that he had always enjoyed (history) had filled the void that had been left when he had had to close his business due to the recession.

All the participants interviewed said that education had given them so much more than a qualification. In particular, their self-confidence and self-esteem had increased sufficiently for them to feel liberated from both recent and distant experiences in their lives.



## Chapter 8

### 8.0 - Discussing the data.

The initial idea underlying this research was that of highlighting the experiences of mature students studying for their first undergraduate degree in a college of further education (HE-in-FE) and the impact that returning to full-time study has had on their lives. Oplatka and Tevel (2006:65) point out:

...gaining a degree can bring with it benefits related to work (e.g., promotion, salary increase), to the individual, and to other life structures.

Oplatka and Tevel (2006:65) went on to discuss a number of other specific benefits associated with gaining a degree level qualification as a mature student:

...such as stimulus for changes in attitudes and values, new aspirations and interests, increased self-confidence, better health, improvement of children's schoolwork, reframing of existing understanding, and access to satisfying jobs (Donaldson and Graham, 1999; Edwards, 1993; Kasworm, 1990; Woodley and Wilson, 2002).

My small research study focussed on a group of 32 mature students and drawing on their narratives, the aim was to try and understand their lived experiences whilst they were studying.

Although the participants in this study (i.e. mature students) are a small percentage of the current student population overall, in the HE-FE institution where these life histories were collected, mature students (i.e. those over 21 years of age) make up the majority of HE students. In this sense then, they can be seen as representative of this particular student body.

Table 5: Percentage of mature students at HE-FE institution involved in this study

<b>Year</b>	<b>09/10</b>	<b>10/11</b>	<b>11/12</b>	<b>12/13</b>	<b>13/14</b>
<b>Age under 21</b>	32.66%	36.51%	36.23%	36.39%	38.19%
<b>Age 21-25</b>	23.41%	20.97%	20.00%	24.57%	23.01%
<b>Age Over 25</b>	43.93%	42.52%	43.77%	39.04%	38.80%

All students, regardless of age or gender, bring a mixture of strengths and complexities into the classroom; they all have to manage competing demands, and

this becomes part of their learning experience. What this research cannot comment on (as I have not done a comparative study of mature undergraduates and traditional undergraduates) is whether mature students have a different set of complexities to traditional students. On the other hand, what is important is that the mature students in this study perceive their lives and educational experiences as different to that of traditional-age students. As Neugarten (1979:891) points out

As lives grow longer, as the successive choices and commitments accumulate, lives grow different from each other.

Mature students have to manage competing commitments that have built up over longish periods of time and are probably less malleable or pliant than their traditional-age counterparts. For the most part, the traditional age entrant to higher education is in some respects, still very much an adolescent. That means that they live emotionally complex lives and are often busy finding their feet as adults. I do not wish to suggest that in some way or another their experiences of studying are therefore less complex. Besides, some traditional undergraduates have children and/or caring responsibilities too. However, most mature students juggle their studies whilst maintaining other commitments in their lives (Blackstone, 1999:np). What is also clear is that mature students have a different set of expectations to the traditional-age student.

Reay (2002:415) writes of the many stories of 'determination, commitment adaptability and many more triumphs of the will' among mature students. In this final chapter, I discuss for the most part snapshots of the experience of returning to learning for the group of mature students who participated in this study, experiences that for some have been shaped and/or heightened by previous educational memories. The findings from my small research study concur with West's study into the motivation of adults returning to education at a particular stage in their lives, conducted some 24 before mine. West (1995:np) states:

...lives torn or falling apart and of education as one potential means to reconstruct...

Whereas in the previous chapters, I have presented their stories with very little commentary, in this chapter I undertake a thematic analysis. I begin by looking at how and why HE-in-FE has much to commend it, moving onto their experiences

through the sociological concept of higher education as a 'transitional space'. I then compare motivations, challenges and support that participants spoke of as facilitating their experience of transition and compare them, where relevant, to the research literature on the mature student experience. Geographical, social and financial elements of the mature student experience in HE-FE are also discussed, as is the habitus and the shadow of past educational experiences. Finally, themes of identity negation and confidence, self-esteem and liberation are also woven into these narratives. This final chapter concludes with some personal reflections.

### 8.1 - How and why HE-in-FE has much to commend it.

Traditional universities are seen in the UK as the main provider of higher education, although as mentioned previously there is a long history of HE provisions in FECs. However, as McKenzie and Scholfield (2018:316) point out:

As college education is also governed by partnered universities the colleges do not have the power to change or influence the market, leading to a stratified approach to education.

The Dearing Report (NCIHE,1997) suggested that traditional student engagement in higher education was in some respects a narrow field and would not suit or appeal to all, proposing therefore, that what was needed was a diversity of study options (Parry and Thompson, 2002). The provision of HE-in-FE can be seen as a response to this, a method through which wider participation in HE could be made accessible (Parry, 2003; Parry and Thompson, 2002).

While many students who enter higher education are actively seeking geographical and psychological changes within their lives (Brine and Walker, 2004:110), many FT students do seek out their original college when considering:

Whilst they may not do so immediately on completion of their L3 courses, they are likely to consider their previous colleges as providers of their future HE programmes (Saraswat, and Widdowson, 2013:11)

This echoes a number of the participant narratives analysed in this thesis where local access to HE education increased the opportunities for those students who wanted or needed to increase their educational qualifications in an untraditional way. Participants found that despite having considerable practical experience in

their field, if they wanted to progress within their chosen profession, an academic degree was now considered as a precondition of promotion.

Kirkwood and Kirkwood (2011:31) state that with its 'ease of access', HE-in-FE brings 'people together who share some of the same life circumstances' (Kirkwood and Kirkwood, 2011:19). Similarly, research conducted by King, Saraswat, and Widdowson (2013:13) found that the location of the HE-in-FE underpinned 'a student's choice of college'.

For those students undertaking an Access course, HE-in-FE also offers continuity of study, a factor that may attract non-traditional or wider participation students who would not have previously contemplated studying at degree level.

To ensure the Higher Education sector's continued success, greater attention must be given to the provision of the non-standard offer wherever it is found (Higher Education commission 2017).

In his research with 90 non-traditional learners in the South of England, West (2014:39) points out:

The methods emphasize the importance of 'good enough' qualities of relationship – including with tutors, other students and in the research itself as well as to the symbolic world...

West (2014:42) goes on to say:

Like the child, an adult, or rather the infant and child in the adult, can get anxious about her capacity to cope, and/or whether s/he can be good enough in the eyes of significant other.

Many of the commendations participants in this research mentioned in relation to HE-in-FE echo the findings of other studies such as West (2014). For some, it was the tutors who offered 'considerable emotional support and advocacy' as well as 'human and emotional resources in the attentiveness of the teachers' (Reid and West, 2016:566). Overall, HE-in-FE provided them with 'space and frameworks, with the help and support of others, to understand better and revise', their own life story (West, 1996:x). Participants also appreciated the smaller cohort sizes. Furthermore, a number of the participants said that they felt less social distance between them and their colleagues as well as less social distance between students and staff. Research by James, Busher and Suttill (2015:17) states that Access to Higher Education students perceived:

...the cultures of FE and AHE courses to be more supportive in terms of meeting their learning needs, enabling them to (re)engage in formal learning.

All of the participants narratives emphasized the importance of the support they received from their tutors. Research by Merrill (2015:1869) similarly found that:

Lecturer support and encouragement was crucial in enabling students to stay and succeed in many cases. Such support boosted the learning confidence of students.

King, Saraswat and Widdowson (2013:12) point out that many HE-in-FEs provide 'more class contact hours and more individual study support from tutors' and as Merrill (2015:1869) argues, 'Providing in-depth feedback on work was also an important aspect of the support process'. Which leads to West (2014:48) who points out 'that more nuanced understanding of the dynamics of a university habitus and non-traditional students is required'.

Many of the narratives emphasised the importance of the geographical location of the college. 'continuity of place, being close to home' (McKenzie and Scholfield, 2018:321) meant students had more time to study both at home and at college (King, Saraswat and Widdowson (2013:12), while benefiting from family support and being able to continue employment when and where necessary. The importance of geographical location became evident to Carla, who went away to university but then returned to her college:

...I studied on an Access course here and when it came to university, I decided that I wanted the experience of living and studying away from home. I lasted perhaps six or seven weeks, [silence] it was embarrassing. I hated every minute of it. I felt alone and isolated and could not cope with the huge numbers in the lecture theatre. [silence] So, I contacted my Access tutor and asked if I could come back to the college. [silence] I feel I'm an individual here not just a number on a seat.

The local college was also found to be a better alternative to distance learning for Daisy, a single parent in her first year of study:

I did the Access to higher education course last year and thought that as a single parent it would be easier for me to study at home with the Open University. But I felt I had little or no support. [brief pause] I really struggled studying alone so I came back to the college, the support I get from the tutors and my peers here is really amazing.

Studying at his local college meant that Theo, a first-year student in his thirties, was able to maintain his support networks, crucial for his well-being:

I know that I have made the right decision to study locally because I suffer from a mental illness. The support network here seems very good, everyone seems to have time to listen. I have support from the tutors, from my peers and support from other staff such as the library.

Finally, the college was the obvious choice for Aaron, having become familiar with it through doing an Access course:

Although I am studying for a degree here now, I was terrified when I first started the Access course. I felt awkward, [silence] I was only 3 months out of drug rehab and had forgotten how to, how to be with normal people. Following the Access course, it was natural for me to apply to study for a degree here. I don't feel out of place, everyone knows my past drug history and they are supportive, the tutors, fellow students, everyone.

Comments such as these show how participants' 'habitus and their interactions with the collective habitus in the fields of their courses and their colleges' (James, Busher and Suttill, 2015:17) shape their HE choices. Many mature students appear to prefer the supportive arena HE-in-FE has to offer as well as the 'continuity of educational experiences that colleges have to offer' (McKenzie and Schofield, 2018:321).

James, Busher and Suttill (2015:17) state that further education can be 'an important site of transition and personal transformation' for students.

It is evident from the participants narratives that the feeling of self-confidence 'can work at an unconscious, emotionally primitive level' (Formetti, West and Horsdal (2014:75). Participants in this research project stated that as their degree improved, their self-confidence increased and they felt that they had become 'transitive' and were beginning to 'feel superior to facts and events'. Almost all of the participants spoke of a feeling of 'liberation', reminiscent of Freire's emancipatory pedagogy.

Then again, many mature students chose to return to education for more than just domestication or liberation (Kirkwood & Kirkwood 2011). For some, it was the increase in financial benefits on graduation, as well as a number of other non-financial rewards which were about confidence, self-esteem and for some even health benefits, as well as inter-generational benefits. Several of the participants (Florence, India, Danielle and Zoe) echoed participants in Field, Merrill and West's

study (2012:85) when they commented that studying for a degree had had a positive 'impact on their children's education and encouraged them to study at school and think about going to university'. For example: Sam (one of the oldest participants interviewed), who had entered HE-in-FE for his own 'experience and pleasure' (see 7.05. Sam), said that one of his sons, who was in his thirties and had left school following his GCSE exams, was considering returning to education because his father had chosen to study for the sheer pleasure of it.

Regardless of their reasons to return to education, studying HE-in-FE was for the majority of the participants a 'safe space', a transitional space where they could be themselves and do what they wanted to do and be who they wanted to be:

In sociological terms transitional space can be viewed as a temporal location for reflecting on past identities and working out new ones (Merrill and West, 2013: np).

Moreover, Merrill and West (2013: np) go on to say that: 'higher education institutions can provide a transitional space in the lives of non-traditional adult students. This could be recognised as a 'process of reflecting on one's identity through learning'.

Mature students who choose to attend a traditional university, for those entering university straight from school or college, found themselves trying to fit into institutions not made for them. HE-in-FE would seem therefore, the obvious choice for these students. On the other hand, Wheelahan and Davis (2017) says that although HE-in-FE is seen as supportive, studying HE-in-FE suffers from a certain lack of credibility when compared to the traditional university. McKenzie and Schofield (2018:317) agree that 'there are clear differences between types of provision'. Due to the collaborative arrangements between HE Institutions (HEIs) and Further Education Colleges (FECs), many mature students find studying HE-in-FE, is often far less daunting than their perception of a traditional university:

HE in FE can offer something different from the traditional university experience, but equally valuable: Last year QAA conducted over 150 summative reviews of HE in FE. This is the final stage of the Integrated Quality and Enhancement Review (IQER) process, and the outcomes show that FE colleges are very capable of maintaining standards. As such, they are of benefit to those students who do not want a traditional 'university

experience'. Some want to study locally to fit in with busy lives as parents or carers; some need 'front-loaded' skills development; and some want to remain in the institution where they gained their previous qualifications. Colleges, often in conjunction with employers, continue to be sufficiently flexible to meet these needs (Edwards, nd).

West (1996:2) argues that there are many reasons why mature students return to study, whether it is due to the 'economic restructuring and casualisation of the workforce' or in some cases, because there are no longer guarantees of progression within their employment. However, as West (1996:2) points out, one of the most important things is the 'danger of being lost: what a new career or return to education represents at a particular juncture in a person's life and why it may be crucial to change direction'.

Finally, a report published by the Higher Education Commission (2017), entitled 'One size won't fit all', states:

The challenges facing the office for students' reveals that HE in FE opens up HE education to those who want or need to access it in an untraditional way, limiting diversity and social mobility.

This section has discussed some of the broad reasons why HE-in-FE has much to commend it. Other aspects such as transition, motivation, challenges and support and geographical proximity are discussed in more depth further in this chapter. To conclude, I return to the Robbins Report (1963) that contributed so much to the change in the landscape of higher education and further growth proposals of The Dearing Report (1997) (NCIHE) for moving HE from being an elite sector towards mass provision. The NCIHE had the foresight to include in its report the expansion of sub-degree provision within further colleges of education. This was to encourage wider participation, which would address the under-representation of certain groups. It also offered students an informed choice of education: where and how they wanted to receive it, thus recognising the need for institutional diversity and creating the conditions within which more innovative and flexible institutions could enter the higher education market.



In the more recent Norton and Carter (2017:np) report, 'One size won't fit all', which is about 'ensuring the diversity of the Higher Education sector and high-quality choice for students', the first recommendation is:

Universities should learn lessons from the further education sector to create an environment that feels more accessible to students from low participation backgrounds.

Having studied HE-in-FE for my first undergraduate degree, I returned to study a number of years later for a master's degree, followed in short succession by studying for a PhD in a traditional university. In my opinion, this combination was the correct choice for me at the time. However, I consider that both HEIs and FECs have a certain amount to learn from each other. Whether one is a traditional- aged student or one of mature years, 'One size won't fit all'.

## 8.2 Transitions and transitional space.

From a sociological perspective, life transitions can be defined as 'changes in status that are discrete and bounded in duration, although their consequences may be long-term' (George,1993:358). Although the study of life transitions by George (1993) is over 20 years old, it is still relevant in today's society where 'young people are staying in the parental home for longer'; they are also entering employment later and, in many cases,, following university (Houston, Lebeau and Watkins (2009:146). Furthermore, 'a job is not for life any more', (Ingram, Field and Gallagher, 2009:1), so that it is not just a matter of changing jobs, but also, changing careers.

As George (1993:367) points out:

Job shifts (vertical and lateral moves, as well as movement in and out of the labour force) are transitions, and careers are the trajectories within which job shifts occurs.

This process has contributed to the growth in the number of mature students entering higher education.

The initial transition for traditional-age students is from sixth form or college to degree-level study, whether this involves the traditional practice of studying away from home or the choice to live at home whilst studying, due to the substantial

financial and, in some cases, emotional advantages of doing so. The notion of transitions has become so important in education that, as Ecclestone (2009:9) states, managing such transitions effectively, 'has become a focus for policy, practice and research in the UK'. Transition is also an important concept within the sociology of higher education. For example, the American sociologist Trow (1973:34) argued that the transition from an elitist higher education to one that is for the masses has brought with it a number of problems and dilemmas for teachers, students and administrators alike. Fifty years later, Billett and Searle (2013:265) describe the transition to higher education as potentially traumatic, regardless of age or gender and 'not a uniform one'.

Ingram, Field and Gallagher (2009:2) state that anyone regardless of age or gender who undertakes a form of education or training, for example, professional development (PD) within the workplace:

...will also be engaging in almost permanent transitions in learning as well as using learning to prepare for and cope with other transitions.

Within higher education there are many areas of transition. For mature students, the transition is likely to be quite specific. Often there will have been a gap in their studies, and they may have family and work commitments to juggle alongside their studies. Regardless of where the transition takes place, students move from one locale (home, work) to another (college, university), and a period of uncertainty will often ensue. By immersing themselves into university life they engage with 'new information and experiences', which provide them with a different perspective (McQueen et al., 2009:37). Palmer, O'Kane, and Owens (2009:38) point out that this kind of transition can cause students to be 'suspended between one place (home) and another (university), which can result in an in-between-ness – a betwixt space'.

Transition into higher education, specifically, the first year of study 'when most adjustment is needed', is about an individual's change in status and the possible impact that it may have on their role in life (McQueen, Wilcox, Stephen and Walker, 2009:5). Palmer, O'Kane and Owens (2009:52) also identify the early transition phase or first year experience as being crucial in 'alter[ing] or indeed accentuat[ing] the ways in which students make meaningful connections with

university life'. Moreover, as Black (2012:1) argues, the first year of study in higher education is 'a time of great change in the lives of students' and it is often described as the 'first year experience' (Houston, Lebeau and Watkins, 2009:149).

Without exception, all the participants within this research study indicated that they felt a certain amount of confusion on entering higher education. In fact, many of them said that they felt in a complete state of 'transition' during their entire first year of study, echoing Kantanis (2002:2) who describes the entire higher education experience, encompassing the period leading up to it and afterwards as 'a state of constant transition'. The transition that they experienced was described as a transference of identity from being a parent, partner and/or employee to a full-time student. This is similar to Baxter and Britton's research (2001:91) that looks into the stories of mature students and the effect of higher education on their identity. The participants in this study spoke of the 'threat that this can pose to relationships within the family' for example, the previously taken-for-granted gender division of labour and responsibilities, as Danielle's story illustrates. These risks are, however, not uniform, but gendered and classed. The dynamics and consequences of family disruption are different for male and female students, and social class interacts with gender to produce different outcomes.

For mature students, the transition to higher education can provide the opportunity to complete what they may have considered as 'unfinished business' and put to rest previous 'educational baggage' (Britton and Baxter, 1999:183) such as educational failure. For example, for Zoe (who does not feature to any great extent in this thesis) and Ben, being accepted onto a degree level course and consequently gaining degree status, served as a catalyst for what can only be described as a feeling of euphoria, as they had always had this feeling of 'unfulfilled potential' or that they had somehow 'missed out'. Several other participants also said that they felt that they had carried around educational baggage for many years. Rowena said that she felt that she had carried around the shadow of a primary school teacher on her shoulders:

I was made to stand up in class daily and the teacher would ridicule me. I would then have to repeat after her 'I am an idiot Mrs O'Brian'.

A similar comment came from Daisy who felt that school had always been a struggle:

I have always been a worrier because I have an anxiety disorder. I think this is why I was bullied continuously at school. The teachers used to watch whilst it was going on in the playground and told me to 'stop being a cry baby'.

While Jake said:

I suppose you could say that my problems started right back in primary school. I just never really understood what was going on and what I was meant to do. It was all very confusing. I felt that I was labelled an idiot.

These reflective accounts illustrate how underlying factors such as educational baggage of any description, may affect the first-year transition of undergraduates.

Merrill and West (2013:np) says:

In sociological terms transitional space can be viewed as a temporal location for reflecting on past identities and working out new ones.

On the other hand, Kantanis (2002:2) points out that transition into university 'can be much anticipated, exciting and stimulating' but it can also be 'fraught with feelings of self-doubt, unease and awkwardness'. The majority of the participants in this research study agreed that studying at degree-level was for them intimidating; however, they also said that it generated feelings of 'liberation' from what and where they were at that particular stage in their lives, and encouraged them to be where they wanted to be.

There is, of course, a final transition within higher education and that is to graduate status. Many of the third-year participants interviewed described themselves as being in a constant state of 'flux' as they felt that they were facing a further major transition from student status to employment. Many of the participants indicated that they would have preferred to have postponed this transition if a form of finance had been available, which would have allowed them to continue with their studies onto a master's programme. This contrasts somewhat with a four-year research project that questioned students in fifteen different higher education settings, in different universities and different subjects' (SOMUL) by Houston, Lebeau and Watkins (2009:157). The report concludes:

...students do not often consider postgraduate studies as an option immediately after their first degree. This may be a consequence of the accumulation of debt during their undergraduate experience, which appears to be increasingly influential on the transition process.

The accounts of this study's participants suggest that not all felt ready for what they considered to be a final transition from student to employment. Hugo, a third-year student whose narrative has not figured extensively in this thesis, was concerned about this next transition:

Where have the last three years of my life gone? I do not feel that I am equipped to move on to the next chapter.

A transition within higher education that is seldom considered is that of moving to honours level study from a foundation degree. The views of Kantanis (2002) can be seen in some of the contrasting comments from the participants in this research study. Those participants who had entered higher education without completing an access to higher education course felt that they were at a disadvantage compared to their fellow students who had previously experienced transition to and then from, an access course to higher education. The initial transition phase for those participants who had not travelled the access route and had entered higher education from employment or simply from being a parent, was, for the most part, one of continued uncertainty. All these participants said that they felt disadvantaged compared to the access students for several reasons, which included that they perceived themselves to be encroaching on previously forged friendships. Rowena, for example, commented that the tutors appeared to know everyone but her and from her previous educational history, she was not sure whether that was a good or bad thing.

In contrast, those participants who had transitioned from FE-to-HE level commented that they felt at a significant advantage due to their familiarity with the college layout, its teaching rooms, the library as well as social areas. In many HE-in-FE colleges there are no specific demarcation lines or boundaries between the further and higher education sectors. Thus, familiarity with individual academic and administrative staff, as well as other support systems, was also seen as an advantage of undertaking an access course prior to embarking on HE-in-FE. The transition of access students was also aided by their recent experiences of undertaking research and writing assignments. Moreover, many of the staff who taught on access courses also lectured on degree-level modules. This is not to say that their transition from FE-to-HE was straightforward. Dillon said:

Even though I had spent the last year as an access student, parking my car and then walking through the front door of the college two or three times a

week. Repeating this familiar process and then turning left to the HE area instead of right to the FE area made me feel physically sick. I really wasn't sure I could handle it.

Another important factor that participants who had previously studied on an access course identified as facilitating their transition to higher education was the established social contact with others - friendship bonds that had already been forged during their access course. Those participants who had transitioned from access to higher education said that they felt that they were part of a group transition and not alone; this is because they were studying in the same building, occasionally in the same classrooms and in some instances, tutored by the same staff.

However, even those participants who had previously attended an access course at the college, experienced the transition to higher education as somewhat traumatic. Florence said: 'it was a fear of the unknown' whilst Aaron stated:

I had been in and out of the college numerous times whilst studying on the access course, however, when I walked in the front door on the first day of my degree course, I felt so terrified that I almost walked back out again. I felt awkward, a little aloof and yet elated all at the same time.

Brine and Walker (2004:106) argue that many students approach their transition to university with fear and trepidation and that it is quite common for older learners to be anxious about their transition into education, because they are 'less likely to have a peer group who are entering university at the same time' (Mercer, 2007:30). However, for those students who have studied on an access course, this sense of trepidation is due to their transition from the 'familiar setting of FE to the unknown risks and threats offered by university' (Brine and Walker (2004:106). Christie, Cree, Hounsell, McCune and Tett (2008:569) state that emotional responses are also more prevalent amongst students with 'no previous familial experience of higher education'. Of course, these emotional responses are not limited to mature students, traditional-age students may also be affected by such emotions. (ibid, 2008:569).

Thus, the transition into higher education can be both a 'bewildering and dislocating experience' as well as a 'learning shock' and 'huge culture change' (Christie et al., 2008:570). Mallman and Lee (20016:685) argue that 'all students

must adjust to a learning environment' and that the minority status of mature students, in many respects, gives them added transitional challenges throughout their first year (Christie, 2009). However, this research study was conducted in an HE-in-FE environment where mature students were in the majority. Lily's comment is typical:

I completed an access course and I knew that many of the other students on my course would be the same students that I had already studied with. But I still felt apprehensive just walking through the door of the classroom on my first day as an HE student.

Studying close to home, which HE in FE enables them to do, made it more possible for the mature students interviewed for this study to juggle their responsibilities such as employment and family commitments. One of the advantages of studying HE-in-FE is that for many mature students, this transition may simply be an intra-institutional one, from completing an access course to studying at degree level (Norton Grubb, 2009:103). In this regard, in a study involving eighty-four students studying HE-in-FE, students stated that they would never have had the self-confidence to apply and study at a 'traditional' university (Burton et al. 2011:33).

Bathmaker and Thomas (2009:122) argue:

Transitions from one level of education to another – from further to higher education in 'dual sector' institutions – cannot therefore be understood in isolation but need to be seen in the context of the wider field of higher education.

Overall, the data indicated that transition to higher education as an access student had many advantages over those who had entered HE-in-FE without recent educational experiences. Participants specifically mentioned the availability of information on courses and up-to-date timetables and the encouragement and support that they received from tutors who were familiar with their capabilities as well as being familiar with the relationship between higher-level study and how it fitted in with other responsibilities mature students had. By contrast, the direct entrant students said that they felt at a disadvantage due to their lack of study skills in comparison to the students who had transitioned to HE via an access course. The next section looks in more detail at the factors participants mentioned as easing the transition.

### 8.2.1 Higher education as transitional space.

The experience of student-hood can pose basic questions of who a person is, who they have been, and who they wish to become (Field, Merrill and West, 2012:82).

Transition has its roots in some sociological work and is often referred to as liminality or a linear state. Lineal states are states that are between one thing and another, 'betwixt and between', neither one thing or the other and they mark transitions. Abrahams and Ingram (2013:np) offer examples of transition:

It is logical to see transitions in strands: from school to work, from family home to own property, from single to married/in a relationship and from child to parent.

This can be seen in the transition from childhood to adulthood, which in some cultures is marked by ritual. These rituals take place over a period of time and in liminal space and in many cultures, can be seen as a significant stepping stone in an individual's life. The age at which a child celebrates their transitional rite of passage into adolescence will depend entirely on where they live and what culture they grow up in. It can be said that higher education provides that transitional space for traditional-age students, a transitional space where students change and, in most cases, mature and grow as independent adults. This transition from compulsory education to tertiary education may also be considered a cultural one.

Higher education is for many students, although less so for the mature students who took part in this research study, a safe place to make a transition: a transition from dependent children into adulthood or a transitional space where one can acquire a professional role, for example within the medical profession. As Holliday and West (2010:np) propose:

Being and becoming a student in the many spaces of an increasingly diverse university system requires different levels of understanding.

Field, Merrill and West (2012:82) propose university itself as

'a kind of transitional space, in which everything is organised on the assumption that most of the actors will leave after a more or less fixed period...'

Although higher education is considered a safe transitional space, Field, Merrill and West (2012:83) argue: 'Entry into university was often understood by students



as a challenging transition in itself'. This is because it provides a transformative space (marked by a ritualistic period as an undergraduate) from childhood to adulthood for some, but not all students.

In their research on negotiating liminality in higher education undertaken at University College, Cork, Rutherford and Pickup (2015:702) state:

This 'betwixt and between space' can be experienced as vulnerable but also as pregnant with opportunities for transformation and empowerment.

Conversely, for some of the mature students who were interviewed as part of this research study, their transition within higher education was not one from childhood to adulthood, but from one kind of directed life to a different kind of life. It involved, for example, a change in their adult roles, perhaps from a predominantly domestic role to an independent adult role as a student. Their 'betwixt and between' space, was not one thing or another while at the same time marking a significant change in their identity as well as in their adult roles, to a new set of adult roles. West (2014:42) argues that the university can be seen as:

...a space where self is in negotiation, and where struggle around separation and individualisation – letting go of past ideas and relationships – takes place.

For example, reflecting on her transition from full time mother to student, Florence said:

At home I am a mum, nothing more and nothing less. At times I feel that I am nothing more than a glorified servant to my children. But here, at uni, I am not the person I used to be, I am not sure who I am, or what I am, I just know that I am changing.

Other participants spoke of becoming mature students as a liminal space where every day normality is suspended in some way, creating almost a magical space, a sacred space, a space in which individuals are able to be different or certainly can contemplate different possibilities. As Abrahams and Ingram (2013:np) put it:

...in shifting back and forth between misaligned fields people can create their own differently structure space that is neither one place nor the other – nor is it a compromised space between the two worlds – rather they open up a space of new cultural possibilities.

Then again, not only does higher education provide that transitional space, but also the students (traditional and non-traditional) are caught in this betwixt and between space – not one thing or another. This transitional space, ‘between different life stages’ is a space where students can change – it is not just a space where students grow up, it is a space ‘which we probably expect to go through at some time as we grow older’ (Field, Merrill and West, 2012:80).

West, Fleming and Finnegan (2013:np) argue:

We can think of university as a space where self and story are in negotiation and where struggles around separation and individuation – letting go of past idea and relationships – can take place.

West also reminds us that this liminal space is not always an easy one:

Individuals may not know why they act as they do. The forces at work may be cultural: class, gender or ethnic factors shaping the way people think, feel and talk about themselves.

West (1996) points out that there are other kinds of transitions and that many adult students leave university as changed people, in that, they arrive at university lacking confidence and, in most cases, they leave after a more or less fixed period with not only having gained an undergraduate degree but a change in their identity having gained confidence in themselves and increased self-esteem. This connection between transition and identity is highlighted by Merrill (2015:1869):

The transitional space of the university provided them with a social space...  
... a safe space for the working out and reconstructing of identities ...

In terms of identity, it is an in-between space ‘whereby an individual lets go of part or all of their old identity and assumes a new or modified identity (Merrill 2012:1869).

Studying at degree level can also become a transition into a different role, for example, students may gain a professional qualification as a teacher. Merrill (2015:1862) points out that this process ‘of undergoing and coping with life transitions is a biographical learning experience’ and becomes ‘part of a person’s life history’. In other words, for some students their lives post university ‘marked a new positive biographical transition’ (Merrill, 2012:1860).

### 8.3 –Learner motivation, challenges and support.

There are a number of reasons why adult learners are motivated to engage in higher education. In so far as we live in a knowledge society, engaging in higher education is one way to improve one's life chances. This may particularly be the case given that continuity of employment in an occupation or profession over a life course is no longer the norm. Jamieson, Sabates, Woodley and Feinstein (2009: 246) point out that 'the benefits to the individual of a university qualification have been well documented'. Although much of this emerging data relates to traditional-age undergraduates, many mature students who undertake a degree-level qualification also benefit from a 'wide range of financial, health and social benefits' (Jamieson, et al., 2009:246). Mature students rarely embark on a course of learning for a single reason and for the mature students in this study, there was a definite relationship between academic and personal development and the anticipation that their involvement in higher education would improve their prospects for employment.

Statistical research published by Parry, Callender, Scott and Temple (2012:123) found that:

Students' motivations for participating in higher education were primarily instrumental. They were concerned with improving their life opportunities (71%), getting a good job (62%), pursuing higher education as part of their long-term career plan (62%), needing a higher education qualification to get ahead (54%), and wanting to study a particular subject/course (52%). Moreover, there was a large degree of consensus among the students surveyed in their reasons for entering higher education, with few significant variations among different student groups. However, younger students aged 20 and under and those studying full-time particularly stressed their desire for better opportunities, getting a good job, and wanting to study a particular subject/course.

West (1995:np) offers a quite different perspective regarding the motivation of mature students, that are far from instrumental:

Some individuals are driven by social needs: a desire for contact with others, perhaps because of loneliness and isolation, while others, the 'learning orientated', may primarily be motivated by a love of a subject itself.

In his research on motivation and why adults want to enter higher education, West (1995:np) suggests that 'human motives in choosing education or career pathways

are more complex than is often indicated'... Put simply, in his biographical analysis on adults, motivation and higher education, West, (1996:9) argues:

Damage, even of a basic, primitive kind can be repaired through good enough relationships in later life. Some people turn to therapy but reparation might also be possible in educational setting through contact with people who respect, care and empathize with us.

This can be seen within the narratives of some of the participants within this research study. Whilst many talked of challenges and previous struggles: within education, their family life or ill-health, others came across in their interviews as vulnerable, needing support, and yet resilient at having survived their own personal struggles. In many respects their narratives were fascinating and vibrant, but challenging and full of motivation and courage.

The participants in this research study said that they had enrolled onto a degree-level course for a variety of reasons: for their own benefit or to benefit their families, as well as employment-related reasons. All the male participants, apart from Ben, said that they had embarked on their degree to improve their employment prospects. For the most part, they said that they had left secondary school education with either a few or no qualifications at all, although one or two of them had studied at A-level. Several of the participants were single parents who said that their motivation for engaging in higher education was to gain financial stability for themselves and their children. In contrast to receiving financial gains, one of the participants said that he had returned to education for recreational reasons (he had just retired).

Studying at degree level can be a life changing event for many mature students and the catalysts may be cultural, financial, social, vocational and/or emotional.

Beth said that following a long illness she had lost all confidence in herself:

I was just going to 'have a go' at the functional skills course in English and Maths. However, on completion I had accomplished high marks and was offered a 'fast-track' place on an access course. At the time I had no intention of going on to do a degree.

A similar comment came from Daisy:

I did the access course last year for something to do other than be a 'Mum'. I was so surprised at how much I enjoyed the experience.

For Ben, studying met the need to have something to distract him from a debilitating illness.

In terms of the challenges of being a mature student in higher education, whether it is a traditional university setting or studying HE-in-FE, success requires 'interdisciplinary, psychosocial understanding' (West, 2014:48).

Importantly, mature students will need to be able to cope with this transitional space:

without fear of rejection or of never being good enough (West, Fleming and Finnegan, 2013:np).

In this regard, West (2014:39) proposes that:

Students have to find the means, psychosocially, to overcome aspects of university cultures, or habitus, that they may find difficult.

Most students spoke about the importance of the support structures in place in HE-in-FE. Whilst many of the participants interviewed entered higher education via an access course, others enrolled directly onto their chosen course following an interview with the course director. All the participants said that one of the unforeseen benefits of studying HE-in-FE was the flexible level of learning that was offered, which was 'central to their participation' (Elliot and Byrna, 2009:107). This included the delivery of lectures and seminars, the timings of which coincided in the most part with school hours.

In addition, because the learner groups were small, some of the participants said that the relationship that they had with their tutor was crucial to their academic and personal development, with many of the tutors offering an almost open-door policy, which was supplemented by regular email access. Danielle said:

...the HE-in-FE environment was on the whole supportive with almost unlimited access to tutors as well as support staff.

This is significant, as one of the most common challenges mentioned by the participants was time management and 'balancing the needs of study with the needs of others' (Stone and O'Shea, 2013:99). Reay, Ball and David (2002:9) state: 'mature-age students are inevitably time-poor' and indeed, many of the participants commented that they felt that their lives were a 'constant juggling act'

which meant that they were making sacrifices daily (Stone and O'Shea, 2013:100).

Bowl (2001:143) states:

...family lives and concerns are not merely the background against which their educational careers develop but are integral to their experience of higher education study.

For the most part, mature students who study HE-in-FE have an established network of support in the form of family and friends. However, there is still a need, to a certain extent, to develop a friendship base with other students. The importance of support from family and friends outside the institution were evident in many of the participants' narratives. Nonetheless, the support of other students also occupied an important place in their narratives. Indeed, Danielle, Ben and Isaac indicated that their shared experiences as students had made them friends for life.

As far as I am aware, these friendships did not extend beyond the classroom environment. This may be because a number of the participants were single parents and could not socialise outside of university hours. On the other hand, there appeared to be a considerable amount of support for each other on social media (Facebook) – although not all of this was of a positive supportive nature. Many of the participants said that they struggled with time-management, finding it difficult at times to fit their studies around other commitments, which included family and employment. This in turn restricted their ability to form peer group relationships of any meaning outside the educational setting. Hence their reliance on communicating with each other outside of the educational environment via social media.

Askam (2008:91) says that for some students, their support network, whether it is from the institution in the guise of tutors or their 'wider social network', which includes 'partners, parents and children', is essential 'in overcoming crises and providing encouragement'. Brine and Walker (2007:103) argue that a 'supportive relationship encourages the (re)construction of learner identities'. Conversely, lack of, or no support whatsoever within their studies need not necessarily be an encumbrance to the learner (Brine and Walker (2004:103).

Research shows that support network for all students, whether traditional or mature, can make a crucial contribution to academic success. For mature students, returning to education can be seen in some cases, as a 'lifeline during periods of change and uncertainty' (West, 1996:np). West (1996:np) argues:

...providing space and frameworks, with the help and support of others, to understand better, and revise, the story of one's life, even repair past damage and construct a stronger self in consequence.

In addition to the support network and in some respects, the challenges that some mature students encounter during their undergraduate degree, having motivation and maintaining it, is an important factor that propels them towards completion and graduation.

#### 8.4 - Geographical proximity.

As discussed in Chapter 2, a distinguishing characteristic of HE- in-FE is its position within specific localities. A research report on Behavioural Approaches to Understanding Student Choice (2012), which was commissioned jointly by the HEA and the NUS, states that geographical proximity is one of a range of factors students take into consideration when deciding where to study. Recent research suggests that the following factors are among the most significant when choosing where to study: academic reputation, location, distance from home, course suitability and employment opportunities (Diamond et al. (2012:7&8). However, for many mature students the distance from home is often a determining factor, especially for those students who have family or work commitments. Another important factor that mature students take into consideration when studying for a degree is the 'material constraints', which include the 'cost of travel' as well as travelling time (Reay, 2002:9). For the participants in this study, geographical proximity and material constraints go hand in hand. It is important to mention that all the participants indicated that had HE-in-FE not been available to them within a reasonable travelling distance of their home, they would not have had this 'second chance' at education due to their responsibilities at home. Although, Sam said that there were times when his homelife infringed on his desire to study and vice versa, studying locally, HE-in-FE, allowed him to study whilst living at home maintaining his family relationships. On the other hand, it also had its drawbacks

because Sam's wife was not happy with the amount of time that he was spending on his studies and this eventually led him to withdraw from the degree course in order to maintain the family equilibrium.

Participants in my research study by contrast did not see living at home and studying locally as a disadvantage. HE-in-FE was for them available, accessible and conveniently close to their home and for some, the wider family support was essential. Moreover, the HE-in-FE provided a disciplined place for them to study (self-directed learning), offering them the availability of either the library or the HE common room to 'take advantage of the open-door policy' (Burton et al. 2011:33). Several of them said that removing themselves from their home environment allowed them to study without the many distractions at home. This contrasts with a two-year study on the experiences of with twenty-two adult learners (Askham,2008:89) which found that:

Much of the learning environment or context inhabited by the adult learner seems to have a negative or obstructive impact upon their learning process.

Dillon's decision to study HE in FE was all about geographical proximity, since this enabled him to juggle his responsibilities:

...we live within a reasonable travelling distance of several universities, but it was a very definite decision to study HE-in-FE. This college is on my doorstep and as my wife is the breadwinner, the most important thing as a family is that I can still take my boys to school and collect them at the end of their day.

Similarly, Beth said:

In my view mature students must study where their home is, they cannot just get up and move halfway across the country when they are established with employment, a mortgage and a family, the upheaval would be too much. I am in my fifties and I just don't have the option to apply to study anywhere else.

Geographical proximity also encompassed social dimensions. Another reason why participants chose to study HE-in-FE was that they considered the college to be part of their local community, with what they considered to be less of a social distance between themselves as students and their colleagues, their families and home life, and in some instances the staff as well. The social contacts that traditional-age students build by going away to university are very different from the ones that this group of mature students have built by studying near their home. For example, Danielle said 'I feel that I have made friends for life here, as we all



live locally'. These narratives are significant, confirming that the local provision of HE-in-FE is important not only to this group of mature students, but also to the traditional-age students who may choose to study in close proximity to their home.

### 8.5 - Financial hardship and rewards.

Shaw (2014:841) notes that the presence of mature students in higher education is considered valuable and that they are considered a 'valuable commodity'. If they were dissuaded from entering higher education due to the increase in tuition fees, then their absence, he argues, 'will have a serious impact on the sector'. Shaw (2014:839) also argues that graduates 'can expect to earn considerably more in their lifetime than non-graduates'. However, this is not always the case for mature graduates. In this regard, Jamieson et al., (2009:246) argue that mature students do not benefit as much 'in terms of income from undergraduate study' as traditional age students due to the number of years that they have left in employment. The government, and to some extent the universities themselves, have focused attention on the personal economic benefits and sometimes the wider economic benefits, of higher education, as well as the financial gain to graduates. Cameron (2010) in a speech promoting graduate employability and the justification for full tuition fees said:

[...] over the course of a life-time, a graduate earns on average over £100,000 more than someone who doesn't go to university. Isn't it right that those graduates' contributions to the system should reflect the advantages they have enjoyed? (HM Government 2010).

Yet financial gain is not always prevalent where mature students are concerned. Although the research is not current, Egerton (2001) argues that a large percentage of mature graduates do not enter the higher earnings sectors following completion of their degree and that in many cases it takes them longer to obtain initial employment. In addition, Woodfield (2011:409) argues that:

Much work on mature students assumes their overall experience to be one of disadvantage relative to traditional-age graduates and this includes employability.

In this regard, Egerton and Parry (2001:21) argue that:

If returns to graduates were to increase, it is possible that mature graduate earnings would increase sufficiently to offset the cost of loans.

Indeed, one of the major challenges that affected these mature students was of a financial nature. This financial insecurity, which may be experienced by both mature students as well as traditional-age students, is due in part to 'the advent of student loan and subsequent debt' (Shaw, 2014:838). A number of the participants said that as mature students, with more financial responsibilities than traditional-age students, they felt that they had the burden of a large debt hanging over them and that they had considerably much less 'time to repay any loan in their working lives' (Shaw, 2014:838). These students' experience did not fit with the supposed purpose of the loans which, according to Cable (2012) are:

to help mature students fund the costly extras of learning, such as books, childcare, travel costs, and specific course equipment.

Some of the participants said that even though they were studying full-time, they had had to find, or continue with, some form of employment that fitted in with their studies, to cover their monthly outgoings. This was due in part to prior financial commitments that were not covered by their allocated student finance. Many of them said that they were also concerned with the rapid accumulation of debt (de Cogan, nd). Some of the participants commented that although remuneration from their employment was crucial to their survival, employment was at the same time an added stress factor and that having to work alongside studying was detrimental to their studies as well as their home life and relationships. For some mature students, financial pressures were alleviated in the guise of a partner who was willing to support the household, which allowed them to take time off work to study (see Danielle). What is interesting about the participants in this study (due to their age range), is that it is at least arguable that gaining a degree will not make an enormous difference to their earning power over the duration of the rest of their lives

Thus, when talking about the returns of higher education, Cameron (2010) does not take into consideration mature students who may have other demands on their income (Shaw, 2014:846). On the other hand, tuition fees, funding or lack of it, employment and the accumulation of debt, is not necessarily an issue for all mature students. One of the participants said that age may be an advantage because although she had incurred a huge debt whilst studying, she may never earn sufficiently in the remainder of her working life and the debt will then be 'wiped out' on her retirement. Moreover, a minority of the participant's interviewed

indicated that they were financially independent and free from debt, including mortgage repayments.

Zoe had a very different perspective with regards to the loan made available to her in order to pursue her studies:

I consider that my student loan is in place of my wages, I am gaining as much financially from my student loan than if I was working part-time. I have a student bank account, applied for my rail card and everything else I possibly can as a student. I have also been thinking of drawing on my interest free student overdraft of 1.5k and buying premium bonds, then cashing in the premium bonds at the end of my degree. The old student discount is going to be useful for Christmas shopping as well.

From a male perspective, Joe who was not engaged in any form of employment and was the main child-carer, said that he felt guilty because his wife was working full-time and that he was not contributing to the household finances.

Although the burden of student debt is a concern to many, several participants with school-age children said that since they had been studying themselves, their children appeared to be more engaged with their schoolwork and in almost all cases, their school grades had improved considerably. Similar to the research into mature students by Reay, Ball and David (2002:11), several of the participants, specifically those with school-age children, said that they 'saw themselves as role models for their children'.

India said:

I think I have been a really good role model for the children – it has been really good for them to see me studying. My eldest son is now thinking about going to university, whereas before he thought he would just increase his hours at the local supermarket.

Many participants noted that when they 'integrated' their studying into their home lives (Reay, Ball and David, 2002:11), their children noticed their work ethic, which would be beneficial for all the family as well as affording them the opportunity of a higher earning potential on graduation (Shaw, 2014). Sophie said:

I left school over fifteen years ago to earn money and all I have been doing is dead-end jobs such as retail and waitressing. My daughter was heading the same way until she sat with me whilst I was studying to do her homework; she has now gone from the bottom set in maths to the top set in one year.

Despite the financial constraints, all the participants felt that they would be better equipped to enter the employment market, in the current climate, with a degree rather than without. An important outcome of the undergraduate degree programmes was that it fostered a desire to continue to study. A third of the participants said that they would have continued with their studies with a master's degree but were unable to do so due to personal and/or financial constraints and lack of funding from the government. Regardless of their age and gender, studying at degree-level was a positive experience, and although some of these participants may not actually increase their earning power when they graduate, studying for a degree provided other benefits. Although not all mature students reap financial benefits on graduation, there are other rewards to be considered, which are not so easily translated into a financial reward. They are about, confidence, self-esteem and health benefits as well as inter-generational benefits, which will be discussed in sections below.

## 8.6 – Habitus and the shadow of previous education experiences.

James, Busher and Suttill (2015:5) argue:

The notion of habitus also helps construe the interplay between past and present that is created through primary socialisation into the world through family, culture and the milieu of education. Thus, it is not a set of attitudes and values, but is embodied in terms of how people feel and think. Further habitus is constantly remade, permeable and responsive to what is going on around people and to their choices (including the success and failure of previous actions).

Research by Abrahams and Ingram (2013:np) on local student experiences draw on Bourdieusian theory and states:

In using habitus, we consider all new experiences to be mediated by perceptions laid down through past experience. Therefore, we can consider students' perceptions of new experiences in the education field only in relation to their previous internalised perceptions...

Furthermore, James, Busher and Suttill (2015:7) argue:

Prior learning experiences can act to provide a general disposition, a turn towards what Bourdieu terms 'cultured habitus' (Bourdieu, 1967:344).

This can be seen in terms of the class system. Reay (2001); Reay, Crozier, Clayton, Colliander & Grinstead (2007) and Yorke (2000) suggest that working class students who do not achieve believe that it is due to their lack of ability.

Another way of looking at the relationship between learning and identity is by drawing on Bourdieu's concept of habitus, referring to deeply ingrained habits, skills and dispositions that we have because of our life experiences. These habits, skills and dispositions are so deeply ingrained, they are embodied, part of the being of the person:

Bourdieu argues that a particular disposition – for example, towards a type of music or film - has to be learned. Yet although these competences are closely associated with educational level, he believes they are less likely to be learned consciously, by formal effort, than from the 'unintentional learning made possible by a disposition acquired through domestic or scholastic inculcation of legitimate culture' (Bourdieu, 1984: 28),

Failure is referred to in many of the narratives in this thesis. Participants spoke of 'lacking success' as a learner as a fact of their lives and talked about entering higher education with a deeply felt disposition of being a failure. Similarly, participants in James, Busher and Suttill's empirical research (2015:10) on the impact of Access to Higher Education (AHE) courses, on mature students' learning identities, and of the changes in higher education policy on their chances to participate:

Their experiences of educational disadvantage during early years of compulsory education led to a long-standing impact on later participation in education.

Conversely, West (1996:9) argues that engaging in education can also be a form of therapy:

...damage, even of a basic, primitive kind can be repaired through good enough relationships in later life. Some people turn to therapy but reparation might also be possible in educational settings...

Theo said that prior to enrolling and attending an AHE he was undergoing counselling to aid a mental health condition, which he attributed to working in an all-male environment. Theo said that enrolling and attending an AHE was for him a life saver. This is because his mental health issues began to abate; and on doctors' advice, he reduced his medication:

I feel that returning to education has helped me to find out who I am; it has given me an identity and a broader perspective on life.

Similarly, Daisy who had recently been undergoing Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT) for anxiety said:

And so, umm, so school for me was almost a constant struggle. I was bullied throughout and now have an anxiety disorder because of it. I didn't do very well – ever. I didn't get the GCSE I wanted, and from there I was told I was not clever enough to do A-levels, so I went into the workplace and had lots of different jobs, I was even bullied there. I kinda struggled through life until now. Now I feel I have the opportunity and the ability to achieve where I never have before.

For Theo, educational failure went much deeper. This is because for him, his lack of success was one of sporting prowess in his ability or lack of ability to obtain a basketball scholarship, which coincided with a distinct failure in his GCSE exams:

At school I was very sporty, into my sport, I was into basketball, and had aspirations of making it happen within that discipline – my PE teacher encouraged me to apply for a sports scholarship in America. Unfortunately, it didn't happen – looking back I feel I wasn't giving the right guidance – I know now I was never going to make it – the school wanted basketball trophies and I was a means to an end. I was a star at basketball but failed my GCSEs miserably because I did not revise preferring to practise and play basketball - leaving me with nothing, no scholarship and poor exam results.

It is in fact striking, how many of the narratives contained references to negative labelling in school. In this study, Rowena for example, enrolled onto a degree course following last minute changes within her employment and family life.

However, she had been haunted by her experience at school:

I have had a teacher sitting on my shoulder forever, constantly telling me that I am an idiot. I was nine years old and made to stand up in class daily and she would ridicule me... 'You are an idiot, what are you' and I would have to repeat – I am an idiot Mrs O'Leary.

This is similar to participants who took part in a Lothian Apprentice Scheme Trust (LAST) they recalled their previous educational experiences and how these had had a significant influence, not only on their current aspirations and learning process but on 'how they approached a task' (Bamber and Tett, 2000:62).

Returning to the empirical research by James, Busher and Suttill (2015:9), class, gender and ethnicity contribute to the disposition, aspirations and ultimately student identities, of the AHE students who were studying at three further education colleges in the East Midlands, they state:

The complexity of the AHE student's lives impacted on their lack of confidence and uncertainty about their ability as learners, reflecting their structural positions in terms of class, gender and ethnicity. They described their negative experiences of school and educational disadvantage and self-exclusion, having left school with few or no qualifications. These experiences had shaped their negative, or at best fragile, learner identities from the start of their education.

This leads to Rowena who said that she was only in her first year of study, but she already felt that the ghost of her old teacher Mrs O'Leary was slowly being laid to rest. As West (2014:42) states Rowena, in section 4.07, was 'letting go of past ideas'. Rowena said that she felt that part of her healing process was due in part to the 'considerable human and emotional resources in the attentiveness' that she received from both the tutors and her peer group (West, Fleming and Finnegan (2013). These comments from Rowena indicate that as a HE-in-FE student, she was moving through a social space in terms of expectations and adapting to new fields, a process in which 'habitus was adapting to suit new capitals' (James, Busher and Suttill, 2015:15).

Similarly, Zoe (who does not feature to any great extent within this thesis) and Kassie both admitted that they had distanced themselves from their previous lifestyle. In Zoe's case, she said rather guiltily, this involved 'going to the local pub and debating politics' with what she called (prior to her studying for a degree), 'like-minded people'. Whereas now she preferred what she called a 'more educational style of debate at uni'. During the interview process, Zoe reflected that her socialising habits no longer involved debating in a pub; instead, she had formed other social connections, in her words, because she needed 'a more educated conversation' these days. Kassie struggled at times with the change from her previous lifestyle and habitus; for example, she reported that she felt pressured by friends to leave her university work to spend time with them. However, on the whole, she distanced herself from what she referred to as 'past acquaintances', arguing that studying at university had offered her and her daughters a new and different lifestyle.

The process of Rowena's transition as a mature student can be compared to Bourdieu's ideas on capital, a process that is 'largely unconscious. Bourdieu' ideas

on capital also offer a tool for understanding the enduring impact of social inequality in students' lives' (West, 2014:40).

A similar story of perceived academic failure emerged during Jake's life history:

...I just never really understood what was going on at school and what I was meant to do. It was to me all very confusing. I was always in trouble and I never knew why. I felt like I was labelled, so I started being disruptive in class. Looking back, it was because I couldn't understand what was going on and no-one was prepared to help or explain anything to me.

Jake went on to talk about the teaching assistant at his local learning centre who recognised that he was dyslexic. This was the turning point for him. Without it, he would never have had the opportunity to learn to read and write, complete an access course and go on to study at degree level or even pass his driving test.

Even though most participants had considerable work experience, within the learning environment, they spoke of feeling overwhelmed at times and out of their comfort zone. Brine and Walker (2004:106) argue that 'mature students are more likely to fear academic failure than their younger peers'; this is due in part to the 'high risk investment' that academic study entails, or in some cases to a 'poor previous learner identity'. Research drawing on the experiences of 23 mature access students in an inner London FEC suggest that in some cases, whilst waiting for their marks to be published, it was the feeling of failure and 'shame and fear of shame' that preoccupied their thoughts (Reay, Ball and David, 2002:15).

Reay (2001:340) says:

If education has been a source of both discomfort and feelings of inadequacy, then fitting in and feeling happy are especially important.

It is understandable that mature students who have experienced 'painful, dislocated schooling' need to feel 'a sense of safety' within the realms of further and higher education (Reay: 2001:340). In Paulo Freire terms, almost all of the participants in this research study were subject to the oppression of compulsory schooling and in some sense, school oppressed them as it made them feel that they were to some extent or another failure. Higher education gave them a route out of and away from these feelings; it enabled them to be and feel successful. In other words, it gave them a feeling of liberation from a past life - a transformative change:



...liberation is not gained by chance but through the praxis of their quest for it, through their recognition of the necessity to fight for it. (Freire, 2003:45)

This is probably why all the mature students interviewed said that studying HE-in-FE was for them a positive experience, especially as many of them had entered higher education via an access course. They all agreed with Brine and Walker (2004:103) who say that: 'the risk of academic failure is the most immediate and acknowledged risk'. This is significant because Weil (1993:175) suggests that 'adults do not just bring their experience with them into education; they *are* their experience'. Similarly, James, Busher and Suttill (2015:18) state:

...habitus is open to possibilities rather than fixed certainties. Entry to a new field can be seen as providing the opportunity for habitus to change as individuals are confronted by the unfamiliar.

Nonetheless, with their confidence and self-esteem increasing, over time the participants talked of feeling more focused and confident in their ability to develop and learn a new skills-set at degree level. This was compared favourably with previous educational experiences, which for many had been problematic. For example, although Rowena's previous memories of her early school life was distressing at times, she said that she soon embraced the positive aspects of HE-in-FE by moving 'beyond her past' and allowing her present experience to dictate a very different future (West, 2014:42).

The majority of the narratives in this research illustrate the complexity of the participants' lives and the impact that previous unsuccessful educational experiences had on their ability to achieve as learners. For many of them it was a fact of life and not just something that they had thought about. Instead, it was embodied within them. To echo Bourdieu here, education habitus was one of failure and negative disposition. For example, Jake left school with no qualifications because the school had barred him from taking his GCSE exams. However, it seems to me that Jake made sense of his habitus by reflecting on his experiences of compulsory education:

By the time I got to the upper school, I was so fed up that I think I just decided that OK if you are going to treat me like an idiot I am going to behave like an idiot – I felt I was labelled, so I started being disruptive in class, and looking back it was when I couldn't understand what was going on and no-one was prepared to stop and help or explain. I used to get up, walk out of the classroom, and go into other classrooms looking for my friends.

By and large, for the participants in this research study, higher education provided an acceptable route out of their previous habitus, whether dominated by educational failure or ill-health. By participating in higher education, they have all been able to re-label themselves as successful.

In this sense, as Bourdieu (1996:213) argues:

Social reality exists, so to speak, twice, in things and in minds, in fields and habitus, outside and inside agents.

### 8.7 - Health benefits of studying.

'Continuing to learn well into adulthood is beneficial to health and happiness'  
(Dujlovic, 2015:np).

The impact of higher education on individuals is argued to be significant not just from an economic point of view but for their well-being. Research into the benefits of higher education participation for individuals and society by the Department for Business Innovation and Skills (BIS) (2013) indicates that there are a wide range of 'non-market benefits' to the individual and society in general. They list these benefits as follows:

- that graduates can expect to live longer' (p. 24);
- they are less likely to drink alcohol excessively (p.26);
- less likely to smoke (p.27);
- less likely to be obese (p.29);
- and are more likely to engage in preventative care (p.31);
- depression is less common for those with a degree compared to those with A-levels as their highest qualification, which leads researchers to believe that graduates have better mental health issues (p.32);
- graduates are more likely to report 'excellent' health, indicating better general health (P.36).

The report discusses the wider benefits of lifelong learning, which are improved health or improved condition management and therefore, a reduction in health

care costs. Similarly, Higgins, Lavin and Metcalfe (2008:4-5) state 'education is an important social determinant of health', which impacts on all levels of society.

The 'relationship of education to different aspects of health' is well-established and documented (Murrell, Salsman and Meeks, 2003:591) as are the benefits of degree-level qualifications to the well-being of the individual (Jamieson et al.2009:246).

Research by Hanh and Truman (2015:658) found that:

...education as a personal attribute is a central conceptual component and essential element of health, similar to physical fitness.

Similarly, Zimmerman, Woolf, and Haley (2015:np) state:

Among the most obvious explanations for the association between education and health is that education itself produces benefits that later predispose the recipient to better health outcomes.

Research undertaken by Hummer and Hernandez (2013) in the United States found that there are 'educational differences in adult mortality' in the United States of America. Highly educated adults 'have lower yearly mortality rates than less-educated people in every age, gender, and racial/ethnic subgroup of the population' (ibid, 2013:3). Furthermore, Hummer and Lariscy (2011) say that 'recent evidence suggests health gradients in education have increased during the contemporary era of college expansion'. Feinstein et al. (2006:176) found 'substantial and important causal effects of education on health'.

The relationship between education and well-being are reflected in the life story narratives of three participants who were diagnosed with medical conditions prior to starting their degree course. My research suggests that Aaron, Ben and Theo have all benefitted health wise, whether physically or mentally, as a direct result of studying at degree-level. They all spoke of the positive impact of higher education on their own health and the indirect health benefits of studying for a degree. For Theo, returning to study had a significant impact on his dependence on medication:

I was very unhappy working in a male orientated industry. I was prone to mental health problems, which caused me long bouts of depression. For my health's sake, I needed a complete change of direction. This led me to return to education, which has changed my life and my mental health issues. I no longer take any medication – my mental health problems and

bouts of depression have been resolved in my opinion all with the help of studying.

Aaron, who had been dependent on illegal drugs, stated that education had literally saved his life:

Drugs took over my life at an early age really, I ended up in a drug-induced coma with my body going into spasms, and releasing toxins into my liver, it was a case of life or death. I returned to rehab and it was suggested that I consider returning to education rather than employment. I have since completed an access course and I am now studying for a degree. I feel that education has stimulated something inside me that I never thought existed. For me education has saved my life.

Ben, who had had to accept early retirement due to continuing ill health, said:

When this degree finishes later in the year I am going to be completely lost; it has taken my life over in such a positive way for me and my family.

Thus, the narratives of these three participants show what a dramatic impact education can have on mature students returning to study. Interestingly, there appears to be very little research on the health benefits of studying whilst suffering from some form of illness.

Education also has an indirect positive impact on health. For example, education contributes to, and has an impact on, a wide range of skills, which helps individuals to make choices for themselves that increasingly determine health and survival (Mirowsky and Ross, 2005:216). Research into the health impacts of education by Higgins, Lavin and Metcalfe, 2008:12) found that those with higher levels of education are more likely to work as a volunteer, take an interest in politics and have a greater understanding of diversity and equality, which 'contribute to increased levels of social capital which in turn is associated with better health'. This also suggests that an educational setting 'can support positive attitudes towards health' (Higgins, Lavin and Metcalfe, 2008:12). For example, those who get a degree level qualification may feel that they have a 'greater sense of control over their lives, which in turn may lead to better health' (Higgins, Lavin and Metcalfe, 2008:12). With regards to mature students, Murrell, Salsman, and Meeks (2003) suggest that lifelong learning has an 'impact on life satisfaction' and should be encouraged, because of its beneficial health impact. These findings can be seen in the narratives of most of the participants in this study, who speak of liberation, increased confidence and greater satisfaction.

## 8.8 - Family and Inter-generational Matters.

These participants' narratives focused for the most part on the positive dimension of their undergraduate experiences. The majority of those interviewed embraced the impact that higher education had had on their lives and for some of the participants the impact that it had on the lives of their immediate family and/or wider social network. All of the participants said that they were the first generation in their family to study at degree level (apart from Rowena and Zoe who had children at university). However, not all the participants' immediate family and close friends understood their motivation to return to education. Thomas and Quinn (2007:51) note:

First generation entrants are those for whom the responsible older generation (not necessary birth parents) have not had the opportunities to study at university at any stage in their lives.

Florence said that her return to education challenged her parents' tunnelled views on education and that her father said that 'education is not for women, marriage and motherhood is where they belong'. Florence went on to say that her mother said that 'I am selfish and shirking my duty and responsibilities to my children and to them'. Similarly, Rowena also endured negative comments when she told her husband about her impromptu return to education, he said 'they must be desperate to take you'.

Research by Pollard (2008) into 'What do adults think of HE?' says that in general, 83 per cent agreed that university 'is not just for young people'. Pollard (2008:8) says:

'attitudes to HE was positive, which was greater than expected and perhaps represents a change in recent decades'...

This positive attitude is confirmed by another participant Danielle, who said that her parents had not only given her emotional encouragement, they had also supported her when childcare issues arose. On the other hand, although initially she had been under the impression that her husband supported her return to education, Danielle later came to realise that it was grudging support at best. During my third and final interview with Danielle, which followed her graduation, Danielle said that she felt that she had been living a lie, because her husband had recently claimed that he had only tolerated her decision to return to education:

I wanted to train to be a teacher. However, my husband did not understand that I would have to undertake further teacher training on completion of my degree. Because of my decision against his to undertake teacher training, I have recently been going through my own War and Peace. My husband says it is time that I give some financial input into the household and that I must work full-time and give up any thoughts of further study. So, I am now back to where I was before I graduated a few weeks ago with a first-class honours' degree - working as a teaching assistant.

This corresponds with research by Cooney et al., 1982, (cited in Thomas and Quinn, 2007:60) into the effect of studying on marital relationships, which found that 'first generation entry produced tensions and difficulties, which were not easy to resolve'. This can be seen in Danielle's story in which her husband appeared initially to approve with her studies but then, in Danielle's words, he became 'controlling' when she wanted to continue studying by enrolling on a PGCE course. On the other hand, students who were also parents in this study, felt that their children were more likely to think positively about their own education and the possibility of attending higher education. Several of the participants (Danielle, Florence, Harriet, India, Joe, Dillon and Ruth) commented that their children, on seeing their parents occupied with academic work, whether it was reading, writing-up notes or writing an assignment, took a greater interest in their own school work, joining their parents to complete their own homework. In a number of cases, children's school grades improved significantly. For example, India stated:

I have noticed a change in all my children's attitude towards their schoolwork and homework. My eldest son is on the Autistic spectrum and his work ethic and grades have improved considerably since I have been studying for my degree.

Kassie said:

My daughters are really proud of me, they can't stop telling me just how proud they are – they don't really understand the level that I am working at as neither of them has studied for a degree. I think it is a good thing for them to see, that you are not too old to go back to studying and it is never too late.

Several of the participants said that they felt that studying at home has shown their children that there is a positive side to education. India said:

I think I have been a really good role model for the children – it has been really good for them to see me studying and to understand that you must work hard at your studies to get good results.

Similarly, Zoe said:

My kids are really proud of me, they really are. My parents are oozing with pride because I am the first one in the family of my generation to go to university.

Further positive family remarks come from Sophie who said:

All three of my girls watch me work – they have seen me stress over my studies to achieve good marks.

Previous studies by Biesta et al., (2011); Parr, (1998) and Schuller et al., (2004), all document the transformation and change in parents who are mature students and the positive effect this can have on the children.

Although this research is not focused entirely on women, it can be said that higher education has given some of the female participants the incentive and opportunity to step outside of what was a predominantly domestic world of family life and do other things, meet other people, think different thoughts, and be someone else. Willets (2013:26) says that at the time of the Robbins Report (1963) ‘women were particularly under-represented at university’. He states:

In the 1960s only 25 per cent of full-time students at UK institutions were female. But in 2011–12 they were in the majority – 54 per cent of full-time students at UK HEIs were female. The number of women studying has grown by a larger proportion than the number of men across every subject. Women are still under-represented in sciences (maths and physics) and the applied sciences (computing, engineering, technology and architecture), but the margin has narrowed from the 1960s when only three per cent of students studying “applied science” were women. Arguably the most dramatic increase is in medicine: in the 1960s only 22 in every 100 medical students were women, but by 2011–12 this had risen to 59 in every 100.

## 8.9 – Identity negation and confidence, self-esteem and liberation.

This section focuses on the participants’ desire for self-development and the changes they perceived in themselves in relation to their identity, feelings of self-worth, self-confidence and self-esteem and the feeling of liberation that studying at degree level gave them, in that they found themselves through engaging in higher

education. In this section I draw on the ideas of Paulo Freire, associated with the notion of education as both oppression and potential liberation.

During his childhood and adolescence at school, Paulo Freire was four grades behind his peers and his social life revolved around playing with other poor children in his neighbourhood. The lack of educational experiences shaped his future educational concerns for the poor. In his book 'Pedagogy of the Oppressed', which has its roots in Freire's own lived experiences, he introduces the oppressors–oppressed distinction and applies this distinction to education. Freire (2003) argues that by championing education, the oppressed may regain their sense of humanity. Nevertheless, he acknowledges that for this to occur, the oppressed individual must play a role in their liberation:

...education makes sense because women and men learn that through learning they can make and remake themselves, because women and men are able to take responsibility for themselves as beings capable of knowing—of knowing that they know and knowing that they don't (Freire, 2004:15).

Put simply, Walters (2000) and Burke (2002) argue that it is the aspiration for self-improvement and in some cases, self-discovery, that inspires mature students to return to education.

Research into mature students in higher education with special reference to women (Adams, 1993) and a longitudinal study of 32 mature, 'non-traditional' students making the transition to higher education (Bowl, 2003), found that returning to higher education increased confidence and self-esteem. Similarly, although participants in this study had mostly instrumental reasons for returning to study, their narratives are full of references to the impact studying had on their self-esteem and confidence.

Many of the participants' narratives revealed that in terms of identity, gaining a place to study at degree level and achieving by passing exams and assignments, gave them a personal feeling of liberation. Similarly, Baxter and Britton (2001:88) discuss the conscious way in which mature students engage in the educational process:

Mature students are, by definition, a group of people who are attempting to use education to shape their own biographies and identities in a reflexive



was. They have self-consciously made decisions about themselves and the future course of their lives. Often these decisions involve a major change from or break with their past lives and identities.

Many of the participants pointed out that as their academic identity developed, they found themselves less characterised by their past and much less defined by their previous educational history, which in time was overwritten by their success and sense of achievement. In this sense, they were developing what Merrill and West (2013:np) call 'a learning identity', which they came to recognise as being the capacity to study at degree level. This enabled them to overwrite their past negative school experiences with their new higher educational knowledge. It is almost as if their past life as a written narrative had been not only overwritten, with paragraphs omitted but even the narrative voice itself had changed to a more confident self, with better self-esteem, which in itself was liberating – a liberation of the mind.

In a sense, the mature students in this study chose to go to university and continue their education to escape certain limitations they perceived in themselves and their situation. This brought about a disjunction in their sense of self in the present and their past sense of self and in some respects, put a distance between themselves as students and their childhood community (friends and family).

The participants in this study 'brought with them a very diverse range of past life experiences and current life circumstances' (James, Busher and Suttill, 2015:17) and although studying for a degree may not give them as mature students a 'brilliant new job' (Kassie and Aaron) it has given them so much more as a person. As mentioned previously, studying at degree level has not only improved their self-confidence and self-esteem, it has also liberated their mind so that they can become a different person. My participants' stories in some respects still echo that of Rita in the film 'Educating Rita' (1983), which portrays a woman's struggle to fit into a new educated middle-class existence. Although this film, which is based on a 1980 play by Willy Russell, is set in the 1970s, my data suggests that those dislocations are still there – some of the participants felt alienated from both their family and in some instances their friends as well. In many respects, they were afraid of what others would think. Some participants spoke of fearing their close friends and wider circle might think that they had 'acquired airs and graces'.

However, Kassie's new found confidence gave her the confidence to make her own decisions and instead of trying to please everyone:

I have erected barriers in my life that I would never have considered before. I am not so readily available.

Indeed, for some of the participants, returning to education was not only perceived as a financial risk, but also an identity risk. In this sense, becoming higher education students represented 'a threat to class identity' (Britton and Baxter, 2001:89). Their identity and the changes to that identity upon entering HE was not a matter of personal preference or choice but was negotiated with others and in this respect, it was their fellow students, together with the HE-in-FE staff who affirmed participants' new identity and role as university students. In discussing social capital, James, Busher and Suttill (2015:6) describe the development of a learner identity as follows:

Research suggests that developing an identity as a learner is shaped by the complex interaction of a number of factors that relate to social capital, because learning is essentially a social activity.

Meanwhile, Choi (2017:164) discusses the connection between class identity and learner identity:

Learner identity associated with academic success is potentially negotiable and self-sustained through determination, self-regulation, and reflexive strategies, rendering the availability of resource support less important for working-class students' identity development.

One of the participants featured within the research (Rowena) said that 'even in a short period of time here, I feel that I have changed significantly'. Like participants in Merrill's study (2015:1866) focusing on learner identities, Rowena was 'affected by the HE experience', although she had initial doubts about herself and her ability to study at degree level, she felt more confident as the degree progressed and 'managed to develop a resilient and determined learner identity enabling her to keep going and find her place and space within academia' (Merrill, 2015:1866).

Britton and Baxter (1999:179) argue that for mature learners, education is a 'key site for the construction of identity'. A later study (2001:89) states that:

...education has left these students uneasy in their new and old identities. They are leaving behind old identities and establishing new ones, losing the certainty of their old identities in this process of transition.

In their book about adult learning, Biesta, et al. (2011:13) draw a link between changes in disposition that come about through learning and a person's identity. This is based on the premise that 'we have multiple identities' (2011:93?). As can be seen in the narratives of the participants, people see themselves 'differently in different situations' with their roles as parents, partners, sisters, brothers, employees etc. overlapping each other. For some of the participants it was a case of 'leaving behind' their old identities and recognising the fact that their identity is ever changing and emerging in this process of transition (Baxter and Britton,2001:89). Indeed, further research by Baxter and Britton (2001:87) states:

To be 'educated' is to stake a claim to a new identity which can be threatening both to one's own sense of self or to others. This may be experienced either as being seen by others as superior, or as feeling superior to others, but in both cases, there is an implicit challenge to former relationships.

This research corresponds with all the participants' narratives: not only has returning to education been a transitional period in their lives, it has also been a transformative one, during which self-confidence and self-esteem had increased and for most of them, had brought about a change in their identity Reay (1998). Those participants who came from a working-class background now saw themselves as 'owning' a middle-class education. In fact, most of the participants said that they felt an increase in 'self-worth' and that they were 'becoming someone' (McQueen et al., 2009:34). They also said that they felt that they were establishing a new identity with their increased confidence and self-esteem. Almost all of the participants identified with participants in Merrill's study (2015:1869) in that: 'The transitional space of the university provided them with a social space'.

Studies that focus on the stories mature students tell about studying in higher education have also looked at the effect on their families and former friends, 'where the new identity of mature student poses challenges to established gender roles and identities' (Baxter and Britten, 2001:89). Not all the participants' experience echoed research by Diane Reay's (1998:14 and 2001:), who suggested that students can experience a significant loss of community and working-class identity when studying at degree level. Two sources of risk are highlighted in their stories; firstly, risks stemming from challenges to established gender roles in the family, which are mediated by the effects of social class; and

secondly, risks that accompany the movement away from the working-class habitus, which is an inevitable consequence of being in higher education. To be 'educated' is to stake a claim to a new identity which can threaten both. However, the process of shedding their old one also 'affords a sense of fragmented dislocation of the self'. This is similar to Bourdieu (1976, 1986, 1994 cited in Baxter and Britten 2001:89) who argues that as students' progress through their studies, they negotiate and re-negotiate their identities.

Many of these education narratives involved memories of previous educational experiences that still had a hold on their identity as students. Some of the participants commented that prior to embarking on their chosen degree they felt that they were an 'educational failure' (Rowena and Jake) and in the case of Florence, Zoe and Ben they said that somehow, they had 'missed out' on previous education. However, as they moved into talking about their current experience, it was obvious to me and to them that they were no longer that former self that they were discussing. They had become someone independent who had stepped back to achieve (McQueen, et al., 2009:37).

All the participants indicated that, as they progressed through their degree, they felt a sense of empowerment and enrichment within themselves that they had not experienced before. Some participants could identify very specific moments when they experienced a change or shift in themselves, for example upon getting exam or assignment results. This perceived change was invariably positive, with many participants emerging with an increase in their confidence and self-esteem

Most of my participants at some point in the interview used the conceptual label of 'finding a voice' (Strauss & Corbin, 1994:121) or 'liberation' as part of this enrichment process. They used these to describe changes in their identity; a central aspect in this change was gaining the confidence to speak (academic, personal and social). Many of them remarked that before becoming a student, they would have remained silent in any given situation. For example, Kate said:

I am a very different person now than who I was at the start of my degree. I have an opinion and I interact with people more. I feel as if I have something to say – something of interest, now I will get into a debate and hold my own, yeh I am far more confident in myself and my surroundings.

What was evident in this reflection was the amount of self-doubt that Kate harboured in her own identity as a person and her ability to communicate.

In fact, several participants commented that they now felt better equipped to engage in conversation, almost as if they had gained an 'entitlement' to speak.

Hunt and West (2009:82) point out:

The language of identity takes us so far but our work suggests something both more powerful and significant in the lives of many adult learners: a struggle for self, no less, and to connect thought with felt images, and to make what has been unconscious, or repressed, conscious.

Having interviewed several of the participants, two and in some cases three times over the course of eighteen months, in my opinion, it is not that the participants have lost their previous identity, it is that they have been able to develop and grow a new identity and that growth has led to an evolution in their social confidence and self-esteem. This is the power of education and the life history narratives presented in this thesis are about just that. Katie, for example noted that: 'I feel that I am my own person now and not an extension of my husband'.

Similarly, India said:

Studying has made a difference to my relationship; my husband has two degrees and he is quite outspoken and assured. I was never ever confident enough to put forward my opinion. Now with my increased confidence and self-esteem, I will meet him in the conversation and disagree. He is sometimes taken aback because he says where has my meek wife gone?

Mercer (2007:20) suggests that some mature students experience a phase of self-development, change and growth, which may be considered as an integral part of their learning experience.

Brine and Waller (2004:111) argue that this transformation in identity can pose a threat to family and friends with a 'possible loss of existing relationships'. In my study, as the participants' confidence in their ability to study at degree-level increased, there were certainly changes in their relationship with their partners, which seemed to threaten prior dynamics.

Danielle said:

I have changed so much, my increased self-confidence has changed my relationship with my husband, which is fantastic for me, but not my husband. The increase in my self-confidence has also been noted in my work as well as socially. . .

Similarly, Sophie said:

...for the first time in my life I feel valued and others are willing to listen to me. Although, my husband says he wishes I had not started this ... course.

Whilst Emilia said:

My husband has said that he has had enough; he felt that I had learnt all I needed to know when I had completed the access course and if I learn any more, then that would be the end of our marriage. Well, I am in my second year of my degree, I don't know what is happening in our relationship, I know that I have changed, and my husband doesn't like it.

Alternatively, West, (1996:x) argues:

...education can offer a supportive space during periods of profound change and uncertainty. With the help and encouragement of significant others, education can be used to create more meaning, authenticity and agency within a life. It can be a resource, emotionally and intellectually, to help participants move beyond fragments.

West's argument that education, far from threatening a student's identity, offers an opportunity to find a more authentic 'self' and have more agency in the world, is borne out by my participants' accounts. This research study demonstrates how identity transformation at any age can change the views, perspectives and actions of others. What is liberating is that as mature students, their sense of self changes and they begin to see an increase in their self-confidence and self-esteem, sometimes to the point of becoming a different person.

In conclusion, Field, Merrill and West (2012:88) state:

When adults and other non-traditional students articulate narratives of their HE experiences they often tell stories of increased self-confidence and self-esteem... The significance of this is that the enhanced self-confidence and self-esteem that successful students who have been interviewed talk about is not only an important development experience but also provides part of the habitus (or dispositions) that enhance access and retention in higher education

## 8.10 - Returning to the presence of the researcher within the text.

We can think of university as a space where self is in negotiation...  
(Finnegan, Merrill and Thunborg (2014:42)

At the beginning of the thesis (1.5) I reflected on the presence of the researcher within the text. With this in mind, I do not consider that this thesis would be complete without returning to the presence of the researcher within the concluding chapters. Although the research focused on the experience of undergraduate mature students studying, HE in FE, there is a small biographical element to this research in that the participants followed the same path I once walked as a mature student studying HE-in-FE at the same college of further education.

Merrill and West (2009:2) point out: 'Biography enables us to discern patterns but also distinctiveness in lives'. Although I consider that I was very conscientious to maintain a professional researcher/participant element whilst conducting interviews, it was whilst I was transcribing a number of the narratives, that I recognised that there was an auto/biographical element to this research. I considered that the 'uniqueness yet also the similarities of lives and stories...' (Merrill and West 2009:2) to some extent paralleled my own experience as a mature student. Whilst transcribing the interviews, many of the issues resonated with me; so inevitably, I compared and contrasted the stories participants told about their undergraduate experience, with my own, especially in terms of their motivation to return to study and their negotiation of habitus. I also noted the dynamics of transitions that occurred both in the past and potential future transitions for these students. Merrill and West (2009:95) state:

Biographical research constantly raises other questions: about the relationship between the past, present and future, or about who a person has been, is and might be...

Moreover, whilst recruiting and interviewing some of the participants in this small piece of research, I said to them in all honesty, that I had not only sat in the same lecture rooms as they were, I had also listened to some of the same lectures that were being delivered by some of the same tutors. I also said to some of the participants, 'look at me, look at what higher education has done for me and where I am today, conducting my own research as a PhD student'.

The relevance of this is that whilst I was transcribing, a number of memories came to the surface. For example, I had been commended by some of the tutors for my presentation skills - I was usually the mature student who volunteered to present first. On the other hand, I recalled struggling on occasions with the more formal

tone and style of academic writing, and this, together with the fear of failing an assignment, stayed with each and every one of the mature students in my cohort until we had received our results. I also remember one particular assignment feedback that commended me for the ability to look beyond the surface. I found echoes of these memories in the narratives of my participants. To a certain extent, therefore, my own experiences as a mature student shaped the interpretation of my data. West (2014:40) states:

If the relationship is good enough, shared reflexivity is forged overtime, and interviewees play an active role in considering the themes generated.

As a mature student I was able to empathise and identify with the participants; My experience gave me a greater understanding of the difficulties and sacrifices that many of them had or were experiencing whilst studying for their undergraduate degree. The importance of this is that many of the participants viewed my own educational journey as a success story; a number of them commented that they could identify with me and that what they perceived as my success inspired them to continue their academic journey beyond their first degree. I consider that this affinity also led to a number of them sharing their most intimate life histories in an open and honest way, facilitating a bond of understanding. In other words, far from creating bias, my shared experiences with the participants led to the co-construction of rich, contextualised accounts.

### 8.11 - A Final Personal Reflection.

I was drawn to this research topic because of my own experience as a mature student. For me as a single mother, higher education transformed my life. I was a mother and a wife who had previously been dominated to a certain extent by the 'patriarchal authority of a husband' (West, 2014:166). Higher education was the beginning of my transformative journey during which I returned to what West (2014:166) describes as a former 'questioning, agentic, self-authored' self. Furthermore, as mentioned in the introduction, I found that studies of student experiences in higher education tended to be located in traditional universities. As far as I am aware, there are no studies that focus specifically on further education institutions as the context for mature learners in higher education, despite being significant providers of higher education to this important category of 'widening participation' students.



The change I made to my methodological approach from ethnography to life history, has significantly shaped the findings. Whilst transcribing the initial data, it became clear that what I was eliciting from the participants was their educational history. Secondly, I realised that with the number of participants that I had recruited, I did not have the time or the resources to undertake a thorough ethnographic study, in that it would have required a longitudinal approach. Finally, it became obvious that an ethnographic study would have presented a major ethical challenge and resolving the ethical issues would have further reduced the time that I had to spend collecting the data. It was at this point that a life history approach emerged as a methodological alternative. Kouritzin (2000:1) argues:

that participants in life history research benefit from being listened to and from framing their stories in terms of overcoming adversity, while the researcher benefits from becoming critically involved with her or his participants.

Life history is a term that captures aspects of person's remembered experience at a specific point in their lives, so that we can learn from it. During the interview process, I feel that I learnt to listen to the silences and to what was not being said. I also became aware of the interviewee's facial expressions and body language. I was mindful that I was retrieving something from the participants past in the hope that it would help to produce rich and insightful life history narratives for the future. I also became aware of how emotional some participants became while telling their story (some sad and reflective, whilst others expressed anger) and particularly, as they discussed their previous educational experiences. They appeared to have battled with their inner-self, and in some instances, with their families, prior to beginning their higher education studies, and as their stories unfolded, the impression was that they had undergone distinct changes in their identity and engaged with deep emotional turmoil, self-development, internal change and growth. In other words, whatever the motivation, however instrumental, for returning to study, the experience was rich and multifaceted. However, it was not until I started to examine and interpret the data, that I fully understood the personal and private struggles that participants had experienced. As West (1996:11) states:

The more the project evolved, the more I felt it necessary to understand and document my impact on others, and theirs on me, in storytelling.

On the other hand, for the most part HE- in- FE was a positive learning experience, not only for themselves but for their family as well, particularly it would seem, for the children. For all the participants, the experience of entering higher education and undertaking an undergraduate degree was a significant milestone in their lives.

Some, if not all, of the participants portrayed in this thesis may never have had the opportunity to return to study at degree-level if it was not for the publication of the Robbins Report (1963), which was significant in the transformation of the state funded, public system of higher education. As previously stated, this report played a very large part in not only the growth of higher education as we know it today, but also the recommendation that 'courses of higher education should be available for all those who are qualified by ability and attainment to pursue them and wish to do so' (Robbins:1963:8) and 'should not be confined' to those students who could afford to attend (Robbins:1963:210). Robbins (1963) endorsed the inclusion of married women in higher education and in terms of the participants in this study, many of the report's recommendations are directly related to the themes within this thesis and I would have to say, resonate today.

In terms of widening the participation of mature students, the Open University has led the way by harnessing technology to facilitate the access of mature students to higher education learning. The Dearing Report (1997:24) had this to say about the Open University:

...part-time students have more diverse entry qualifications. The Open University, in particular, has shown that many mature students, with few or no prior educational qualifications, are capable of benefiting from higher education (NICHE, 1997:24).

In many respects, HE-in-FE is now following in the footsteps of the Open University (OU), at a time when the OU is facing very serious challenges following the recent resignation of the Vice Chancellor ([www.theguardian.com](http://www.theguardian.com)). With the increase in tuition fees and the decline in part-time students, the OU has been hit hard.

By increasing universities' understandings of mature students and to what extent they value the opportunity to increase their qualifications to degree-level, further

research could provide additional and useful knowledge which might help the sector to more effectively attract and support mature students.

The official view of mature students as encompassing anyone over 25 is unhelpful. Research by Purcell, Wilton and Elias (2007:60) note that the term 'mature graduates is a complex and contested term', which distinguishes between three groups of students and is based on 'stakeholders and commentators engaged in the HE policy debate:

- the traditional-age student graduating before the age of 24;
- the young mature students (who graduate between the ages of 24 – 30);
- the older mature students who are over 30 when they complete their undergraduate studies.

The narratives presented in this thesis demonstrate how diverse the motivations, needs and expectations of mature students can be.

Because there has been very little research undertaken on the experiences of mature students studying, HE-in-FE, this thesis has attempted to provide a greater understanding of the role of mature students studying higher education in a further education setting. The aim was to try to understand and represent the lives of full-time mature students whilst they were studying, HE-in-FE. This is essential to encourage further growth of these non-traditional learners in a learning environment. It is important to remember that the main benefit of education is to society; education itself is a well-established part of society and is almost entirely taken for granted. One only has to imagine a world without doctors, dentists and engineers, for example. Universities train almost every single profession that society relies on for life. In most cases, these professions could not exist without universities. For example, the next generation of antibiotics will be invented by scientists who studied or are studying at university.

Some of the narratives present a somewhat contradictory picture: whilst participants' motivations, or their remembered motivations, as mature students may be primarily instrumental, it may well be that the benefits that they accrued are not to be those that they predicted or thought about when they initially decided to enter higher education. Almost all of the participants agree with research conducted by Choi (2017) into educational transition and learner identity in Hong Kong. Choi (2017:177) states:

After all the disappointments and surprises, the students' concluding reflections speak of the comforts of intellectual gain and social confidence, possibly because of the inclusive nature of the 'modest' university.

It is not so much that they achieved something vocational, it is that they end up a more confident person. This is where life history has much to contribute to our understanding of the mature student experience, in that it does not try to eliminate the internal contradictions and provisionality of experience. It is this kind of understanding that could enrich future policies and practices that aim to facilitate life-long learning.

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[Accessed 12 July 2018]

## Appendix A

### FIELDWORK – Participants who did not fit the criteria

#### ELLIS

Ellis volunteered to take part in the research together with a number of mature students from her cohort. Whilst arranging a date and time to conduct the interview it did not occur to me that she did not fit the research criteria [she was just short of her twenty-first birthday] when she commenced her studies. Although I realised as the interview commenced that Ellis did not fit the research criteria, I chose to continue the interview and found that what Ellis had to say about studying alongside a large cohort of mature students was valuable to this research.

Ellis began the interview by explaining how she felt when she received her A-level results, she said that although she gained the necessary results to be granted a place at the university of her choice, it was only then that she felt that she had made a mistake as the university was at least a four-hour drive from her home.

Ellis says:

Although I am the second youngest of six (my twin brother is the youngest), I did not attend any university open days or visit any universities prior to receiving my A-level results, due to family circumstances. The universities that I chose to attend were centred purely on the school's recommendation. However, once I had arrived at my chosen university, I realised in a very short space of time that I had made the wrong decision for me. I felt that the university itself was so big and a very long way away from home. I was very concerned about money and the lack of it, and it occurred to me that I could do the same degree closer to home, this way I would not incur such a large student debt. In my view, when you are studying A-levels, the school encourages you to apply to top universities, they expect you to achieve good results, leave home and go to university; without giving any thought that this may not suit the individual. There was no discussion whether attending a local university may benefit some individuals from an emotional or financial point of view. You do not question, in fact, you are not allowed to question your teachers, and you do as you are told. On hindsight, I feel I never had the choice, or was given the time to think, we were not encouraged to question anything that we were told. When we were applying for university places the size of the universities was never discussed, nor was the distance from home. In hindsight, it was all about the kudos of pupils studying at a top university. I never had the chance to ask questions: is this the right decision for me? Is it the right time for me to study away from home? I feel the school was only interested in my A-level results and what universities I was applying to study. The decisions that the

school made were not the right decisions for me at that specific time. I have a twin brother who is disabled with a neurological condition, the school knew my circumstances and they know my brother as he attended the same school as me. They know what his capabilities are, and they still encouraged me to apply for places away from home. I feel now that it suited their statistics and not my personal circumstances – when I left home to go to university, I felt guilty leaving my brother at home.

Ellis said that she returned home having spent less than four weeks at the university and although she felt relieved to be home, she also felt a sense of shame and a failure. She said that she also felt that she had ‘let everyone down’ including herself. She went on to explain that she was unhappy living away from home and had almost asked her parents to take her home with them as soon as they had arrived at the university. Ellis said that the doubt began to creep into her subconscious on the same day that she had received her A-level results when she realised the implication of her choice of university.

Nonetheless, Ellis returned home and took a gap-year whilst she considered what her options were. She said that she was fortunate that the part-time job at her local supermarket where she had worked throughout her A-level studies was still available and that it was during one of her shifts that she discussed her reasons for ‘dropping out’ with her co-worker, Laurel. At the time of the conversation, Ellis said that Laurel was a full-time mature student at the local university and was studying on a similar course to the one that Ellis had previously started the year before.

Following on from her discussion with Laurel, Ellis said that she researched what degree courses were available locally and enrolled on a similar course to the one that she had previously started. Now in her third and final year of full-time study at her local university, which she said she ‘did not know existed’, Ellis said:

One of the things that I have found beneficial about studying closer to home is the number of mature students that are studying on the same degree course as me. In fact, there are more mature students studying on my course than students of my own age. In my opinion, studying with mature students has not only helped me mature as a person, they have helped with the whole concept of studying. I have learnt so much from listening to their conversation and the interaction that I have with them, that is both in and out of lectures. The attitude of the mature students

has also helped to put into context things like assignments, essays and exams; I have a better perspective of studying now. I have been stressing away, worried about an assignment, yet when you talk to a mature student about your concerns, they put it into context and say now look at it this way, or there is another point of view. It is not as bad as you think, what about this. They do care, but it is not the end of the world to them unlike traditional-age students. According to most mature students, if you put the time and the effort into your studies, you will see the results. It makes so much sense talking and listening to some of them, rather than worrying on your own needlessly. The mature students that I have been studying with have a very high work ethic and I feel that that has rubbed off on the rest of us in the group.

Ellis continued to talk about her plans, which included further study, albeit dependent on her final classification. Ellis said:

After careful consideration and lots of discussion, I have applied to do a nursing degree. I have been offered a place, dependent on my results on a course in Scotland. [Smiling] Yes, I know, that will mean that I will be leaving home to study, but it is an easier journey home by train. I have not only discussed this decision with the group of mature students that I am studying with now, I have also discussed this with my twin brother and family. I have not only discussed the possibility of a nursing degree but also studying away from home. I have found everyone's advice and guidance invaluable. I feel that I am now prepared mentally to embark on living and working away from home. I feel so grown-up myself, that I am feeling scared that the nursing lectures will be full of young immature students. I also feel that having worked hard and already gained one degree I will be starting from the beginning again and studying with much younger undergraduates, not that I am old, but many of them will be straight from A-levels. I am concerned that they may not have the same work ethic that I have benefitted from working closely with mature students here. I feel that I have matured myself, so much more than if I had stayed at university with students of my own age. I also feel that my results have benefitted from working in a local university with mature students. I am on track to attain a first-class honours degree here.

As mentioned previously I have included Ellis and her views on studying alongside mature students as I consider her views an invaluable contribution to this research study. This is because she has heightened my awareness of the experiences that traditional age students might gain when they study alongside mature students. To conclude Ellis said:

I can only say that studying here alongside mature students has been a rewarding experience; they have given me the confidence to have an opinion and given me a different outlook on life totally.



## WILLIAM

William is the second participant who did not comply with the research criteria for two reasons. The first reason was that he had already studied and attained an undergraduate degree as a traditional age student. Secondly, unknown to me, William was studying part-time on a Foundation degree course. Like Ellis, I chose to continue with the interview with William as not only was he keen to participate but also, he had some interesting views of studying as a mature student.

In his late forties William had studied and achieved a BA (Hons) as a 'traditional entrant' student. Recently, however, he had changed direction in his career path and had returned to education as part of his current employer's training programme. As with all participants at the beginning of the interview, I explained the research study in detail. William immediately responded that:

I now realise that education is ageless and timeless, I am enjoying the experience so much that I may consider applying to study for my master's even though I will be over fifty when I graduate from this degree.

William recalled that when he initially discussed the option of entering a degree programme with his employers, he voiced his concerns that at his age he did not have the skills or mental ability to study at degree level. His employers reassured him that he was not the oldest employee that they had sponsored to study at degree level and would not have offered him the opportunity if they did not consider him capable. According to William, the company ethos was to ensure that all employees were given the opportunity to study at degree level regardless of their age. William went on to say that initially, he had a few concerns about returning to study. The first was that he would be the oldest person in the lectures and that the rest of the students would be 'traditional entrance' students and the second concern was that they would be drinking and partying all night and he felt that he was too old for that! William admitted that he was wrong on both counts: he was not the oldest student in his group and the number of mature students outnumbered the traditional age students and although the group indulged occasionally in social activities it did not involve heavy drinking or partying all night!

## Appendix B

**Faculty of Social Sciences**  
School of Education and Lifelong Learning

University of East Anglia  
Norwich Research Park  
Norwich NR4 7TJ  
United Kingdom

Email: @uea.ac.uk  
Tel: +44 (0) 1603 59  
Fax: +44 (0) 1603 59

Web: www.uea.ac.uk

Dear Sir or Madam,

### **Research Title: A Study of Mature Students - Studying for an Undergraduate Degree in a Higher Education Setting.**

I am writing to you about the research study I am conducting as part of my studies to attain the qualification of Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) at the University of East Anglia (UEA).

I am interested in Mature Students who are studying for an undergraduate degree; in particular, I am interested in looking at the following specific areas:

- what is it like to be a mature student;
- how their experiences as a mature student relates to their past;
- critical educational transition points to include:
  - ❖ entry and exit points;
  - ❖ pre and post assignment date deadlines;
  - ❖ pre and post first year examinations.

During the data collection, I hope, with your permission, to interview you on a one to one basis or via email. One to one interviews will be recorded and transcribed; and will take place in an area agreed with you the participant. 'Follow-up' interviews will also be conducted with a selected number of participants, the follow-up interviews will be dependent on the participants and where they are situated within their studies (i.e. first, second or third year of studies).

It would be very helpful if you could take part in my research study. Please read the information sheet attached to this letter and, if you are willing to take part, please sign and return the consent form, which is also attached.

If you have any questions about the research, please contact me Frances Cobbold at

f.cobbold@uea.ac.uk. If you have any concerns about the research please contact my supervisor

Dr.Rebecca Westrup: [r.westrup@uea.ac.uk](mailto:r.westrup@uea.ac.uk).

Yours faithfully,

Frances Jacks-Cobbold.  
PhD Student  
School of Education and Lifelong Learning  
University of East Anglia  
Norwich. NR4 7TJ

## Appendix C

### PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

**1. Title of Study:** A Study of Full Time Mature Students – Studying for an Undergraduate Degree in a Higher Education Setting.

**Researcher:** Frances Jacks-Cobbold

**Supervisors:** Professor Nigel Norris and Dr. Rebecca Westrup

#### **2. Invitation:**

I would like to invite you to take part in my research study, and if you agree to participate, I will require you to sign an agreed consent form. Before you decide, it is important for you to understand why the research is taking place and what participation in the research study will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully. Please contact me if there is anything about the research study that is not clear, or if you would like further information.

#### **3. What is the purpose of the research study?**

#### **4. Why have you been chosen?**

You have been chosen to take part in this research, because you are a full-time mature student over the age of twenty-one, studying for standard BA or BSc qualification.

#### **5. What is this study about and how will you be involved?**

In order to understand your experience as a full-time mature student, the research will be carried out using one to one interviews and observations.

During the data collection, I hope, with your permission, to interview you on a one to one basis, with the interview to last between 1-2 hours, the interview will be recorded and transcribed; and will take place in an area agreed with you the participant. 'Follow-up' interviews will also be conducted with a selected number of participants, the follow-up interviews will be dependent on the participants and where they are situated within their studies (i.e. first, second or third year of studies).

It is anticipated that some observations will take place within the boundaries of the higher education setting, this will involve spending time with you, for approximately between 1-3 hours a day, although not continuously. The amount of time spent observing you and other participants on a daily or weekly basis will depend on your specific academic timetable.

The aim of the interviews and observations will be to understand and represent the educational experiences of mature students studying for an undergraduate degree. The use of photographic images will be considered to capture student experiences. These would be used specifically to record the social and educational spaces of your experience, particularly learning space, study space and learning resources.

It is anticipated that formal transition points will be covered during the course of the study.

Specifically, entry and exit points, pre and post assignment dates and deadlines, pre and post first year examinations, all to be considered as formal transitions points.

Interviewing and observations will take place between April 2014 and February 2015 dependant on the participants and where they are situated within their studies (i.e. first, second or third year of studies).

#### **6. Do you have to take part?**

It is up to you to decide whether to take part in the research study, if you do decide to take part in the research study, you are free to withdraw as a participant at any time, without giving a reason. Your decision to participate or otherwise in the research study will not affect your learning experience and/or your assessments.

#### **7. Advantages/ Disadvantages of taking part in this research study.**

No incentives or payments will be offered in direct return for participation in the research study. It is anticipated that the information collected during this research study will give a greater understanding of mature students studying for an undergraduate degree in a higher educational setting.

**8. Who will have the access to the research information (data)? Will taking part in this study be kept confidential?**

All data gathered from the research study (data management) will follow the 1988 Data Protection Act. All information, which is collected, during the course of the research will be kept strictly confidential. An ID number or pseudonym will identify you and any information will have any specific identifiers removed, to ensure anonymity. All information relating to participants will be kept in secure files, information will be anonymised, and personal identifiers will be removed from all documents. All data collected for the study including informed consent forms will be stored securely, and computers used will be password protected.

**9. What will happen to the results of the research study?**

The results of this research study will form part of my Doctoral thesis. Participants will not be identifiable in any report or publication from the results of the research.

**10. Who has reviewed the research study?**

The research study has been reviewed and has been approved by the research ethics committee of the School of Education and Lifelong Learning, University of East Anglia.

**11. What happens next if you agree to take part?**

You will be given a copy of the following documentation:

- participant letter inviting you to participate in the research study,
- participant information sheet,
- two copies of the informed consent form to sign. One signed copy of the informed consent form is kept by yourself the participant for your records; the second signed copy is returned to me to be stored securely.

**12. Whom do you speak to if problems arise?**

If there is a problem with your participation, please let me know. You can contact me via the University of East Anglia at the following address: [f.cobbold@uea.ac.uk](mailto:f.cobbold@uea.ac.uk)

Frances Jacks-Cobbold  
School of Education and Lifelong Learning  
University of East Anglia  
NORWICH NR4 7TJ  
[f.cobbold@uea.ac.uk](mailto:f.cobbold@uea.ac.uk)

If you would prefer to speak to someone else concerning the research study, you can contact one of my supervisors:

- ❖ Professor Nigel Norris at [n.norris@uea.ac.uk](mailto:n.norris@uea.ac.uk)
  
- ❖ Dr. Rebecca Westrup at [r.westrup@uea.ac.uk](mailto:r.westrup@uea.ac.uk)

If you have any complaints about the research, please contact the Head of the School of Education and Lifelong Learning, at the University of East Anglia:

- ❖ Dr Nalini Boodhoo, at [n.boodhoo@uea.ac.uk](mailto:n.boodhoo@uea.ac.uk).

**13. What if you would like to withdraw from the study?**

You can withdraw from this research study at any time without explanation, or detriment to your studies. Results up to the period of withdrawal may be used, if you are happy for them to be used. Otherwise, you may request that they are destroyed, and no further use is made of them.

**Thank you for considering taking part in this research study.**

Appendix D

**INFORMED CONSENT FORM - PARTICIPANT**

**(Signed copy to be returned to the researcher)**

**Title of Study:** A Study of Full Time Mature Students – Studying for an Undergraduate Degree in a Higher Educational Setting.

**Research Establishment:** University of East Anglia, Faculty of Social Sciences, School of Education and Lifelong Learning.

**Researcher:** Frances Jacks-Cobbold

**Supervisors:** Professor Nigel Norris and Dr. Rebecca Westrup.

This is to certify that I have read the information about the study.

*(Please tick the relevant*

*boxes)*

I am willing to take part in the study.

I am not willing to take part in the study.

Name: .....

Signature: .....

**YOU WILL BE GIVEN A COPY OF THIS FORM TO KEEP**

=====

Should you wish to withdraw from this Research Project, please complete the form below and return to the researcher Frances Cobbold. [f.cobbold@uea.ac.uk](mailto:f.cobbold@uea.ac.uk).

**I WISH TO WITHDRAW FROM THIS RESEARCH PROJECT:** A Study of Full Time Mature Students – Studying for an Undergraduate Degree at a Higher Educational Institution.

Signed..... Date.....

Date: .....





