

**Perceptions of learner identity amongst students progressing from a  
Foundation Degree to Honours top-up**

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Perceptions of learner identity amongst students progressing from a Foundation Degree to  
Honours top-up

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**Declaration:**

This thesis results entirely from my own work and has not been offered previously for any  
other degree or diploma.

Signature .....

## Abstract

This study examines perceptions of learner identity and the factors that influence and shape this amongst direct entrants ('top-up' students) from Foundation Degree (FD) study in Further Education Colleges (FECs) into year three of an undergraduate Education degree in a large post-1992 Higher Education Institution (HEI). Since the origination of Foundation Degrees (FDs) in 2000-2001, enrolment numbers have borne witness to rapid peaks, a trend that has declined significantly in recent years. Despite the unique temporal nature of this brisk emergence and growth within the UK Higher Education (HE) sector, there is an absence of studies that scrutinise the significance and impact of *dual* HE experiences for these learners. This creates an opportunity to examine the nature of the capital these students bring with them and the extent to which this is valued, as studies in this area tend to identify these learners as deficient in the skills, knowledge and experience required to flourish in an HEI.

Through employing Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), this thesis presents the findings of interviews with eight top-up learners progressing from five different FECs at the end of their Honours level year. The study uses the concepts of institutional habitus and capital (identity, social and cultural) to understand their experiences, and illustrates the complexity of the dual institutional habitus these students are required to navigate, and the impact of this upon perceptions of the self as a learner.

Findings show that exposure to contrasting institutional habitus and the peripheral nature of participation these learners experience has significant consequences for their inclusion in HE, yet this can be mediated to some degree through the social capital top-up students bring to their learning at an HEI, which can serve as an important contributor to validate their sense of self as authentic learners. This study therefore presents an analysis of a distinctly changeable period of HE provision that is now subject to contraction within a broader climate of far-reaching HE proposals and scrutiny, and so makes a timely contribution to debates around diversity and the nature of transformation possible as a result of HE participation.

## Table of Contents

Acknowledgements	7
Abbreviations	8
List of Figures and Tables	9
List of Appendices	10
<b><u>Chapter 1: Introduction</u></b>	<b>11</b>
1.1 Context: Political	11
1.2 Context: Professional	13
1.3 Context: Personal	14
1.4 Trajectory of the research	16
1.5 Research aims and research questions	18
1.6 Overview of the study	19
1.6.1 The institution	19
1.6.2 The sample	21
1.6.3 Overview of methodology and methods	22
1.7 Reflexivity in the study	22
1.8 Theoretical influences and key studies	24
1.9 Structure of the thesis	25
<b><u>Chapter 2: Literature Review Part 1: Context</u></b>	<b>28</b>
2.1 The policy background to Foundation Degrees	28
2.2 Foundation Degrees and the initial consequences of hybridity	35
2.3 Employers and employees: the purpose and value of Foundation Degrees	36
2.4 Student experiences and the value of Foundation Degrees	39
2.5 Summary	42
<b><u>Chapter 3: Literature Review Part 2: Transitioning to Honours</u></b>	<b>44</b>
3.1 Progression motivation and trends	44
3.2 The experiences of those who have transitioned to Honours	46
3.2.1 Academic expectations	52
3.2.2 Study skills	58
3.2.2 Tutor relationships	60
3.2.4 Pedagogical environment and practices	61
3.2.5 Peers	63
3.2.6 Belonging, participation and learner identity	69
3.3 Summary and conclusion to review of the literature	77
<b><u>Chapter 4: Methodology and methods of data generation</u></b>	<b>81</b>
4.1 Theoretical grounding	82
4.2 Critiquing IPA	86

4.3 IPA in this study	89
4.4 Sample and context	91
4.5 Research design	93
4.6 Use of experience centred narrative interviews	97
4.7 Reflexivity	101
4.8 Ethical considerations and procedures in the study	108
4.8.1 Informed consent	111
4.8.2 Anonymity	112
4.8.3 Storage and retention of data	113
4.8.4 Analysis and writing	113
4.9 Analysis of data	114
4.9.1 Immersion in the data	116
4.9.2 Initial noting	118
4.9.3 Developing emergent themes	121
4.9.4 Searching for connections across emergent themes	123
4.9.5 Developing super-ordinate themes	127
4.10 Reflections on reliability and validity	130
4.11 Summary	137
<b><u>Chapter 5: Interpretative commentary of findings</u></b>	138
5.1 Overview	138
5.2 Student Stories	138
5.3 Super-ordinate themes	146
5.4 Super-ordinate theme 1 – structural influencers	149
5.4.1 Social class	149
5.4.2 A second chance	152
5.5 Super-ordinate theme 2 – significant others	153
5.5.1 The role of others	153
5.5.2 The significance of peers	155
5.6 Super-ordinate theme 3 – agency and learning	161
5.6.1 Learner self-concept	161
5.6.2 A passion for learning	166
5.6.2 Personal transformation	168
5.6.4 Career	171
5.6.5 Identifying as a student	173
5.7 Super-ordinate theme 4 - dual institutional experiences	175
5.7.1 Expectations	176
5.7.2 Curriculum	183
5.7.3 Staff support	186
5.8 Summary of findings	188
5.8.1 The impact of previous educational experiences upon learner identities	189

5.8.2 Students' understandings of what it means to be a student and a learner	190
5.8.3 Contrasting experiences of HE and their influence upon perceptions of the self as a learner	191
5.9 Points to take forward	192
<b><u>Chapter 6: Discussion</u></b>	194
6.1 Assertions and Research Questions	196
6.2.1 The influence of prior educational experiences	200
6.2.2 Perceptions of the self as a learner	202
6.2.3 HE culture in FE and HE – institutional habitus	210
6.2.4 Peers as a support tool	216
6.2.5 Peripheral participation and belonging	219
6.2.6 Peers as social capital	222
6.3 Summary	224
<b><u>Chapter 7: Conclusion</u></b>	229
7.1 Answering the research questions and making contributions to knowledge	231
7.1.1 Research question 1: How do dual experiences of HE impact upon top up students' perceptions of what it means to be a learner?	231
7.1.2 Research question 2: What roles do peer relationships play for students entering directly into the final years of a BA Honours degree?	234
7.1.3 Research question 3: In what ways are contrasting experiences of HE culture significant for students navigating their top-up year?	235
7.1.4 Research question 4: Is current policy and practice for direct entrant students suited to their prior experience and needs?	236
7.2 Implications: Policy	237
7.3 Implications: Practice	241
7.4 Implications: Methodological	244
7.5 Limitations of the study	244
7.6 Closing reflections	245
<b><u>References</u></b>	247
<b><u>Appendices</u></b>	264

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Emily Davies 1830-1921

Suffragist and Campaigner of Higher Education for Women

and

Emily Davies 2014 –

My daughter. May you always love learning.

## **Abbreviations**

<b>BA:</b>	Bachelor's Degree
<b>BTEC:</b>	Business and Technology Education Council (level 3 vocational qualification)
<b>CoP:</b>	Communities of Practice
<b>CWDC:</b>	Children's Workforce Development Council
<b>DfE:</b>	Department for Education
<b>DLHE:</b>	Destination of Leavers from Higher Education (survey)
<b>EYSEFD:</b>	Early Years Sector Endorsed Foundation Degree
<b>EYPS:</b>	Early Years Professional Status
<b>FD:</b>	Foundation Degree
<b>FDF:</b>	Foundation Degree Forward (organisation)
<b>FE:</b>	Further Education
<b>FEC:</b>	Further Education College
<b>HE:</b>	Higher Education
<b>HEFCE:</b>	Higher Education Funding Council England
<b>HEI:</b>	Higher Education Institute
<b>HESA:</b>	Higher Education Statistics Agency
<b>HNC:</b>	Higher National Certificate
<b>HND:</b>	Higher National Diploma
<b>IPA:</b>	Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis
<b>LPN:</b>	Low Participation Neighbourhood
<b>LPP:</b>	Legitimate Peripheral Participation
<b>NQF:</b>	National Qualifications Framework
<b>NVQ:</b>	National Vocational Qualifications
<b>OfS:</b>	Office for Students
<b>QAA:</b>	Quality Assurance Agency
<b>TA:</b>	Teaching Assistant
<b>TEF:</b>	Teaching Excellence Framework
<b>UCAS:</b>	University and Colleges Admissions Service
<b>UK:</b>	United Kingdom
<b>UUK:</b>	Universities UK (organisation)
<b>WP:</b>	Widening Participation

## **List of Figures and Tables**

### **Tables:**

- **Table 1:** A comparison of student characteristics at Laydon University and those across all UK HEIs
- **Table 2:** An overview of samples and methodology of ten core studies
- **Table 3:** Participant demographics
- **Table 4:** Overview of data collection phases
- **Table 5:** Matching of emergent themes to research questions, by participant
- **Table 6:** Emergent themes classified by super-ordinate themes
- **Table 7:** Alignment of super-ordinate and emergent themes with research questions
- **Table 8:** Undergraduate enrolments in the UK by all modes of study, 2012-13 to 2016-17 (HESA, 2018).

### **Figures:**

- **Figure 1:** Prior educational experiences and perceptions that impact upon students' ability to cope and flourish in their top-up year

## **List of Appendices**

- **Appendix 1:** Information sheet and consent form for participants
- **Appendix 2:** Example of IPA analysis on transcript excerpt
- **Appendix 3:** Table of Smith et al's stage 4 analysis process with super-ordinate themes

## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

This introductory chapter begins by situating the context for this study in three arenas: political, professional and personal. It then progresses to document the trajectory of the research, present the research's aims and research questions, and supplies a brief overview of the sample and methods used. This is followed by some essential points around reflexivity within the study, a recognition of particular theoretical influences that have influenced the work, and finally an overview of the structure of the thesis.

### **1.1 Context: Political**

The inception of Foundation Degrees (FDs) in 2000 contributed to a significant change in the landscape of Higher Education (HE) provision in the United Kingdom (UK). The numbers of enrolled students on these programmes soared, and then dipped within a relatively short space of time, characteristic of a decline across the HE sector as a whole which was sharply felt in 2012-13, but recovered for first-time undergraduate degree programmes. Most of the brunt of this decline was borne by non-degree undergraduate programmes, i.e. HNCs (Higher National Certificates), HNDs (Higher National Diplomas) and FDs, and remains ongoing.

Reflecting upon the development of FDs in HE in the post New Labour period (1997 onwards) demands recognition of this provision as a transformative force upon Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and students in the last two decades. Although FDs continue to recruit, it could be suggested that they now occupy a somewhat awkward position in the menu of HE provision available to prospective students; an option either at full fees (up to £9250 for 2017/18) for a programme that is not quite the same as the first two years of an undergraduate degree, or differential fees at some FECs (Further Education Colleges) (£6000 at some institutions). This fee inequality is re-iterated by UCAS (2017), outlining that generally, a two year FD with a one-year top-up tends to incur lower fees

than a traditional three-year undergraduate programme; this financial stratification may carry connotations of cost reflecting value and does little to clarify the difference in options and suitability of courses for applicants. Furthermore, with regards to entry qualifications, commonly FDs require much lower admissions requirements (and institutions can apply discretion around these) than those for a first year undergraduate programme, and evidence around the tangible employment benefits of gaining an FD is murky and in some cases indistinct due to its reliance on the Destination of Leavers from Higher Education (DLHE) survey, the accuracy of which can be criticised on many grounds, such as failing to take into account of longer term career progression (Universities UK, 2010) and the definitions of a 'graduate' job. Therefore, the position of FDs has been subject to significant shifts which at the present time leave their prospects uncertain.

This thesis therefore represents an important contribution to analyses of a potentially distinctive period in HE policy provision, examining a group of students that embody quite a unique manifestation of HE policy: such zealous government commitment (rhetorical and financial) to enabling access to non-traditional groups of students, at present, does not look to be on the horizon again. For, whilst there is consistent and undeniable recognition of FDs as a valuable conduit for personal transformation (Tierney and Slack 2005, Knight et al 2006, Snape and Finch 2006, Goodship and Jacks, 2007 Dunne et al 2008, Edmond 2010, Morris 2010, Yorke and Longden 2010, Fenge 2011, Ooms et al 2012, Largan 2015, and Herrera et al, 2015) and recognition of their positive impact upon the Widening Participation (WP) agenda and enhanced recruitment from low-participation neighbourhoods (Harvey 2009, Fenge, 2011, Robinson 2012, Largan 2015), the ability of FDs to act as a vehicle for social justice is under threat, as evidenced by the sharp contraction of numbers across all non-degree undergraduate provision since 2009 (HEFCE 2014, HESA 2018). This situates the route to HE and Honours status as an uncertain one for many individuals. Despite impending changes within the HE sector couched in the language of inclusion, employing metaphors that describe HE as a "powerful tool" and "an engine" for social mobility (DfE, 2017a), the retraction of FD availability and popularity as a result of policy changes (see chapter 2) is the antithesis of this rhetoric, and this

study supplies evidence of the potential loss of opportunities prospective learners may not have access to if these trends continue.

## **1.2 Context: Professional**

The study has been undertaken during a prolonged professional period for myself, whereby I have made the transition from full-time Lecturer, to Senior Lecturer, to Course Leader, then fractional Senior Lecturer at the host institution. Consistently throughout this time (nearly nine years), a substantive part of my role has been centred around recruiting, inducting, teaching and supporting students who enter onto an undergraduate Education programme with advanced standing, due to existing qualifications at Levels 4 or 5<sup>1</sup>. For some time, these students formed a majority of the student body at this particular HEI, and indeed at times myself and the wider teaching team felt overwhelmed by the number of entrants progressing from FDs: it had ‘conveyer belt’ connotations without us ever satisfactorily getting to know these students in the compressed time frame of one academic year. It created pressures in terms of larger cohorts, and also opportunities with regards to income generation, increased reputation, curricular development and pedagogical considerations for the particular needs of this cohort. Consequently, it would not be inaccurate to say that more recently, the retraction in FD students, and subsequently fewer entering our programme to ‘top up’ to full Honours status has had a significant effect upon our programmes and team. For example, class sizes of Level 6 modules that may have reached 80 in 2010-11, now sit more comfortably in the 30s, a shift which again, has both pedagogical and financial implications. As a relatively young academic with the potential for another thirty or more years of a working life ahead of me, this era of FD ‘boom and bust’ has undoubtedly had a significant impact upon my career.

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<sup>1</sup> In the UK, a National Qualifications Framework introduced in 2015 defines Level 4 as equivalent to Year 1 of an undergraduate degree programme, and Level 5 on a par with Year 2.

Significantly, it has enabled me to further gain insights into experiences and expectations of so-called 'non-traditional' students, a term which I unpack later on in this thesis, and one which I have found to be increasingly redundant through my contact with top-up students. Furthermore, expansion in numbers and the attendant management required of this cohort contributed to additional opportunities for me to both focus my teaching in areas of interest which are popularly aligned to this cohort, and also to move into course leadership/ programme management for a time, a valuable period for my own personal development in which I gained a great deal of knowledge and experience.

### **1.3 Context: Personal**

My own undergraduate experiences were very far from those of the students at the centre of this study. I carried many of the stereotypical characteristics of an undergraduate in the late 1990's, being aged eighteen, entering with A levels, a white female, having experienced a lower middle-class upbringing in an ex-grammar turned comprehensive, where the norm was progression to university. Aside from the bad timing of my university entrance which coincided with the introduction of tuition fees, my undergraduate career was relatively uneventful, but without a doubt sparked a strong interest in social justice with regards to educational issues. Prior ideas I had held of progressing to a career in law changed swiftly as I became increasingly interested in education policy, and 'equality of opportunity' as it was termed at the time. Following a few years involved in European-funded research with no real contact with students, I returned to my discipline of Education to lecture in 2004 somewhat in the dark about this seemingly 'new' breed of FD-originating students who were populating my classrooms, and as a younger member of staff I was acutely aware of the discrepancy in age, whereby most of them were significantly older than me, with valuable experience in education sectors or children's workforce.

Increasingly, I became more and more engaged with these cohorts of almost entirely female, mature, students who were managing complex lives balancing not only study, but often almost full-time employment, families, and a whole host of other issues and influences upon their studies. When I began to carry out exploratory pilot interviews around student experiences in the early stages of this study, it was the experiences of this cohort that resonated with me most on a personal level, and there are two reasons for this. The first is that their stories are more complex and less straightforward, enriched with life experiences and obstacles, and if they were reflected in fictional writing, they would be all the more beguiling; I cannot resist a good story. The second reason I became more committed to, and entwined with the stories of these women was as a result of my own personal transformations that occurred during the course of my doctoral studies. Not only did I become a part-time student attempting to balance a demanding career with study, I also became a mother, and these experiences allowed me to step into some of their shoes for even just a brief time, and to experience even greater awe at their achievements, and more resonance and connections with the travails of women with multiple identities; student; mother; employee. In some small ways, I had become increasingly similar to those whom I was researching: not quite 'one of them', but certainly closer to that end of the spectrum than I had been before.

On a personal level, I now carry a tinge of sadness that my classrooms are no longer dominated by 'these kinds' of students who have come from the FD route. I feel this loss both at a personal level due to the pleasure of our personal and pedagogical connections, and also realise that the experiences of the students who now populate the courses I teach upon are less enriched by their exposure to peers with maturity, experience and resilience at play.

## 1.4 Trajectory of the research

This study began with the broadest of parameters: a focus on student experience. Immensely privileged to have access to a cohort characterised by incredible diversity, through pilot interviews in mid-2010 my interest was increasingly piqued by the experiences of mature students, in all likelihood due to the sharp contrast they provided to my own degree level studies, and also because of the steep progression in my knowledge and understanding about the complexity of life as a mature student. Gaining an insight into this helped me to reflect upon and affirm a commitment to try to exercise a more empathic and inclusive approach to my teaching and learning practices.

In order to further narrow the boundaries for a potential study, the focus honed in on the experiences of students who were entering the programme with so-called 'advanced standing' due to prior qualifications. Here I found myself privy to the experiences of students with sometimes decades of experience in the education sector, and often under pressure from employers to gain the all-important degree status, for career progression and job security. So, interviews at the end of 2010 included those who were lecturers in FECs, experienced early years practitioners, or learning support tutors for adults in the area of key skills and I found the experiences of these who had joined in Years 2 or 3 of the programme to be more unique, problematic and resilient than those of more 'traditional' students who had entered the conventional way, embarking upon a three-year degree programme on a full-time basis, usually at a younger age, and, already receiving a good deal of attention in the literature.

I found this specific group of direct-entrant participants could be ring fenced further, creating less significant variance within the cohort by focusing solely on those who were entering directly into the final year of the programme as a result of undertaking a FD, usually in the area of early years. Therefore, what was originally intended as data collection for a main study became another pilot (in late 2010), and the final data presented here in this thesis was gathered between March and May 2012. As noted earlier in this chapter, conversely this was the point at which much of this type of

undergraduate provision began to contract, and so already the students under consideration had had their heyday at this point. These students, dichotomous in that they were 'new' to university study yet already third years, were encountering perhaps some of the sharpest shocks to their sense of self, professional and academic identities through the demands of a somewhat alien environment which required sink or swim adjustments in a rapid space of time – just a nine-month academic year in which to gain the Honours status that was being chased by themselves, their employers and the sector as a whole at the time.

The demographics represented within this cohort of top-up students also permitted examination of a combination of structural characteristics that interested me, predominantly gender and social class. But, also, the prevalence of maturity, a prior professional status, and – crucially – existing experience of HE in settings where such provision was still relatively new meant that the cohort I had access to exemplified a quite unique opportunity for research.

Whilst registered for studies, two periods of intercalation were necessary. Initially these caused uneasiness and doubts about the currency and relevance of the study, as the downturn in FD and top-up students became apparent. However, an alternative way to view this has been to recognise that the demise of the trend of large numbers on FDs and subsequent top-ups (both nationally and within the institution where the research is based) actually creates an opportunity to reflect upon a very specific epoch with the benefit of hindsight and a lens that is more distinct and less blurry than it might be if I were still immersed in the culture and day to day realities of managing and working with such large numbers of top up cohorts.

## 1.5 Research aims and research questions

The above sections have identified the broad remit of the research and begun to establish some multifaceted political, professional and personal rationale for the focus. This next section introduces the broad aims of the research and works through the research questions that guide the study.

The overarching aim of the study is: **to explore the influence of a dual institutional habitus upon the perceptions of learner identity amongst top-up students progressing from a Foundation Degree to an Honours 'top-up' programme**

The research questions that underpin this aim and are implemented within this study are:

1. **How do dual experiences of HE impact upon top-up students' perceptions of what it means to be a learner?**

This question seeks to explore the significance of prior educational experiences upon students during their exposure to HE programmes, both their HE in FE experience (i.e. their FD) and their top-up year at an HEI. The influence of early educational biographies and rationale and motivation to undertake HE study in the light of structural and agentic factors is considered.

2. **What roles do peer relationships play for students entering directly into the final year of a BA Honours degree?**

Common to all participants in the study are characteristics synonymous with the label of 'non-traditional' students, placing these learners on the peripheries of 'usual' student norms in terms of appearance, activities and demonstrable engagement in 'student life', particularly in a social context. These considerations therefore focus upon inclusion amongst the student body, and the significance of social and emotional support from peers in coming to terms with perceptions of difference.

3. **In what ways are contrasting experiences of HE culture significant for students navigating their top-up year?**

This question seeks to identify and explore the differences experienced by students who have directly comparable experiences of HE study in their local FEC followed by HE study in a significantly larger HEI. Both institutions emit the espousal of certain facets of institutional habitus which are distinctly comparable to one another and demand rapid adjustments and embodiments from students as they transition to Honours level study.

#### **4. Is current policy and practice for direct entry students suited to their prior experiences and needs?**

This question is concerned with establishing the extent to which learners' HE experiences and ability to form a learner identity is impacted upon by existing assumptions and practice towards progressing FD students in the HEI institution to which they progress. The intention behind this question is to explore what adaptations policymakers and practitioners may consider in the broader context of widening participation (WP) strategies and actions for these learners.

## **1.6 Overview of the study**

### **1.6.1 The Institution**

The site for research is a post-1992 large HEI that serves a predominantly regional and local student base. Within this study the HEI will be referred to as Laydon University. This HEI has a far reaching history of providing education originally for working class men, then developing a strength towards more technical provision, and progressing from Polytechnic to University status in 1992. HESA student data for 2013-14 obtained from the institution (the most readily available detail near the time of data collection) shows that both institution-wide, and particularly within the academic department where these students were situated, there is a higher than average proportion of students who are female, part-time, and aged over 30, as illustrated below:

	% of female students	% of part-time students	% of students over 30
UK wide	56	16	11
Education and Childhood students at Laydon	68	33	33

Table 1: A comparison of student characteristics at Laydon University and those across all UK HEIs

More broadly, the institution draws 17.3% of young full-time students from Low Participation Neighbourhoods (LPN), which is higher than the 2015/16 UK wide figure of 11.3% (HESA, 2017). Thus it is apparent that the demographics of Laydon situate the institution very much as synonymous with a WP (Widening Participation) ethos.

A particularly defining characteristic of this institution is its relationship with a large number of FECs across a vast geographical area, and this is of importance to this study as the focus is upon student perceptions of *dual* HE experiences. Also of significance is that of the eight participants within this study, they had progressed from five different FE settings between them, and so the experiences of HE study in FE that they brought with them were not just confined to one establishment. These FE settings varied with;

- Three students coming from one college a considerable distance away from the HEI, in a small market town within a large rural area
- One student coming from the most local college, situated in the same city as the HEI
- One student from a college on the outskirts of the city
- One student from a college approximately 30 minutes away from the HEI's city, in an area ranked within the top ten in the country of the most deprived authorities

- Two students coming from a collaborative arrangement with the FD delivered in partnership with the local authority and the HEI, with delivery by FE tutors in a number of local authority training centres.

So, a contrast in the settings for FD delivery is apparent. Whilst this makes the range of influences upon experiences more variable, it also benefits this study by ensuring that it is not just a straightforward comparison of progression from one educational institution to another, but an exploration of experiences common to the FD and progression to top-up, regardless of the specifics of the FEC. This means that perceptions and experiences cannot be attributed solely to just one institution's culture, policies or procedures, but to the nature of this specific qualification in a range of similar institutions with commonalities of habitus.

### **1.6.2 The sample**

The sample is constituted of a cohort of eight female students who upon completing (passing) their FDs in their local FE setting, progressed to the HEI for the opportunity to undertake one further year of study and top-up their FD to a BA (Honours) degree. All of the students had undertaken an FD in the area of Education, and had progressed onto one of two possible top-up options, both in similar disciplinary areas. The typical graduate destinations for students on the top-up programmes are primary teaching or social work with children. Ages ranged from 25 to 56 and the majority (seven) of participants identified as being of White ethnicity. Employment type was typically in early years or classroom assistant roles.

### **1.6.3 Overview of methodology and methods**

This study employs an interpretivist and idiographic approach through experience-centred narratives, with data gathered in the form of semi-structured interviews. This approach and method was consistent throughout all three phases of data collection (over a period of two years), with two pilot phases and one main study.

The focus of some questions in the interview schedule were necessarily altered throughout the study, but the method remained the same, whereby relatively unstructured and narrative accounts were elicited in a one-to-one interview setting undertaken between the participants and the researcher. For the main study (presented in this thesis) the data was collected quite intentionally towards the end of the academic year and top-up period of study in order to facilitate reflections and accounts based on a near complete top-up experience.

### **1.7 Reflexivity in the study**

Recognition of the extent of reflexivity required for this study has been gradual and yet perhaps the most significant part of Doctoral study on a personal level. It is important to note that although this thesis demands some element of reportage upon the reflexivity that can be identified within this study, this is not viewed as a complete business or process by any means: one of the most conclusive things for me to take away from the experience of this study is the sense that the research, and indeed the researcher remain unfinished, as part of a continual growth (Attia and Edge, 2017).

Necessarily, this study demands recognition and consideration of the role and influence of the researcher, and this is significant in several respects;

- I acted as either course leader or module tutor for all of the participants and therefore held responsibility and power with regards to decisions such as awarding marks for assessed work and decisions that might be taken at relevant assessment boards.
- I was an embodiment of the HEI ethos, status and habitus of Laydon University which franchises and quality assures the FD programmes that the students had previously completed. This carries with it certain connotations of an institutional hierarchy whereby the HEI acts in the role of approver, authorising decisions such as staff whom are deemed eligible to teach, whether provision and experience at the FE college is judged to be appropriate, and moderation of assessed work. As course leader I was implicated in, and often responsible for some of these decisions.
- Perceptions I held of myself as a researcher and an academic have undoubtedly influenced my confidence in pursuing aspects of this study. These reservations filter all the way through into my perceptions about the reflexive element of this study and my ability to truly “know and make known [my] subjectivity” (Wickens et al 2017 p.865)

These multifaceted representations of my *self* in the study denote not so much just a reflection, but a *diffraction* (Bozalek and Zembylas 2017) of ideas, interpretations, understandings and perceptions which requires identification of differences in positions of those involved in the research and analysis of “their effects in knowledge-making practices” (p.112).

Chapter 3, Methodology and Methods of Data Generation, situates this study’s conceptualisation of reflexivity and discusses elements of the research processes and procedures in relation to this.

However, it must be stressed that these discussions are not seeking to classify a specific ‘type’ of reflexivity applied within this study, as to do this would run the risk of reducing discussions on reflexivity to a “positivist exercise in checking and validating” (Findlay and Gough, 2003 p.28). The aim of exercising a reflexive approach within the study is to cultivate what Pillow refers to as an

“uncomfortable reflexivity” (2003 p.188) which demands a consistent level of attentiveness to pockets of unease that arise, and locates what I believe becomes ‘known’ in the study as tentative representation grown out of many tangled roots.

## **1.8 Theoretical influences and key studies**

The principal bodies of established theory upon which this study can comfortably situate itself are derived from the work of Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger (1991, 1998) in the form of the concepts of *legitimate peripheral participation* from top-up students who perceive themselves as remaining on the outskirts of a ‘real’ student community. There is also some use of the work of Pierre Bourdieu (1990) in relation to discussions of institutional culture and *habitus* within the FE and HE institutions in question. Chapter three of this study articulates the ways in which these theories contribute to an understanding of learner identity, and the significance of this.

The study recognises the significance of institutional habitus and the demands upon top up students to doubly acclimatise to and then navigate two sectors (HE in FE, followed by HE). At a surface level observation in terms of the programmes offered, these two kinds of institutions could be said to be moving closer together on a continuum of HE provision in the UK, but in reality the distinctive institutional norms attributed to each pervade. Authors in this field who have worked to apply the concept of institutional habitus to HEIs most notably include Thomas (2002) and Reay et al (2001) who stress that different kinds of educational institutions have differences in their institutional habitus, and identifying the manifestations and consequences of this for these students, and their perceptions of themselves as learners, is at the heart of this study.

A bridging concept central to this thesis that straddles the distance from institutional habitus to legitimate peripheral participation is that of *social capital*, also most often ascribed to the work of Bourdieu (1986) and conceptualised as a resource by which social connections can enhance, or “the capacity of individuals to command scarce resources” (Portes, 1998 p.12). In this study, these “scarce resources” can be envisaged as knowledge and understanding of the norms, practices and expectations of the HEI. It is the assertion of this study that top-up students are largely prohibited from extending their social capital which in turn, leaves them less well equipped to cope with the institutional habitus of the HEI. This lesser reserve of social capital is also compounded by the positionality of top-up students on the outskirts of an already-established learning community, a scenario subject to extensive analysis in the work of Lave and Wenger (1991) and Wenger (1998), whose writing about the significance of reduced familiarity with a community’s practice can be applied in this study to the understanding of factors that might make the transition experience, and feelings of authenticity as a learner at the HEI more valid for these direct-entrant students.

Relevant contributions in this area that have specifically examined the experiences of top-up students span a time frame of circa ten years, from Christie et al (2006) to Morgan (2015), although the quantity of studies published in the area scarcely outnumbers the number of years over which they have been published, thus making enquiry into these cohorts’ experiences and their role in the landscape of HE provision and development somewhat scarce.

## **1.9 Structure of the thesis**

The structure of the thesis is as follows:

## **Chapter 2: Context**

This chapter analyses literature that situates the development of FDs from a political, economic and social justice perspective. It examines a range of studies that have sought to establish the consequences of FDs in the landscape of UK HE provision, and reviews evidence around the perceived purpose and value of FDs from the perspective of both students and employers.

## **Chapter 3: Transitioning to Honours**

Continuing to review the literature, this chapter presents an examination of the evidence around trends and motivations for progression amongst FD students, then begins to interrogate the limited body of research that has focused specifically on the Honours experiences of direct-entrant students who have completed degree level programmes at HEIs. This chapter also draws upon a range of literature pertaining to learner identities and (peripheral) participation.

## **Chapter 4: Methodology and methods of data generation**

Here, the methodological approach and methods used in the study are presented and justified. It provides rationale for the ontological and epistemological lenses that are applied in the study, and the way in which these translate into particular ways of thinking and doing in the course of the data collection and analysis.

## **Chapter 5: Analysis: Interpretative commentary of findings**

This commentary presents findings from the analysis of eight narrative interviews, presenting interpretations of the top-up students' experiences of FD and Honours level study.

## **Chapter 6: Discussion**

Transforming the key findings into assertions that can be attached to each of the study's research questions, this chapter establishes an understanding of the value of the study's findings in light of existing knowledge. The exposition focuses upon the extent to which contrasting experiences of HE

institutional habitus impact upon learner identities, and the significance of peer support and social capital throughout the transition from one HE environment to another.

## **Chapter 7: Conclusions**

The thesis closes by presenting the study's conclusions which indicate that: for the cohorts representative of those in this study who participated in a booming and expansive phase of HE provision, the gains have been subject to cultural manifestations of HEI's values, processes and practices, with varying degrees of inclusion and personal transformation available to learners.

This chapter also asserts the implications of the study's findings for policy and practice, the contribution to knowledge made by this research, and limitations of the study.

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review Part 1: Context**

This chapter establishes the political, economic and social justice context in which this thesis is situated, and analyses literature that has examined FDs from these perspectives. It considers the role and value of FDs in the landscape of HE provision in the UK, and determines the climate in which this study was conceived and progressed.

### **2.1 The Policy Background to Foundation Degrees**

The origins of FDs are widely agreed (Doyle 2003, Wilson et al 2005, FDF 2007, Fenge 2011) to be situated in the 1997 National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education, better known as the Dearing Report, an inquiry commissioned by a Conservative Government then published just two months after New Labour's landslide victory in May 1997. Its brief was to consider the direction of higher education in the UK over the coming twenty years.

Wolf (2002), in commenting upon the Dearing Report portrays it as a document that "offers a ritual obeisance to the notion that education 'contributes to the whole quality of life', but then proceeds to ignore this for the remaining 446 pages of the main report" (p.255), suggesting that the report, whilst containing a chapter with the heading of 'Widening participation' was preoccupied only with matters of economy.

This is a suggestion recognised in other literature analysing the development of policies concerned with adult education at the time, such as Bennett (1997, cited in Apperley 2014). Watson (2014) notes the almost simultaneous publication of Dearing alongside other reports with a similar focus upon the notion of lifelong learning: The Kennedy Report (*Learning Works: widening participation in further education*) and the Fryer Report on Adult and Continuing Education (*Learning for the Twenty-first Century*), also both published in 1997. These three reports were the focus of prompt analysis by

Tight who examined the varying interpretations of lifelong learning and refers to the idea of lifelong learning within Dearing as a “rather thin veneer” (1998 p.476). Whilst he acknowledges that all three reports extol lifelong learning as a vehicle that should involve a wide range of society, he claims this is “grounded in fairly simplistic assertions about the need to increase economic competitiveness” (p.477-478), thus supporting the stance of those above who assert that Dearing’s prime focus was upon the economy.

A useful analysis of the development of Foundation Degrees can be found in the work of Doyle (2003) whose inquiry and language clearly illustrates his view of adult education policy around this time as “functional”, motivated by the need for Britain to invest further in human capital (also recognised by Gibbs, 2002). Doyle illustrates how shifts since the 1980s ground policy further away from the democratic ideal towards the economic, with a dominance of the “work preparation theme” (p.280) and an assumption that HE was not providing what the economy needed, thus prompting proposals for significant changes, which indeed cannot be denied from the current day perspective, as the twenty years that Dearing was looking forward to come to a close upon a vastly different HE landscape in the UK.

Doyle analyses the influence of Third Way ideologies upon HE policy developments from the late 1990’s to the early 2000’s and highlights a range of conflicts between government policy that ostensibly seeks to remain in a democratic camp, with aspirations towards social justice and fulfilling individuals’ potential, in opposition with narrow and specific targets for HE expansion, focusing upon HE as preparation for work. Tight (1998) identifies a long list of ‘non-participants’ identified across the three 1997 reports and suggests that the identification of such groups of individuals (e.g. those on low incomes; some ethnic minority groups; lone parents; part-time and temporary workers) actually works to place the blame for non-participation upon them, applying an individual deficit model to excluded and vulnerable groups of learners. These non-participants identified as a prime target for expansion of adult education are indeed many of those who progressed onto Foundation

Degrees: success if a cursory glance is taken, but doubts abound as to whether the expansion of higher education as part of this strategy has in fact been a success in this respect, as recognised by Doyle who levels that “The rush to expand higher education and frame even the most vocational of courses within the honours degree template has not necessarily served the best interests of a more diverse student body” (2003 p.286).

And so the climate from which the specific blueprint for FDs emerged was already muddled by conflicts between ideals about social justice and the economy. Age old political priorities that have been clumsily combined in education policy within the compulsory and post-compulsory sector for some time remained apparent; for example, the ethos of inclusion versus the establishment of free market principles amongst schools. Part of Dearing’s rationale for the Foundation Degree in particular lay in some apparent “concern.... that too high a proportion of students is aiming for a degree rather than a sub-degree qualification” (Dearing 1997 para 3.10), a source of anxiety due to the seemingly too high-risk potential for failure. There are thus several reiterations within Dearing that the recommended expansion should have a strong focus upon qualifications *below Honours level*; either as HNCs, HNDs or other similar awards (ibid para.6.14) that, it was suggested, would “warrant the title Bachelor’s degree at level HE” (ibid para.10.47). This suggestion was in line with new proposed national qualifications frameworks, that a qualification with a ‘degree’ label could be introduced, without the Honours (referred to as level ‘H3’ in the Report, akin to Level 4 in the current UK qualifications framework).

Subsequently the proposal for Foundation Degrees was seen in the DfEE’s (2000) *Foundation Degrees: A Consultation Document* followed up by more detailed information in HEFCE’s *Foundation Degree Prospectus* (2000). In this prospectus, invitations for actors to submit bids to develop the original FDs stipulated that there must be the involvement of an HEI, employer representatives and the delivering institution, usually a FEC. It was envisaged that in the first year of delivery, 2001-02, up to 2000 student places would be available (HEFCE 2000) with potentially a further 1000 to follow.

Applications for proposals were given a tight turnaround, from publication of the bid in July 2000, to the deadlines for submission in October of the same year.

Specific characteristics of the proposed new qualifications became apparent as the invitation for bids made it very clear that these qualifications were aimed at individuals in intermediate-level occupations, with opportunities for specialisations and progression: “The foundation degree is intended to help education providers supply the labour market with the high-quality graduates needed to address the shortage of intermediate level skills” (HEFCE 2000 p.3). Also unique was the way in which they were intended to blend academic knowledge and technical skills – an ideal from Dearing who warned that to separate academic and vocational routes “is at variance with the facts. We see advantages in creating a framework which encompasses both pathways” (Dearing, 1997 para 10.21). Wagner suggests FDs are “substituting employability for vocationalism” (2001 p.4), with the not uncommon inference that qualifications perceived as vocational were somewhat tainted and less attractive. The FD could be said to have been conceived with the hope of trying to go some way to bridging the age old divide and lack of compatibility between these two kinds of provision referred to as a “bipolar” relationship by Gibbs (2002 p.201) who questions why we even need to try and reconcile the two to create some kind of “illusion of parity of esteem” (ibid).

The creation of a new qualification was an ambitious strategy trying to combine a number of objectives: to upskill a specific sector of the already existing workforce; to bring more people into employment (and thus reduce unemployment figures); to encourage HE participation from under-represented groups; to provide an alternative route for some young people; and an attempt to rationalise the number of below Honours qualifications (e.g. the HNC and HND). The pinning of these broad aspirations upon one single qualification gave rise to some comments about the incongruous nature of such strategies, for example from Wagner (2001) who acknowledges the potential attraction of FDs for part time students but queries the suitability for some full time

students from low participation groups, with the exception of filling what was then a gap for those who may not have had the qualifications for an HND, or preferred the lure of the 'degree' title. Fuller (2001 p.245) argues that "the explicit targeting of the foundation degree to adults in work excludes the unemployed who are already under-represented in part-time higher education", which adds further weight to claims presented earlier about the possible lip service paid to the concept of widening participation when in reality the priority was upon the economy. Gibbs (2002 p.203) foretold that "...those who choose them.... will be the more vulnerable, under-represented and underprivileged". Whilst Gibbs' comment on the one hand would have served as an ill-received portent by those behind the policies, those who enter higher education as most vulnerable are also those most at risk of failing, withdrawing, and in need of high levels of additional support.

Commentary around the time of FDs launching includes Wagner's reference to them as "radical" with the potential for "revolutionary impact" (2001 p.3) and Gibb's consternation about the potential for deception with such an award; "I wonder why the use of the label 'degree' is being stretched way beyond its common usage in global educational markets...The award is misleading in that it trades on the values and benefits of a predecessor – the honours degree" (Gibbs 2002 p203).

And thus it was apparent that a range of mixed views around the value, purpose and accessibility of the new qualification were emerging rapidly as programmes became established. In 2003, the organisation Foundation Degree Forward (FDF) was established to oversee the development of foundation degrees and establish maximal employer engagement. From 2006 their remit was widened such that they were also tasked with improving employer engagement with HE more broadly, not only with regard to FD programmes, and so this shift in focus carried with it an inference that HE should have more of an employability emphasis. This was seen explicitly in the 2006 Leitch Review of Skills with recommendations to increase employer engagement with HE further through the development of partnerships and access to HE through the workplace. The report itself explicitly

stated that growth in the HE sector should move away from traditional three-year degree programmes to focus on developing more specific job related skills such as those seen in FDs (Leitch, 2006).

In 2008 Dunne et al described a “mandatory optimism” around FDs (p.239), suggesting the inevitability of this employability-oriented policy direction. This was the subject of Bird’s analysis of Leitch who questioned whether HE was in fact the best vehicle for skills, claims that the report has an “underlying neo-liberal obsession” (2010 p.9) and that surely “learning to learn” as espoused by Dearing is the only real skill needed, and is readily available in existing HE opportunities. Harvey’s extensive review of the existing literature around FDs (in 2009) also identified several sources that critiqued the drivers behind the FD policy, querying the effectiveness of the qualification as a key tool in meeting the skills gap (Brain et al 2004, cited in Harvey 2009) and a suggestion that employers would prefer more specialised qualifications (Little, 2005, cited in *ibid*). There is also the suggestion from Fuller (2001, cited in Harvey 2009) that FDs offer a well-funded easy ‘opt-out’ for employers who would otherwise have to fund alternative workforce development routes. So, commentary in the early days of FD development represented mixed views on the purpose and prospects of the qualification.

FDs were experiencing their heyday around this time, with a rapid increase in entrants across a three-year period, peaking at 2009-10 (HEFCE, 2014), although it has been noted (Harvey, 2009) that this coincided with a decline in other enrolments on qualifications at Levels 4 and 5, largely at HNC and HND level. Of particular note and relevance to the focus of this study, is that FDs in the area of Education were extremely popular, with FDF holding records of 420 programmes in this area in 2008, more than in any other disciplinary area. This is testament to the heavily endorsed and supported Early Years Sector Endorsed Foundation Degree (EYSEFD) whereby students received generous support from the Department for Education in the form of loaned laptops, supply cover,

mentor support, bursaries and some were also in receipt of financial assistance with fees and childcare. This commitment from the government was indicative of their support for development of the early years workforce, with weight from Children's Workforce Development Council (CWDC) and their introduction of 'graduate leaders', or Early Years Professional Status (EYPS) roles in 2007.

Wolf (2002, p.183) interrogates the government's idea that for the most part, students would stop after their FD award and questions why a student *wouldn't* take this alternative route to end up with the same result as their peers? The progression routes offered the possibility of an Honours degree that can still be achieved within three years: with lesser entry requirements, lesser costs and no greater time commitment. Progression statistics around the time showed that 59 per cent of FD students from qualifying programmes in 2007-08 had progressed onto Honours level programmes (HESA, 2010), supporting Wolf's assertion that "It seems much safer to predict that 'foundation' students will mostly be en route to a full, and more general, degree, and will show their usual disregard for governments' vocational rhetoric" (2002, p.184).

In more recent years, the available data published by HESA shows a sobering reduction in the numbers of students enrolled on FDs. HESA statistics illustrate a drop of 26,155 FD students in the past five years in sharp contrast to first degree numbers that continue to grow despite fee increases in 2012. Not only restricted to FDs, all kinds of non-degree undergraduate provision have declined since 2009 (HEFCE, 2014, HESA, 2018) and the bonfire of Quangos since 2010 (with FDF dissolving in 2011) may well have resulted in a great deal less promotion of and operational support for FDs (Verinder, 2015). Add to this broader policy changes in the HE landscape such as the student number control policy, whereby universities' funding has been tied in closely to prioritising three-year cohort courses (traditional undergraduate programmes) and also a reduction in part-time students generally across the sector, and it is not difficult to see why FDs have undoubtedly had their heyday in terms of enrolments.

## 2.2 Foundation Degrees and the initial consequences of hybridity

At their inception, the vision of FDs was that they would be a hybrid of “demanding HE programmes” (HEFCE, 2000 p.9), yet also grounded in economic and professional development imperatives. Not long after the first tranche of FDs (beginning in 2001-02), the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) published their overview report commissioned by HEFCE to survey the features and quality of these new qualifications, and to gain feedback about the quality of students’ experiences. The sample included around one third of all students studying on FDs at the time, across thirty-three programmes, so perhaps reasonably representative, but very soon after implementation. Based on feedback at that time, the majority of programmes were deemed to be successful and feedback from students was generally positive. The judgement from the QAA at this time was also that FDs were facilitating widening participation as a result of an increased choice of awards for students.

However, one of the key recommendations of the report was that future development addressed a concern that had been identified, which was that “many students were achieving practical and vocational skills *at the expense of higher-level, intellectual analytical and reflective outcomes*” (QAA, 2003 p.2, my emphasis). Some subsequent studies did go on to highlight similar findings although none have really gathered feedback from students that points to overwhelming concerns about academic standards. Portents that there would be “suspicion and scepticism...that the new intermediate qualification would lack academic credibility and be too narrowly vocational” (Wilson, 2005 p.117) have not appeared to dominate in students’ documented experiences to any great extent. In contrast, Tierney and Slack’s (2005) study published in the same year identified concern amongst students about the academic component of their FD in that they felt the expectations of them surrounding academic writing were too *high*, also echoed by the early years’ students in Knight et al’s work (2006). So a small amount of evidence suggests that students certainly perceived the demands upon them as academically arduous, although there remains the suggestion that a lack of clarity over the very purpose and nature of FDs has been an influencer upon students’ perceptions of

their experiences. For example, Fenge's small scale study of mature students studying on an FD in health and social care carries the title, "A second chance at learning, but *it's not quite higher education*" (2011, my emphasis), indicative of student feeling that the course they were engaged upon was not really a degree: the students Fenge interviewed felt they were getting just a "taste" of HE. Importantly however, this seeming disadvantage was actually interpreted by Fenge as the factor that had enabled some students to even contemplate undertaking such a qualification, as the programme was perceived as less intimidating by them. So whilst Harvey (2009) in his extensive literature review of FDs referred to "deep seated prejudice" around vocational qualifications, it may well be that a view of them as less daunting has been of appeal to some students lacking the confidence to align themselves with a 'proper' degree level programme. The fact that a majority of FDs are delivered in FE colleges rather than at HE institutions was also identified by Fenge as a possible factor that made them a better suited qualification for students who might otherwise have not contemplated HE, as colleges were perceived as better places to meet the needs of mature students.

So perceptions around the academic credibility and identity of FD courses have been mixed, and subsequently, the next focus in this chapter shifts towards the existing knowledge about perceptions of FDs from a more vocationally-oriented perspective.

### **2.3 Employers and employees: the purpose and value of FDs.**

Perceptions of the FD from employer perspectives can be seen within a number of studies seeking to gain feedback and commentary with regards to their feelings about the tangible impact of the qualification for their workforce, and concerns around areas of uncertainty and purpose. Many of the studies presenting this feedback have been undertaken with regards to FDs in the area of Early Years, or Teaching and Learning. This is unsurprising given that, as noted earlier in this chapter, FDs

in the discipline of Education have constituted a majority of those available. This may be of relevance here due to the fact that in this case, many employers would be public sector funded and so some of these learners will have been eligible for the central government funding attached to the qualifications i.e. many of these employers will not have had to pay for their employees to undertake these programmes and thus may have had a less vested interest in a 'return', which could have impacted upon their perceptions of the qualification and its value.

Commonly, there is evidence across a number of studies that employers lacked clarity around the purpose and value of the qualification, which could have consequences for not only the amount of support they might be willing to offer to employees engaged in FD study, but also their willingness to employ applicants with a qualification they may be uncertain of.

Greenwood et al's (2008) report commissioned by FDF focused on evidence from a number of different sectors (including Education) and on the whole identified mixed feelings from employers. Several studies examined by Greenwood and colleagues referred to a lack of understanding amongst employers about the qualification, particularly with regards to its value to them. This sentiment was also echoed in a range of the literature reviewed by Harvey (2009) who identified confusion about the relevance of the FD amongst employers. Tatum (2009), the then Director for Employer Partnerships within FDF wrote that "the way the Foundation degree qualification is interpreted causes real concern for some employers" (p.12). Work from Ooms et al (2012) and Robinson (2012) also identified feelings amongst students engaged on FDs that their FD was not valued or recognised by their employer. Specific to the early years sector, Edmond raised the issue of confusion over FDs in light of other available qualifications or progression routes - namely the Early Years Professional Status (EYPS) - which muddled the routes for those wanting to progress due to the lack of clarity about the best available options. She refers to the "'exchange' value of FDs...undermined by notions

of equivalence of routes” (2010, p.319) which illustrates a lack of clarity over the progression routes for this large body of public sector workforce whom were a key target for the FD.

Of more interest to this study, many of the pieces of research available sought to understand the experiences and opinions of students in terms of the value of the course to them as an employee. One of the strongest messages to emerge from a number of studies relays a degree of disappointment in that financial returns expected from the FD (namely an increase in pay) were largely unrealised for the majority of students. Knight et al (2006), Snape et al (2007), Dunne et al (2008), Tatum (2009) Morris (2010) and Herrera et al (2015) all recognise a degree of dissatisfaction amongst the majority of their samples (across a range of disciplines) that aspirations of increased pay in their existing workplace were not realised. Despite generally positive experiences on the EYSEFD, Snape et al’s (2007) study reported that the least well met aspiration of students who had undertaken an FD related to chances of a pay rise, also a concern amongst the practitioners in Greenwood et al’s (2008) research. Dunne et al’s (2008) final judgements about the value of FDs to Teaching Assistants carry with them a rather sobering indictment lacking in optimism in direct opposition to the governmental rhetoric:

Our research suggests that doing a Foundation degree may not ‘kick-start’ careers in the way the government intended, and that the apparent luring or enticing of people onto the degree course might even represent false promises, especially for more mature students. The intrinsic or personal benefits of doing the degree for this group of people appeared to outweigh the extrinsic. If the Foundation degree is seen as more of a personal rather than a professional development (by schools and local authorities alike), then perhaps it is inevitable that those who gain the degree will not receive the commensurate pay awards

(p. 58)

Aside from this disappointment and some disillusionment regarding the lack of forthcoming financial rewards, students have been able to clearly identify benefits of the FD from a professional

perspective, with reports of greater enthusiasm at work (Snape and Finch 2006), and better subject knowledge and understanding (ibid; Knight et al 2006, Edmond 2010, and Herrera 2015). Feelings of greater academic capability or improved academic skills were also reported (Tierney and Slack 2005, Knight et al 2006) with Dunne et al's work with teaching assistants identifying "a realisation of personal capability to engage with academic study at HE level" (2008 p. 242) and "deep pride" in gaining the FD.

## **2.4 Student experiences and perceptions of the value of FDs**

More optimistically, as implied in the last quote from Dunne et al above, literature consistently identifies benefits to students in terms of their own personal development and sense of esteem, which could be of particular significance to many students for whom the FD will have marked a return to study after some time out of the education system. This next section shifts the lens to examine literature concerned with learners' views about the value of their FD study from a more personal and intrinsic perspective.

Largan's (2015) work exploring *internal* progression of FD students (i.e. those who continue to Bachelors level but within the same institution) perceives the FD as a forceful vehicle for change in a multitude of ways, referring to it as "a technology of self as it leads participants to feel changed.....and this change can lead to a *new* life, *new* version of self and hopes of *new* employment" (p.158, emphasis in the original), and indeed some of these positive proclamations are borne out by students' feedback about their FD experiences within a range of research.

Across nearly all studies exploring a number of different disciplinary FDs, students' identification of increased confidence as a result of the FD was a consistently common finding (Tierney and Slack, 2005; Knight et al, 2006; Snape and Finch, 2006; Goodship and Jacks, 2007; Dunne et al, 2008; Edmond, 2010; Morris, 2010; Yorke and Longden, 2010; Fenge, 2011; Ooms et al, 2012; Largan,

2015; and Herrera et al 2015). Other intrinsic rewards relating to personal development and more positivity about the self were increased self-esteem (Tierney and Slack, 2005; Snape and Finch, 2007; Dunne et al 2008; Morris, 2010); independence (Snape and Finch 2006) and becoming a role model for children (Tierney and Slack, 2005).

In addition to students' feelings about the value and contribution to their own personal development as a result of the FD, perceptions about their academic experience and challenges are of particular relevance to this study due to its focus upon components of academic culture experienced by top up students, and so to establish the characteristics of the academic climate experienced within the FD is a necessary starting point.

Reports on student experiences within their FDs tend to be mixed across the literature, with varying views about teaching, and academic support from tutors within FE colleges. The Early Years Sector Endorsed Foundation Degree (EYSEFD) that was in receipt of heavy subsidies from the DfES produced a series of evaluation reports from 2003-2007, and the second of these six publications (Snape and Finch, 2006) revealed particularly positive views with high proportions of students expressing satisfaction with teaching quality, personal tutor support and support with study skills development. A subsequent study (the fifth of the six) from Knight et al (2006), focused on a smaller number of students (50) for in-depth interviews, compared to the 642 participants who were part of computer assisted telephone interviews as reported upon in Snape and Finch's work. This feedback painted a more problematic picture of some students' experiences at college, with reports of disorganisation, unreliable provision of resources needed to complete assessed work, and a lack of feedback on assignments. Much of the feedback reflected the fact that at the time of some of the data collection (2002-2005), FDs were still in their relative infancy, and a general feeling of teething problems and parallel development of the course as it was being delivered was identified by some students. At a similar time, Tierney and Slack's (2005) research (albeit a significantly smaller sample

size, and not part of the EYSEFD programme) with those on early years programmes identified concerns amongst students about the academic components of the programme, especially around the academic writing expected of them, and a feeling that tutors expected students to know more than they did in terms of academic skills.

As discussed earlier, these concerns about the academic integrity and support for students had been identified early on in the QAA's report in 2003 which identified "variation" in the quality of written feedback; concerns over the clarity of marking criteria; the need for more attention upon academic skills; and, a little too much of an emphasis upon didactic teaching methods. Research to date since this QAA report still conveys a range of varying degrees of satisfaction and perceptions about FD experiences from an academic perspective, although it must be noted that Harvey's (2009) recognition of the limitations of available research due to the majority of studies being localised and of small scale still rings true. Fenge's (2011) work with students on a health and social care FD found consistent expressions of need for further support, and that amongst the students who had withdrawn from the programme, feelings of the study required as "overwhelming" were cited as one of the main reasons for this. Similarly, Morris's (2010) cohort of principally mature female students reported finding the academic demands of the FD difficult to cope with. However, a slight majority of students (53%) from Goodship and Jacks' (2007) sample reported that they had found the FD to be as demanding as they had anticipated, and Yorke and Longden's (2010) extensive study with 474 students also found that less than half felt that the academic work was harder than they expected it to be, so there is certainly not overwhelming evidence of a mismatch between expectations and experiences with regards to the levels of academic challenge present in FD programmes. It is fair to say that representations across the literature point to varied experiences of 'academia' as part of FD study; further examination of this in light of contrasting study within the top up year (at level 6) follows in the subsequent chapter.

From a broader political perspective, conducive to initial government aspirations for the FD, there is a recognition in the literature that the availability of FDs has had a positive impact upon the widening participation agenda (Caller, 2005, cited in Harvey 2009, Craig, 2009, and Largan 2015). Avis and Orr (2016) recognise the role played by HE in FE courses to transform lives and enable social mobility, and more specifically Largan presents an impassioned argument for FDs to be perceived as a “location for personal and social justice” (2015, p.303), especially for part-time female students, but there remains evidence of negative perceptions on the ground amongst students enrolled on the programmes themselves of the value of FDs in the wider hierarchy of the higher education market in the UK. Criticisms of the FD as “second best” (Robinson 2012), not a ‘proper’ HE qualification (Fenge, 2011), and reports from students that there would be more “status” if they were attending university rather than an FE college (Robinson 2012) show that participants themselves are not immune to this discourse that ranks FDs, or perhaps HE in FE more broadly as a poor relation to attending a university campus for a ‘real’ degree, a superiority/ inferiority debate recognised as problematic by Kadi-Hanifi and Elliott (2016). However, two persuasive and mitigating points of view to counter these perspectives are that firstly, as recognised earlier, the perception of an FD as something other than authentic higher education could in fact be the very factor that enables students to perceive HE as accessible to them via the route of a FD, due to less intimidation than that which may be encountered by going to university (Fenge 2011). Secondly, whilst acknowledging that the case for FDs as vital for “empowerment” may not be weighty enough to disregard criticisms of them, the value of them as a passport to ‘real’ HE is a key conclusion put forward by Largan (2015), and this thread of progression and transitions that is examined in the next chapter.

## **2.5 Summary**

This chapter has situated the development, rise and contraction of FDs within the domains of policy and experience for a number of key stakeholders. Of particular note is the lack of clarity amongst

several stakeholders about the purpose and nature of FDs, and some of the consequences of this for the aspirations that were not always realised, particularly for individual learners with regards to their career progression, despite the indisputable value apparent for individuals in relation to their own self-esteem, confidence and personal transformation. Evidence about experiences of learning on an FD remains mixed, however there is a clear thread of awareness about FDs as a form of HE in FE not quite having the same degree of authenticity and regard as HE in an HEI, a significant point to stress due to the implications this may have upon students' perceptions of their experiences once undertaking their top-up in an HEI; the focus of the subsequent chapter.

## **Chapter 3: Literature Review Part 2: Transitioning to Honours**

Proceeding from the previous chapter's assertions about the intentions, perceptions and impact of FDs to date, this chapter narrows the focus to analyse research with an interest in the specific cohort of learners particular to this study: students whom upon completion of their FD progress to top-up their level 4 and 5 study and move onto level 6 study to gain Honours degrees, usually a progression entailing a move away from FEC provision to studying on an HEI campus for one year. Firstly, trends and motivations for progression are considered before moving on to review the fairly limited number of studies that have directly examined these experiences and conceptualised them in a number of different ways in order to make sense of the learners' HEI experiences.

### **3.1 Transitioning to Honours; progression motivations and trends**

Initially, it should be noted that literature in this area is somewhat limited. Harvey's extensive review of existing literature on FDs in 2009 explicitly recommended the need for further research in the area of progression and transitions for FD students. Since then, a small but steady trickle of studies have emerged in this area, examining the onward routes of FD students, however, literature around transitions to HE remains predominately focused upon and populated with the perspectives of first year students entering a 'traditional' three-year degree programme (Mann, 2001, Krause et al 2005, Scanlon et al 2007, Leese, 2010, Thomas, 2012, Bowles et al, 2014).

Validating Largan's claim at the end of the previous chapter about FDs as a vehicle through which to enter onto a degree programme, students in several investigations commonly cite their clear intentions to progress, and that the pathway to Honours level study had been an early and unequivocal influence upon their initial decision to begin a FD. In early developmental work around

FDs at one institution, Morgan et al (2004) identified the opportunity to progress to an Honours degree as a key concern amongst mature students considering FD study. Tierney and Slack (2005) found that most of their interviewees (albeit a small sample of 7) assumed they would progress, as did the majority in Snape et al's (2007) work, and that of Goodship and Jacks (2007). Similarly, Largan's (2015) participants commonly identified a desire to progress and in Robinson's study (2012), all of those undertaking a FD in the area of Teaching and Learning wanted to progress in order to work towards teacher training, with students in other disciplines expressing concern that they might encounter difficulties or barriers in the future if they did not possess a degree. Yet, these messages are tempered by a small degree of uncertainty identified in Fenge's (2011) work with students for whom progressing to a top-up programme seemed unobtainable to them at that time.

Factors influencing the decision to progress include career aspirations, finance, and perceptions of academic capability. Worthy of particular note is the identification of the significance of peers as an influencer; Shaw (2012) in exploring progression choices of FD students, recognised the importance attributed to the accompaniment of peers and friends on the journey to Honours level study, the presence of which "...made the prospect of progression 'comfortable' and 'familiar', keeping friendship groups together and reinforcing the understanding that a form of higher education was available that was for 'people like them'" (p.121). And so, progressing with friends was seen as an important factor that reduced the degree of risk attached to progression. In a similar vein, Largan's work with women transitioning onto Bachelor's level understands this through the lens of class, gender, and age, as a group of students who "experience a range of social and structural intersecting markers of existence. These confirm them as being *certain* types of students attending *certain* types of courses in *certain* institutions" (2015 p.143), further solidifying the importance of familiar people with common experiences and frames of reference as an important consideration when faced with the potential of progression.

The experiences of students who have progressed from FDs onto Honours level study is the focus of the remainder of this chapter, narrowing analysis onto studies specific to this cohort once they have embarked upon their top-up studies.

### **3.2 The experiences of those who have transitioned to Honours**

This next section of this review chapter begins to directly establish findings about the experiences of students who progress to top-up year (although this may be top up *years* for students who study part-time, and depending upon their entry point). Due to the scarcity of research in this area, some of the literature examined in this section is reporting on student experiences progressing from HNCs (Higher National Certificates) or HNDs (Higher National Diplomas) which are comparable in some ways to FDs in terms of their level on the NQF (National Qualifications Framework), and accepted as a qualification to enter a degree programme with advanced standing at many HE institutions.

However, widening the scope of the review to include these studies cannot be done without a note to acknowledge the differences between HNC/D qualifications and the FD. Each qualification was conceived and designed in a very different political and economic climate, with the origins of HNCs and HNDs resting in the inter-war periods and aligning with the expansion of technical and vocational education following World War Two. For decades such provision manifested in a range of varying policy permutations, but a decline in this area in the 1990's was accompanied by claims that "insufficient rigour and quality assurance" (Association of Colleges, 2014 p.7) was being applied to HNC/Ds, and although FDs were very much marketed as a hybrid of vocational and academic qualifications, claims exist that they were in fact HNDs "converted" into FDs (Verinder, 2015).

Regardless of the subtle differences between the two, both kinds of qualification have been subject to declining student numbers (HESA, 2018) and face perhaps uncertain futures, but for the purposes of establishing the experiences of direct entrant students, widening the net to include these studies

provides a broader base upon which to draw, taking in to account the limited number of available studies that look specifically at a cohort identical to that used for the data collection in this thesis.

Studies from either progression route tend to be concerned with determining the degree of prior preparation students received before transition, and of their perceptions either before, during or after their top up year(s). In most instances studies are referring to students similar to those in this study, those who begin their Honours study in Year 3 (or part-time equivalent) of the degree programme, although there are some minority instances where students enter into the second year (e.g. Christie et al 2013).

Authors acknowledge that there already exists a wealth of literature about transition to university for first year students (Penketh and Goddard, 2008, Pike and Harrison, 2011) but little focusing on top-up learners. Part of the reason for this could lie within the contemporary policy context and financial collateral to be secured by those HE institutions who are effective at retaining students for the full lifetime of their degree programmes (usually three years); this could therefore contribute to some explanation for the lack of studies, more recently, looking at transition for these students, due to the lesser financial appeal that they carry.

All of the studies (bar Largan, 2015) are based in HEIs whereby students have physically moved geographical locations to a different educational establishment for their Honours studies, and as such they provide a host of opportunities to examine the experiences of higher education as situated in two very different environments, firstly a FEC, and then a HEI.

Sample sizes and data collection tools vary significantly across the studies, as does the point at which data collection has taken place, meaning that some studies are gathering data in the early weeks of entry onto the Honours top up programme, others at several points throughout the academic year, and in some studies it is unclear as to what point in the academic year the data has been gathered.

This may be of significance due to students' accuracy when recalling key information from past experiences, or at times when difficulties experienced are at particularly stressful 'crunch points' within the academic year, which could distort perceptions due to compounded anxieties (Mitchell et al 2011, cited in Largan 2015). This variance in the fundamentals of these studies reduces direct comparisons that may be made with similar literature, yet also adds further weight to claims presented in the introduction about the lack of comparable literature available.

The data collection methods used are largely qualitative in nature, employing predominantly interviews (Christie et al 2006, Bingham and O'Hara, 2007, Greenbank, 2007, Barron and D'Annunzio, 2009, Pike and Harrison, 2010, Christie et al 2013, Morgan 2015, Christie et al 2016), but also utilising other methods such as journals (Penketh and Goddard, 2008), focus groups (Greenbank, 2007, Winter and Dismore, 2010, Largan 2015), diaries (Winter and Dismore, 2010), reflective reports (Winter and Dismore, 2010) questionnaires (Christie et al 2006, Morgan 2015) attainment data (Bingham and O'Hara, 2007) and image based interviews (Largan et al 2015). In turn, sample sizes of the cohorts vary quite significantly, ranging from 11 to 156, although some of these include students and staff. Disciplinary representation is varied, with students progressing in fields relating to Business, Education, Management and Early Years. There is a slight majority of female and mature students represented across the studies, reflective perhaps of the demographics of students enrolled on FDs.

Whilst reference will be made to other relevant literature within this section, the main studies being subject to analysis are summarised below in order to provide an overview of the remit, currency, data collection methods and demographics, to aid familiarity with discussions throughout this section.

Table 2: An overview of samples and methodology of ten core studies

Source	Sample	Data collection tools	Point of data collection
Christie, H. Cree, V. Hounsell, J. McCune, V. and Tett, L. (2006) 'From college to university: looking backwards, going forwards' <i>Research in Post-Compulsory Education</i> 11:3 351-365	35 students, majority female & mature Humanities & Social Science (mostly Education/ Social Work)	Interviews & questionnaires	At beginning of Honours study & one year beyond
Bingham, R. and O'Hara, M. (2007) 'Widening participation on early years degrees: 'I realised I could, and would, do this – and I have!' <i>Journal of Further and Higher Education</i> 31: 4 311-321	18 students Childhood Studies	Attainment data Interviews	Interviewed at different points in course – unclear when
Greenbank, P. (2007) 'From foundation to honours degree: the student experience' <i>Education and Training</i> 49, 2, 91-102	17 students from 2 FECs Progressing from FDs in Management Lecturers from both HEIs and FECs	Questionnaires Focus groups Lecturer interviews	Unclear
Penketh, C. and Goddard, G. (2008) 'Students in transition: mature women students moving from Foundation Degree to Honours level 6' <i>Research in Post-Compulsory Education</i> 13:3 315-327	12 students Mature, part-time students Education	Journals	Throughout the year
Barron, P. and D'Annunzio-Green, N. (2009) 'A smooth transition? Education and social expectations of direct entry students' <i>Active Learning in Higher Education</i> 10, 1, 7-25	101 students Majority under 24 & female Business School Progressing from HNC/Ds	Questionnaire	Orientation Day prior to top-up study
Winter, J. and Dismore, H. (2010) 'Investigating the experiences of foundation degree students progressing to an honours degree: an integrated approach' <i>Journal of Further and Higher Education</i> 34:2, 253-270	98 questionnaires 20 focus group participants 6 students completing diaries and reports From across a network of 19 FECs	Online questionnaires Focus group Diaries Reflective report	Throughout first semester
Pike, A. and Harrison, J. (2011) 'Crossing the FE/HE divide: the transition experiences of direct entrants at Level 6' <i>Journal of Further and Higher Education</i> 35:1, 55-67	11 students	Interviews	Week 5 of academic year
Christie, H. Barron, P and D'Annunzio-Green, N. (2013) 'Direct entrants in transition: becoming independent learners' <i>Studies in Higher Education</i> 38, 4, 623-637	20 students: majority female Business school	Interviews	End of first year
Largan, C (2015) 'From Foundation degree to Bachelor degree: Exploring the identity construction of part-time women students within one vocationally focused Higher Education institution' PhD thesis, University of Birmingham.	30 women for questionnaires 5 for case interviews	Questionnaires Image-based interviews Mediation interviews Focus groups	Over 13 months at critical points in transition/ progression process
Morgan, J. (2015) 'Foundation degree to honours degree: the transition experiences of students on an early years programme' <i>Journal of Further and Higher Education</i> 39:1, 108-126	156 Staff & students Some in Year 2 of FD, others in Honours year From 9 partner colleges Early Years discipline All female, majority mature	Questionnaires Interviews	January – July of academic year

To initially introduce these core studies: broadly, there are mixed views across existing literature about the nature and ease of transitions. Greenbank (2007) found the majority of students experienced the transition as difficult: also recognised by Winter and Dismore (2010) and Pike and Harrison (2011), although it should be noted that for the latter two studies, the data appears to have been collected early in the academic year and so teething difficulties and settling down experiences will have been fresh. It is fair to say that representative of the literature as a whole, Morgan (2015) found a mix of views with many who found transition to be smooth, whereas others in the study found it very stressful, and she suggests much of this is related to prior educational experiences and perceptions of self and lack of support from family which make it very emotional. It is this variance in ability to cope with moving to the different climate and culture that is of particular significance to this study, and so some of the specific areas examined in this section seek to determine what makes adjusting more or less successful in a number of areas.

Apart from the study by Largan (2015), students in these studies were all progressing from the sites of FE colleges, which means there is a common exposure to this specific educational culture amongst nearly all of the participants across the studies. Although other studies have written about bridging modules and strategic transition activities in isolation, (Knox, 2005, Mytton and Rumbold, 2011), none of the core studies under consideration here reported detailed bridging modules or other preparatory activities, with the exception of Largan (2015). As articulated progression routes are a requirement for FDs, frameworks and procedures are clearly in place for top-up students, but here it is possible to identify that there is limited evidence about the extent to which it can be said that FE institutions adequately prepare their students for this change, and establishing known experiences of this is a key aim of this section. It should be noted that this comment is not a criticism towards the FE sector's role in enhancing preparedness: discussions around greater partnerships to facilitate transition for more traditional students from colleges and 6<sup>th</sup> forms have long been recognised as crucial to adjustment, retention and engagement in HE programmes (Leese, 2010). However, what may be different about the nature of these students is the element of direct-entry into the more

advanced, latter stages of a programme, and thus an *assumption* on the part of relevant individuals (HE staff, FE staff, and perhaps even students themselves) that there is a degree of readiness, and indeed ability, to slot in and to have academic skills at the requisite level, an assumption which in reality has disadvantaged some of these students (Christie et al 2013). That these gaps between expectations and realities is problematic is summed up simply by some researchers such as Barron and D'Annunzio Green who report that "university life was not what they expected and they did not know what was expected of them" (2009, p.11) and more specifically from Winter and Dismore who encapsulate the situation as; "Essentially, they appear to be first year students in the body of third year students" (2010 p.265). These judgments about the experiences of such cohorts conjure up connotations of groups of learners as somewhat misunderstood.

The work of Largan (2015) closely mirrors the focus of this thesis with the significant exception that the students progressing in her study were doing so internally i.e. from their FD in an FE context to the top up programme also in the same FE context. Also, all students in her research were studying on a part-time basis. However, her assertion that the existing research sees disruption and learning discontinuity for these students as *inevitable* is a useful judgement to be aware of, and on a more sympathetic level, perhaps a slightly resigned indictment that the sector should be wary of. Crucially, for the vulnerable kinds of students under consideration here, on a perhaps precarious and fragmented journey to becoming a graduate, the transition to top-up is perfectly summed up as an experience which "altered the rhythm of their learning" (Largan, 2015, p.289). That is, although adjustments to the tempo of learning were no doubt experienced and required, the learning continued, and persevered.

The next sections of this chapter begin to explore the nature and scope of these alterations, and the impact of them in a range of different top-up experiences.

The main issues identified across these studies are characterised as falling into a number of key areas:

- Academic expectations
- Study skills
- Tutor relationships
- Pedagogical environment and practices
- Peers
- Belonging and learner identity

An analysis of each of these areas follows in turn.

### **3.2.1 Academic Expectations**

This section explores how students in research to date have expressed their views about elements of their top-up course that they would identify as 'academic', so issues identified relate to the level of difficulty they experience in studying and producing assessments following the transitions from FD to BA, and, also the expectations they understand to be at play with regard to characteristics of their work such as breadth and depth of reading, levels of analysis in the work, and expectations of independence and initiative.

Overwhelmingly, studies consistently identify that academically, students felt a sense of inferiority and that the levels of work expected of them were not easily within their reach, usefully summed up by Winter and Dismore, whereby "FECs were often described as '*comfortable*', with *attainable* academic expectations....and *limited expectations* on students to learn autonomously" (2010, p.259, my emphases), and the opposite of these characteristics of the FE environment are borne out through most of the literature examining these cohorts once they are in HE.

Earlier studies, and those where students were progressing from HNC/HND programmes found perceptions amongst students that the work required would be too advanced (Barron and D’Annunzio Green, 2009), that they would be “mixing with brighter peers” (Christie et al 2006 p.361) and that there were feelings of inadequacy (Bingham and O’Hara, 2007, Greenbank 2007). These feelings, whether self-ascribed or cultivated through receipt of attitudes from HE staff and existing students were on occasion reported as resulting in quite extreme feelings of difference, with a student in Greenbank’s (2007) study feeling “victimized” by lecturers as a result of their FD status. Expanding upon some of the characteristics of the differing academic environments, and articulating the specific expectations they were aware of, students identified a greater expectation for independent learning (Christie et al, 2013, Morgan, 2015) and autonomy (Winter and Dismore, 2010), both of which are ideals espoused at university level programmes and expected as a demonstrable skill of a graduate.

The kinds of terminology studies used to report on students’ perceptions of academic expectations included references to *theory* (Greenbank 2007), *critical thinking* or *criticality* (Winter and Dismore 2010, Morgan 2015), and a greater *workload*, notably *more reading* (ibid). So, there is a strong theme of higher academic levels, standards and expectations noted in these and other studies (Pike and Harrison 2010, Christie et al 2006) which resulted in anxiety for some learners around assessment, as identified by Penketh and Goddard (2008), Christie et al (2006) and Barron and D’Annunzio Green (2009). What is notable for its absence within the literature is any substantial evidence to suggest that learners felt well equipped or prepared for their top-up year in respect of these academic demands upon them.

Part of the source of what are perceived to be increased academic expectations stems from aspects of the differing habitus experienced by students transitioning from FE to HE, so in this instance, the idea of institutional habitus and how this is represented and applied in the literature is pertinent to examine, as acknowledged by Thomas who demonstrates that “the notions of habitus and

institutional habitus appear to be useful tools. If a student feels they do not fit in, that their social and cultural practices are inappropriate and that their tacit knowledge is undervalued, they may be more inclined to withdraw early” (2002 p.431). Whilst Thomas is writing in the context of retention, the aspects of exclusion that she identifies are all examples of institutional habitus that may well impact upon a direct entrant’s capacity to feel included and develop sufficient self-esteem to ascribe themselves a valid learner identity in their new environment.

There has been much work considering the significance of habitus with regards to students entering HE and largely, in this literature, the term is used predominantly in relation to issues of social class, where this concept has been commonly used when considering the situation and experiences of students from under-represented, lower socio-economic backgrounds embarking on their university careers (for example in Ball et al 2002a; Ball et al 2002b; Crozier et al 2008). Habitus is “probably the most widely cited of Bourdieu’s concepts...yet...also one of the most misunderstood, misused and hotly contested” (Maton, 2008, p.49). Maton draws on a range of definitions to explore the complexity of this concept, making reference to “a property of social agents...“structured” by one’s past and present circumstances” (ibid, p.51) and a strong emphasis on the idea of disposition, or *predisposition* which is structured and shaped by one’s position in various fields.

Key studies examining top-up experiences do not tend to draw upon the notion of habitus significantly, with the exception of Winter and Dismore (2010), Morgan (2015), and Largan (2015) all of whom acknowledge the significance of this for top-up students. However, in studies where a key focus is upon those who have experienced more than one institution and its attendant culture, it is impossible to consider the experiences of these students without rooting back somewhat to this key sociological concept in its broadest sense and it is argued that recognising the significance of institutional culture, and the concept of institutional habitus in particular is necessary to employ in order to understand the experiences of these learners and provide a theoretical framework upon which the research can be situated.

Bourdieu defines habitus as “systems of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, as principles which generate and organise practices” (Bourdieu 1990 p.53). And so in its simplest form in regards to *institutional* habitus (the institutions here being FE colleges and HE at university), this can be thought of as the norms and practices of particular groups (most likely to be students and staff), which thus translate into policies, procedures and practice, all three of which are aspects of the two HE experiences that participants in this study commented upon. This concept originating from Bourdieu’s work has been applied to higher education institutions most usefully in the work of Reay et al (2001) and subsequently Thomas (2002).

Thomas (ibid) presents a comprehensive consideration of institutional habitus in relation to the HE experience in her study of retention in a widening participation institution, to elucidate her tenet that if an institution is inclusive, then students will experience more acceptance which will improve their determination to succeed in HE. She stresses in particular that methods of teaching, learning and assessment “provide sites for interactions between staff, students and their peers, and within institutional structures, and thus have a central role in both changing and reproducing social and cultural inequalities” (2002 p. 434). It must be stressed that there is not a suggestion of a homogenous HE institutional habitus across the sector here, but an acknowledgement that these sites of interaction within HE institutions will vary according to the status and mission of an individual HEI, such that students studying in a Russell Group institution would experience a different institutional habitus to those at a post-1992 establishment (Reay et al, 2001). As such, it is not possible to identify a raft of examples or a typology of typical HE institutional habitus, but this great variation in institutional habitus across the HE sector must be appreciated as even more exaggerated when the concept is applied to HE in FE sectors.

In relation to schools, Reay defines aspects of institutional habitus as “educational status, organisational practices and the expressive order” (2001, para 8.4). Specific examples given are

careers advice, and the curriculum, and these aspects could broadly be identified in any educational institution at any level. In trying to define notable characteristics of HE in FE culture, other writers have commented upon differences in the capacity within FE to prepare students for independent learning, physical learning spaces, a lack of academic symbols and the learning experience (Leahy, 2012, Parry 2012).

Recognition of the manifestation of institutional culture (and culture as capital) in academic expectations is present in a number of the core studies under examination here. Greenbank (2007) noted how students viewed the college and the university as culturally dissimilar, and that this was reinforced by lecturers saying how different it would be. Similarly, Winter and Dismore (2010) refer to the significance of “cultural factors” in the form of familiarity with systems, facilities and rules of each institution (FEC or HEI).

Christie’s reference to a “secure learning environment” (2013 p630) could be viewed in a similar way to institutional habitus, whereby when it is known, this creates security and familiarity. When this is removed, this results in an interruption, particularly with regards to expectations of greater independent learning, as highlighted earlier in this section, as students have difficulties in “coming to know” (ibid p631) new rules, practices and norms. Similarly, interpreting some of the differences between FE and HE as cultural, Winter and Dismore (2010) also recognise that change was experienced as a result of lesser familiarity with systems, such as rules and regulations, with more formal and less flexible procedures for assessment which they refer to as a “zero tolerance” approach. Some of the far-reaching differences are recognised and summed up helpfully by Morgan, who in commenting upon the literature notes that “it has been highlighted that the culture of the foundation degree as well as the institutional habitus of FECs may be more conducive to promoting particular ways of thinking and learning which privilege classroom-based activities, surface learning and student support” (2015, p118), characteristics of learning which the literature

bears out are experienced considerably differently within a top-up year(s), as is illustrated through the discussions further on in this chapter.

Therefore, it is apparent within the literature that students moving from HE in FE to HE in HE may experience significant shifts in both explicit and hidden academic expectations transmitted to them, and that these expectations are embodied in the habitus of either the college or university. There is however, limited application and use of the concept of institutional habitus *across sectors*, which is a gap this study can address to some degree. To adjust and re-learn a new habitus is a challenge and indeed it is this adjustment, and students' experiences of this which are central to this thesis.

### **3.2.2 Study skills**

Closely related to the clearly noted increase in academic expectations, the literature commonly emphasises notable differences pertaining to specific academic study skills and tasks where students experienced increased demands in their top-up year. There is little difference in the kinds of issues identified depending upon progression from HNC/D or FD, and also those identified in earlier literature (Hatt and Baxter, 2003) are still reflected in much more recent studies (e.g. Largan 2015, Morgan 2015) despite the years between them and the significant peak in the numbers of students on FDs during this span, suggesting not only a degree of consistency in the experiences and demands of students at each level, but also perhaps a lack of evolution in the preparatory and bridging work that occurs within some programmes at transition time.

And so, earlier studies such as that by Hatt and Baxter (2003) recognised that the students progressing from HNC/D courses arrived to their degree programmes with a different set of skills, and later research towards and past the peak years of FD enrolments has identified specific concerns

such as the ability to apply criticality (Bingham and O'Hara, 2007, Winter and Dismore 2010, Morgan 2015), structure an argument (ibid); the requirement of more theory in assessments (Greenbank 2007), a greater commitment to read in more breadth and depth (Pike and Harrison 2011, Morgan 2015), time management (Penketh and Goddard, 2008, Barron and D'Annunzio Green 2009), adaptation of language to a more "sophisticated" style (Bingham and O'Hara 2007, Winter and Dismore 2010) and, more rigour or in some cases entirely different systems and rules around academic referencing (Greenbank 2007, Winter and Dismore, 2010, Morgan 2015), which sometimes served to discredit not only what students had been taught beforehand, but also their own competence with a very important academic skill.

The issue of referencing is a pertinent example of how insecurity can be created amongst progressing students, undermining what was thought to be mastery of referencing as an academic skill. This can also be tied into the notion of institutionalised power and protocols which may be viewed as forms of institutional habitus as per Largan (2015) who argues that these rules represent "regimes of truth" (p.261) about how one might feel validated as an academic, and that whilst "referencing [had] been an important part of all of their submitted work whilst on the Foundation degree....at Bachelor level, it becomes a very specific and legitimising discourse", and "the ability to do this is normalising of their participation and gives them authenticity" (ibid p.262). So, apparent in the literature is both an interpretation linked to institutional habitus, but also the concept of valid and authentic learner identities, and the influences that shape and form these, which will be explored in greater detail in section 3.2.6 of this chapter. What is overwhelmingly apparent from studies in this area is consistent and significant evidence of difficulties with academic literacy and study skills, with no evidence to suggest that this aspect of Honours degree study could be a smooth or unproblematic aspect of the experience.

### 3.2.3 Tutor relationships

Differences in tutor support between FD level study and the top up year were commonly reported amongst student experiences, and although the overwhelming consensus is that an FE environment offers a more readily available and greater amount of support, feedback about the support at HEIs was not always negative in comparison.

In Bingham and O'Hara's (2007) work, both tutors and students recognised that the levels of support and guidance within FE were particularly high, and this was acknowledged as potentially disadvantageous by students who reflected on this experience as; "the college tried to help me, so as to be useful for university. They gave you all the information and told you what to include in essays. We were babied really, and so it wasn't useful in the end" (ibid, p.317), and subsequently in reference to the HE experience; "we had less support with assignments, but perhaps that was better because it made me tackle it in my own way, so I understood what I was doing better" (ibid).

Similarly, reflections from students about the realities of tutor support in HE were apparent in Greenbank's (2007) study where students noted that getting tutorial appointments with lecturers was more problematic, but that there was an element of acceptance about this inevitable characteristic of HE due to the different demands upon HE lecturers. Morgan's (2015) study presents mixed views from the participants, with some students finding their past levels of FE support to be greater, whereas others observed that they had actually found lecturers in HE to be more contactable and experienced "outstanding" levels of support. Clearly a whole range of factors such as expectations and prior experiences will shape perceptions as to whether support was outstanding or not, and experiences will vary widely. What is of interest and relevance to note here with regards to the focus of this study is the consequences of these experiences in terms of tutor-student pedagogical relationships, and the impact of this upon smooth and successful transition to a top-up year. This was interpreted by Winter and Dismore (2010) as students noticing an absence of the "intimacy" of prior relationships they had experienced with FE tutors, a notable point as literature

does recognise the significance of student's relationships with staff as an important element of integration (McGinvey 1996, and Tinto 2002 cited in Wilcox et al 2005). This situation could have the potential to be very significant upon both *perceptions* of support and institutional knowledge of actual sources of support within an unknown learning environment, thus impacting upon inclusion.

### **3.2.4 Pedagogical environment and practices**

Unsurprisingly, literature consistently observes that students note significant differences in terms of logistical and environmental characteristics of their top-up programme, and that managing some of these differences can be a source of anxiety. These concerns included navigating a larger campus (Winter and Dismore, 2010, Pike and Harrison, 2011, Morgan 2015) and a larger library (Christie et al 2006) and also greater practical arrangements in terms of travelling (ibid, Barron and D'Annunzio, 2009). There is also evidence that different approaches to teaching and learning practices are distinguishable and create discomfort in terms of pedagogical practices that differ to prior experiences.

One change that brought about perhaps the most commonly noted impact for students across several studies was the shift from small teaching groups in the FECs to larger class sizes, and sometimes more of a traditional lecture delivery style (Greenbank 2007, Winter and Dismore 2010, Pike and Harrison 2011 and Christie et al 2013).

Some studies interpret and locate the change in class size as the crux of a pedagogical barrier to engagement, quite at odds with prior experiences and known models of teaching and learning experienced previously. Smaller class sizes in FECs enable greater participation and exchange of views and experiences in a reciprocal and perhaps more informal manner, well suited for teaching

programmes with an ethos and agenda such as those espoused by most FDs. In contrast, larger class sizes and a more didactic approach with traditional lecture, transmission based learning activities (Greenbank 2007) in the HEIs were a hindrance to effective learning for some students. Christie et al (2006) in particular note that a lecture theatre environment precluded participation, compared to the more discursive approach associated with FECs (Greenbank, 2007), as did Largan (2015).

The significance of this shift in class size and pedagogical style can be identified as twofold by drawing on the perspectives of Greenbank (2007) and Largan (2015), and these are particularly relevant to this study because they emphasise issues around prior learning experiences and expectations, and the effects of experiencing contrasting cultures. Greenbank stresses that features of FE usually lauded as essential for student success, small teaching groups being a core feature here, may in fact “inadvertently make the transition to university more difficult” (2007 p.94), and so this insight stresses a paradoxical disadvantage that students might encounter as a result of the very qualification which has enabled them to progress and top-up. Largan (2015) also noted this difference in classroom dynamics as particularly significant in pedagogical terms in that the tendency for teaching rooms to be organised in rows “*imposed an individualised learning process* shifting the participants’ construction of learning from interdependent to independent, *creating dissonance in their understanding of learning and learning culture*” and “*threatening the collegiate and collaborative learning styles that had been instrumental in the construction of strong learning identities*” (p.263, my emphases). So, these interpretations around environmental characteristics of the top-up experience identify a kind of double disadvantage that students may be carrying when they are beginning to enter their often more densely populated, and inflexibly arranged learning spaces, and may contribute further to the loss of an established learning identity and familiarity with culture and practice in the classroom.

Linked to this, differences in pedagogical practices in the form of teaching and learning styles were also observed by students in Greenbank's (2007) research with students studying Business, who reported overall agreement that the teaching style was much more "teacher centred" and "transmission" based than that which they had experienced at their FEC, further reinforcing the points above from Largan about 'typical' teaching and learning interactions in an HEI, often centring around a lecture, with a one-way diffusion of knowledge from lecturer to student is the norm.

So, perceptions of difference with regards to interactions with the systems, expectations and individuals within the HEI are certainly present in the literature, and now the focus upon the literature shifts to a more inter-personal consideration of the role of peers.

### **3.2.5 Peers**

The next area to be explored as part of the focus upon this specific collection of studies concerns peers, friendships and social and emotional support throughout the transition and top-up experience. There exists a good deal of literature that takes into account the significance and influence of peers in the context of retention (especially for first years) and factors influencing this (Tinto, 1993; Thomas, 2002; Christie et al 2004; Wilcox et al 2005, Thomas 2012), but it is recognised that there is not a great deal exploring the nature and significance of friendships within HEIs (Finn, 2015). This predominant focus upon the first year means that there is often a specific attention upon aspects of the student experience that are much less relevant to those under consideration in this study with regards to issues of age, in that most are around the typical undergraduate entry age of 18 or so, and prominent issues include difficulties in leaving home, family, and friendships behind and learning to live independently: issues less likely to be of relevance to many top-up students. However, if such time and space is dedicated to the role of peers and social support for retention

and engagement for first years, then there must also be exploration of the extent to which this is reflected in the literature for top-up students, which follows here.

Broadly, there are two main ways in which the importance and impact of peers are explored in the literature: friends as source of support, and friends as social capital.

The role of friends as a support mechanism has been considered and understood in the context of *social support* by Wilcox et al (2005) who drew upon the model hypothesised by House (1981), defining social support as emotional, instrumental, informational and appraisive. Although it must be noted that House's overall agenda was predominantly focused the workplace, these are useful facets of social support to consider when reflecting upon various aspects of new students' experiences, and the areas in which they may need additional support.

On the whole there tends to be a depiction of peer relationships as a deficit characteristic or feature of the experience for top-up students. Relationships with peers, or lack of these is identified as a source of anxiety amongst top-up learners (Barron and D'Annunzio, 2009), and particularly noted are feelings of a lack of integration with existing students (Bingham and O'Hara, 2007, Pike and Harrison, 2010, Winter and Dismore, 2010). Often this was perceived by the top up students as a result of them being *different* (Christie et al 2006, Morgan 2015), and feelings of inadequacy as a result of this. Many of these feelings of difference stemmed from the maturity of the top-up students. Gathering data prior to, or right at the commencement of top-up studies, the students in Christie et al's (2006) study conveyed willingness that they wanted to participate in all aspects of university life, but presented anxieties that they would not "fit in" with peers, largely due to age differences as much of the sample were mature learners (63% over the age of 30). However, Barron and D'Annunzio's study (2009) with a younger cohort (the majority being aged under 24) who were interviewed during semester 1 of their top-up studies still identified that relations with their new

peers was an issue of concern to them. The significance of age with regards to making new friendships in an HE environment has been explored by Rubin and Wright (2014) who in the light of exploring social class differences as a factor in friendship, determined that the main reason as to why students from lower socio-economic groups tended to have a lesser quality and quantity of friendships was due to the fact that they were often mature. This gives rise to broader discussions about feelings of inclusion, fitting in, and feeling different, both on an academic and social level, all themes recognised by many of the studies focusing upon top-up students (Christie et al 2006, Bingham and O'Hara, 2007, Pike and Harrison 2010, Morgan 2015).

With feelings of inclusion comes access to social support. Although focusing on younger students in their first year, Brooks' (2007) work found that social support was crucial to the students who were undergoing periods of adjustment. This recognises the vital nature of peer support for students who are transferring into an environment where – certainly in their classes and perhaps in many of their domestic and social gatherings – the majority of their peers are similar to them in that they are all 'new' together. However, for top-up students who are entering physical spaces where they are conscious that so many of the other students already have established friendships, and may outwardly look very different in terms of age and appearance, the security to be gained from maintaining already established friendships from the FD becomes absolutely critical, but just two of the studies in this area identified the tendency of progressing students to remain closely with their known peers (Winter and Dismore 2010 , Pike and Harrison 2011). Subsequently this also resulted in a lack of inclination to attempt to embark upon new friendships (Pike and Harrison 2011) and recognition that this was particularly difficult given the already existing friendship groups anyway (Bingham and O'Hara 2007, Pike and Harrison 2011). Therefore, it is apparent that this propensity to remain with known peers can result in a lack of social inclusion with the existing participants of the community (i.e. students who have been at the HEI for several years previously), which may have

negative consequences, or limitations with regards to top-up students adopting an authentic learning identity as a member of their HEI, an issue explored in further on in this section when considering the way in which perspectives around learner identities have been explored in the literature, relevant to this group of learners (see section 3.2.6).

Nevertheless, there is extremely limited recognition of these existing peers as an asset: the focus is largely upon the inability (situated *within* the top-up learners) to make new friends and join existing social groups. In the few studies that do pay regard to this, current top-up friends as a source of support were identified as a strong influencer upon determination and motivation (Bingham and O'Hara, 2007), and the presence of secure friendship groups has been constructed as a fundamental part of the learning process by Largan (2015) who posits that the social groups formed through studying on the FD and beyond were essential to academic belonging and indeed it was this sense of belonging that meant their transition was manageable in an emotional sense. Largan interprets the friendship groups as akin to a "joint learning enterprise" (2015 p.279) whereby being surrounded by individuals similar to themselves enabled the students to feel that they had a shared identity with others. Yet, on the whole there is sparse examination of the role and value of existing peers as instrumental in the learning process within the top-up year.

Brooks (2007) identified clear beliefs amongst her young participants that friends were crucial to facilitate what she describes as "social learning", interpreted as encompassing an increased confidence in one's own identity, greater self-reliance, and generally learning more about themselves and others in the world, especially those from other cultures. These findings are also echoed by Wilcox's study which asserts that a significant part of becoming a student is about creating a new identity, or "finding your place" (2005 p.712) amongst others, and that this is significantly facilitated by social support from peers. Whilst some of these findings will have been particularly apparent amongst the younger student group in both of these studies, they may be less relevant to more mature top-up cohorts who seem less likely to be seeking new friendships.

Returning to House's (1981) model, certainly aspects of emotional support can be seen in some of the findings of the literature discussed above, but there is little evidence of the other component parts of the model (instrumental, informational and appraisive). Interestingly, Brooks' (2007) research identified elements of competitiveness amongst students which resulted in a tendency for them to avoid discussing course content in-depth, for fear that it may be seen as a weakness, or that others might take ideas for their own work, but none of the studies examined here focusing upon top-up students present any such findings with regards to such individualised or competitive behaviour. Again, this may be a significant difference in attitude towards peers which could possibly be attributed to age differences and maturity.

The second way in which peers and friendship relationships are explored in the literature is with regards to other individuals as a source of social capital. Social capital is a resource that may be drawn upon by individuals, usually in the form of specific social connections by way of friendships or social networks, and these connections, described by Bourdieu as a "durable network" (1983) take on a Marxist viewpoint through Bourdieu in the form of an investment and yield model, whereby the effort spent in building new connections reaps benefits. Since Bourdieu's development of social capital theory, it has been further considered by Coleman (1994) more explicitly as an asset towards human capital, which presses further upon us the worth of friendships and peer support from another value-based perspective, perhaps nudging at House's (1981) inclusion of instrumentalism as a form of social support. Finn's (2015) work with young women also frames some of the significant relationships, or bonds, she analyses as a form of capital, and so there exists recognition of the role of this for HE learners, broadly.

This perspective of peers as social capital then, carries with it connotations that it may be particularly potent for vulnerable students – as those from under-represented socio-economic groups, as top-up students often are (Reay, David and Ball 2005, Finn 2015). It can be established

from existing literature that top-up students have fewer opportunities, and perhaps inclination to develop their share of social capital, which in turn may impact upon the stores of resilience and coping mechanisms they may bring to their transition to top-up study. In a not entirely dissimilar scenario, McTaggart's (2016) examination of HE students in an FE setting asserts that the institutional arrangements experienced by students meant that;

"students did not get the opportunity to develop important social capital bonds with others who were doing the same programme, and/or to build up linking and bridging capital with peers.... which could/ would help the student to integrate more successfully and support them during the many difficult times they had on their programmes"

(2016 p.94)

It becomes apparent from the available literature, then, that the role and significance of peers for progressing FD students is portrayed in two ways: for the most part friendships are problematized with a focus on ways in which top-up students are precluded from fostering new friendships, and that this is a challenging aspect of their experience which serves to depict them further as deficient in comparison to other students. There is a small amount of evidence emerging to suggest that those who come with an already established support network have a buffer of some nature here, but the overwhelming message represented in studies to date tends to be that it is most common for top-up students to be placed in a disenfranchised social position, and this possibility is explored further in the subsequent and final section of this chapter.

### **3.2.6 Belonging, participation and learner identity**

The previous section that discussed inclusion on a social and emotional level leads into a consideration of literature that examines inclusion with regards to learner identity, belonging and the extent of participation in academic communities that direct entrants have access to, and utilise – or not. Examination of this literature is crucial to the focus of this thesis, given the over-arching aim

of the study, that is, the impact of HE institution upon perceptions of learner identity. The principal body of literature to be drawn upon in this section is studies that have looked at learner identities, the variety of influences on these, ways in which these develop and their significance for 'success' in HE. Additionally, there is a degree of exploration stemming from the premise of top-up students as being different, and entering already-established sites of learning, and so models drawn from Lave and Wenger's work on communities of practice, and the extent to which participation in these impacts upon perceptions of learner identity is utilised towards the end of this chapter.

Firstly, it is important to make an overall observation about existing approaches to labelling learners in HE contexts, which has become more commonplace within the literature as educators in the HE sector seek to understand the increasingly diverse groups that feature in classrooms. These labels and definitions of learners and their identity have often been situated within characteristics that could more accurately be described as demographic, or socio-cultural factors (Lawson, 2014), particularly those associated with the traditional areas of educational disadvantage, predominantly gender (e.g. Britton and Baxter, 2001) and socio-economic background (e.g. Reay, 2003, 2009). Many of these studies highlight an emancipatory and social justice perspective, illustrating moving journeys and transformations as students develop new identities (Johnson and Watson 2004; Palmer et al 2009; Christie et al 2008) and thus, by implication, sometimes shed the deficits which they may have previously been assigned due to their 'non-traditional' status.

From an institutional perspective, 'non-traditional' students are presented as a challenge to retention statistics, for example, in the work of Yorke and Longden's (2007, 2008) extensive studies. This is as a result of the inescapable fact that successful widening participation strategies have revealed correlations with high attrition rates (Reay, 2009), and thus these concerns may also contribute to different perceptions of this body of students. However, although 'non-traditional' is a term used commonly within the literature, I object to this as I feel it does little to reduce the tendency to place

students in oppositional categories or as Leathwood and O'Connell (2003) suggest, to pathologise these groups of students as "deficient", thus constantly comparing them to something else, something better. For this reason, and due to the fact that the post-1992 institution where this study is situated has strong widening participation roots and practices, I have found this approach of traditional versus non-traditional unhelpful in trying to understand notions of learner identity, and also identify with the views of Mallman and Lee who neatly articulate the potential consequences of such simplistic 'non-traditional' classification as a trend that "decreases institutional responsibility for acknowledging and supporting... widely differing needs" (2017, p514).

Therefore, I argue that a better route towards understanding the experiences of these top-up students can be found in the way in which the concept of learner identity has been used amongst literature on student engagement. Initially, it is necessary to acknowledge that one such recognised limitation to the literature on learner identity in HE is that most of the focus to date in this area has been upon learners who are new to HE (Lawson, 2014, Macfarlane, 2018), and so to say this is directly applicable to the students at the focus of this study would be to some extent misleading, given their prior study at HE level from their FDs. However, common themes apparent within literature on learner identity does yield useful and relevant insights that are applicable to top-up learners, and these are explored in this section. Firstly, consideration is given to broad definitions of learner identity, including recognition of the multiple and changeable nature of this. Then, influences that can impact upon the formation of perceptions of learner identity are examined, namely with regards to the significance of certain characteristics that can contribute to feelings of 'difference' and also the extent to which participation in institutional practices, and exposure to institutional cultures, can play a part.

As highlighted previously in this section, there is a degree of tension between situating definitions of learner identity amongst structural social constructs, and those which focus upon the actual ‘business’ and individual meaning that can be attributed to identifying as a learner. Lawson’s (2014) work is a useful overview here, acknowledging as she does existing definitions which vary from recognition of the resources required to construct this; feelings of ‘fitting in’ and belonging; and, links with communities of practice theory (the latter two here are both explored further on in this section). In seeking to generate a definition, Lawson (2014, p.346) arrives at;

‘Learner identity’ is how an individual feels about himself/ herself as a learner and the extent to which he/she describes himself/herself as a learner. This may be affected by a number of intrinsic and extrinsic factors, such as personal motivation, a sense of belonging, support and encouragement from others and previous experiences of education”

The above definition serves this study well given the phenomenological and interpretivist approach that situates at its core the participant, their subjective experiences and perceptions, and places value upon views as interpreted by them. Indeed, the influence of this definition can be seen clearly when the schedule of questions for data collection in semi-structured interviews is viewed (see section 4.6).

The idea of identities constantly evolving is also a strong theme, or perhaps a necessary understanding, as expressed by Green and Webb when they suggest that “It does not seem fruitful to conceptualize identity as a static and unchanging notion particularly in contexts where unequal social relationships are open to challenge” (1997, p.131). Macfarlane’s study on learner identity for successful transitions more recently (2018) also acknowledges that the temporary nature of learner identity is a commonly understood characteristic. Accepting the idea of identities being emergent and developing means that the kinds of research which seeks to label students as types, as ‘traditional’ or

'non-traditional' could be further argued to be somewhat redundant as it is acknowledged (for example, by Baumeister and Maraven, 1996, cited in Scanlon *et al* 2007; Mann, 2008; Hussey and Smith 2010, cited in Macfarlane, 2018) that as identities evolve and undergo significant changes, this may then impact upon student approaches and interactions. This evolution may be particularly pertinent to students encountering more than one institution, or habitus, due to the different experiences and expectations associated within each.

Moving on to focus upon the impact and influence of institutional culture, there is recognition within the literature of the relationship between the culture of an HE setting and learner identity formation (Mallman and Lee, 2016, 2017; Macfarlane 2018). As acknowledged at the beginning of this section, through some literature it is suggested that it is preferential for students to adopt wholly, or as much as possible, an identity in line with institutional perceptions of what a student identity is, and the subsequent expectations that go alongside this: often primarily for reasons of retention (Read, Archer and Leathwood, 2003; Field and Morgan-Klein 2010, cited in Macfarlane 2018). However, having one's primary identity as a student in line with university perceptions may not always be possible for some student groups (Archer and Leathwood 2003, Askham, 2008). In seeking to understand the significance of identity and utilise a model helpful to this study, the concept of identity capital, from Côté (1996) is worthy of exploration here. Côté's model was developed as a result of examining the links between culture and identity. He likens the concept of identity capital to other forms of capital commonly cited as significant in educational outcomes, i.e. human capital, social capital and cultural capital, suggesting that identity capital is a useful concept for individuals to "successfully negotiate the vagaries of life passages in late-modern society" (1996, p.424). Côté defined identity capital as an intangible resource combined of psychological factors and character attributes (1996) that provides individuals with the means to negotiate opportunities (1997) and could explain why some individuals succeed in educational contexts more than others. Côté posits that the acquisition of such a resource

“describes how the individual invests in a certain identity (or identities) and engages in a series of exchanges with others in a variety of contexts” (2005, p.225). And, although the concept of identity capital appears scarcely in other literature, a report by Preston (2004) developed the concept somewhat, suggesting that some individuals have the ability to trade on their identity (using their capital) more than others. This notion points to factors within learners that may facilitate more or less resilience towards coping in varying learning situations, an idea acknowledged by both Christie et al (2013) and Largan (2015), who stake a focus upon trying to identify factors that make transition more or less effective for some students.

Largan situates the ability to transition successfully within factors such as confidence and resistance of externally generated difficulties – engendering such attributes is cumulatively dependent upon a number of different forms of capital (social, economic, cultural), and this study recognises the relationships between these various forms of capital as contributory factors towards an impression of the self. The opportunities and means through which learners can accrue and develop these kinds of capital to build upon and invest in an identity, however, is partly linked to the extent of participation that learners – particularly top-up learners – can afford to seek out and adopt.

Therefore, the next consideration around identity-shaping in a learning context is the significance of belonging and participation. The notion of ‘belonging’ or ‘fitting in’ within an HE context has been examined within the literature (Bourdieu 1986, Mann 2001, Reay et al 2009) and for the most part the ideal is that students entering an HEI should seek to assimilate and adapt to the institution for their own benefit, with the predominant viewpoint being that “...success in an education system can be thought of as full participation” (Turner and Tobbell 2017, p.315). The notion that participation and belonging go hand in hand is not disputed in the literature, nor necessarily in this thesis. To add further to this equation, the relationship can be extended to the assertion that participation results in belonging, which is a requirement for a learner identity: “Learning-identity is constructed through participation in practice” (Mallman and Lee, 2017 p.515).

Thus, the role of participating in practice can be seen to be a core component of how one might form a learner identity. And, a reminder of the relationship between practice and culture is timely here: as established in section 3.2.1, the culture of an institution can be observed and felt via its policies and practices. In turn, these policies and practices have the power to facilitate this vital participation, or otherwise.

A core body of work influencing understanding of the concepts of belonging and participation comes from Lave and Wenger (1991) and Wenger (1998). The key concepts to emerge from their work rest in a broad base of social learning theory and have evolved to become identifiable as situated learning, legitimate peripheral participation and communities of practice. Their treatises on each of these concepts all have a common base of the centrality of *engagement* and *context*. The latter has particular pertinence to the ontological approach of this thesis and its contribution to knowledge in that the unique positioning of these top-up students with regards to their temporality in HE policy is very much context-dependent.

The earlier work of Lave and Wenger (1991) on participation and peripherality is an exceptionally apt way to conceptualise the position of top-up students, particularly when the temptation to interpret the concept of legitimate peripheral participation (LPP) solely in an absolute *literal* sense (i.e. simply as a form of exclusion) is avoided. Lave and Wenger emphasise that it is more helpful to think of legitimate peripherality as an articulation between related communities and that peripheral participation should not be thought of as an inferior positionality. This is a useful theoretical thread to apply to the assertion highlighted earlier about the common assumption of optimal success being achieved through participation and draws upon the “peripheral trajectories” (Wenger, 2010, cited in Turner and Tobbell 2017) idea which concedes that whilst some communities of practice (CoP) may not enable full participation for a variety of reasons, a peripheral trajectory may permit a degree of

access that is still significant enough to contribute to a learners' identity. In this model, perceiving learning as LPP transforms learning into an "evolving form of membership" (Lave and Wenger 1991 p.52) of a CoP, and whilst the authors assert that this peripheral nature should be viewed as a positive term, their work also unquestioningly suggests that newcomers *have* a desire to become part of the CoP, in order to become a full practitioner in their context, and that furthermore a shift and development in identity is requisite for this to occur. However, there is little suggestion of an opposing view in the literature whereby the idea of the contrary might be entertained: some learners simply may feel as though they do *not* have a desire to undergo an identity shift, to belong, to ascribe or to become a member. A small amount of literature as highlighted earlier in this chapter (section 3.2.5) recognises that the unique nature of top up students means that some of them have little inclination to look to make new friends or belong in a social sense to already existing cohorts and communities. This idea is further supplemented by the work of Taylor (2014), whose research with teaching assistants undertaking FDs found that these students already felt they belonged to a CoP professionally, and thus the appeal or need to belong to another may be absent. The possibility that institutions could better accept the validity of students who are not striving to become members of a CoP is a divergent yet valid supposition to draw from the literature, yet there is little evidence in these studies of top-up learners of this conclusion.

However, the theory of a CoP does have some presence in the literature around these cohorts of students, for example, Herrera et al (2015) use CoP as a model to help examine students' personal development within their FD studies, partly upon the premise that the model has not been used explicitly in literature about FDs to date to help explore the process of learning and personal development. Linking the learners back strongly to their existing professional roles is also recognised by others such as Askham (2008), and Herrera et al (2015), whose findings suggest that the shared perspective and starting point of the FD students created a CoP for themselves which had

a “marked influence” (p.854) on their personal development and creation of new identities. Therefore, any simplistic notion of a CoP in this context as a singular notion should be re-thought, that is, the existing CoP of students at the HEI (i.e. continuing second and third year students) is not the *only* CoP. Wenger (1998) acknowledges that individuals belong to multiple CoPs, just as they have more than one identity, but that the consequence of this is a job of “reconciliation to maintain one identity across boundaries” (p.158), work which he asserts may be “the most significant challenge faced by learners who move from one community of practice to another” (ibid p.160). For top-up students, it is fair to assert that these boundaries are of a more pronounced multiple and blurred nature.

In synthesising this section’s discussions about the nature of learner identity, and what shapes this, it is clear to see that a definition of learner identity is very much shaped by the approaching lens – of both the learner and the researcher, or writer. This then situates the centrality of a phenomenological approach which prioritises perceptions and experiences rather than adopting a wholly structural point of view that seeks to definitively explain and classify a particular epistemological stance for the work. In this study, the socio-cultural characteristics are not centralised due to the nature of the learners comprising this cohort, and the setting in which the research takes place. The focus instead is upon ways in which the experiences of those undertaking HE in two institutions is uniquely shaped by exposure to culture and practice. Discussion in the last section of this chapter, along with Lawson’s (2014) earlier definition of learner identity, recognises that the ongoing construction of identity is doubly impacted upon by various external forces in the respective educational environments of FE and HE. The view of learner identity employed in this study is situated within the understanding that institutional expectations, cultures and norms all play a role in illuminating and shaping individuals’ perceptions of themselves as learners as a result of the extent to which they feel they can participate, and subsequently belong.

### 3.3 Summary and conclusion to review of the literature

Chapter two's focus upon FDs established the founding and development of the qualification and identified perceptions from a range of stakeholders, which served to ascertain the climate and context necessary to understand discussions whereby the emphasis has been upon establishing how predominant bodies of theory and empirical research can be applied to the circumstances of top-up students. Whilst the realities from an economic and utilitarian perspective appear to have fallen short of aspirations for the FD, it is apparent from literature available that personal intrinsic rewards and value are held amongst the graduates of many FD programmes.

Following the more focused review of literature about students who are direct entrants into established HE programmes in this chapter, it is possible to make a number of claims about the existing knowledge base pertaining to this group of learners, as summarised below;

- Top-up students may be particularly vulnerable to academic alienation as a result of moving from one HE institutional culture, to another. Difficulties in transition could be exaggerated for direct entry students in comparison to first year students, because first year students generally *expect* differences as they move to study from college, or 6<sup>th</sup> form, to University. That is not to say that they do not encounter differences, but compared to direct entrant students, expectations differ.
- There is evidence to suggest that top-up students may be disenfranchised by changing demands and requirements, and that in some ways these serve to discredit and minimise existing skills and experience they have about academic conventions and approaches. This can de-stabilise and make insecure prior conceptions of themselves as learners.
- Top-up students experience varying degrees of satisfaction and support from tutor relationships, which may have a significant impact upon their perceptions of, or actual experiences of inclusion in their top-up environment.

- There may be disadvantage and potentially, loss of knowledge about how to be a successful learner as a result of pedagogical practices and environments, which in some instances remove students' abilities to engage in learning as they know how.
- Top-up students experience degrees of social exclusion from 'other' existing students
- Top-up students, whilst *arriving* with their own kind of social capital in the form of existing peer groups, have fewer opportunities to build new social capital, the kind of which may be of greater value to them within the new institution.
- There is a clearly recognised relationship between institutional culture, participation, belonging, and the shaping of learner identities.

These findings apparent in existing literature illustrate a situation whereby the most common depictions of top-up students are ones that portray these learners as innately disadvantaged, presenting at an HEI with distinct *deficit* connotations; principally seen through being deficient in knowledge and understanding about academic requirements and study skills, unable to integrate into existing social groups and struggling with a shift in pedagogical practices.

Other characteristics of the literature on these learners that has been exposed by this review is;

- Little evidence from existing studies about the kinds of preparatory work that FECs or HEIs may have undertaken with progressing students;
- A prominent and perhaps acquiescent theme that such disruptive and difficult experiences are an inevitable part of a top-up learner's experiences (also recognised by Largan, 2015);
- Significant variance in the point of the academic year in which data is collected, with little recognition of the potential impact of this; and,

- A consensus that there is a dearth of research with these learners (Pike and Harrison, 2011, Christie et al 2013, Morgan, 2015), specifically highlighting the need to understand further different aspects of institutional culture and their overlap (Winter and Dismore, 2010).

The areas pinpointed by this review of the literature in chapters two and three therefore feed into the study's research questions in a number of specific ways;

- Seeking to identify further and explore the ways in which prior HE (in FE) educational experiences play a role in the *potentially fragile learner identities* of students who have taken this specific route to Honours (Research Question 1)
- Analysing the causes and impact of *learning on the periphery* of what are perceived to be already established CoPs, populated by 'other' students who hold existing capital in relation to the specific requirements of Honours degree study at an HEI, and questioning assumptions made about social capital deficits (Research Question 2)
- Refining and contributing further to the knowledge base of HE in FE, characteristics of *contrasting institutional habitus*, and the challenges encountered in adapting learner behaviour in transition from one to another (Research Question 3).
- Beginning to identify the extent to which the inclusion of top-up learners is directly impacted upon by institutional policies and practices (Research Question 4).

The following chapter sets out the methodological approach and decisions made by the researcher in implementing the data collection.

## **Chapter 4: Methodology and methods of data generation**

This chapter details the methodological approach undertaken in the study, which requires exploration and clarification of the particular epistemological influences, and the way in which I conceived of them. Rationale for the adoption of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) is presented, followed by details of the research design and an insight into the analytical process.

Before progressing to explore the origins and character of IPA, it is prudent to briefly remind the reader of the nature and focus of the study here, in that the endeavour is to seek understanding about how students make sense for themselves, as learners, of the experience of studying for an Honours top up. There is an emphasis upon exploring their *participation*, and the theoretical bases of the study (institutional habitus and LPP) and gaps identified in the literature mean that the nature of the research carries with it assumptions about what it is that students do, or do not, bring with them to their top-up experience (forms of capital), and the impact of this upon their learner identities. Such an enquiry can only be enabled by a qualitative approach appropriate to facilitating and hearing accounts of the lived experiences of these students, and thus requires data characterised by rich and unrestrictive descriptions. A qualitative form of data collection applied to the transitional experiences of the students is the most frequent method used for this line of enquiry (Mytton and Rumbold 2011), and employing quantitative data or a combination of the two was never entertained when considering how to design the study.

Developments in qualitative research approaches leave researchers with an “embarrassment of choices” (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005 p.18), but for the purposes and situational context of this study, there are two key ways in which the design of the study fits with the research aim and enables data relevant to the research questions to be obtained;

1. Firstly, the methodology and data collection approach adopted is a way in which participants can be *enabled* to meander towards and reflect upon significant personal considerations such as identity shifts and personal transformation. A desire to gather the perceptions of individuals about potentially private and perhaps even scarcely considered components of their self whereby participants may stumble across and recognise personal transformations, and the complexities they have encountered and overcome is not to be taken lightly. Therefore, the study was designed first and foremost with an awareness of the need for the approach to be sensitive towards participants, but also facilitative in order to allow them to access, identify and reflect upon recollections and realisations.
2. Secondly, the approach needs to be one which permits for, acknowledges and embeds the role of the researcher; in this instance a personification of the institution, the site of research. This needs to be more than a routine consideration of reflexivity, but a thread throughout the work, and indeed a seam that hems the context and positionality of the researcher into the study itself, in order to not only *identify* “the filters that alter their perception of the phenomena they are researching” (Ashwin, 2012 p.139) but to work with them and weave them into the analysis and data production. Thus, this chapter begins by establishing the characteristics and grounds for the adopted approach of IPA, and key themes of the self and consciousness of this appear throughout.

#### **4.1 Theoretical grounding**

The research approach taken to the qualitative inquiry in this study is driven by Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, or IPA, a relatively recent methodological stance and not yet commonplace in educational research to date. This part of the Methodology chapter will dedicate a

portion of time to discussing some key characteristics of IPA and then justify the adoption of IPA as the most appropriate strategy for this study.

There is recognition in the literature that IPA is a developing and increasingly popular approach to qualitative research (Brocki and Wearden 2006, Smith et al 2009, Hefferon and Gil-Rodriguez 2011), and this is particularly noticeable in the area of health research, even though Jonathan Smith, credited with the conceptualisation of the term in a 1996 paper, intended it primarily for use in Psychology, and adopters of IPA are prone to identifying its predominance in the field of Health Sciences or Psychology (Gauntlett et al 2017, Kacprzak, 2017), particularly in studies examining experiences of illness (Oxley, 2016).

In 1996, Smith situated the IPA approach in the roots of phenomenology and symbolic interactionism, and then in later works (Smith et al 2009), more centrally in three epistemological sources of phenomenology, hermeneutics and idiography, and these remain the theoretical triad recognised as underpinning IPA. It is worthwhile acknowledging the methodological epoch in which Smith was developing IPA; the early to mid-1990's is a period referred to by Denzin (2010) as 'Paradigm War Number 2' between post-positivist, constructivist and critical theory paradigms from 1990-2005, with a raft of "isms" (including interpretivism) and debate about which paradigm was the purest. And so from within this climate, Smith's drawing from long-established philosophical traditions sought to introduce approaches that were little used in the discipline of health psychology at the time.

The epistemological threesome consistently referred to by a plethora of writers defining IPA is comprised of phenomenology, hermeneutics and idiography: Smith was not the first to begin to situate these strands together, for example Van Manen's text on lived experiences (1990) is deeply situated in phenomenology and he explicitly links this to hermeneutics, referring to this interpretation of lived experiences as an approach that "edifies the personal insight" (1990 p.7).

Phenomenology is the study of lived experiences originating in the work of philosopher and teacher Edward Husserl and first apparent in his work from 1900-01 (*Logical Investigations* Volumes 1 and 2), progressively critiqued and developed throughout the twentieth century by subsequent philosophers Heidegger (1889-1976), Merleau-Ponty (1908-1961) and Sartre (1905-1980). A central tenet of phenomenology is the view that subjectivity in inquiry is unavoidable, and that this is not a scenario to be condemned, but indeed a vital part of knowledge seeking. Moran posits, "It is frequently argued that the main contribution of phenomenology has been the manner in which it has steadfastly *protected* the subjective view of experience as *a necessary part of any full understanding* of the nature of knowledge" (2008, p.21, my emphases). At first glance such a definition might seem akin to a licence for free rein research and inquiry if subscribing to this epistemological stance, but Husserl was keen to emphasise the role of consciousness and argue that as a result of reflection, "we grasp the corresponding subjective experiences in which we become 'conscious' of them" (Husserl, 1927 cited in Smith et al 2009 p.13). And so, detaching ourselves from an activity or object, acknowledging and addressing our assumptions and perceptions and reflecting upon our way of thinking or seeing things in relation to that activity or object, means we are adopting a phenomenological perspective. The resonance between this approach to experiences and the concept of reflexivity cannot be ignored, and indeed links between these two subjects can be seen in this chapter's discussions on the matter. Subsequently, Heidegger's development stressed context, temporality and inter-subjectivity, Merleau-Ponty worked to emphasise the embodied nature of experience, and Sartre conceived experiences as contingent upon relationships with others. Thus, the contributions of these seminal philosophers helped to create clear parameters about a phenomenological approach with a message the antithesis of generalisation.

The next strand underpinning IPA is identified by Smith as hermeneutics. Once a phenomenological mind-set is adopted, it is difficult to see how these two movements might not be inextricably linked; indeed, Smith makes reference to Heidegger's assertion of "phenomenology as a hermeneutic enterprise" (2009, p.28). After identification of the many facets that a lens of consciousness might

incorporate when presented with data about a phenomenon, processing and seeking to understand them in light of one's self is the next goal, which presents itself in the form of hermeneutics, explained in its simplest sense as the theory of interpretation. Contemplating the motivations and influences upon our interpretations of others' lived experiences demands further recognition of the way in which knowledge is co-constructed by the analyst, or the researcher. The most common form of data collection utilised in IPA studies is in-depth, semi-structured interviews (Smith, 2011). Analysis of these from a hermeneutic model is unavoidably situated within the process of writing undertaken by the researcher. Van Manen helps to impress this upon the reader by reassuring us that "human science writing *is* a form of research" (1990 p.111, my emphasis) which is "the very activity of doing phenomenology" (ibid p.132). Therefore, it is the process of writing in which the interpretation occurs in order to offer up "meaningful insights which exceed and subsume the *explicit* claims or our participants" (Smith et al 2009, p.23).

Finally, the last component contributing to the character of IPA is idiography; the focus on the particular, the individual, depth and detail. This is in contrast to much psychological (and social science research) where measures of credibility are so often linked a perceived prize of generalisability, seeking to be nomothetic. Idiographic researchers may not necessarily shun generalisations, but these will be proffered in a very cautious manner as appropriate for claims based on individual, or certainly rather small, cases. Linking findings from the particular to wider, existing nomothetic research helps to create a more balanced and holistic understanding of phenomena but with the essential closeness that examining experience "on its own terms" (Smith 2011 p.9) requires.

## 4.2 Critiquing IPA

As with any methodological approach, IPA brings with it a range of challenges and criticisms, some of which are immediate to the researcher in their efforts to apply IPA. The first of these concerns the double hermeneutic nature of the approach which is recognised in the literature (Smith and Osborn 2003 and Clancy 2013), whereby participants in the study are articulating their experiences and trying to make sense of them in this way, and then consequently the researcher is trying to make sense of the participants trying to make sense. This has also been described as two aims by Larkin et al (2006, p.104); firstly, to try and understand the participants' experiences, or world, and secondly to "develop a more overtly interpretative analysis which positions the initial 'description' in relation to a wider social, cultural and perhaps even theoretical context".

This layering of interpretation upon interpretation may be perceived as both a strength and a weakness of the approach, depending upon the epistemological stance. It is true that all data requires interpretation at some level, and that "data and facts...are the...*results* of interpretations" (Alvesson and Skoldberg 2018 p.1, my emphasis). As qualitative researchers, we are not seeking to identify "incontestable answers" (Lyons and Cole 2007 p.4) and so the viewpoint that takes umbrage with two sets of interpretation is not a constructive one from which to seek an expansion upon enquiry in a qualitative domain. However, the viewpoint that interpreting an already existing interpretation is problematic does also carry some weight as such a significant imprint of the researcher may also bring with it suggestions of power dynamics, bias and motivations that risk impressions around validity, if such a stance that is ignorant of the role of the researcher is adopted. In contrast, Wagstaff et al (2014) praise this characteristic of IPA as it enables the researcher and the participant to look at the same phenomena from different angles, which is of benefit in the quest for a holistic understanding. However, this asset to IPA is only as good as the researchers' ability to reflect, and also their ability to recognise the extent to which they are working to acknowledge their own interpretation (Brocki and Weardon 2006). The double hermeneutic phenomenon is also

represented in the literature as a combination of empathic and critical hermeneutics (Lyons and Cole 2007, Eatough and Smith 2017), conceptualising the two sets of interpretation as something very different, with the first being an attempt to experience the phenomenon from the experience of the participants (i.e. in their shoes) and the second a questioning and probing approach. Both perspectives can be viewed as exceptionally constructive and helpful to researchers when engaging in reflexivity as an IPA practitioner: they serve as well-structured reminders of in-depth and interrogative reflexivity that researchers can query in their actions and approaches.

This example of different understandings of the hermeneutics at work here is perhaps illustrative of appraisals of IPA which express a lack of clarity over some fundamental characteristics of the approach, with Tuffour claiming that there exists little consensus on the nature of phenomenological research broadly, which has resulted in a lack of standardization (2017). This lack of a common method could be problematic for those seeking to understand the actions of researchers, and their subsequent findings, without an understanding as to how they arrived at them. Shineborne (2011) claims there exists a persistent view that IPA lacks a robust theoretical base. Here, I am inclined to agree with Tuffour's judgement, noting that it seems almost impossible to source IPA studies *without* being guided through the theoretical triad of interpretivism, hermeneutics and idiography by the author(s), and so it is not unreasonable to say that a very apparent level of awareness of the influence of these three movements is evident in literature to date.

Another thread apparent in the literature commentating upon IPA relates to the spectrum of idiography and generalisability, whereby the focus on the particular is at one end, and generalisability is situated at the extreme opposite; this situation is claimed to be the most frequently cited dilemma in a review of researchers' experiences of IPA by Wagstaff et al (2014). Rodriguez and Hefferon (2011) note that there remains a lure for some IPA researchers to aim towards generalisability, however, Oxley (2016) claims that a lack of generalisability in IPA is an

accepted characteristic of the approach (such is the idiographic core): to level this claim at it is a failing is to misunderstand the purpose and intentions of the approach.

There is evidence of other criticisms that centre on the actual analysis process for IPA, being as it is quite a uniquely prescribed process with a specific framework and “steps to analysis” (Smith et al 2009 p.81). Broadly, Chamberlain (2011) questions the distinctiveness of IPA analysis procedures and likens it to grounded theory or a thematic analysis, suggesting all approaches have common similarities, but Pringle et al (2011) are keen to identify discernible differences between these two approaches and IPA, and so mixed debate prevails here. However, both authors share similar views around the structure of the analytical method: despite Smith et al’s insistence that their detailed analysis strategy permits flexibility and does not insist on linearity, the guided six steps of analysis, and writing (2009) has raised objections (Giorgi 1997 cited in Pringle et al 2011) around being too rigorous. Smith’s attempt to quantify the extent of data extracts in the reporting of findings as an indication of quality is also noted as out of the ordinary in guidance for working with qualitative data (Chamberlain 2011). However, this level of detail serves as nothing but helpful for newer researchers, whilst perhaps organising and systematising a toolbox of familiar techniques for more experienced researchers.

To examine trends and review the rapid uptake of IPA research, Smith conducted an analysis of 293 papers from 1996-2008 and this resulted in the articulation of a range of criteria that could be used to assess the quality of IPA work, and future directions and development of the approach, further expanded upon by commentators Shaw (2011) and Todorova (2011). These discussions and some use of Smith’s seven criteria will be picked up on again later on in this chapter as discussions around credibility, quality and validity will be considered.

### 4.3 IPA in this study

Why IPA for this study? This is the next consideration here, with the focus upon the research questions and the participants in this study of top-up learners. The case for IPA is argued hereon in with regards to four contentions: disciplinary suitability, interpretivism, context, and methodological approaches used in HE research.

Firstly, in line with the ideas underpinning the three theoretical keystones of phenomenology, hermeneutics and idiography, it makes sense that IPA is commonly thought of as suitable when focusing upon an event, process, or situation (Smith and Osborn 2003, Larkin et al 2006). Disciplinary adoption of IPA, whilst still predominantly in health and psychology related fields, can be seen to be spreading into other areas, albeit at no fast pace. Smith's 2011 review only identified four of 293 papers in the subject area of Education and there is some relatively recent consensus in the literature indicating that the use of IPA in educational research is by no means commonplace (Bickle and Gauntlett, 2016, Oxley 2016). However, it is an approach well suited to the phenomena under consideration in this study, that is of transitional periods for individuals (Farouk, 2014 cited in Oxley 2016) and transformative experiences (Eatough and Smith, 2008). Tuffour's (2017) critical review of IPA sites education as one of a growing number of disciplines with an increased presence of phenomenology. Searching current databases for evidence of this – particularly in HE research around student experience – yields little of direct relevance, with a few notable exceptions (Denovan and Macaskill 2013, Gauntlett et al 2017) and a scattering of more recent theses in the area of student experience in HE with IPA as the chosen methodology (Grainger, 2015, Macleod, 2016, Teideman, 2017), and the recency of these indicates a shift in this area, adding further weight to my claim of the suitability of IPA for this study.

Secondly, this study's intentions fit well within an interpretivist approach with the premise that participants' views, feelings and experiences are valid and interpreted by them (for example, through the emphasis they place upon feelings, events or issues) during the process of their narrative (as gathered in the interviews). And, as noted at the beginning of this chapter with regards to my own role, whilst I was encouraging participants to interpret and present their own experiences, I was subsequently interpreting these myself, on two levels: firstly, in the immediate research context where I was responding to participants' input within our narrative, and then again during the analysis process. Thus my interpretive 'imprint' might be seen from the moment the participants' voices were recorded in an interview context, and it would be perhaps somewhat naïve and duplicitous to deny this: IPA permits an extensive embrace of this researcher self and numerous examples of IPA studies are rich in their inclusion of the researcher themselves, and the researcher takes an active role in the process of the research exercise (Smith and Osbourn, 2003).

Next, returning to the claims made in the Introduction to the thesis about the particularly temporal nature of this study within HE policy and development in the UK, the emphasis upon context within IPA is another characteristic of the approach that affirms its suitability for this study. Smith et al (2009) and Eatough and Smith (2017) stress the way in which attending to context is an important part of assessing the quality of research. In their 2009 work, Smith et al draw significantly upon criteria produced by Yardley (2000) to guide an assessment of qualitative data, and many IPA focused papers (Pringle et al 2011, Shineborne 2011, Todorova 2011, Elmi-Glennan 2013, Gauntlett et al 2017) since then also refer to this, in particular Yardley's principle of sensitivity to context. Once again, it is to be pointed out that this is not prioritised only in IPA, but remains a broad principle of phenomenological research (Van Manen 1990). Within the remit of this study, a group of individuals for whom participation in the FD and top up progression was notable and significant is extremely context specific when comparing this research with other studies perusing similar issues amongst students (identity, experience). As outlined in the Introduction and Literature Review chapters of this thesis,

the sector's time-limited experience of a mass surge in these students with very specific backgrounds, and aspirations, combined with the government and employer view, makes study of these students incredibly reliant upon context. This is summed up nicely if one holds these students in mind whilst reading Harnett's words; "People are products of times in which they are living: lives moulded by policies, structures, prevailing beliefs and attitudes" (2010, p.165), and so I argue that the significance of context (situational and temporal) is a crucial aspect of the study that demands the three-rooted characteristics afforded by IPA. In contrast to this, if a less idiographic approach were to be taken, the work could be viewed as another student experience study based on interview data, and these abound in the literature in no short supply.

Lastly, the adoption of an IPA approach here offers an opportunity to afford progression and development within a particular method of qualitative research within HE studies. It sits with hopeful projections about the future of qualitative research as a "moral and methodological community that honors and celebrates paradigm and methodological diversity" (Denzin 2010, p.425) rather than pitting approaches against one another. IPA may also act as an enabler to go some way towards filling the gaps that are perceived to exist amongst the detail that researchers supply (or not) when talking about analysis of data in the field of researching teaching-learning interactions in HE (Ashwin, 2012), such is the detail supplied about the analysis process, leading to greater transparency and therefore more secure truth claims.

#### **4.4 Sample and context**

The table below presents key characteristics of the participants. All were female, and all were studying on a full-time basis, completing their top-up in the period of one academic year.

	<b>Participant pseudonym</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Ethnicity</b>	<b>Employment</b>
1	Elaine	56	White	Nursery
2	Eleanor	39	White	Teaching assistant
3	Harriet	43	White	School support
4	Lauren	25	White	None
5	Libby	36	White	Nursery
6	Nicola	30	Non-white*	Community childcare
7	Rachel	43	White	Early Years
8	Zoe	33	White	Teaching assistant

Table 3: Participant demographics \*Specifying this students' description of her own ethnicity could make her identifiable

Pen pictures of each participant are presented at the beginning of Chapter 5. The sample was attained through open invitation to all students across two top-up programmes in the disciplinary areas of Education and Childhood Studies, by way of e-mail. Whilst I regularly saw all of these students face to face in one of the modules I was leading, I did not invite participation in this context in case it created any face to face pressure or expectation to volunteer: e-mail allowed participants to proactively opt-in to the study. In the academic year 2011-12, there were a total of 125 top-up students (full time and part time) across these programmes. Of these 125, fourteen students responded. This was in excess of the sample size I preferred, and would have been somewhat unmanageable within the remit of an IPA approach, but fortuitously due to difficulties scheduling mutually convenient interview times, the final participant group fell to eight. Compared to the demographic constitution of the key studies identified in this area (see page 48), this sample represents a much less diverse cohort in terms of age and gender than others, but it is accurately representative of the cohort of 125 students in that academic year which was *entirely* female, with only six students from minority ethnic groups. Thus, in line with the emphasis upon context in the IPA approach, the sample reflects the predominant trend amongst this particular student body at that time.

## 4.5 Research design

Following on from section 4.3 which presented arguments for the suitability of IPA in this study, the choice of data collection method for this study (interview) lies partly in the precedent set by IPA norms whereby the researcher aims “to enter the lifeworld of the participant rather than investigate it” (Eatough and Smith 2013 p.30), partly in the instincts of the researcher (as discussed in section 4.6), and partly in the demands made by the study’s research questions which require inquiry into a spectrum of experience, current and historical, and potentially complex considerations about perceptions of the self. The appreciation of objectivity and interpretation within IPA is facilitated through interviews due to their nature as a knowledge-*creation* process (as opposed to one dimensional identification) that occurs between the interviewer and interviewee (Kvale and Brinkman 2009).

The approach which I took for my pilot study, and which was pursued for the main study is influenced significantly by the method of narrative interviews, which was the data collection strategy adopted. Despite copious literature around specific terms within this genre such as life histories and life stories (e.g. Hatch and Wisniewski 1995), I felt it was not necessary for me to distinguish with absolute precision and certainty which specific label my research would utilise, and as Erben (1998, p.9) says, “a standard research method for biographical investigation cannot be proposed”. This was further reinforced through my reading of texts such as Andrews et al (2008), Goodley et al (2004) and Merrill and West (2009), all of which tend not to be concerned about making any such clear cut definitions between a life history and narrative approach, but use a number of terms: narrative research, life stories and biographical research.

A narrative approach particularly appeals to me in order to *enable* students to engage in meaningful reflection about their educational (and broader learning) experiences to date. Furthermore, a preliminary overview of relevant studies in my area showed that many of them used semi-structured

interviews characterised by narrative (life history or life stories) approaches (Penketh and Goddard, 2008; Pike and Harrison, 2011; Largan, 2015; Morgan, 2015). I felt it was apparent that other methods would not be able to gain the insights into the kinds of issues I was concerned with. The fact that, from a narrative approach, students would be able to control and shape the content of the interview themselves is perhaps the most persuasive strength to this approach.

To further the rationale here as to why this data collection method fits with what I was trying to achieve in this study, it is worth noting that such approaches (specifically biographical methodologies) have been commonly and successfully used in relation to educational experiences and adult learning. Merrill and West (2009) present evidence in the form of studies and associations across the world whereby biographical methods have become a popular approach to studying educational experiences of adults, particularly of more marginalised and so-called 'non-traditional' learners which my study focuses upon. This approach has been used to good effect in a number of other studies looking at broadly similar issues (Moore 2004, Askham 2008, Baxter and Britton, 1999, 2001, Reay 2003, Crossan et al 2003), and has also been used amongst one of the studies focussing specifically on transitions to Honours for FD students (Penketh and Goddard, 2007; 2008). The other studies in this area (Pike and Harrison 2011; Greenbank 2007) have tended to use a combination of approaches, but these remain largely qualitative.

Chase (2005), in identifying the major disciplinary approaches in contemporary narrative enquiry, suggests one such approach stems from sociologists who stress "identity work" is engaged in by people as they construct their selves within specific contexts, thus suggesting that this is a common and appropriate approach to take for researchers who have an interest in this area (of identity). Also, Usher suggests that an autobiographical approach is "ideally suited...in tracking the development of the self as learner" (1998, p.18), and Scott that "biography or biographical study is the *sine qua non* of understanding how education systems function" (1998, p.32).

Thus, there are clear precedents in relevant literature for the suitability of my chosen methods in this study, and fundamentally, I believe this method is appropriate not only because it has been used to good effect in a number of other studies looking at similar issues (Moore 2004, Askham 2008, Baxter and Britton, 1999, 2001, Reay 2003, Crossan et al 2003 and Gallacher et al 2003), but also because I resonate with Corrine Squire's assertion that, "we frame our research in terms of narrative because we believe that by doing so we are able to see different and sometimes contradictory layers of meaning, to bring them into useful dialogue with each other, and to understand more about individual and social change" (2008, p.5).

One particular model of narrative research outlined by Squire which influenced my stance, is the idea of experience-centred narrative research, a broad 'category' but advantageous in this way because "all this work rests on the *phenomenological* assumption that experience can, through stories, become part of consciousness. It also takes a *hermeneutic* approach to analysing stories, aiming at full interpretation and understanding rather than, as in Labov's case, structural analysis" (2008:16, emphasis in the original). This is in contrast to the other perspectives in narrative research Squire identifies as approaches focused on narrative syntax, or narrative semantics.

Squire (2008, p.17) presents four characteristics associated with narratives and the experience centred approach;

- Narratives are sequential and meaningful – these may be event narratives or around a theme or structure, including past and future experiences. These could be a thematic biography, for example about a career (such as a learning career)
- Narratives are definitively human – they are the means of human sense-making as humans have an inbuilt tendency to tell stories
- Narratives 're-present' experience by reconstituting it. Narratives involve reconstruction and cannot be repeated exactly

- Narratives can display personal transformation or change

These characteristics clearly and unequivocally align with the nature of the study's research aims and questions, the focus being upon exploring identity, making sense of an experience and recognising change in the self.

As with all methodologies, narrative research approaches are open to criticism and carry with them a number of flaws. It is common to come across the idea of a 'narrative turn' in many social science texts, as there has been an increasing amount of interest in narratives and storytelling as research tools (Atkinson and Delamont, 2006), but the approach is fraught with caveats and grey areas, particularly in relation to the issue of what exactly narratives represent. Andrews et al (2000, p.9) assert that "narratives both reveal and conceal, enable and constrain", thus summing up a range of concerns expressed by writers in the field. The idea that assumptions may be made somewhat falsely on the basis of what might be a single narrative is also an issue (Squires 2008 and Andrews et al 2000). It would be easy to approach a narrative with a view to classifying individuals, and thus a strong awareness of what Brockmeier and Harre call "the representation fallacy" (2001, p.53) is of concern. Assumptions should also not be made based on what might be left out, or not explicitly mentioned, as some narratives can be defensive (Andrews et al 2000) or participants may quite consciously choose not include references to events, individuals or experiences (Squire, 2008, Bruner 1993 cited in Skies 2010), even if this means that the narrative might be "partial, fragmented or contradictory...(an)incoherent or incomplete representation of experience" (ibid, p.40).

Here is the point at which a counterbalance for these concerns is supplied by the hermeneutical and idiographic emphasis within IPA, with an acceptance, attribution of validity and appreciation of the particular. As with IPA, the issue of time and context is also significant to narrative work, and narratives can only ever offer a 'snapshot' representing that person's perceptions at that moment in

time. However, it could also be argued that the retrospective nature of many narratives (although often also including present and future considerations) mean that “autobiographical narratives often confer meaning on events that they did not, and indeed could not possess at the time of their occurrence”(Freeman and Brockmeier, 2001, p.82), and it is this meaning-making and interpretation that is being sought through narratives situated in an IPA grounding, not an accurate and objective representation, as each narrative represents “particular points of view...in particular voices” (Brockmeier and Harre 2001, p.53).

#### **4.6 Use of experience centred narrative interviews**

A strong characteristic of research with any biographical characteristic is its open and unregulated nature, but equally, a total lack of structure can be a hindrance for both the researcher and the researched, as it may lead to confusion. The students in question participating in this research are in their first year of experiencing an HE-in-HE habitus, and it may be that participating in interviews such as these is not something they have experienced before, therefore I felt that some kind of structure was necessary to guide and avoid too much pressure being placed upon participants to find subjects and issues to talk through. Squire (2008) says that most experience-centred narrative interviewing is semi-structured in some way, but also acknowledges the ‘free association’ approach which is highly participant-centred and ‘allows’ (or perhaps it might be more accurate to say ‘does not discourage’) silences and awkward pauses that might traditionally be avoided in interviews.

To facilitate this, an unstructured, or open approach was adopted in interviews in this study. This is a small step away from what might traditionally be termed as semi-structured interviews, although the distinction could no doubt be disputed. From this open interviewing strategy, Merrill and West (2009) suggest two main approaches: a fairly unstructured beginning, with an open ended question such as “Tell me about your educational life history”, followed by more structured questions (or, in effect a ‘checklist’ of topics) towards the end about issues such as family, social background,

mentors, structural barriers/ support, and university experience. Chase stresses that, “When researchers conceive of interviewees as narrators, they not only attend to the stories that people *happen* to tell during interviews but also work at *inviting* stories” (2005, p.661, emphasis in the original). This idea of invitation is not straightforward. Chase describes this as framing the interview with a broad question (similar to Merrill and West’s first suggested approach, above), but Chase notes that this requires the researcher to understand and be able to identify what is “storyworthy”. And, of course, what I may deem to be story worthy and of value may not tally with that of the individual being interviewed.

It should be noted briefly that an alternative method of facilitating data collection in the interview context entertained the idea of using more structured tools such as mind maps, life grids or time lines, in order to structure and then elucidate discussions. I considered these as I felt that they would all be useful exercises to lead to some useful initial discussion and agreement about which issues identified by the participant are of significance and thus worthy of in depth discussion during the interview (a negotiated approach, as taken by Lawthom in her research with the mature student, Colleen, 2004). Indeed, for the first of the pilot interviews I developed a time line template with the intentions of using this as a starting point for discussion, but in the reality of the interview room, I found that introducing such a structured activity felt instinctively wrong. I realised that this was due to my position as lecturer, and that presenting a largely blank piece of paper with attendant demands to fill in the blank space, and to attempt to structure and organise the collection of their recollections and perceptions would simply have been too much like a teaching and learning activity they might experience in a timetabled seminar or workshop. In the short period of time from welcoming that first participant to settling down to begin the interview, the prospect of ‘task setting’ in such an overt, visible way that placed expectations on the participant felt counter intuitive to the atmosphere I was trying to facilitate and the nature of conversations I wanted to engage with.

Thus, the interviews were indeed guided by a 'schedule' with an opening question, and a range of areas to be covered, but these were by no means phrased in an identical way in each instance, or worked through in the same order. This lack of uniformity in the process simply arose as a result of the naturalistic, conversational environment and tone that was apparent in each instance of data collection.

To identify the areas I felt needed to be covered in order to gain insights into my research questions, a checklist of three key questions and attendant issues I wanted participants to consider was to hand in all interviews, as below. Oftentimes, conversation organically meandered on the outskirts, or directly into these items and so intervention to extract a participant from one train of thought and re-direct them to another was rare, but the schedule acted as a reassuring guarantee that I would not forget to cover any particular areas. For the most part, the prompts were not required, but I found it useful to prepare these in advance, stemming from common findings identified in key studies that had been published to date at the time of data collection.

**1. Can you tell me about your educational biography to date?** (where you have come from and how you have got here?)

- Educational history; schooling, post 16/ FE, employment/ career path to date
- Can you identify your reasons for deciding to come to University?
- Are there individuals who have been influential in your decision to come to University?

**2. Talking about differences between college and university**

- How did you find the transition from college to university?
- What kinds of differences did you notice?

**3. Feelings about being a learner**

- How did you feel about learning, and being a learner before, and after coming to University? (i.e. more or less competent, confident, in control?)
- If learning is enjoyable to you, why? Is it because it enables a sense of achievement? Or is it learning of new knowledge?
- Do you think past experiences of learning prepared you for University?

- Do you perceive being a student as part of your identity? (multiple identities; some more prominent than others? how do these identities co-exist?)
- Has being a student impacted upon other individuals in your life?
- Are there individuals in your life who are a source of support to you with your studies?

In terms of the procedural conduct of the interviews, Smith et al (2009) guide that IPA interviewing can shift between phases that are narrative and descriptive, and that participants should be encouraged to be expansive, with a limited amount of input from the interviewer. This is where flexibility in the approach was particularly valuable because some interviews flowed more organically with very little input from myself, whereas others (one in particular, with Nicola) was largely comprised of quite short, succinct answers that I was unable to extract more expansiveness from. Interviews ranged in time periods from 29 minutes (Nicola's) to 67 minutes (Harriet's). Interestingly, I was surprised to see that the interviews I have the most vivid recollections of as enjoying connections with the participant and conversation flowing easily (those of Rachel and Zoe) were two of the shorter ones, perhaps suggesting that rapport and comfort was achieved with greater immediacy.

Interviews were organised via e-mail contact with participants, in private study rooms in the University library, and so whilst this was still on-site within the institution, the library represented to some extent a more neutral space apart from departmental or organisational markers, and separate from offices occupied by academic staff whom might represent any hierarchy or embodiment of institutional habitus.

Interviews were begun with a re-statement of the aims and purpose of the interaction, students were supplied with copies of an Information Sheet about the research, and a Consent Form (see Appendix 1), which they had already been sent prior to the interview by e-mail. Participants were reminded that the interview was to be recorded, that they could take a comfort break where

necessary. These pointers reflect the preparations and setting of the “stage” as recommended by Smith et al (2009) and Kvale and Brinkman (2009). All interviews were audio recorded for the duration.

The phases of data collection for the study spanned a period of two years in total, due to two pilot studies, without which the focus would not have come to rest specifically upon FD students. Data collection for the main study took place within a two-month period in 2012. The span of data collection and number of participants at each stage can be seen in the table below:

<b>Phase</b>	<b>Period of data collection</b>	<b>Number of participants</b>
Pilot 1	May 2010	6
Pilot 2	November -December 2010	6
<b>Main study</b>	<b>March – April 2012</b>	<b>8</b>

Table 4: Overview of data collection phases

## **4.7 Reflexivity**

Inherent in the phenomenological character of this study is a requirement to include and inspect the self, a key factor taken into account when designing the research. This next section presents the understanding of reflexivity adopted in this study and documents the ways in which evidence of research reflexivity can be seen throughout the work.

There are two initial points to be raised here with regards to ways in which reflexivity is often accounted for or presented in research. Firstly, it is the norm to reflect upon the self, and the impact of this upon the research from beginning to end. However, this norm suggests an end point to the study which in reality does not seem possible when the developmental idea of *reflexivity as growth of the researcher* (Attia and Edge, 2017) is considered, and it is acknowledged and highlighted here

that the reflexivity and the process of myself making sense of the research, and my part in this will always be somewhat incomplete.

Secondly, the notion of reflexivity in research is often presented in the literature as a tick box exercise whereby the researcher simply reflects upon, and identifies potential bias, followed by a proffering of details about how this was minimised. This is a relatively straightforward and linear way in which to claim that reflexivity has been attended to in a study, but a somewhat surface level approach that has been noted within literature in this area. Dedicating time to writing about reflexivity in research has been referred to variously as an activity for “virtuous portrayal” by Clegg and Stevenson (2013), largely “task driven” (Wickens et al 2017), and even “self-indulgent, narcissistic and tiresome” (Pillow 2003, p.176). Such comments do little wonders for the self-image of reflexivity, but when taken in balance with other viewpoints in the literature, and phenomenological principles, help to convey the controversies around the intention and reality of reflexive practices.

The understanding of reflexivity adopted in this study is inextricably linked to the methodological foundations of IPA. Although inclusion of the self in research has been seen as “a potential contaminant, something to be separated out, neutralized, minimized, standardized and controlled” (Fine et al 2003, p.169), a phenomenological approach that has at its centre the lived experience of *individuals* cannot exclude the researcher as one of these individuals. A core part of the phenomenological mind-set requires what is referred to as a “defence” of subjectivity and consciousness (Moran, 2008) whereby a subjective and situated view of phenomena is an essential part of constructing any kind of reality of that given experience; to argue otherwise would be to exclude a large part of the picture. In contrast to Pillow’s observation of some reflexivity as indulgent, Moran stresses that recognition of this consciousness should not be a “wallowing in the subjective domain” (ibid p.15). However, it is easy to see how such wallowing could be encountered, as reflexive thinking for myself on occasions *has* involved lamenting of missed opportunities or

remorse at not having produced extensive journals documenting my detailed thoughts on every aspect of the research process. This remorse in itself is indicative of my original grasp of reflexivity as something akin to quality control, where every potential threat to subjectivity should be recorded and acted upon - as per Fine's comment - an understanding that I now find to be quite redundant. My notes recorded after data collection tended to focus on the extent to which I found interviews to be a 'success' or otherwise, with few references to myself or the potential conditioning, subjectivity or impact that I could have had on these interactions. My scribbled reflections during analysis of interview transcripts reveal chides and intentions about potential paths for reflexive exploration which have then been curtailed by my reluctance to embark on such a route, often for fear of the lack of value of my own reflections. Such self-criticism is revealing in itself and entirely representative and indicative of feeling out of my depth as a relatively inexperienced researcher and hesitation to ask the reader for their further trust which might have enabled me to "know and make known [my]...subjectivity" (Wickens et al 2017, p.865) to a satisfactory standard, in an authentic manner.

I brought little of my self into the interviewing process, even though I was aware that doing so can on some occasions be a conscious strategy to create a more reciprocal environment of information exchange. In being reluctant to do this, I potentially reduced the co-construction of knowledge created in the data collection process. There was perhaps less of an "inter view", or exchange of views between two individuals, as conceived by Kvale and Brinkman (2008), and more of an adherence to the recommendations of Smith et al (2009) in that finding a "comfortable research persona" is required, which means the displacement of usual social interactions such as sharing parts of ourselves, being fully empathic or encouraging a more positive interpretation of events.

As outlined in the overview of personal and professional context supplied in the Introduction chapter, the latter stages of this study with time spent substantively reading and writing have proved as a stark re-iteration of Van Manen's assertion that "phenomenological research does not

start or proceed in a disembodied fashion. It is always a project of someone: a real person, who in the context of a particular individual, social and historical life circumstances sets out to make sense of a certain aspect of human existence” (1990 p.31). Therefore owning this project myself, as a real individual, “forces us to come to terms ...with our selves and the multiple identities that represent the fluid self in the research setting” (Alcoff and Potter 1993, cited in Lincoln and Guba 2003, p.283).

The multiple identities at play for myself within not just the data collection period but the whole lifespan of the research have shifted significantly, and my relationship with my professional self and the institution have been subject to tensions and pressures that have inevitably become implicated in my approach to the study, situated as it is within the specific business of my day to day work life. When I refer back to fragmentary reflective notes and piece these together with the benefit of hindsight, and truly dedicate time and space to processing and engaging in further meaning-making about the experience of researching, it exposes many insecurities around perceptions of credibility, authenticity, and the dual role of a researcher and lecturer to the participants in the study. These roles and my positions are subsequently explored in more detail, picking up the points presented in the Introduction chapter where I presented three core areas of what, at one time, I would have referred to as areas of disclosure, but are referred to as political, professional and personal context here, as it is more appropriate to conceive of them within Van Manen’s parameters of objectivity and subjectivity, which it is worthwhile re-presenting here:

“...‘objectivity means that the researcher is *oriented* to the object that which stands in front of him or her...The researcher becomes in a sense a guardian and a defender of the true nature of the object. He or she wants to show it, describe it, interpret it while remaining faithful to it – aware that she is easily misled, side-tracked or enchanted by extraneous elements....Subjectivity means that we are *strong* in our orientation to the subject of study in a *unique and personal way* – while avoiding the danger of becoming arbitrary, self-indulgent, or of getting captivated and carried away by our unreflected preconceptions”

(1990 p.20, emphasis in the original)

This notion of being conscious in our orientation towards a particular phenomenon or experience is a phenomenologically-situated one: Moran refers to this as “objectivity-for-subjectivity” (2008, p.15) which nicely depicts the relationship between two positions that might otherwise be seen as oppositional, but expressing this pairing of them in this way neatly illustrates that one is required for the other.

Some of the ‘work’ of reflexivity in this research from a procedural perspective can be found in this chapter’s section on Ethics, such is the overlap in some respects. The following narrative details some important considerations that have been contributions to my positionality.

Operationally, for the participants in this study I was course leader or module tutor and therefore inextricably linked to actions of the university that could be impactful upon the lives of participants. Thus, I held shared responsibility (with other colleagues) for both broad and specific actions including awarding marks for assessed work, and discussions about progress at assessment boards. As noted in my discussions on ethics, actions to ‘offset’ these roles were implemented, but the inherent knowledge of the complexity of individuals and their histories, once known, cannot be unknown. Whilst my interactions with the academic decisions for these individuals were subject to the scrutiny of others and broader quality assurance checks and balances, I cannot assure myself, or others with absolute certainty that increased familiarity or empathy for the individuals was not at play. Thus, I experience the discomfort of possibilities of either conscious or unconscious influence here.

The issue of potential power dynamics and my role as a member of the institution also comes into play. Tied up with the focus of the study is the positioning of several HE institutions (Laydon University and the various FE institutions where students undertook their FDs) and my role within

this dynamic. Laydon, as the institution franchising and quality assuring the FD programmes that participants previously studied upon, may have been perceived by participants as a distant body they were aware of through FEC tutors' references to moderation of assessed work, or visits from HE staff. My own perception of this relationship is very much influenced by the administrative and procedural viewpoint of this relationship, in a number of respects. FECs offering HE courses can create competition to the student numbers and day to day business of HEIs, thus on a broad level my awareness of this and potential implications for my own institution and course viability were at play. On a more individual basis my role at the time as course leader, liaising with a large number of changeable FE staff (due to short-term contracts and staff turnover) who were often at the mercy of climactic forces in FE (for example, last minute assigning of staff to a course they may not have taught on before) was an administrative challenge and on occasions this evidence of organisational disorder, as I perceived it, was viewed by myself in sharp contrast to the relative stability of such provision in my HE department and institution. Therefore, my perceptions of the experiences some students will have brought with them in this respect will have been coloured in this way, even though we were both (i.e. myself and the participants) engaged in different degrees and kinds of relationships with these FECs.

I also played a role in some decisions that may have impacted upon the students' prior experiences in their FECs (such as playing a part in franchise or staff approval), and whilst it is unlikely that the participants were aware of this, I was an implicit part of these approval and authorising processes whereby the HEI has a hierarchical role to play as the body that makes judgements about quality of provision and student experience. Having only experienced these processes from the perspective of the HEI, it is fair to say that I was aware of the potential power of the HEI here, in the role of accreditor who has the authority to authorise or refuse certain allowances to another provider of HE, and that this awareness impacted upon my initial perceptions of the quality of experiences students may have had at their prior FECs. Although, at the time, the FECs and HEI in question were not in direct competition with one another for students on these top-up courses (the students *had*

to progress to Laydon or A.N. Other HEI to gain Honours degrees, it was not possible for them to do so at their FEC), my sense of professional identity and attachment to the HEI, and my keen-ness for top-up students to become familiar with a contrasting educational experience that was only possible through actual attendance at a physical HEI was apparent to myself.

The fact that this perceived increase in 'academic-ness' of the HEI compared to FECs became a thread in the study's findings must be viewed by myself through a conscious lens here: did I seek this out to validate my existing views and perceptions of HE in HE versus HE in FE? I certainly recall one occasion during data gathering where in the course of an interview I took pains to explain to one participant the reasons for a certain HEI process linked to quality, aware at the very time that I was doing this, that in effect I was acting as a defender of the HE institution and trying to consciously highlight a quality assurance asset of what the student was experiencing, and so a degree of allegiance to the institution and its standards is discernible.

This recognition of my institutional positionality in the work is both a reflexive and ethical demand (Sikes, 2010) and offers some insight into my prior individual understanding of issues and motivations. The impact of this recognition required a shift in my perceptions, as I gained a greater insight into the transformational value of opportunities afforded to students through FD study before even stepping foot into the HEI, and this has had relevance to the analysis of data and construction of meaning and findings which will always be presented in *my* language in this study (Wickens et al, 2017). These shifts in recognition and perception also attest further to Attia and Edge's exploration of reflexivity as a developmental process in two ways. Firstly, I was an individual researching what was essentially a substantive part of *my own practice* at the time, that is, teaching and managing large courses and student numbers originating from top-up programmes. Thus, there is an element of humility in seeking to establish this rigour that can only be gained from honesty around the subjectivity that exists when researching "*one's own backyard*" (2017, p.37, emphasis in

the original). Secondly, identifying and interpreting the impact of this reflexive trajectory fits with the classifications of reflexivity as both prospective and retrospective, the latter being the effect upon the researcher, as “a reflexive practice never returns the self to the point of origin” (Sandywell, 1996 cited in Attia and Edge 2017 p.35). And so for myself, engaging in reflexivity in this study has served as an adjustment exercise in identifying that perceptions I previously held of the phenomenon under consideration were shaped and coloured by the role I held at the time. By locating their experiences in the literature and embracing an IPA approach, the knowledge constructed within the study represents particular interpretations of the particular combined lived experiences of the individuals involved and situates myself as a participant in the research.

#### **4.8 Ethical considerations and procedures in the study**

It has been made apparent that writing on reflexivity and ethics is an intertwined process, and some of the broader conceptual considerations that fall at the crossroads between ethics and reflexivity have already been addressed in the previous section. This next part of the chapter focuses upon more concrete ethical considerations in the study, and the actions undertaken by the researcher to minimise any potential negative ethical impacts.

Thinking and behaving ethically is a wheel on the vehicle of research that must turn from inception to beyond (Kvale and Brinkman 2009), yet it is vulnerable to fall prey to the same risks as reflexivity, in the sense that it can be seen as a tick box exercise, exacerbated by the scrutiny of institutional ethics committees and the guidance labelled as “start-up criteria” by Smith et al (2009, p.53) from bodies such as the BERA (British Educational Research Association). The presence of these procedural requirements can take engagement in ethical actions away from the more personal and fundamental requirements of simply behaving as an ethical human being undertaking activity that requires interaction with another human being. Fundamentally this means being aware of guidelines, principles or codes of practice to guide a researcher’s behaviour (Merrill and West 2009)

and the avoidance of harm (Smith et al 2009). Complexity arises when the meaning of the terms “guide” and “harm” is meditated upon, particularly within an IPA framework whereby the depth and exposure to potentially intricate and intimate details of others’ lives is the subject matter.

Kvale and Brinkman (2009) utilise the concept of phronesis, the skill of practical wisdom or judgement, which brings with it the need for “thick” description to help researchers act morally.

Their recommendations to thicken events are to; contextualise, narrativize, focus on the particular example and to consult the community of practice. The first three of these considerations can be clearly seen to be congruent to the principles of IPA’s triad of phenomenology, hermeneutics and ideography. The latter refers to the learning of ethical behaviour in the context of professional culture, and here my own accountability to other stakeholders such as peers and the institutions at play is of relevance. Reflexive narration earlier in this chapter referred to my own allegiances as a member of the HEI institution that was the site of research, and my associations with the FEC’s that top-up students had progressed from. Relationships between partnered FE and HE institutions can be sensitive, vulnerable and complex (Bridge et al 2003, Dishman et al 2010, Tummons et al 2013) resulting in working tensions between two different sets of education professionals. My ethical responsibility here lies in striving to ensure that my treatment of data about institutions and colleagues who are a wider part of Laydon’s network of provision is sensitive and respectful towards different pedagogical practice and norms. For example, during not passing judgement on comments made by participants about aspects of their FD experience they felt to be unsatisfactory, nor validating them during interviews. Equally, representation of idiographic experiences of FDs presented in this study must be illuminated with care and consideration for fellow pedagogues.

The sections below detail the more practical and procedural aspects of ethics in this study. Ethical approval for the study was sought and granted from ethics committees at both Lancaster University and the host institution, Laydon.

Firstly, with regards to recruitment of participants, as outlined earlier in section 4.4 explaining interview procedures, students were invited to participate via e-mail. Ethical concerns that could have been at play here are;

- Even though I was not in any way requiring students to participate in the research, critics could suggest that as their lecturer, they presented a 'captive population' (Iphofen 2009 p.119-120). Through invitation there could have been a (mistaken) feeling among students that their participation would result in some kind of benefit, or indeed that their lack of participation could lead to negative ramifications for their studies.
- There was also the risk that students may have felt they were unable to withdraw without encountering some kind of ill feeling towards them.
- Students may have been concerned that I would learn fairly personal details of their lives that they might not otherwise wish me to know in the context of their tutor.

Transparency about the reality of these issues were covered through precautions relating to informed consent, anonymity and confidentiality (see below).

In addition, a primary concern related to my role as lecturer on a module common to nearly all of the participants and as such, my responsibility for assessing their work, which was not at the time an anonymised process. In order to minimise the possibility of my enhanced knowledge of these individuals influencing my award of grades, it was ensured that each of these students' assignments were selected and put forward for internal moderation procedures to verify that I had applied the assessment criteria fairly. No objections to the grades I had awarded were raised by colleagues, nor highlighted in the scrutiny of the module by the course's external examiner.

#### **4.8.1 Informed Consent**

The key principle of informed consent for any kind of research is that participation must be voluntary and based on full and open information (Christians, 2005). This means that the invitation

issued to students must not imply any benefits to be gained or place them under any duress. Information given to students from the outset clearly outlined the purpose and aims of the research; the anticipated duration; the methods to be used; any risks that might be involved; further requests for research that might be issued; clear indication of the right to withdraw at any point; details about anonymity and confidentiality; the way in which data might be used in publications; and, contact details of myself and other relevant organisations – in this instance the University’s counselling service and the Director of Studies at Lancaster University. This information was provided to the students on two opportunities, by e-mail prior to organisation of an interview, and again in hard copy prior to the commencement of the interview. Informed consent was therefore gained both through signature and recorded on audio file as interviews began.

Homan (1991, p.71) presents 4 elements of informed consent which are useful to consider:

Informed =

1. That all pertinent aspects of what is to occur and what might occur are disclosed to the subject;
2. That the subject should be able to comprehend this information.

Consent =

3. That the subject is competent to make a rational and mature judgement;
4. That the agreement to participate should be voluntary, free from coercion and undue influence.

Clearly many of the terms used in these four principles are open to interpretation, and consent should not be perceived simply as a box to be ticked: consent “is not a once-and-for-all act...it is a process” i.e., it is ongoing (Iphofen, 2009, p.67), but the processes outlined above offer a comprehensive range of actions to mediate these. Capacity to consent in my context was not an apparent difficulty: students were all adults and I was not aware of any who may have had significant difficulties understanding any information due to mental health difficulties. However, some participants did specific learning difficulties and so this was taken into account when writing

the Information Sheet and Consent form (see Appendix 1), in order to ensure all information was written in an unambiguous way, avoiding information overload, and accessible via other formats (for example through a screen reader upon receipt of the documents by e-mail).

#### **4.8.2 Anonymity**

Anonymity is assured as much as possible in the study to try to ensure that participants remain non-identifiable in any representations of themselves that might feature in publicly available documentation. Practical measures to assure anonymity included separating any identifying information from the actual data through keeping a master list of student's real names and contact information along with their pseudonyms in a separate place to the data, and disposing of this as soon as the research process was over. Students were invited to choose a pseudonym, or to have one assigned to them. Iphofen (2009) notes how there is often tendency to assign pseudonyms that are well suited to the characteristics of the participants (i.e. indicative of a particular regional, ethnic or temporal name that could be indicative of identification) and so whether by choice or assignation, participants were given pseudonyms perceived to be neutral, without connotations of minority ethnic groups, age or nationality.

In Goodley et al's (2004) analysis of four different life stories, ethical precautions taken as a part of their work included having particular regard to aspects of the narrative that might make the individual identifiable if published, for example, choosing pseudonyms for other individuals and places referred to in the data, and removing some especially sensitive experiences. The latter was not something that I felt arose during the study, and so there were no portions of data eliminated from analysis due to such concerns, although of course this judgement is based upon my own perceptions, analysis and interpretation and cannot be assumed to be accurate. Pseudonyms of

individuals mentioned by participants were assigned, and references to college names, or places were omitted.

Associated with the principle of anonymity is that of privacy and confidentiality within an institutional context, privy as I was to many details of students' lives. Whilst not a risk for publication, as a "safeguard against unwanted exposure" (Christians, 2005, p.218), it was recumbent upon myself to keep all details confidential, and the identities or details of any participants were at no point shared with any other students or staff in the institution.

### **4.8.3 Storage and retention of data**

All data for the duration of the research study (paper based and electronic) has been kept in a locked filing cabinet in a locked office, with only one other person who had access to this office but not to the locked filing cabinet. Identification of pseudonyms and data to actual individuals was retained in this locked facility, and not available elsewhere. Electronic data such as correspondence between participants and myself, and the raw data (although anonymised) in the form of interview transcripts has always been held on institutional devices and networks which are only available to myself through password-protected access.

### **4.8.4 Analysis and Writing**

Ethical practice does not end upon thanking the participant for their time when an interview is finished. Certainly, in the realms of an IPA approach embedded in hermeneutic principles, interpretation of data carries with it the prospect of immense ethical burden, not only with regards to inclusion, but to representation in the form of selectiveness over excerpts from transcripts, the ways in which these are situated and presented, the meanings elicited from them, the balance

between idiographic focus and wider sample characteristics (the convergence-divergence strain in IPA) and of course the conscious positionality of the researcher and their motivations in representation. Squire (2008) refers to these issues as “interpretative responsibility”, which Bold further clarifies by surmising that a researcher “cannot ignore the fact that everyone will interpret your work differently. What you must accept responsibility for is producing an account that does not lend itself to misinterpretation” (2012, p.69). This clarity in representation is associated with another part of this ethical responsibility here which is the need to exercise caution about the claims made on the basis of data (Ashwin 2012), and to be honest and transparent about what *cannot* be asserted on the basis of the data (ibid).

#### **4.9 Analysis of data**

As discussed, the presence of subjectivity in IPA is acknowledged and treated as part of the phenomenological underpinning which recognises one’s own consciousness: this is perhaps most at play during analysis and representation of data, whereby the double hermeneutic nature of the approach becomes apparent once again.

As referred to earlier in the consideration of some criticisms of IPA, the prescriptive and detailed approach to analysis espoused by Smith et al (2009) is presented as a number of processes based upon specific strategies that take the raw data through an iterative and inductive process, starting with a single case and then looking across cases, and this was the model followed in analysis of the study’s data.

It must be acknowledged that different researchers would almost always identify slightly different interpretations; in other approaches to research this might be countered through the process of checking or validation of identified themes by another researcher, but in wholly adopting IPA, such actions would be somewhat antithetical to the idiographic and subjective nature of IPA and may

even be missing the point in such research, even though Brocki and Wearden (2006) found in their review that this was indeed the process followed in some of the studies they reviewed. Thus, the procedure in this study was that full and complete transcription of the data was undertaken solely by the researcher, as was the implementation of analysis. In contrast with other kinds of analysis (e.g. discourse analysis), IPA does not require the minutia of non-verbal interactions to be recorded, but I did denote particular characteristics of narrative with appropriate indications such as pauses (represented with “.....” or sometimes verbalised as “Ummm”), exclamations (“!”), or italicising particular words or phrases that the participant had clearly placed emphasis upon through the gravity in their tone of voice, volume, or the particularly slow or protracted articulation of a word. All of the transcript data was analysed manually, without the use of any computer software for organisation or coding purposes.

Although Smith et al (2009) are keen to assure the reader that there is room for manoeuvre within the strategies they propose for analysis, as a newcomer to IPA, my analytical procedure almost wholly followed their step-by-step process until step 4 of the 6, where I found that I had perhaps subsumed several steps together or fallen out of time with my steps and their steps. However, reassurances of flexibility here permit this and my analysis remains thorough and transparent. This whiff of apparent dichotomy between following rules or not in IPA practice is summed up nicely by Brocki and Wearden who recognise this mystery around analysis when they identify the bind whereby “Guidelines are offered to the researcher who is then informed that they cannot do good qualitative research simply by following guidelines” (2006, p.100), but this flexibility certainly played to my individual approach here.

In writing about my findings, I found explaining concisely what I had done and why I did this to be particularly difficult, because many of my thought processes and approaches to organising these ideas are instinctive and are done without explicit recognition of the nature of what is being done at that moment. In my account of the analytical process I am honest and frank about what was done

and why, and acknowledge instances where I struggled to understand what I was ‘supposed’ to be doing at that particular stage. The analytical processes outlined below are accompanied by references to appendices where evidence of the analytical stages can be viewed.

My overall aim is that it should be apparent to the reader what processes were undertaken so that there is transparency and validity underpinning the findings, and to hopefully avoid the scenario identified by Ashwin (2012) whereby research into teaching and learning in HE often conceals the analytic work undertaken. The following narrative is described perfectly for me by the title of Holliday’s chapter on data analysis, entitled “Showing the workings” (2007).

The process for analysis, guided more or less as detailed by Smith et al (2009) along with my particular actions at each stages of the analysis process are outlined subsequently. An example of an extract from one of the transcripts can be viewed in Appendix 2.

#### **4.9.1 Immersion in the data**

Transcription of the data resulted in transcripts totalling in the region of 65,000 words, and the first stage of the analysis process requires a slow reading of the data, which was undertaken sometimes in conjunction with a return to the audio files to clarify any points of uncertainty in my transcription, or to re-listen for any further notable characteristics. Initially I read each transcript without a pencil in my hand, to avoid the temptation of highlighting and noting at such an early stage – this was in some ways a frustrating experience for me to focus wholly upon the story being presented and make a concerted effort to apply myself and be totally immersed in that person’s story, and *only* their story. I repeated this for each transcript, trying to clear my mind of one story before beginning on the next. I particularly came to appreciate the fact that I had completed all the transcription myself, as on countless occasions I could recall intonations, accents and expressions of humour or other

emotions. Each participant became, once again, a real individual sat in front of me rather than simply a text.

I found reading the transcripts through with such concentration to be quite an emotional and tiring experience: I was reminded sharply of the privilege that I had been granted through the actions of the participants choosing to share their stories with me and when I had finished reading them initially, I felt a degree of sadness that I identified as similar to that I have experienced whenever I have finished reading an exceptionally engaging fictional text, where one feels close to the characters and almost feels a sense of loss once a connection with them is over, when the story ends. After purposely trying to read each transcript individually I then found that upon re-reading, I was reaching for others and noticing some shared ideas, experiences and common ground amongst the participants. There were significant differences in interview lengths, and I recalled how one individual in particular had seemed somewhat closed and unwilling to expand or embellish upon her responses to questions, and how others had conversed at length, building up a detailed and rich account of their life for me.

I then allowed myself to record any recollections, reflections or feelings that arose through this process of re-reading. For example, when participants were recalling their early experiences of beginning their top up year, and their first encounters of the University at induction, or lectures in their early days of study, I found it hard not to don my lecturer's hat and explain the reasons for procedural, institutional or academic encounters they had experienced. I tried to identify whether instances where I had talked about my own educational career and decisions had impacted upon the extent or nature of participants' ability to share information with me or not. I noted how some interviews had seemed to adhere quite closely to the structure created by the interview questions, for example where all chronological details were clustered together, compared to others where there was much to-ing and fro-ing from various periods in a participant's life and educational career.

These observations helped me to become much more intimately familiar with each participant and their transcript, and also to appreciate the complexity of the content of each transcript, and the connections made by participants from one issue or experience to another, how the general could jump to the specific and particular, and how such illustrations helped my understanding of that individual's perspective.

Data at this stage required organisation of the transcript into a format with three columns allowing for the commentaries to be made at each stage, and simple initial reactions or observations to the data were recorded, striving to keep these fairly brief and lacking in complexity at this initial stage, to allow engagement with the narrative and appreciation of the whole presentation by that individual.

#### **4.9.2 Initial noting**

This stage is where the work of analysis began to feel much more authentic and absorbing, with notes being made on the transcript simply at an "exploratory" level, noting things of particular interest. Here is perhaps where the firmer nudge of reflexivity is felt, as Smith et al's (2009) advice to take "notes of anything of interest" is of course susceptible to debate about what might constitute interest for the researcher, and why this might be the case. The nature of comments to be made here are fairly unrestrictive, and might be in relation to descriptions of things of apparent significance to the participant, the way in which a participant refers to aspects of experience, the language they may use, the context in which they set events or occurrences, repetition, emphasis, contradictions; guidance prescribes "no rules" about what ought to be commented upon here.

At this stage I went through each transcript again and made quite detailed notes in a left hand margin. I applied an idiographic lens and noted down anything of interest, and hence I soon understood why Smith et al refer to this as the most time consuming phase of analysis. Oftentimes

my comments were descriptive and in a sense often simply re-iterated or even repeated what participants were saying, for my own benefit and understanding. My notes in the left hand margin range from reactionary reflections (my feelings and interpretations about what is being said) to summaries of portions of text. Some of these begin to comment upon what is said from a linguistic perspective, by which I mean not only the words used, but pauses, hesitation, uncertainty, laughter, the speed with which some responses were given, repetition of particular words and intonation.

For example, in my interview with Elaine:

Interviewer: Umm, the first thing I wanted to ask you about, is if you could tell me about your educational biography? And, what I mean by that is everything in your life perhaps that's been educational, so maybe a little bit about the kind of primary school you went to, secondary, what you did after that, career wise I guess, basically leading up to how you came to be here!

Elaine: (...) Oh, right! (laughs). Which, has got a lot of years, hasn't it? (Elaine, lines 1-9).

Elaine's reaction which was comprised of a pause, humour, and the assertion that her educational career spanned a lot of years led me to interpret this response as demonstrative of her perception of herself as older, having many years' of experience to draw upon.

In another example, in my interview with Zoe, she used the phrase "I've got a brain!" or "you've got a brain" (a comment from a tutor) several times within a short space of time (lines 465-474), the repetition of which suggested to me that this was a significant realisation for her.

Although as mentioned, the audio recordings were relatively fresh in my mind and came to life of their own accord on occasions, I re-listened to portions of these where appropriate as this was particularly helpful. Some sections of transcripts became littered with many comments, whereas others had pages that were relatively sparse. I was aware that I needed to avoid honing in on particular words or accounts of events that might fit with what I was *expecting* to find in the data. Despite inductive intentions, it was difficult at this stage to avoid thinking about potential themes

and commonalities between transcripts. I made efforts to focus my notes upon the particularities of each participants' transcript, based on what I read.

The most challenging part of this process was trying to identify conceptual comments, which seek to identify the participants' "overarching understanding" (Smith et al 2009, p.88) of the issue under consideration. This is where, as analyst, I became hyper aware and somewhat anxious of the interpretative element at play here. Smith et al acknowledge the degree of personal involvement in this stage of the process and the extent to which the analyst almost inevitably draws upon their own prior knowledge and experience, and so I frequently reminded myself that my task was to try and *understand*. Thus my conceptual comments are more reflective, tentative and seek to make sense of participants' feelings and experiences. On some occasions I was aware that this felt as though I was verging upon turning the idiographic into the nomothetic i.e. making generalisations and turning what was granular into something lacking in precision. Thus, an example of initial noting incorporating all three kinds of exploratory comments can be seen below in a brief excerpt from Lauren's interview:

Original data	Exploratory comments
Lauren: Erm, I can't really remember, not really anything significant about primary school, it sounds a bit arrogant, but I was quite clever at primary school.	<i>Descriptive comment</i> Nothing particularly significant in early school experiences <i>Linguistic comment</i> Slight hesitation with the use of "Erm" – nothing significant springs to mind quickly Use of "was" implies she may no longer perceive herself as clever? <i>Conceptual comment</i> Primary school was unproblematic and not perceived as particularly significant – is this in contrast to other educational experiences?

This triple level of scrutiny was not applied in this manner to every single sentence within each transcript, as some portions of text lent themselves to, for example, linguistic comments more readily than others, whereas others were predominantly descriptive for some time.

The *context* of particular portions of text was also considered as on occasions this could make a significant difference to my interpretation; specific words or phrases that were used and might be interpreted in one way could in actual fact be seen in another light when viewed in the broader context of the particular 'story' being told at the time. For example, Elaine's father died quite suddenly, and she uses, understandably, strong language to describe this incident and the effect it had upon her and her family, for example, "disaster", "sudden", "unexpected", meaning that her youngest son "went to pieces". These kinds of specific comments about a bereavement naturally carry with them sadness and a great depth of adverse emotion. However, when this occurrence is viewed in the broader context of that period within Elaine's life, it is actually apparent to see how this became a kind of critical incident which resulted in her taking her son out of school, and her becoming (as she puts it) "radical" with her children's education. In turn, I was able to follow the thread of this story and interpret some of her subsequent actions as influenced by her father's death, in the ways that she became confident to stand up to educational professionals both in her children's education, and subsequently also in her own learning.

### **4.9.3 Developing emergent themes**

As is apparent from the degree of detail generated from just a few small examples above, this stage becomes, by necessity, an exercise in the reduction of data so that the researcher begins working primarily with notes and their commentary rather than the raw data at all times. Working through to develop emergent themes requires identifying presence of these in particular portions of text in order to transform dense sections of text into more manageable themes referred to as Smith et al as "pithy and concise" (2009, p.92). This is where the double hermeneutic nature of IPA really becomes apparent, as attempting to produce a statement of what is important, apparent, or present in the transcript is subject to miniscule scrutiny resulting in endless dilemmas about how best to interpret what a participant *may* have *meant* (explicitly or implicitly) through their words, and then how best

to represent this through my own lens, with my own understanding. Hence, more of the actual researcher is subject to become embedded in the construction of knowledge from this point onwards. The process of working to develop these themes and in essence, identify accurate and representative 'labels' for various portions of text is a clear progression in trying to capture an understanding of the participant and they should contain "enough particularity to be grounded and enough abstraction to be conceptual" (ibid p.92).

This was a somewhat agonising process because firstly, it requires a detachment from the actual transcript and a shift to trying to just work with the initial notes, and secondly because trying to extrapolate themes from the data felt as though I was leaving the richness, complexity and uniqueness of each individual behind. This stage was an exercise in trying to achieve some middle ground and identify themes "which contain enough particularity to be grounded and enough abstraction to be conceptual" (Smith et al 2009, p.92).

Through focusing upon the initial notes in the left-hand margin, rather than the actual transcript, it was possible to identify and develop themes which were a few words, or a phrase, and were, I felt, accurate and specific enough to reflect what participants were saying, but sufficiently instrumental to me in order to become conceptual and reflect my broader understandings of what was emerging from the data. These then began to translate into emergent themes in the column to the right of the transcript (see Appendix 2).

The reality of the double hermeneutic nature of interpreting participants' stories became very apparent to me here, as not only was I trying to achieve some degree of useful generalisation, but I was constantly questioning my own understanding and interpretation of what the participants were saying. I questioned and re-checked my interpretation of particular words and phrases repeatedly to try and ensure I was doing my utmost best to understand and interpret with minimal distortion. Despite my intentions to only work with my notes rather than raw data again, I did return many

times to the participants' words, and this process enabled me to appreciate the fact that IPA is not a simple linear process, in spite of its seemingly prescriptive and detailed steps.

The example in Appendix 2 illustrates the emergent themes determined in the column to the right of the original transcript. Some of the terms attributed to each of these themes were altered and refined after further reflection and appreciation of the different ways in which they appeared in each transcript. For example, some of my initial notes around the theme of 'learner self-concept' had initially appeared under the theme 'perception of own intelligence', although as I worked through the transcripts to develop the themes I realised this was too narrow a definition, or conceptualisation, and that the comments I was considering did not always pertain to intelligence, but oftentimes to attitude, feelings and habits.

#### **4.9.4 Searching for connections across emergent themes**

My analysis at this point resulted in the identification of fourteen themes. I recorded the presence of each of these chronologically for each participant, along with a few accompanying words to support the theme and act as an aide-memoire to myself. The next phase here begins to link up and look for connections across emergent themes, to begin to synthesise a way in which the themes can be brought together (and usually further reduced). This process then leads to the identification of what are referred to as super-ordinate themes. Here, I had begun to organically move away slightly from the prescription in Smith et al's stages: step 5 is 'Moving to the next case' and step 6 is 'Looking for patterns across cases'. So, from hereon in, my approach became a little more of what seemed logical to me in order to make some connections and links.

The route to these super-ordinate themes was initially reached through one of Smith et al's (2009) recommendations which is to search for connections by simply listing all the themes in chronological order in a list and seeking to cluster similar themes. For each individual, then, this resulted in a

column which extensively listed one or two words constituting emerging themes, for example Peers, Learner self-concept, Characteristics of FD, Approaches to study, Identifying as Student. This then progresses to the action of abstraction, where the clustering of these emergent themes results in some being merged and new names being assigned to the cluster, which now constitutes a super-ordinate theme. In a slight variation on Smith's presentation, I evidenced these super-ordinate themes with page numbers from each transcript to locate them (see Appendix 3).

Inevitably, identification of the super-ordinate themes was somewhat clouded by the chronological way in which the themes were organised, but I did find it helpful in terms of stimulating my thinking about the potential for cause and effect, i.e. the presence of one theme early on in a participants' story, and whether this tended to result in the presence of another theme later on. However, I soon realised that this still meant that each case was largely being considered in isolation.

The second method I used was to write each theme on a piece of paper and to go back to my research questions. I felt as though I needed to do this to re-align my focus, even though this is not a step mentioned in Smith et al's processes.

So, I took each of my research questions, and in effect, sought matches between the questions and the themes I had identified. By this I mean that I aligned my themes with the idea of them possibly contributing to 'answers' for each research question, as can be seen in the table below. I felt a little uncomfortable doing this, partly because it is not prescribed in the IPA stages, but also because it felt as though I was perhaps skipping some stages, but I reasoned that such an exercise might help me to sharpen my focus, as by this stage I was feeling adrift in the data and struggling to appreciate how it linked back to my original intentions, and questions for the study.

Here I labelled my emergent themes as follows:

1. Characteristics of the degree (meaning the top up year at University)

2. Staff (the significance of staff participants had come into contact with)
3. Approaches to study (what participants said about their attitudes or methods towards studying)
4. Passion for learning (expressions of enthusiasm, commitment and positive feelings towards learning more broadly, as opposed to the actual programme of study)
5. Personal transformation (realising that the experience of study had contributed to a more far reaching and fundamental change in perspective or attitude, rather than just the gaining of a qualification)
6. Identifying as a student (perceptions around the extent to which participants felt they were 'authentic' students themselves, or comments they made about characteristics or stereotypes of students they observed)
7. Social class (participants' identification of class as a factor in their lives)
8. Own children as route into Higher Education (locating their impetus for study in their involvement with their own children's' upbringing and education)
9. Career (identifying career desires or pressures as a motivating factor for embarking upon or continuing study)
10. A second chance (recognition that earlier opportunities to attend higher education had not been present, or had been missed)
11. Peers (the role and significance of peers in the participants' study)
12. Influential individuals (the presence of people who had either positively or negatively influenced decisions participants had made about their education)
13. Characteristics of the Foundation Degree (aspects of this experience that were specific to time spent on that programme of study, at that institution, i.e. FEC)
14. Learner self-concept (participants' perceptions of themselves as learners, both prior to embarking on higher education, and during their current programme of study).

At this point, to develop the kinds of tools I needed to view the data as a whole, I had already moved to step 6; looking for patterns across cases. Here, there are a range of issues and, in effect, criteria that can be utilised, such as; my interpretation of the way in which a theme in one case might shed light on another case; the frequency of comments about certain phenomena; the context in which they were situated, and what Smith et al refer to as a dual quality, whereby "participants represent unique idiosyncratic instances but also shared higher order qualities" (p.101), a reflection of the convergence-divergence emphasis within one group's experiences within an IPA approach (Hefferon and Gil-Rodriguez, 2011). In seeking to establish the convergence element of findings, I present emergent themes as possible matches with the study's research questions, as below:

Research question	Themes & participants amongst whom these themes appear
1. How do dual experiences of HE impact upon top-up students' perceptions of what it means to be a learner?	7) Social class - Rachel, Libby, Elaine 10) Second chance - Rachel, Harriet 14) Learner self-concept - All 4) Passion for learning - Nicola, Eleanor, Rachel 5) Personal transformation - Rachel, Nicola, Eleanor
2. What roles do peer relationships play for students entering directly into the final year of a BA Honours degree?	6) Identifying as a student - All 8) Own children as a route to HE - Nicola, Elaine, Rachel 9) Career - Rachel, Harriet, Elaine, Lauren, Zoe, Nicola, Eleanor (all apart from Libby – doesn't mention doing this FOR career reasons) 11) Peers - Rachel, Harriet, Libby, Elaine, Nicola, Eleanor 12) Influential individuals - Rachel, Elaine, Lauren, Nicola 14) Learner self-concept All
3. In what ways are contrasting experiences of HE culture significant for students navigating their top-up year?	1) Characteristics of the degree - Rachel, Harriet, Elaine, Lauren, Zoe, Libby, Eleanor (all apart from Nicola, does not note differences) 2) Staff - Rachel, Libby, Elaine, Lauren, Eleanor 3) Approaches to study - Rachel, Harriet, Zoe, Eleanor 6) Identifying as a student - All 13) Characteristics of FD - All 14) Learner self-concept All
4. Is current policy and practice for direct entrant students suited to their prior experiences and needs?	1) Characteristics of the degree - Rachel, Harriet, Elaine, Lauren, Zoe, Libby, Eleanor (all apart from Nicola, does not note differences) 2) Staff - Rachel, Libby, Elaine, Lauren, Eleanor 6) Identifying as a student - All 12) Influential individuals - Rachel, Elaine, Lauren, Nicola 13) Characteristics of the FD - All

Table 5: Matching of emergent themes to research questions, by participant.

It became apparent that some of these emergent themes are not necessarily neatly matched to the research questions, but have a degree of fit and can be clustered together for the purposes of

further analysis and discussion. For example, Research Question 2: it would be difficult to establish the significance of peer relationships without also examining the significance of other relationships (including colleagues within individuals' careers) noted by participants. Similarly, it would be naïve to carry forward an assumption that only recent HE experiences have impacted upon students' perceptions of what it means to be a learner (Research Question 1) and so emergent themes about students' perceptions of the role played by other influencers upon their educational careers, or observations about the way they believe educational experiences have changed them are called into play here.

#### **4.9.5 Developing super-ordinate themes**

Cognisant of the fact that fourteen themes were a large number to work with, and in light of Smith et al's (2009) use of abstraction to create super-ordinate themes, I sought ways to reduce these themes and place like with like, which resulted in new names for the themes, clustered according to their relevance to the research question.

In considering the ways in which themes matched up with the research questions, I asserted that many of these themes tended to represent the participants establishing perceptions of their self, and their prior learning careers. I established that for the most part, these themes represented particular influencers, often either positive or negative. Research questions one and three are partly focused around experiences prior to attending the top-up year (with some exceptions). This helped me to think about the kinds of terms that might be used for super-ordinate themes. Initially I considered the three themes of Barriers, Drivers and Influencers but upon reflection I found a good deal of overlap when trying to categorise emergent themes under these headings. Many of the themes represented some kind of influencer that had been (or continued to be) significant to that participant in their educational journey. I felt it was accurate to label some of these as structural influencers, namely *social class*, and *a second chance* (because of missed opportunities to attend

university previously). The next super-ordinate theme was more concerned with the role of significant others and I assigned the emergent themes of *staff, own children, peers and influential individuals* to this super-ordinate theme.

So, these first two super-ordinate themes were comprised of emergent themes that influenced either decisions to begin or continue a route in HE, or acted as influences that played a part in the nature of the experiences encountered within the participants' HE journey, both in the FD and in the top up year.

The next super-ordinate theme needed to reflect a much more individual and intrinsic aspect of participants and their perceptions of themselves and their study experiences. In looking at the remaining emergent themes, apart from those around experiences of either the FD or top up (*characteristics*) I believed the other themes to carry with them an agentic thread, that is, aspects of the learning experience whereby dispositions to learning were influenced by agency, and so I termed this super-ordinate theme agency and learning and grouped the following emergent themes under this: *approaches to study, passion for learning, personal transformation, identifying as a student, career, and learner self-concept*.

This left the emergent themes which encompassed identifiable aspects of experiences in either the FD or the top up year, i.e. participants' perceptions of various characteristics and phases of their two experiences of HE in two different sectors (FE and HE). I termed this super ordinate theme Dual institutional experiences. In summary, my emergent themes became re-organised under four super-ordinate themes:

<b>Structural Influencers</b>	<b>Significant Others</b>	<b>Agency and learning</b>	<b>Dual institutional experiences</b>
Social class A second chance	Peers Staff Own children Influential individuals (these last 3 become subsumed into “the role of others”)	Approaches to study Passion for learning Personal transformation Career Identifying as a student Learner self-concept	Characteristics of FD Characteristics of degree (top up year)

Table 6: Emergent themes classified by super-ordinate themes

These super-ordinate themes then became the structure through which an interpretative commentary of findings could be situated upon (as presented in the subsequent chapter).

As observed earlier in this chapter (Van Manen, 1990), the act of writing constitutes part of the research itself, rather than an end-point reportage. Smith et al (2009) determine a study’s analysis, or results section as the most important within the write-up of an IPA study, for this is usually the only way in which a reader will be able to gain access and insight to the lived experiences of participants. Guidance on presenting IPA findings in a results section is also fairly detailed from Smith et al, with a progressive shift from a greater proportion of description and data extracts to more of the researcher’s analytical interpretation encouraged. Van Manen refers to such examples from data as anecdotes or stories that should not be used to “butter up” boring text, but that anecdotes, or passages of interest can be used as a methodological *device* “to make comprehensible some notion that easily eludes us” (1990, p.116). The risk here is that quotations may be selected as “juicy”, to reflect a researcher’s chosen theoretical standpoint (i.e. to support and agree with existing theory, claiming this has been exemplified), thus resulting in tautological research (Ashwin 2012), which fundamentally reproduces what is already known and bases claims about the significance of studies upon existing literature rather than the data that has been gathered. Thus,

where possible, the commentary of findings (in the subsequent chapter) sought to be cautious and careful about the meaning, length and frequency of data extracts, the proportion of such evidence attributed to each claim, and the prominence afforded to findings.

#### **4.10 Reflections on reliability and validity**

Some of the discussions in this chapter in relation to ethical practice and reflexivity have skirted around issues of reliability and validity, inseparable as they are from one another in many ways.

Similarly, this section could fall prey to routine presentation of actions undertaken to try and evidence ways in which the study should be perceived as valid, or reliable. This pitfall will be avoided by initially seeking to establish precisely what nature and degree of scrutiny is appropriate within the context of this work.

The two concepts of reliability and validity in qualitative research are still much touted, despite several decades of aspersions being cast upon the extent to which the 'tools' of validity and reliability fit, or sit, within a good deal of qualitative studies. Certainly, the way in which validity and reliability can be conceived for this study is particular to the methodological approach, context, and the temporal nature of the research in relation to developments and perceptions about the nature of qualitative research. Kirk and Miller (1986) declare claims of reliability and validity that are usually used by quantitative scientists to be largely worthless for qualitative researchers, and twenty years later this remained re-iterated by Flick (2007) claiming it is "useless" to apply traditional criteria of reliability, validity and objectivity in trying to assess qualitative data, a viewpoint more or less echoed by Yardley (2008) who asserts that the criteria of objectivity, reliability and (statistical) generalisability are mistakenly applied to qualitative psychology studies. Denzin's 2010 claim that the presence and development of non-mixed method interpretative researchers will seldom use the terms perhaps remains a little utopian, and a more accurate way to consider this might be to take Gauntlett's

viewpoint here which insists that, “Qualitative research is subject to thorough consideration of quality, but requires different forms of measurement than quantitative methods. Thus, terminology within this paradigm moves away from traditional use of positivist criteria” (2017 p.77).

On a similar plane, Gergen and Gergen (2000) entertain the idea of abandonment of the term (validity) but settle upon a reconceptualization, part of which lies within the nature of situated knowledge, whereby “Descriptions and explanations can be valid so long as one does not mistake local convention for universal truth” (p.1032). Herein lies the central tenets of an IPA study, in the form of phenomenology and idiography: an easy route to perceived validity would be to claim the primacy of context negates the need for extensive justification of the weight behind findings, but in reality, “It borders on the banal to suggest that everything can be valid for someone” (ibid), and this is not an issue that IPA literature seeks to skirt around.

Smith et al (2009) and many writers (Pringle, 2011, Gauntlett et al, 2017, Kacprzak, 2017) whom draw heavily upon the work of Smith use the framework from Yardley (2000) and I supplement this here with her work from 2008 also. In her frequently cited paper from 2000, Yardley proposes four criteria which she believes to characterise good qualitative research, these being; sensitivity to context, commitment and rigour, transparency and coherence, and impact and importance. Due to the frequently cited nature of Yardley’s framework, these criteria will be applied to this study in turn here as part of the reflection upon the design and operation of the research.

Firstly, with regards to sensitivity to context, Yardley is keen to stress that this is not just limited to the context in which the data is being gathered, but the context created by relevant theory, the work of previous researchers investigating similar issues and of course the data elicited from the study’s participants. Smith et al (2009) suggest that the very action of choosing IPA as a methodology may be demonstrative of sensitivity to context due to the requirements of the research. Further, they take

pains to argue that an absolutely key element of sensitivity to context occurs through the treatment and analysis of data that is undertaken by the researcher, characterised by a good proportion of verbatim extracts from transcripts to support assertions being made and enable the participants' voices to be heard. This study has consistently situated the theoretical context of the work in the application of Bourdieu's institutional habitus and Lave and Wenger's notions of CoP and LPP, thus conceptualising the experiences of top-up students in these theoretical frames of reference. The unique positioning of these learners in terms of their exposure to dual institutions' habitus has also been emphasised throughout as a key contextual reminder about the unusual transitory and adaptive processes that these students go through. An extensive narrative explaining the steps taken with the data as part of the analytical process has been given in this chapter, with due regard to points at which analysis became challenging, or where intended frameworks and guidelines were adjusted accordingly.

The next criteria are commitment and rigour. Such notions could be interpreted in a number of ways, and again, with regards to the analysis that the data is subjected to, Smith et al (2009) point to the degree of care and consideration taken at this juncture. Yardley posits commitment as also being exhibited through prolonged engagement with the topic, skill in the method and immersion in the data. In this thesis, although initially unintentional, the prolonged nature of the study (with data being collected in 2012), whilst initially a source of anxiety to myself with regards to currency in a contemporaneous manner, has proven in reality to be an asset from a retrospective point of view. Had the research been written up and completed within a year or so of data collection, the nature of commentary upon the landscape of HE and the ability to view FDs as a phenomenon in light of the retraction in numbers and shifting social mobility agendas in HE would have been limited, and thus the potency of claims made in the study from a political and policy perspective would have been compromised: again, this relates to the significance of context.

Yardley's interpretation of rigour hints at some well-known phraseology in the realm of making judgements about the *validity* and *reliability* of research, as she frames this in terms of the sample and likens it to the saturation point that may be reached if a researcher is taking a grounded theory approach. The number of participants in this study (eight) is perhaps almost verging on tipping over the optimum sample size for an IPA study, and so the issue of representation is not at play here in that respect. Smith et al (2009) also interpret this as the "appropriateness" of the sample to the question, which is relatively straightforward to defend with the nature of study's focus upon students who have undertaken the transition being confined solely to this focus and participants with this demographic. Indeed, the fact that the participants progress from five FE institutions between the eight of them could serve to further be a point which increases the rigour of the study, as the common thread of FD and FEC experiences are not just confined to one FE institution which may have been subject to its own particularities or characteristics. I would also argue that the findings generated adhere to Yardley's aspirations of transcending superficial and "common-sense" interpretation through the way in which time was taken to explore the context of each participants' educational biography and how has been taken into account.

These two elements of commitment and rigour are intertwined with the next criteria of transparency and coherence. With regards to the first of these, I would refer back to the detailed and expansive care taken to document and walk the reader through the analytical process as outlined in section 4.9 of this chapter, and also the level of detail related to the previous pilot studies and the trajectory of the research over the lifetime of the study, as documented in the Introduction. My own account of personal and professional reflexivity also contributes to transparency around motivations for the study and the values that have accompanied me throughout. Both Yardley (2000) and Smith et al (2009) frame the issue of coherence in relation to the presentation of the study; the coherence, logic, ambiguities, persuasion and construction of reality that is apparent in the write-up of the research. The first point to stress here is that the writer is in all likelihood not the best placed person to make

objective judgements about these kinds of characteristics of their own work. However, my own personal interpretation on this aspect of validity has been to consider the extent to which I can *convince the reader of my conscience* in both the process of undertaking the research, and the representation that I present. I do believe, with conviction, that the extent to which I have foregrounded the primacy of the context and situated nature of the study for both myself and the participants is demonstrable of this conscience. As discussions further on in the work will progress to illustrate also, I believe that my integrity is a part of this transparency, and in this instance this integrity means being bold enough to interpret data and present findings that may be at odds with what might be expected of myself professionally in my role at the HEI. For example, as documented in section 3.7 of this chapter, through engaging reflexively in the significance of my role, I became aware of my allegiance to the institution and the apparent need to defend this on occasion during data collection. However, transparency, coherence and conscience demand that I be able to also recognise and represent a more empathic allegiance to that of the participants and their voices, and whilst this may cause conflict with what might be expected of myself in a professional sense, this is not shied away from, as will be illustrated in the final reflections of this study.

Yardley's final criteria is that of impact and importance, which she describes as the "decisive criterion" (2000 p.223). This is a daunting criteria to live up to. Smith et al recount this in their guidance as to whether it tells the reader "something interesting, important or useful" (2009, p.183). Yardley refines this by qualifying that judgements of this nature can only be made in light of the objectives of the study, its intentions, and relevant audiences. These are all issues that are picked up and pursued in the concluding chapter of this thesis, when identifying contributions to knowledge.

Some of the limitations of IPA have already been explored in section 4.2 of this chapter, and a balanced appraisal of some of the perceived strengths and weaknesses of the approach were explored. In order to counter some of the criticisms presented in that section, in addition to the application of Yardley's criteria, a series of papers published in 2011 that took stock of the

development and application of IPA are worthy of reference. Smith took the opportunity with his 2011 review of IPA to develop guidance for evaluating IPA research, resulting in criteria which could rate IPA research as either Good, Acceptable or Unacceptable. The characteristics of Acceptable research were defined as;

- Clearly subscribing to the theoretical principles of IPA
- Sufficiently transparent
- Coherent, plausible and interesting analysis
- Sufficient sampling to show density of evidence for each theme (with the prescription of extracts from at least three participants to evidence each theme for a sample of 4-8)

(Smith, 2011, p.17)

Furthermore, in progressing from Acceptable to Good, Smith asserts that characteristics of the studies he reviewed that met the higher yardstick were that, "...almost every sub-theme is evidenced with data from at least half of the participants" (ibid p.19), and his further articulations identify characteristics of a "good" IPA paper as those with;

- A clear focus
- Strong data
- Rigour
- Space made for the elaboration of each theme
- An interpretive (rather than just descriptive) analysis
- An analysis that recognises both convergence and divergence
- Care taken in the writing of the paper (ibid, p.24)

Clearly these are high demands to place upon researchers, with only 27% of those that Smith reviewed being deemed worthy of falling into this category. Shaw (2011) dissects Smith's criteria and re-iterates her allegiance to Yardley's principles, suggesting that further criteria runs the risk of

contributing to “the already flooded market” (p.29). However, she acknowledges the value to be had in such detail, which in my view reminds us once again of a characteristic synonymous with the IPA approach, and one which does seem to attract diametrically opposed viewpoints of either grateful reception for such guidance, or resistance to such prescription. Todorova’s response to the same article from Smith expresses a viewpoint tinged with concern, that, “the specific criteria for quality outlined in the review paper shift the balance towards consistency and similarity, rather than diversity” (2011, p.35), and she redirects the focus in response to this back to the core precept of *context*, albeit the need to balance this with coherence.

Thus, this overview of the originator of IPA’s criteria for reflecting upon validity and reliability does create an opportunity to espouse these ideals (of transparency and rigour) through the application of some of the specific measures to aspects of this study, such as quantifying the number of excerpts used to support each claim, or striving to ensure each analytical comment is “interesting”. However, in line with the principles of IPA and the conviction of conscience I referred to earlier, I feel that working through a checklist of each of these items is counterintuitive to the theoretical approach of this study. Doing so could also be interpreted as a way in which the research might be claiming some kind of unequivocal doubt about the findings, whereas caution and modesty (Ashwin, 2012) is more fitting. One of Kacprzak’s closing comments is appropriate here, which is that her viewpoint of ‘good’ IPA research rests in whether the researcher has found something that would have been difficult to explore using a different approach. The prominence of IPA in this chapter (and through the study as a whole) as an approach that permeates every level of the decision-making in this study, as opposed to a cursory search for an affiliation with A.N. Other methodological influence is a significant contribution to the validity of the study in itself.

#### **4.11 Summary**

In this chapter I have presented an extensive discussion about the origins and theoretical influences that shaped my decision to take an IPA approach. I have made it clear why the chosen methods are

those most suitable for this study and why the work is most appropriately situated within the core precepts of phenomenology, hermeneutics and idiography. Fundamental and detailed accounts of my actions in a practical and reflexive nature have been supplied to maximise transparency and assert the optimal ways of working with and interpreting voices of the participants in the study. The next chapter puts into practice this approach through the presentation and interpretive analysis of findings from the eight narrative interviews generated for the study.

## **5.0 Interpretative Commentary of Findings**

### **5.1 Overview**

In this chapter, I explore the evidence from transcripts that contributes to the development of super-ordinate themes and seek to link them to the main focus of this work, that is, the impact of experiences of two differing HE climates upon learner identity. Through presentation and interpretation of these findings I am arguing that particular characteristics and experiences of top-up participants have an impact upon the development of their learner identities, and subsequently their ability to cope with, and gain from the practice of two different HE environments.

This chapter begins by presenting an overview of the participants' stories, followed by pen pictures of each, such that the reader can gain a familiarity with the individuals upon whom the study is centred, and appreciate their varying FD experiences prior to progressing to the top-up. Each super-ordinate theme generated through analysis is then identified, and explored in turn through the inclusion of excerpts from transcripts.

### **5.2 Student stories**

The initial methodological draw in this work was a narrative one, with a desire to enter into, engage with, and appreciate the stories of the top-up students who participated in the study as a means to connect with and to try to experience some immersion in their perceptions of learning as a direct entrant to an already-established course. It's true that in order to really gain a sense of the histories and personal development of these individuals in all their richness, then reading each transcript in its entirety is the only way for this to be achieved: one cannot gain all there is to be had from a novel by only reading excerpts. However, to try and convey the life world of the participants in greater detail, and illustrate variations amongst the participants, this section provides a brief insight into the students' stories, followed by individual pen pictures to supply greater detail.

As highlighted in section 4.5 (Research Design), story-telling is recognised as a significant way in which individuals can engage in the work of constructing, and reflecting upon their identity. By sharing their recollections and experiences of education throughout their lives, participants' stories revealed some common strands, such as few opportunities to progress to further or higher education immediately after schooling, low educational expectations from educators and parents, and the prominence and priority of family, and the home. This latter characteristic exhibited itself in varying ways, with some participants now the parents of grown-up children studying at university themselves, having invested significant proportions of their lives in the care of others, and some with very young families to care for (Lauren had a young child at nursery, and Zoe had her relatively new-born baby with her during our interview). Two students were studying with the express long-held intention of progressing to teacher training in order to fulfil their ambition of teaching in primary schools. Elaine and Harriet were feeling the pressure of increasing government emphasis upon the need for higher-level qualifications in the early years sectors and were anxious about their employability.

There was some notable variation in the way that participants presented their experiences and views of learning, and what it meant to them to be a learner and a student. Common to several participants were previously-held perceptions of themselves as not particularly academic, and thus ideas of 'difference' in this realm were quite long-established for some (Rachel, Harriet and Elaine in particular; the three eldest participants). Markedly, both Rachel and Nicola were distinct in the way that they joyfully and passionately conveyed their commitment to, and experience of an awakening intellectual curiosity. Super-ordinate theme three, agency and learning, explores these findings.

In considering each participants' story, and factors that impact upon their experience of the top-up year, it is important to emphasise once again a key variation in their prior experiences of HE due to progression from five different FE institutions, or partnership arrangements, as outlined in Section

1.6.1. This combination of rural and urban FE colleges, and the local authority hosting and teaching arrangement meant that immediate prior experiences of HE in FE settings were extremely variable. As can be seen in section 5.7, some participants expressed disappointment about aspects of their FD, although generally there were positive recollections about tutor support. Nearly all participants gave prominence to the value of friendships established during the FD, and this ongoing peer support.

It must be stressed that perceptions of educational experiences, the self, and learning as conveyed in these stories are of course subject to a multitude of factors. The narratives as analysed and portrayed in this Findings chapter present variations that come about as a result of numerous agentic and structural influences. In identifying and analysing these through this chapter's commentary, analysis works towards illuminating and focusing upon the ways in which components of participants' experiences and perceptions have combined to influence, form, and develop their learner identities. Below, descriptive pen pictures of each participant are presented to fully convey finer detail about demographic characteristics and key features of their experiences.

## **1. Elaine**

Aged 56, White, full-time student, in nursery employment

Elaine has quite clear perceptions of herself as a learner, from being 'stupid' or average at school, to struggling to listen and concentrate even now. She identifies as coming from a working class background with parents who didn't understand the education system, with most of her peers finishing school after O-levels to work. She felt she lacked much encouragement and felt somewhat of a disappointment to her parents and teachers (she attended quite a middle class school) but was keen to get a job herself.

After having her own children, child-minding was the impetus to follow a career in that field although confidence was an issue to begin with. Professionally, Elaine was becoming concerned about emerging policy developments and government drives towards HE qualifications, which made her feel insecure, and she also worried she was too old to begin such a course. Initially she felt quite intimidated beginning on the FD and lacked in confidence but it was a positive experience and she

'loved' the FD. There were some colleagues who encouraged her to progress onto the top up and Elaine began to perceive herself as potentially 'as intelligent' as others.

The FD was very familiar with no need to move around a lot, but Elaine didn't really feel she was a University student before, whereas now she does, apart from feeling 'old' at times. The top up has been harder, Elaine says it particularly feels quite fast and pressured because of deadlines, but she didn't feel there was a huge step up in the level of work required. She has used the tutor support at University which she feels positive about, and thinks that people who don't use tutor support are 'silly'. She feels the top up is more independent, but disagrees with what she has heard from other people about being spoon-fed on the FD.

Elaine feels proud to be a student and says that being a student is a part of her identity. When the course is finished she will miss her peers and the support network they have together, but the top up has been a place where she has made new friends, even a much younger student (at 24) who she would never usually have had the opportunity to meet and get to know.

## **2. Eleanor**

Aged 39, White, full-time student, in school employment as TA.

Eleanor's degree route is couched in the fact that she has always wanted to teach, but the barriers to her completing her higher education sooner lay both in her lack of confidence, and time spent parenting and raising her 4 children.

Eleanor's views of her FD were contrasting in many ways. Whilst she found the lectures stimulating and interactive, she asserts that she realises the FD in itself is of limited value to her professionally unless she continues her studies. Eleanor identified many positive aspects of her experience of the top up, namely in relation to a variety of tutors and support available, which she acknowledges she has not used enough. She noted a significant increase in the amount of reading required in her top-up year and reflects on her struggles around learning how to produce essays in line with expectations, and in her second language.

Eleanor experienced some pressure throughout her studies due to family life and the need to juggle time, and also laments somewhat that she has not made new friends by coming to university.

## **3. Harriet**

Aged 43, White, full-time student, in nursery/ after school club employment

Harriet had generally positive experiences of school but progression onto further or higher education wasn't really much of an option, or encouraged; there was little careers advice or particularly high expectations. She recalls university as being for "the academic people" and was happy at the time to be in middle bands at school.

Originally undertaking vocational NNEB training, there was no aspiration (amongst herself, or she feels amongst others) to progress further than this and use it as a stepping stone to another career, as she feels many individuals in the children's workforce do nowadays.

The impetus for embarking on the FD and subsequent study was very much linked to Harriet's growing awareness of changes in the children's workforce, and an increasing number of colleagues who were gaining FDs and degrees. Harriet was concerned that the dated nature of her qualifications might put her at threat of being overtaken by younger colleagues coming into the workforce (although personally she holds fairly negative views of the practical and applicable nature of degrees) and so her decision to study was influenced by this and the knowledge that she still has many working years ahead of her, and would like more options, such as possibly teaching in the FE sector.

Her experience of the FD was quite disappointing, as she felt it replicated a lot of the in-service training/ professional development she had already undertaken in the field of early years. She found much of the content to be repetitive of this and at a lower level than expected. She would have liked more 'academic' and theoretical content, and felt her FD experience was quite restricted.

Harriet didn't have any particular worries about progressing onto the top up, and felt their FD group had received some indications about the differences from their tutor, but says that being with different people and different tutors was a contrast to the FD and left her feeling a bit vulnerable. She also said that there had been much more input and step by step assignment guidance on the FD. An initial drop in grades at University made her question whether expectations had been high enough on the FD. Although she feels there is a big difference in the amount of reading and the level of work required, Harriet also likes that University is more laid back in some ways, with a wider age range, a variety of environments and tutors who she perceives to be different to early years teachers at college. Harriet says that she didn't feel like a university student at college but that as a result of the top up, she feels she has done a degree rather than just more work-based training, which is what the FD felt like.

Harriet admits she is a very selective learner who is only inclined to learn if she is interested in something. Whilst she feels proud to be a student (and her family are proud of her too), she doesn't really feel like a student, coming to University is just something she does and she's different to other students due to her age and the fact she doesn't spend as much time here as them.

#### **4. Lauren**

Aged 25, White, full-time student, not currently employed

Lauren generally perceived herself as quite bright at school, but felt that things began to go wrong as she got older and so when she reached sixth form she wasn't really engaged or enjoying her studies at that time. Instead of applying to university Lauren moved away from home and got a job in a school – she didn't have any clear career ideas but her teachers were directing her this way and so she followed this route to see how it would go. Lauren loved this work and her colleagues further encouraged her that she was more capable. She began the FD but gave up and has negative

perceptions of her attitude during this time as she decided not to complete just before the programme finished. Some reflection on this experience about career paths means she re-started the FD, with the express intention of topping up to progress onto teacher training.

Lauren is rather self-deprecating about her attitude and efforts to learning in the past, but her attitude changed when she began the top up and she saw it as a fresh start. She felt her FD didn't feel as important or as serious as the top up and that expectations at university are much higher. She perceives staff support at university to be better and as more expert. Her feelings towards the FD are that it wasn't really very good preparation for a degree; she feels the FD was much more vocational and not academic.

Lauren doesn't really feel that being a student is part of her identity because she sees herself as atypical, not in halls of residence, and with the responsibility of a young child.

## **5. Libby**

Aged 36, White, full-time student, in nursery employment

Libby feels she grew up in a very deprived area, with quite a hard upbringing related to the closure of mining industries at the time, and in her secondary schooling she felt class divides were quite apparent. In her peer group, few went to university and her parents wouldn't have had the knowledge to help if she had wanted to go.

Initially working in nursing, Libby came to the FD and has clear intentions about progressing to EYPS and a Masters, so she has quite high aspirations for herself, and feels that it is good for her children to see her working hard, as a positive role model.

Libby identifies her peers (two in particular) as a massive positive influence and source of support and feels it was really important to progress onto the top up alongside these friends, who act as an important sense of support to one another.

Before coming to University Libby had heard stories about tutors being unhelpful, unavailable, and that you would have to work very much on your own. In reality she found that in some ways expectations were clearer at University and support was better, although tutors were more easily available at college. Some of her FD experiences were not positive due to organisational issues and negative attitudes from younger students, and she felt that sometimes there was too much flexibility and rules were not always applied fairly there.

The differences in coming to the top up were felt to be significant by Libby, most noticeably in terms of the requirement for more analysis and research, and larger group sizes – although she says that sometimes to be anonymous in a larger group can be nice. She felt that in the FD there was a lot of content building, with similar modules, whereas at University a lot of the content is very new.

Libby often feels uncertain about what is required in her university work and really feels lacking in confidence, always hesitant about the quality of an assignment when she submits it. She feels there are expectations at university to get on with it and you have to ask for help, but that the FD at

college didn't prepare her for that level of independence. Libby knows she needs quite a lot of reassurance about her work and often uses tutor support at University to get feedback on draft work and early ideas. She tends to be more anxious about understanding the content rather than the amount of work required.

Libby perceives herself to have improved as a learner. Although she says she never feels confident as a learner, she enjoys studying and feels proud because she thinks that her achievement of coming to university is at odds with what people expected of her. However, she doesn't feel like a 'proper' student herself, mainly because of her age in comparison to many of the younger students she sees around her, who she perceives as living on campus and having a very active social life.

## **6. Nicola**

Aged 30, full-time student (specifying ethnicity could make this participant identifiable)

Nicola came to the UK after some years spent travelling and working in the hospitality industry, but always knew that a career relating to children would be her trajectory, and she had been encouraged in this by her mother and positive role models around her within her wider family. Her route into study came through participation in mother and toddler groups with her own children but her passion for learning and commitment to continue and progress in her own learning is very apparent.

Coming from a fairly small college where she undertook her FD, she notes differences with regards to the amount of time students spend with teachers at University, but generally feels she had been well prepared. Nicola clearly situated her experiences within her very apparent positive attitude towards learning, and recognition of a personal transformation through her studies, referring to it as being part of a 'secret club'. Nicola perceives her year-long top up programme as just part of an ongoing journey, and has some clear ideas about where her career progression might take her next.

## **7. Rachel**

Aged 43, White, full-time student, in pre-school employment

Rachel identifies as working class, having come from a deprived area, and tended not to perceive herself as very academic or intelligent – she refers to her brother as very academic and successful on occasions and it is apparent that there may be (or have been) a sense of inferiority as a result of this. She feels she didn't really try at school but always had University in mind.

Through having her own children, Rachel became involved in pre-school activities and undertook NVQs, moving onto the FD with clear career prospects in mind. Rachel found the jump from NVQ to FD quite significant, feeling the FD was quite academic, and her tutor encouragement and praise at college was hugely influential and a significant influence. In her FD, she felt that the smaller group and the more straightforward organisation (e.g. less tutors, staying in one place) meant that these things changing upon arrival at University was a bit of a shock to begin with but it soon settled down.

Rachel came to the top-up with several close friends from the FD with whom she was really close, but hasn't really had chance to make friends with anyone new at University, mainly due to lack of time.

Rachel felt that both the level and the amount of work increased in the top up, but felt the support available was good even though the availability of tutors is not as great – she says she felt as though the FD group was spoilt by the 24/7 availability of their college tutor. One worry in coming to University was that she felt she knew very clearly the expectations at college, but wasn't sure what was expected at University.

When thinking about herself as a student, Rachel feels she takes it more seriously than many of the younger ones and sees a different, less concerned attitude amongst younger students. She has high expectations of herself and has enjoyed 'discovering' that she is actually capable and achieves good grades, this is a positive experience compared to perceptions of herself as "thick" when she was at school.

Rachel feels proud that she is a student, she has a passion for learning and has a really positive attitude towards this. She sees continual learning as an important part of life and feels that her children perceive her positively as they watch her work hard to study. Rachel feels that her experience over 3 years of FD and top up have changed her in terms of an improvement in self-confidence, and attitude; she feels doing a degree has changed her as a person and that she looks at things from a different, more questioning perspective.

## **8. Zoe**

Aged 33, White, full-time student, school employment as TA.

Zoe has always had very specific career aspirations to teach, although she originally spent a good number of years working in the travel industry, she decided to change direction after giving up work to have children, and so undertook the FD strategically, knowing that she had to progress onto the top up to then apply for a PGCE.

Zoe's experiences of her FD were not very positive. She felt there were very limited expectations which almost seemed to cap what could be achieved, and she also felt that much of the teaching was more geared up towards younger students who sometimes didn't want to be there and didn't have very positive attitudes towards learning. She also felt there was a lot of repetition in what was learnt throughout the FD. She felt that information the college had told them about the top up implied there was little support available at University, although she says she felt everyone was very approachable and that there was more respect between the staff and students.

The limited expectations she felt from the FD staff meant she was shocked when she received very good grades in her top up year, and she felt surprised by her own achievements. This resulted in a good deal of confidence, such that she feels she could continue with studying. However, Zoe doesn't perceive herself as a proper student due to her age.

### 5.3 Super-ordinate themes

The narrative and pen portraits above present a number of commonalities and variations within the fundamentals of students' stories, which can be seen from these brief snapshots into their educational biographies and more contemporary experiences. The origins of the super-ordinate themes that are presented and explored for the remainder of this chapter can be glimpsed in each of the pen portraits, and subsequently, in the following sections, the super-ordinate themes are examined through an analysis of the emergent themes for which they serve as an umbrella, as follows:

- Super-ordinate theme 1, Structural influencers:
  - social class;
  - a second chance
- Super-ordinate theme 2, Significant others:
  - the role of others (family, colleagues, FEC tutors, children);
  - the significance of peers;
- Super-ordinate theme 3, Agency and learning:
  - learner self-concept;
  - a passion for learning;
  - personal transformation;
  - career;
  - identifying as a student
- Super-ordinate theme 4, Dual institutional experiences:
  - expectations;
  - curriculum;
  - staff support

To clarify the congruency of these themes with the overall aims of the study, each of the themes above can be aligned with the research questions accordingly:

<b>Research question</b>	<b>Super-ordinate and Emergent themes</b>
1. How do dual experiences of HE impact upon top-up students' perceptions of what it means to be a learner?	Structural influencers: Social class Structural influencers: Second chance Agency and Learning: Learner self-concept Agency and Learning: Passion for learning Agency and Learning: Personal transformation
2. What roles do peer relationships play for students entering directly into the final year of a BA Honours degree?	Agency and Learning: Identifying as a student Agency and Learning: Career Significant others: The role of others Significant others: The significance of peers Agency and Learning: Learner self-concept
3. In what ways are contrasting experiences of HE culture significant for students navigating their top-up year?	Dual institutional experiences: Expectations Dual institutional experiences: Staff support Agency and Learning: Learner self-concept Agency and Learning: Identifying as a student Dual institutional experiences: Curriculum Agency and Learning: Learner self-concept
4. Is current policy and practice for direct entrant students suited to their prior experiences and needs?	Significant others: the role of others Dual institutional experiences: Expectations Dual institutional experiences: Staff support Dual institutional experiences: Curriculum

Table 7: Alignment of super-ordinate and emergent themes with research questions

With regards to the presentation of quotations in this chapter, it should be noted that data presentation is not following a minute conversation analysis model, which would usually feature timings of gaps, or indications of pitch or speed.

- A sequence of three dots indicates a natural pause in the conversation, or a tailing off of a sentence or statement: "..."

- Non-verbal but auditory communications or reactions are recorded in parentheses: ( )
- Exclamation or question marks indicate intonation in the voice of either surprise or query
- References to individual people or names of schools, colleges or places are omitted and denoted with an “XXX”
- Word in *italics* conveys an emphasis in the voice
- Any portions of text that cannot be clearly heard on the audio recording are marked as: (inaudible). This happened rarely and was restricted to one or two words
- The numbers in parentheses following each quotation indicate the line number in each individual transcript
- The use of [sic] indicates that the participants’ words have been transcribed exactly as recorded, inclusive of any errors (e.g. grammatical) or colloquialism.

An example of an excerpt from an annotated transcript can be seen in Appendix 2

## **5.4 Super-ordinate theme one - Structural influencers**

### **5.4.1- Social Class**

This super-ordinate theme refers to two themes which have some degree of overlap. The most prominent of the themes is social class, which was referred to (and thus perceived by me to be of significance) by three of the participants, although not always as a *barrier* to pursuing higher education. In one of these cases (Rachel), there were no particular connotations to this, or wider discussions, it was simply a voluntary detail proffered when she began to narrate her early school experiences, and so she herself did not present any viewpoints that suggested this had impacted upon her in a way of which she was conscious.

Libby and Elaine both spent some time talking about their social class (identifying as working class), and for both, they felt that this had imposed some kind of limitation upon their educational experiences and opportunities.

Elaine was aware that her parents had little understanding of the school system and did not engage with her education in some ways, for example, not attending parents' evenings. She seems to attribute this to her social class (mentioning her parents feeling "intimidated"), and characterised her peers as tending to leave school early. The key difference regarding pupils who went onto University was that "their parents were pushing them" (160), and so she perceived herself as unlike these school peers in that respect.

Libby, twenty years younger than Elaine (aged 56), situates her upbringing in a working class area, at the time when mines were being shut down, describing it as "hard" with "quite a lot of poverty" (33-34), although she does not specify whether this applies to her own family or whether it was the case in broader society around her as she grew up. Libby also recognised that class differences were at play at school, recalling that secondary school was very "class divided" (49) and as with Elaine's experience, few went to university. So, for both of these students, their social class background had an initial (but not deterministic) impact upon their ability to access HE.

When examining relations between emergent themes, it was clear that for all three students who identified as being working-class, there had been barriers to them considering university at a younger age. Of the other participants, only Harriet had also presented recollections about a lack of career advice presenting university as a possibility, and Harriet did not align herself with any particular class background.

Both Libby and Elaine felt very strongly that it was not the norm for young people in their peer group to progress onto university:

*Elaine:* the girls that I went with, they were from working class backgrounds like me, but we never went on...some of my friends who were from wealthy parents,

their parents were pushing them to go to university, my parents hadn't got a clue! (154-161)

*Elaine:* But, coming from a working class background, it was like mixed messages of oh dear, you know, we were watching tennis [at school] and doing all these sorts of things that didn't go on in my house (1031-1034)

*Libby:* where I grew up, it was very much you either did something like that [be a nurse], or you ended up with a family at 16....There was a couple that we knew, when I got to college, were very good, and we knew they were sort of trying for Oxford or Cambridge, but they were very few and far between (87-105)

Although all of the eight participants identified feeling different in some ways to 'other' students they saw around them once beginning their top up year, these three participants whom all identified as coming from a working class background all conveyed their once-held views of university as a place for "others".

Evidence later on in their narratives suggests that there may also be a commonality exclusive to these three individuals, whereby once they had begun to experience positive achievement during their top up year, this experience was something of a surprise to them, and at odds with previous perceptions they had held of themselves and their academic ability and aptitude:

*Rachel:* I have really enjoyed doing this, and I've enjoyed just finding out how much I am capable of, because when I was at school I probably thought well I'm the thick one really...I think it's nice just to be able to push yourself and think well yeah, I can actually do that! (552-561)

*Libby:* I don't know, I think deep down it was never, it would never have been expected of me, deep down when I was younger, to actually achieve. And so there's that pride factor in, actually look what I'm capable of doing when I put my mind to it! (853-857)

*Elaine:* you know, when you're talking to people and you just sort of know, oh actually, they're not any more intelligent than me (658-660)

There is not substantial evidence in the data to attempt to make any links between those identifying as working class, and the extent to which they cope, or otherwise, in their experiences of the top up year within an HE institution. The majority of participants (six of the eight) all presented quite

definitive points about differences, in terms of academic difficulty they had noted between FE and HE. However, there were no clear trends to be seen here in relation to social class – whilst Rachel and Libby both explicitly expressed recognition that there were increased academic demands upon them in their top-up year, this was less apparent in Elaine’s narrative, and yet quite prominent in others’.

Consideration is also worthwhile of the *absence* of references to social class from the majority of the other participants – five made no mention of social class. It must be recognised that this could be for a variety of reasons: two participants were not from the UK originally, and so different perceptions of social class and its impact upon educational opportunity may have been a factor. The context and environment of Laydon University as an institution with an abundance of students from WP backgrounds may also have normalised this for these learners, meaning that characteristics or markers of social class were not apparent to them. However, assumptions cannot be made that the other participants do not align themselves with a particular social group – it is simply the fact that during the course of the interviews, they did not feel this was a point of relevance to them in order to raise in relation to our discussions.

#### **5.4.2 – A second chance**

The second theme is that of the idea of this time being a ‘second chance’. This was not particularly prominent amongst the participants, with just Rachel and Harriet expressing views that conveyed a sentiment of a missed opportunity, and regret that they had not been able to undertake higher education when younger;

*Rachel:* I kind of always thought in the back of my mind really I should have gone to university and didn’t so...I thought yeah, go for it now (42-144)

*Rachel:* I can’t say I tried really hard [at school], I would have come out with much better results had I tried really hard (461-462)

*Harriet:* One thing I do think, coming to university now, umm, this was never, ever an option, never talked about (121-123)

So, these excerpts illustrate some reflective remorse. In Harriet's case, despite only being aged 43, there was an accompanying pressure evident through repeated references to her age, a degree of vulnerability she felt from those she was working with being better qualified than her, and a sense of being left behind by the rapid pace of change in the early years workforce. These sentiments are interesting when considering educational trajectories and reflections, but analysis of this theme in relation to others did not yield any other relationships between Rachel and Harriet's experiences, or perceptions about their ability to cope with the changing experience of the top up year.

## **5.5 Super-ordinate theme two: Significant others**

In interviews, participants quite frequently made reference to a range of individuals who were, for the most part, a positive influence upon their decisions to enter, or continue within HE. These were staff in the form of tutors either within the FD, or at University during their top-up year; their own children; peers (whom they studied with) or other influential individuals, usually work colleagues.

### **5.5.1 The role of others**

Most (all but two) students identified particular individuals whom they felt had played a role in their decision to enter, or work towards entering HE.

Rachel had uncertain intentions when she began on the FD, reserving judgement about continuing onto the top up until she felt she could ascertain how she would cope with the study. She was quick

to identify her FD tutor at college as particularly influential and encouraging. Others (Elaine and Lauren) pointed to individuals in their workplaces as a source of both encouragement and pressure.

Lauren's impetus came from her work as a teaching assistant (TA) where she was entrusted with responsibilities that were perhaps beyond her remit, and despite her 'hunch' that she could progress, and dissatisfaction with her career prospects as a TA, it wasn't until a teacher asked her, "why are you doing this?" (261), i.e. working as a TA as opposed to studying, that she realised that going (back) to complete her degree was something she was capable of.

Interestingly Elaine's colleagues acted as influencers in both an encouraging and pressurised way. Her indirect colleagues (those who worked in a similar area but not in the same workplace) that she spent time with on training courses acted as an inspiration to her, and part of her reasoning when considering study revolved around her realisation that she should perceive herself more positively – the way she perceived them. From Elaine's comments about these individuals, it was apparent that she very much looked up to these colleagues in a professional sense. She initially perceived significant differences with regards to professional status and also made judgements about knowledge and intelligence, classifying herself as lesser in these respects, asserting that "they know more" (673). However, her perspective began to change and she underwent a realisation that "they're no more intelligent than I am" (674-5), a sentiment she expressed three times within a couple of minutes during the interview: these colleagues whom she had held up on a pedestal strongly encouraged her and despite her reservations due to her age, she says they were a "driving force" (690). So for Elaine, comparing herself to colleagues had required a process of re-appraising and adjusting her own perceptions of herself, and her capability, and this was achieved through the experience of sitting alongside her colleagues, observing them, and reflecting upon her own levels of knowledge and capability, despite her own perceived lesser status to these individuals, as is apparent from her words below:

*Elaine:* [There were] Head teachers on this course, very influential, you know, advisors, on this particular year's course and there was little me! And I thought, you know, when we're talking now, I did come out in that year. At first I started off and I thought well I don't want to say anything, you know when you have to introduce yourself, it was like Oh, my word!

*Charlotte:* Horrendous, yes!

*Elaine:* Umm, but then they were so friendly, and umm it just made me come out, and made me think, well actually, look at the jobs they've got! And, they know more, and that's, does that sound awful? But I just thought, they're no more intelligent, when I'm talking to them, they're no more intelligent than I am. So, then when they started to encourage me to do this, I think that was a big, if it hadn't been for them, I wouldn't be here, if I think about it...

So from several characteristics of Elaine's account, it is apparent that these peers had a significant influence upon her decision to embark upon the FD. Her incredulity as she comes to realise that she can in actual fact legitimise a perception of herself as similar, or even equal to some of these others can be seen through the instances of expressive intonation and surprise (indicated by exclamation marks). The way in which she repeats her claim about perceived intelligence is akin to her almost trying to convince herself of this fact, something which is difficult for her to accept as it is in direct contrast to long-held beliefs about her ability from school days.

In contrast to this, Elaine also experienced pressure from a bottom-up direction in her role as a nursery manager. Her account refers several times to the fact that she was employing individuals with foundation degrees yet did not have a qualification at that level herself. Her repeated comment of "what's going to happen to me?" (535-6 and 542) conveys some feelings of vulnerability about her lack of qualification. Therefore, by virtue of comparing herself to her employees, Elaine's staff also acted as influential individuals.

Nicola and Rachel were the only other participants who clearly identified influential individuals in the form of her family members. Nicola's mother had insistently decreed that she should go into childcare, and her aunts were both teachers, and they acted as significant role models as Nicola was able to see the difference in her own family life growing up compared to that of her cousins,

who she felt benefited from their parents' professional roles. For Rachel, her own children were influential to her in that she believed their observance of her studying was part of being a good role model, and this was a motivator to her.

So, participants present a range of experiences about the presence and impact of individuals as influencers. The idea of a transformational shift and change in the perception of self in comparison to others, and as seen by others is apparent. The significance of staff in both FE and HE settings is explored elsewhere in this chapter, under the super-ordinate theme, *dual institutional experiences*.

### **5.5.2 The significance of peers**

Most prominently, all but two of the participants dedicated quite a lot of time in their narrative to the value of their peers, and so this is worthy of some in-depth consideration. The significance of peers as an emotional and study support was much more apparent than I had anticipated. Literature around the student experience consistently highlights the significance of the social aspect of being a university student, although most from the perspective of a more traditional, younger entrant, direct into the first year of a three-year programme. There is evidence to suggest that social experiences are desirable from an inclusive (and retention) perspective for first year students, but in contrast to this, the data gathered for this study does not seem to idealise this scenario; much of the evidence seems to suggest top up students have little desire to invest in making new friendships, or that they perhaps do not see this as part of the purpose of their top-up year. Rachel in particular summed up the views of many by saying that "you don't get time to really meet people when you come into the third year" (212-213). So, for these students, *retaining* existing friendships was integral for their own sense of familiarity and security: the following commentary on this issue illustrates how these prior friendships may have increased the likelihood of them persevering in their studies, but also perhaps served to minimise the extent to which they became included with other students. The commonality

in findings amongst almost all participants here was that peers were a crucial source of support emotionally and practically, and a reassuring secure base that helped to minimise some of the anxieties that accompanied new studies in a different environment.

The significance of peers appeared as particularly prominent in two of the participants' narratives, for Libby and Eleanor. The importance attributed to peers by Libby was apparent through the repeated reference to peers and some extensive sections of her narrative that reinforced the importance of peers through the repetition of words, or emphasis, accompanied by some strong claims about their support, and the following excerpts from across her transcript are included below as illustrative of this;

*Libby:* Sue, particularly, massive, massive influence on where I am, and that No, you can keep going, you will keep going (227-229)

*Charlotte:* So do you think it was important having friends to come along with you into the third year?

*Libby:* Definitely, definitely! (laughs) (246-248).

I don't think I would have got through it in all honesty if it hadn't been for having them, because there's always text messages bouncing backwards and forwards and despite the fact she works all week, I work all week and we don't really see each other out of here, we've still built that friendship up, that, you know we can moan at each other or we can say look, really struggling, really difficult or whatever, and we can bounce it off each other, and we're quite open and honest with each other so that's helped a lot, a lot (252-261)

I've had Sue and Helen and Jo in my sessions as well, if it wasn't, if I was coming into it completely, if it was a big room and just me, then it might be more of an issue for me...it's not been so bad because I've had people there within the sessions that I know and I can rely on, and talk to (421-428)

Eleanor's reliance on support from friends comes a little more from an academic perspective, by which it is meant that her comments tend to relate to using peers more for reassurance and clarification in relation to her studies, in contrast to Libby's comments which infer a broader motivational and social support:

*Eleanor:* I mean umm definitely Kate and I kind of gave each other little challenges and said well, by next week when I see you, umm, you, we both needed to be doing certain amounts of work or having read something so then when we met next time, have you done yours?

*Charlotte:* Oh, that's good

*Eleanor:* So it was just sort of egging each other on

*Charlotte:* That's good

*Eleanor:* So, when you feel oh, I can't do this, they say Yes you can! Go and do it! (357-366)

Eleanor also talks later on about drawing upon the encouragement of a friend who had undertaken the top-up previously, and how beneficial this common experience is;

*Eleanor:* so we compare notes because she's doing her Masters...And so first thing on a Monday or when I'm in, that's the first thing she'll, [say] Did you do it? Have you done it?! So we bounce off ideas actually, because she brought me quite a lot of useful journals that she printed off, thought you might find that interesting, so we have a conversation quite regularly about it (883-892)

Other participants refer to peers with a degree of regret that they feel the relatively short period of time spent doing the top up (from September – May) does not permit them much time or many opportunities to make new friends (noted by Rachel, Zoe and Eleanor). Although Eleanor did go onto say that she had made friends regardless, she lamented that there had been little collaboration in her experience. One small contrast is represented by Nicola who reported a positive experience of group presentations as a method of assessment and expressed that she was keen to work with new people. So, within the top up year, the breadth of module choices, with differing assessment methods attached to them could have played a significant role in students' opportunities to make new friends.

Elaine, the oldest participant in the research (aged 56), expressed delight and spoke about how "lovely" it had been that she had become such good friends with another student;

*Elaine:* And do you know; the best friend I've got at university is 24! We started together on the first day together and for some reason we've just stuck together all the time. She's looked after me, I've looked after her (1147-1151)

When looking at the way in which social relationships, friendships and fellow students were mentioned in the narratives, the overwhelming message was one relating to positivity and security stemming from progressing with familiar people who had come from the same FD cohort at the students' respective FE colleges

This is recognised with phrases such as the "close little group" (Harriet, 847), and Nicola's assertion (although it is to be noted that she is talking about others from the FD and not including herself here) that, "I think that they felt secure, a lot of the people felt secure being together in a group because they knew each other" (241-243).

All students had experienced being a part of a drastically different sized cohort in their FD, typically coming from a group of circa twenty students (maximum), with whom they studied the same modules and had built relationships with over their previous two years of study. These close bonds continued into their top up year and acted as a crucial source of support, as exemplified by some of the following excerpts;

*Harriet:* I've never been on my own. We've got this close little group of 6, there's 7 of us and we've come together from the foundation degree and we travel together and....

*Charlotte:* And do you think that's been really crucial? Would you have come on your own anyway?

*Harriet:* Uhh, yeah, I would have come on my own, whether I would have enjoyed it as much I don't think I would have done. (846-854)

*Nicola:* I think I would have been alright on my own as well, but it's just a lot more relaxing to know that you don't have to know everything yourself, you can rely on what other people know of where to go and what to do (132-135)

These excerpts above illustrate the importance of continuing friendships, of the reassurance that is felt through contact with familiar individuals. From an institutional perspective, this apparent tendency of top-up students to restrict themselves to existing peers is at odds with usual drives to aid inclusion through widening social circles and engaging in social activities, and so may well serve to further contribute to feelings of 'difference' amongst these students (see section 5.4.5).

Of note, neither Lauren nor Zoe make any references to peers which was something of an anomaly compared to the other participants. Indeed, Zoe makes no reference at all to any influential individuals that have had, or currently do play a part in her studies. Interestingly these were also the only two individuals who reported that they expressly embarked upon their Foundation Degrees with the sole intention of the qualification as a distinct route to teacher training (top up to Bachelor's degree, followed by a Post Graduate Certificate in Education course). Whilst Zoe had known this was a career route she wanted to pursue from an early age, it was an aspiration that came later to Lauren, nonetheless it is notable that both of these students were very aware of their long-held motivation to embark on a particular career route, and that this was a key driver for them: it may be that such an instrumental and specific focus for them precluded opportunities to treat the top up year as any kind of social experience, and that they were simply not disposed to try and establish friendships during this time.

In relation to other emergent themes, Lauren and Zoe were also the two students who presented some particularly negative reflections about their FD experiences. Commonalities with their experiences of HE in FE were that neither had felt they were pushed, or particularly encouraged from an academic perspective (considerations around limited expectations follow later in this chapter with discussions about super-ordinate theme number four), and both commented upon the narrow and repetitive nature of the curriculum encountered there, alluding to a model akin to a spiral curriculum as opposed to the breadth they found the opportunity to pursue in their top up year across a wider range of modules . On the whole their perceptions suggested a lesser degree of

positivity towards and engagement with the FD, and a more isolated experience of the two years of prior study. However, neither of these students reported experiences of the top up that reflected more difficulty than any others, and this issue of agency compared to the impact of significant others as a 'tool' for increased resilience in the top-up year is considered in the Discussion chapter.

Additionally, the evidence from Libby and Eleanor's transcripts was the most potent in describing their attachment to peers, and the significance of these. In considering why this was such a strong characteristic of their studies compared to others for whom peers were attributed lesser significance, it becomes apparent later on in this chapter that these are also the same two students whom exhibit particular anxieties about the quality of the work they submit, and who really lack self-confidence and admit to being very hesitant about their own capabilities and standards (see section 2.3.1). And so, a correlation between confidence as a top-up learner and support from familiar peers is clear amongst some participants.

## **5.6 Super-ordinate theme three: Agency and learning**

The third super-ordinate theme encompasses the greatest number of emergent themes, and reflects findings pertaining to past and present experiences of learning, and ways in which participants perceived themselves, their careers and attitudes to learning. Although structural influences cannot be discounted entirely from the themes examined here – for example the extent to which participants identify as authentic students or not is arguably influenced by some structural factors – there is a clear thread of agency that winds its way through these themes, in terms of both the ways in which agency has a bearing upon engagement with learning, and the ways in which learning might be said to impact upon individuals' agency. The emergent themes discussed in this section are;

learner self-concept, a passion for learning, personal transformation, career and identifying as a student.

### 5.6.1 Learner self-concept

I asked participants to talk about how they perceived themselves as learners, and their narratives tended to focus upon how *effective* and *confident* they thought they had been, and now were, as learners in formal learning environments: so, there was a clear thread of recognition about developments and shifts in perceptions of the self as a learner. Common findings were that several spoke of ideas they *had* held of themselves, particularly during compulsory schooling, as inadequate or lesser compared to others around them, as illustrated by a number of excerpts presented here:

*Rachel:* I guess at the time I just thought, well...you see my brother is really clever...and I kind of wasn't the clever one (27-30)

*Harriet:* if you go to college you could go onto university, that was definitely for the academic people (125-126)

*Elaine:* I was always in trouble because I couldn't shut up, and I thought I must be stupid (48-49)

In contrast, most participants then made it clear that the perceptions they held of themselves as learners currently were much more positive. Several narratives suggested that participants had enjoyed an alteration in the way that they viewed themselves as learners, with a more optimistic concept of their ability to study and learn in recent times:

*Rachel:* I've enjoyed just finding out how much I am capable of, because when I was at school I probably thought well I'm the thick one really (553-554)

*Zoe:* I've had a confidence boost here. And, I feel like I've changed as a learner here....I feel like I could actually go on, because I've enjoyed this year (575-579)

....it gives you a massive confidence boost, it really does, so it makes me feel now that I could go on and do different courses and things and I would do really well

at them, and I could actually achieve more for myself, whereas before I've never really had that, I think because I've always been an average sort of learner (592-597)

Lauren's negative perceptions of herself were much more recent, with a real change in attitude and effort just upon beginning the top-up year. In her foundation degree she portrayed a negative picture of herself as a learner and acknowledged that she did not put a great deal of effort into her studies:

*Lauren:* I was really bad....I couldn't manage....I was always handing things in late, getting rubbish marks (234)

She remarked upon the fact that because grades from the FD were not included in the calculations for the final degree classification, that this had created a fresh opportunity for her, which could be an appealing characteristic of the top up, and help to foster a more positive creation of the self as a learner. This idea of the 'clean slate' and new opportunity to achieve in the top up was also apparent in Zoe's narrative. She had experienced what she felt to be a clear lack of high expectations during her FD, which in turn had made her feel disinclined to put much effort into her studies during those two years (excerpts relating to this are presented in section 5.5.1 later on in this chapter when discussing expectations). In contrast, during her top up year Zoe felt that she had the opportunity to achieve higher grades, saying, "Obviously it works here, the way that I write" (286-7). Achieving higher marks than she had in her FD had made her feel "shell-shocked" and she repeatedly used the phrase "I've got a brain!" which suggested a real shift in thinking was required about the way in which she perceived herself as a learner, or an achiever. Consequently, her ambitions were set higher, and having begun her studies with the intention of aiming for an upper second classification, she was now entertaining the possibility of a first class degree (which indeed she did ultimately achieve). So, this opportunity to revise the way in which she perceived herself, and her responsiveness to receiving higher grades, could be demonstrative of the way in which a more

positive learning experience characterised with various aspects of an HEI allowed her to exercise a greater degree of agency over her own learning than she had felt was possible during the FD.

A similar shift in self-perception as presented earlier in this chapter in relation to the influence of others can be seen in Elaine's realisation whereby she came to perceive herself as "intelligent" in contrast to her prior perceptions of herself. This serves as further evidence that the experiences of HE – and in the cases of Zoe and Lauren, specifically the top up year – were in marked contrast to earlier experiences of learning, as confidence in their own ability grew. Interestingly, these two individuals who had experienced very recent positive shifts in the way they perceived themselves (from FD to top-up) were also those who were identified earlier in this chapter as *not* perceiving any particularly significant individuals who had been of assistance, or a source of support to them in their studies: their decisions and the day to day business of undertaking study was a more individual endeavour for them. Nor had they had particularly positive experiences in their FD, and so for these two individuals, the more affirmative experiences they had encountered in their last year of study (the top-up) were perhaps much more apparent to them, and feasibly the first time in a long time that they had been able to validate themselves as 'good' learners, a status which they felt they could accord to themselves based on their own achievements, without the influence or input of others.

Another aspect of participants' concepts of themselves as learners was apparent in the way that they described their approaches to learning presently. Clear evidence of anxiety and a lack of confidence about whether work would meet the required standard was very apparent in the narratives of Libby and Eleanor.

Libby in particular is useful to consider in a little depth here, as she painted a consistent picture of herself really lacking in confidence with regards to the work she submitted during her top-up year.

She felt that she had been well equipped in her FD, with a good degree of preparatory work from a college tutor, who had flagged up to students what kinds of differences they would encounter at University, but her feelings about the quality of the work she submitted were consistently negative, as is apparent from the excerpts below:

*Libby:* I'm never sure whether I put enough in, and whether I've gone into enough depth in my essays (499-500)

...when I've handed it in....I never have that level of confidence... (515-516)

Libby also talks about requiring reassurance; "I need to know whether I'm on the right track or completely off it" (652-653) and so it was apparent from her narrative that she really lacked confidence around the quality of her work, and her own ability to make judgements about the standard of the work she was completing. She identified feelings that she had not previously held herself in positive regard as a good learner:

*Libby:* I think, I was never, I've never been a confident learner, I can't say, I'm never confident, I'm always wary of putting that essay in (787-789)

However, she also identified some improvement in this, saying that she felt "I've got better as a learner" (776), although it was not possible to elicit from her how and why she felt this way – she seemed to base this premise purely on the fact that she had failed two assignments in previous study (when completing her nursing qualification), and so compared her current success as a learner in a much more favourable light due to these previous negative experiences.

Eleanor was another student plagued by self-doubt about the quality of work she was able to produce. She displayed a particularly critical and harsh approach to herself, clearly having very high expectations and putting a great deal of pressure upon herself to do well;

*Eleanor:* I am quite....a harsh critic on my own work and umm I'm not happy with just writing anything, you know, I do agonise over every paragraph quite a lot (499-501)

She also acknowledges this criticality towards herself impacts negatively upon her propensity to ask for help, and so her inclination to be independent places pressure on herself:

*Eleanor:* ....because of the person I am, I do like to have a real go at something....I don't want to look silly coming with something that I could have found out myself (573-580)

Until I come across in my head a valid question, or valid point that I want to put to the tutor, I don't feel that I want to e-mail them or meet them, because I feel oh, that's really silly I should just find it, or do it (594-597)

As with a number of other participants, Libby and Eleanor both reported that they felt there was a fairly significant increase in the demands upon them when entering the top-up, particularly with regards to the amount of time required to spend reading (see section 5.5.1 further on in this chapter). So they clearly both felt a sense of pressure in undertaking the amount of work that was required, and this combined with the a lack of confidence was no doubt a contributor to the anxiety they felt about their work, and the worries they had around the quality of the work they were submitting.

So, evidence around the theme of 'learner self-concept' affirms that some particular factors can be identified as potential influencers here. There are suggestions of links between prior learning experiences, the nature and recency of these, and associations with perceptions of expectations.

## **5.6.2 A passion for learning**

This emergent theme was by not frequent across participants' transcripts. There was only one individual for whom this theme was apparent. However, in line with some of the analytical principles

of IPA, whereby simple frequency of a theme across cases is not the only criteria applied to value an individual's perceptions, the linguistic, conceptual and contextual elements of some excerpts was felt to be sufficient to validate the inclusion of this theme.

Three of the eight participants' transcripts included views that were classified as evidence of these individual's passion for learning in itself, as opposed to undertaking the learning purely for career gains.

Rachel's expression of her passion for learning was grounded in the wider contexts of both the need to provide a role model for her children (how she felt it was important for them to see her "sitting there working" [779]), and her desire to avoid becoming stagnant or "boring" as she got older. Here, a passage from her transcript is presented to fully evidence her positivity and enthusiastic attitude for learning:

*Rachel:* Well I just think you've got to keep going really. I look at people the same age as me, and their kids are grown up now, and they're just so boring, they're so boring, and I think, I could never end up like that! I mean maybe people think I am, but I just think I couldn't, you know, just go to....and....this sounds really.....[tails off]

*Charlotte:* Life gets mundane, doesn't it?

*Rachel:* Yeah, doing the same thing day in, day out, and sitting and watching the telly every night, and I, well I only have a portable in the kitchen so I couldn't watch it every night but no, I think you've got to keep your brain going, definitely. (717-728)

This excerpt from Rachel's interview was particularly emphatic, and some linguistic aspects, such as repetition of and emphasis upon the word "boring" and at the end, "definitely" served to really convey her strong feelings about the need to continue learning with conviction.

The evidence from Eleanor's transcript about her enjoyment of, and passion for learning, was also grounded very much in a broader context, relating to the fact that she now felt surprised that she might be inclined to continue studying, particularly as she felt she was entering a new phase of her

life where some of her older children were due to leave home, and so she could see pockets of time, and opportunities for herself and her own development.

However, clear and striking evidence of a passion for learning came through most prominently upon several occasions in Nicola's interview. It is relevant to know here that Nicola grew up in a different country where a good deal of widespread poverty was evident to her in everyday life: this context has clearly impacted upon her career aspirations and the ways in which she hopes to put her qualifications to good use, as she discussed later on in her interview that she would like to work abroad, and that she felt a strong sense of moral responsibility to "give something back to people" (503-4).

Her appreciation of the value of knowledge, and the opportunities it could afford for both herself, and a wider population was apparent on several occasions:

*Nicola:* I enjoyed learning and researching so much that I didn't want to stop....  
(70-71)

I can't see myself working in a school for 20 years, not that I would not love it, but I almost see that there is more, and I enjoy finding out about all the different things, researching and stuff...(85-88)

I enjoy the knowledge and everything I'm learning, but also because I know it's taken me somewhere where I'll be able to make a change, possibly (498-501)

...when I came over here first, I couldn't, it was hard for me to get to grips with, like people have never seen poverty, they just don't understand what it really is, just the same as people have never seen wild animals in the park, always in the zoo, so umm, it's bringing it home, isn't it, and I think having that background kind of compelled, not compels, but drives me to want to go back and help (532-539)

Therefore, three students in particular really impressed upon me the importance they accorded to the process of learning, and the gains they could identify from this, and how they felt that either present or prospective learning would be something that would be beneficial to themselves, or others in the future.

### 5.6.3 Personal Transformation

Initial exploration of this theme relates nicely to Nicola's views above, with regards to her hopes that her learning might enable her to make transformative changes to her own life, and in turn, to the lives of others.

This theme was identified as a result of evidence from transcripts that inferred students' recognition of ways in which they felt learning experiences had impacted upon them more broadly than just the knowledge, or qualification they were set to gain. Comments about how experiences of study had impacted on perceptions or opinions of other aspects of life suggested wide-reaching and perhaps more profound effects of higher education. The presence of this emergent theme in precisely the three same transcripts as the prior theme, *a passion for learning* cannot be neglected here. It was again, Rachel, Nicola and Eleanor whose transcripts commented upon the wider benefits they felt they had gained from higher education. This suggests, not surprisingly, that part of having an appreciation for the value of learning comes about through a transformative experience whereby the value has become more apparent as a result of their ability to identify how benefits could be abstracted beyond the passing of coursework or awarding of certificates, and into a wider mind-set, or outlook on life, as is apparent in these two excerpts from Rachel's transcripts:

*Charlotte:* in what ways do you think you've changed?

*Rachel:* I think my confidence, my self-confidence definitely, has definitely gone up a massive amount. Because now I think well I've done that foundation degree and I did that and I can do this, you know, I can do!

*Charlotte:* Feel a bit more empowered, do you?

*Rachel:* Yeah! I'm probably more open now to having a go at anything. I'm going on a windsurfing course at Whitsun! Probably going to die on that! (laughs)...But no, I mean, I think general, just your general outlook, it gives you more confidence to have a go at things (809-821)

*Rachel:* I think it does change you, there's no doubt about it doesn't it? And you look at things differently, you perhaps look at things from a different perspective, rather than just accepting the way things are, you're probably looking to challenge

things more now? It's quite difficult to explain, but I do probably now, when I look at things, rather than just accepting, I probably think well I could do that different, or you could do that different, or...I don't know, it does change the way you think. Definitely (831-839)

Nicola expresses recognition that her attitude towards education has changed, and that the process of undertaking study has, and may continue to impact upon her life in a profound way:

*Nicola:* I think lots of them [students] see it as coming for a means to an end...whereas I don't see it as that, I see it as almost a continuous thing, where I don't know where it's going to lead me but I'm on my way there (381-385)

I didn't attach the value to education when I finished school...you don't quite understand how much of an understanding it's going to give you until you start doing it. And it is almost like being part of a secret club, isn't it, like having children (416-421)

Her reference to the idea of "how much of an understanding" and the inference that participating in higher education is akin to membership of a "secret club" are indicators that she feels her educational experiences go far beyond the knowledge learned within her programme's modules, further demonstrated through the prominence of evidence in her transcript around the theme of a passion for learning.

Lesser evidence is apparent in Eleanor's transcript, but she also acknowledges this element of transformation on a wider scale, as she says she feels she has "grown as a person";

*Eleanor:* ...I do have a better insight and understanding about a lot of things...that weren't apparent, you know just little things, little things and umm more bigger [sic] issues to do with specific things we're looking at, when you see things on the news or when you're reading an article in the newspaper, suddenly you have a huge insight, a different *dimension* I think, that's the word, to your own understanding, and the world (649-658)

These comments – which are of course precisely the kinds of perceptual and hopefully long-lasting changes that educators hope students might be able to identify as a result of their participation in

higher education – convey a change in mind set and perceptions that is recognised as a significant reality by the participants who voice these feelings. For these participants, their journey towards and experiences on the top-up did not just mark a change in perceptions of themselves as learners, but perceptions of themselves and their world view.

#### **5.6.4 Career**

The above two emergent themes have identified perceived benefits of participation in higher education beyond the qualification itself. From another perspective, as would be expected, participants also talked about the ways in which they intended their studies to enable them from a career perspective, and so it was common for participants to have specific career ideas at the forefront of their minds.

Some of the participants were explicit in that they embarked upon this route in order to gain access onto a Post Graduate Certificate in Education, or an alternative teacher training route. Lauren and Zoe expressed particularly instrumental intentions, in that they had only undertaken the Foundation Degree in order to enable them to progress onto the top up and apply for teacher training. Similarly, Eleanor had carried the very specific career intention of becoming a teacher since being a young woman.

For those who were already educational practitioners in the early years, the changing nature of the policy climate was clearly an influential factor, and two of the participants conveyed a degree of anxiety and insecurity about their roles and the currency of their knowledge and qualifications; Harriet, as a nursery school manager, reflected the most extensive and emphatic evidence about this sense of uncertainty:

*Harriet:* I started to see a bit of a change in training that was coming through

*Charlotte:* In terms of the staff you were employing?

*Harriet:* In terms of the staff that I were (sic) employing, the BTEC was up and coming, a lot of people were coming through with the BTEC (373-378)

And so this initially made Harriet begin to think about the changing nature of qualifications, compared to her own, further compounded by the increase of people she was employing with higher education qualifications:

*Harriet:* ...then I employed a girl who'd got a degree....so she was like the first person to come in with a very, a high qualification, and then other people came through and I've actually had now, over the past.....three years, six members of staff that have done foundation degrees and degrees, and I got to a point where I was thinking, things are really changing here, and then the EYP [Early Years Practitioner] started to be talking about and I was thinking, right, I've done this job, phew, twelve years or so at the time, eleven years or so at the time and I'm thinking, is this going to be taken away from me? Am I not going to be qualified enough to do what I actually do? (416-433).

Harriet was particularly conscious of the need to be forward thinking for the rest of her working life (aged 43) and plan ahead, and there were frequent instances of her referring to future career plans throughout her transcript.

Elaine, also in the same line of work, found herself in a similar situation, and her anxiety was apparent through, for example, her repetition of the phrase "what will happen to me?"

*Elaine:* ....it started to come up about Foundation Degrees and the government wanted people, you know, and in my job I'm a manager so I started to question, well, what's going to happen to me then? (533-536)

*Charlotte:* And were you beginning to employ people who had degrees?

*Elaine:* Yes, yes

*Charlotte:* So that makes you feel a little bit worried?

*Elaine:* Yes, and I asked, I said, well what will happen to me? Umm, because obviously they couldn't just sack me, but what will happen? To the managers who haven't got a degree, and at that point they were saying, it had to be

graduate led, the workforce, and everywhere we went, this was the story we were getting (538-546)

Similar points were echoed by Libby:

*Libby:* ....I can now see the benefit of having a highly qualified workforce compared to not having, you know, the ones that have come through NVQ, some of them really haven't got a clue....I've already got a couple [of staff members] on the foundation degree....I think generally even the ones that have got lower NVQs are looking into more things, they're starting to understand a bit more about theory...And because I can understand it, I think that's helped because I, otherwise I'd be like, what are they talking about?! (laughs) (736-752)

This intersection between student and professional role has relevance in light of the next emergent theme, with regards to participants' perceptions of themselves as students.

### **5.6.5 Identifying as a student**

A key part of this study relates to the ways in which participants perceive themselves as students, or more specifically, as authentic in comparison to 'other' students, in light of their different entry point (i.e. the FD) and prior study experiences. The interest here lies in trying to determine to what extent prior experiences of HE in an FE culture might impact upon feelings of inclusion and perceptions of self. This chapter has already presented extensive consideration of this point under section 5.4.1, examining perceptions of the self as a learner, but the study's findings also present some degree of evidence about participants' sense of themselves in relation to their established preconceptions of 'typical' student characteristics of those studying at an HEI.

Most (five of the eight) of the participants identified that they felt 'different' to 'other' students in some ways. Several accounted for this feeling of difference due to their age as mature students, despite the fact that the institution where they were studying has a much higher proportion of mature students compared to the sector average). Rachel, Harriet, Zoe and Elaine all commented upon their age as a factor that made them feel dissimilar to other students: Libby and Zoe both use the term "proper" to describe other students who are younger than themselves.

Lauren places this difference within her circumstances of being a parent, and not living in university accommodation, despite this being a common position amongst students at Laydon. Interestingly, Nicola perceives herself as separate to other students as a result of the passion she feels for learning, believing that this passion is not something she sees around her amongst other students:

*Charlotte:* ...when you think about yourself as a student, do you, do you see yourself the same as all the other students here at the university?

*Nicola:* Ummm, I don't think I do in a way. I don't know, I don't think I've met, umm many students that almost, have got that passion about it (376-381)

Nearly all (six of the eight) of the participants spoke in a positive sense about a feeling of pride they felt as a result of studying at university. Elaine specified that she had not experienced this feeling whilst being a student on the FD through her reflections that articulated, "...sometimes I think oh yeah, I'm at university now. Didn't feel that on the foundation one" (799-800).

The issue of identity arises here, as part of my conversation with students tried to elicit their views about whether being a student was simply an activity they were undertaking, or whether they felt that this was a part of their identity. Elaine, Libby and Rachel were all able to say with some certainty that they felt being a student was a part of their identity at that current time, and there were two strands to this: Libby and Rachel both linked this to their children and how they felt that their

student identity was a visible part of them and a role model to their children which had created an impact they had observed, for example;

*Rachel:* ...so to see me sitting there working I think has been quite a good influence on her, I think she is quite proud of me and we have quite good debates now (535-36)

Secondly, the limited amount of evidence in the findings about participants identifying themselves as *students* is countered by their alternative presentations of the self, as evidenced through some of the extensive reflections upon being a learner, and the processes of learning. The ways in which participants understood their placement in the vast mosaic of those already established and studying at Laydon was much more apparent in discussions about shifts and evolutions in their identities as learners rather than seeing themselves with a distinct 'student' label at a particular institution.

## **5.7 Super-ordinate theme four: Dual institutional experiences**

The last superordinate theme, and that which is most central to this study, focuses specifically upon students' impressions of the differences between studying HE at a FE institution in the form of their FD at college, and the top-up year at the University campus.

It is important to remind the reader here of the stage during the academic year during which the research took place: existing studies examined vary with regards to their timing of data collection. For example, Winter and Dismore's (2010) research was conducted mid-year. Greenbank (2007) and Barron and D'Annunzio (2009) both administered their data collection near the beginning of the academic year. Pike and Harrison (2011) gathered their data during week 5 of the academic year. So, some of the available findings in this area are more akin to anticipatory perceptions of what the differences *might* be like, or certainly relatively early experiences. In contrast, the data collected for

this study was gathered throughout March, and the beginning of April. This means that students had experienced one whole semester (prior to Christmas) and the majority of another, and so it is fair to say that by this stage in their studies, they were likely to have become acclimatised to the campus and services available, and that they had also had a good degree of experience of submitting assessments and receiving feedback. Therefore, their views about aspects of HE are based on a significant amount of experience, and their views about experiences in their FD might be said to be somewhat retrospective, and naturally shaped by their more recent experiences.

Perceptions of these dual institutional experiences highlighted a number of issues, or areas whereby students' reflections enabled them to identify characteristics of their HE study that differed according to the institution (HE vs FE). These differences ranged from variances in logistical and practical features of the programmes, to aspects of pedagogy and culture. Three themes were identified and are presented below; expectations, curriculum, and staff support.

### **5.7.1 Expectations**

Expectations here refer to both what students felt were expected of *them*, and also to a degree, what they expected themselves from the institution they were attending and the programme they were undertaking. This emergent theme encompasses a number of areas that can be grouped under the term 'expectations', with regards to academic 'standards', classroom experiences, and variances in institutional practices.

Clearly, expectations about the top-up were framed and informed by prior experiences on the FD, and interviews sought to establish aspects of these experiences as a kind of starting point.

Comments upon these retrospective experiences relating to the FD may have been slightly difficult

for students to recall some time after their graduation from that course, and that college, and with the recent experiences of the top-up year fresh in their minds. However, the interviews drew out evidence that some students had felt that the FD was limited in regard to its scope, and the level of academia required from them.

Two students in particular reported quite negative experiences that conveyed their disappointment with the programme. Zoe (a student receiving a good proportion of first class marks since entering her top up year) recalled a very early experience in her FD which seemed to send a clear message to her about the extent to which she could achieve high marks at college:

*Zoe: ...you're kind of told at the start, which is probably not a good thing for them to say, we don't give high marks we don't give 70's so don't come in here expecting to get high marks (213-234).*

This statement had a clear impact upon Zoe and her attitude towards the amount of effort she was prepared to invest in the work for her FD, with the importance of grades in the FD lessening:

*Zoe: ...in the end I kind of, not gave up a little bit at college, but you kind of think well, I'm not going to get the high marks because they don't give the high marks so I'll just carry on what I'm doing and if I'm getting 50s I'm going to pass and that's fine to get me onto [the top up] anyway (266-271).*

Another aspect of the FD experience that was implied to fall short of expectations came across strongly in Harriet's narrative. Her perceptions of the programme were that it lacked in "academic learning" and theory, and she felt that much of what had been taught was akin to professional development at the level of the EYFS (Early Years Professional Status) training, which she had plenty of experience of due to her role as a nursery manager. She found this aspect of the FD "disappointing" and her narrative around this issue is interspersed with comments that convey a degree of regret about the experience, and certainly that it fell short of her expectations and what she hoped to gain from the qualification. She states "it wasn't what I expected "(575) and her

professional role and time pressures were also an apparent factor when thinking about the value of the FD, as she uses the phrase “complete waste of my time” twice in reference to some of the content. These comments also relate partly to views around the curricular scope of the FD, which is a point raised by students and considered further on in this section (5.5.2).

And so, many of the participants’ experiences focused upon their perceptions of difference in an academic sense, in that they had noticed a significant alteration in what was expected of them with regards to the standards and level of study. A wealth of comments identified and explored differences in the programmes from an academic perspective. Use of the term ‘academic’ here refers to the perceived study demands and degree of depth students felt was required of them, namely the extent of analysis and inclusion of theory, two particular characteristics of top-up level work that participants felt had not featured as prominently in their FD assessments.

Significantly increased demands in terms of the level (or perceived difficulty) of work and the amount of reading were part of the narratives of most. Harriet was one of the participants who identified this most emphatically in her narrative. This is in the context, however, of her disappointment with the nature of the content and level of her FD, and so her perception of the ‘step up’ may have been different to others.

*Harriet:* the amount of work, and the level of study in this third year is different (1093-4)

There is a lot more reading, there’s a lot more to learn in the third year, definitely (1108-1109)

Rachel also perceived there to be an increase in the level of work required;

*Rachel:* the level of work is definitely a step up here.....it’s a bit more academic.

*Charlotte:* And what do you mean when you say a bit more academic? In what kinds of ways?

*Rachel:* Well, a lot of the modules we did on our foundation degree were kind of work-based, whereas there’s not so much of that here (260-270)

So part of the difference for Rachel pertained to the ethos of the FD as a more vocational programme, which is of course entirely understandable given that the purpose of FDs when being designed was very much grounded in sector-specific skills knowledge.

Eleanor was another participant for whom an increase in level was an issue, both before progressing to the top up year, and even at the point of the interviews to some extent:

*Eleanor:* ....that was certainly my concern when I was, sort of looking to coming here, because I thought, oh gosh, you know, will I be able to keep up.....with the level expected here? (480-483)

There is however additional context relevant to Eleanor's perspective which is the fact that English was not her first language, and so her feelings about her own ability and how well this would meet expectations in the top up year may well have been impacted upon by this, although she does perhaps dispute this as I attempt to clarify the source of anxiety about the issue of 'level-ness';

*Charlotte:* So it was the level, it wasn't a language thing you were worried about at that stage?

*Eleanor:* Well, initially that, in my foundation degree I did worry about that, and then realised, well actually I can, it was a case of can I actually write an essay that will pass and be of some quality? Umm, and so I realised yes, I can do that (480-490)

For Eleanor, the biggest increase in demand was with regard to the amount of reading required, which she admits she had "not anticipated", or "not thought about".

From a more practical and immediate perspective, it was no surprise that students had noted differences in the size of classes they were a part of in HE – it was unclear as to what extent they had expected this, but Rachel, Libby and Eleanor all highlighted this as a difference they had had to come to terms with.

*Rachel:* coming from XXX [college] where you know exactly what you're doing, you're in a small group.....to come in here...There was millions of people there! (199-204)

Libby felt that an advantage of a smaller group was that the college tutors were more familiar with the students, but also perceived being part of a large group as advantageous in some respects, in that it afforded a degree of anonymity rather than being so visible and identifiable:

*Libby:* ....sometimes it's nice to be anonymous! (laughs)

*Charlotte:* Yeah! I mean, we had a big group last semester, didn't we?

*Libby:* Yeah, no, sometimes it is nice just to sit there and be anonymous and take it all in and understand it, because sometimes I have to go through it all and understand it, because sometimes I have to go through it in my head, work it all out for myself, then go home, sort of look at it and go, right that now makes sense, rather than necessarily put on the spot to try and figure something out. (405-414)

And so both a positive and negative perception of differences in class sizes was apparent. This seemingly minor, practical difference between the FD and top-up is representative however of wider norms and expectations, as pursued further next.

The last issue identified in relation to expectations pertains to what could be considered to be cultural aspects of the top up experience, that is the institutional culture of the HE environment. Here, the use of the term culture refers to this from a student perspective, and connotes the kinds of values that are prevalent within a higher education institution, evidenced through communications, actions and nuances about expected behaviours.

One of the kinds of cultural differences that students picked up on related to the degree of 'strictness' in the application of rules and regulations within the top-up, compared to what they felt was a more relaxed and flexible structure in the FD. An example of this can be found amongst the

experiences of Zoe and Libby who both felt that their experiences on the FD had been impacted upon by the predominance of younger students on the programme, whom had in their eyes, had a less serious approach and attitude to their studies. In contrast, they perceived students in the top up year as having made more of a conscious choice in “wanting” to attend university.

This had been problematic in particular for Zoe, whose experiences suggested that she felt somewhat marginalised as a result of the FD focus being geared up towards younger students, as is exemplified from her recollections about the teaching experiences on her FD here:

*Zoe:* Umm, the...(pause) one problem that I found, probably going to sound quite negative about XXX college and I do apologise, but the one thing that I found is that some of the lecturers had a problem switching between 16-19 year olds and teaching older students....

*Charlotte:* Oh....

*Zoe:* So sometimes you kind of felt that you were really being talked down to, and it's, you know I think sometimes they have to understand that when you are an older student, you're there because you want to be there, you're there because you want to do the work and you want to do well, umm, but when they're kind of pointing the finger at you or maybe speaking to you like they're speaking to, or treating you the same as a 16-19 year old, it doesn't really bode well.....they shouldn't have to come to a group tutorial every week because they don't need SMART targets with someone in their 30s or 40s, some women they've got their own, they know what they want to achieve, so that for me was quite an issue (182-205)

Similarly, Libby had felt that the presence of much younger students on the FD had been quite a distinctive feature of her prior study, and that the FD institution had displayed what she felt to be an over sympathetic attitude towards some students compared to regulations on the top-up programme:

*Libby:* We had a few at XXX college, and there was always the younger ones, always the 18, 19 year olds that would *never* put their work in on time, that were three modules behind everyone else for essays! (laughs) (579-582)

Sat with first years that had come from BTEC that didn't have a clue, and that was *very* frustrating, it was very hard work, because they weren't interested, they were all 18 years old, and were there just because they thought, well what else can I do? ...most of them weren't bothered, most of them were, I can't do

this rubbish, and the tutors were like, will you sit still and will you do this and will you do that? (383-393)

...sometimes it felt very unfair, sometimes it was like well, university guidelines are....if they hadn't handed it in [at university] they wouldn't be here, so why are they still here? You know, they're at the end of the year and they've handed no coursework in whatsoever but they're still being given the same chance as everybody else (88-593)

So there was certainly quite prominent evidence (reoccurring on several occasions in the transcripts) about different, negative attitudes that were apparent from fellow students during the FD, but that similar attitudes had not been encountered during the top-up year.

Other comments that formed a much more minor part of participants' transcripts related to perceptions about differences in staff students encountered in the FD, and subsequently top-up.

Harriet referred to the tutors at college as "EY teachers", perceiving there to be a distinct difference in the teaching staff she had encountered:

*Harriet:* I don't feel that they had...the qualities from yourself, or from Carol [lecturer], or from whoever, the university lecturers, they are early years teachers (1022-1025)

These different perceptions of staff in either sector were also held by Lauren, who talked about the differences she had noted:

*Lauren:* ...I was just blown away, like wow, that is what a degree level essay would look like, so I was like, right well, I know what I've got to do, to do the, like that. So yeah, it was a big change. And people seems to know what they're talking about and things, like rather than just....[trails off]

*Charlotte:* When you say people, who do you mean?

*Lauren:* The tutors, yeah, like the tutors. I think in XXX [college] and maybe before, I can't really remember, but they seemed to just like, this is my plan, and we'll just stick to what we're talking about. Like, they didn't seem expert in their field if you know what I mean? (411-422)

It is not unreasonable to suggest that the consequence of these differences served to heighten feelings that the top-up year had 'higher' associations and expectations from an academic perspective. And so it is apparent that this group of students were able to attribute the differences they perceived to a number of areas which largely relate to perceptions of the top up as more "academic" and notable differences in cultural practices with regards to operational factors, and inclusivity.

It is worthwhile pointing out here that the transcripts that have been drawn upon in this section about expectations do not include the views of Elaine and Nicola – these were two individuals whose reflections did not identify any struggles or perceptions of significant changes in the levels of academic work, or differing demands upon progressing to the top up. Nicola was striking for her exceptionally strong passion for learning for learning's sake. It may be the case that she either did not perceive a significant difference in the academic demands made of her when moving to the top up, or it could be that her perceptions of learning as a worthwhile endeavour altered her perceptions of 'difficulty' compared to others. Her passion for learning was clearly something inherent in her nature, fostered by her family and upbringing, and so this characteristic which it might be said increased her resilience to the transition, was not brought about as a result of studying the FD, according to the interpretation of her account. Elaine was one of the participants who had experienced quite a turnaround in the way that she perceived herself as a learner, from prior negative views of her competence in the education system, to a relatively positive view of her ability to achieve. Like Nicola, she also presented her experience on the FD as positive, saying that she "loved" it. None of the other participants' accounts of their FD lacked criticisms or conveyed such positivity compared to Elaine and Nicola, and so there is a potential relationship here between the feelings articulated towards learning and impressions of the nature of the FD experience.

## 5.7.2 Curriculum

A less common, but particularly interesting theme that emerged related to the nature and scope of the curriculum and how apparent this contrast was between the FD and the top up. The majority of students had undertaken the same FD (although delivered at different FE colleges) which focused on early years practice, with one exception where the FD was more focused upon primary sector teaching support.

When planning the interview schedule and considering the areas to address during the data collection, the issue of curriculum had not been one I had considered. The shift in focus from vocational, or work-based content is a feature of progressing to a top up that most students could perhaps reasonably anticipate, and this was explicitly recognised by Rachel and Harriet however there was evidence to suggest that students had found some aspects of the FD curriculum repetitive and narrow.

As highlighted earlier, Harriet's experiences of the content of the FD were disappointing, and she felt it had been somewhat repetitive of some of the early years training she had undertaken. She characterised her FD on several occasions as "practice based", and although she acknowledged it had been useful to refresh her study skills, the content was not akin to what she expected as an HE student:

*Harriet: ....they were teaching us something on a foundation degree level that we'd already done on an in-service training day, and it was the same people that were delivering it, it didn't feel like we were [sic] a university student (1052-1056)*

In contrast, upon coming to the end of her degree programme, her reflections suggest she feels that she has been exposed to a different kind of experience:

*Harriet:* I feel like I've done a degree, I feel like I've done a degree, whereas before, because it was all more or less work based and things like that, I just felt it was an extension of the training (1125-1128)

Furthermore, three participants perceived the curriculum of the FD as somewhat limited, or repetitive:

*Zoe:* ...umm the modules [on the top-up] are so varied, whereas at college it was EYFS so as long as you're au fait with everything you've got your basic knowledge and you can just keep topping up your knowledge as and when you needed (292-296)

*Lauren:* And then, the subject, like the reading things, the reading lists, they just have a few things like, suggest a few things and it was always the same stuff as well. You know, the same theorists and things that they'd just suggest....in hindsight, you think, gosh they're just constantly going on about Piaget and things (laughs) I've heard it all before, you know! (432-440)

*Libby:* ....with the foundation degree, a lot of the modules built on the other modules, so the underlying stuff was already there, and you knew where you needed to go and which books you needed to pick up and which websites to look at, whereas with this one, there's an awful lot that's completely brand new.....with your foundation degree you've got that steady increase with the background knowledge, whereas some of this is very, very new (524-535)

Based on these excerpts, it is fair to say that the evidence from these participants characterises their FD study as narrower, and with an element of a spiral curriculum to the learning, whereas in contrast the top-up modules could have introduced very new areas and more breadth. As highlighted earlier in this chapter, Lauren and Zoe both shared negative recollections of their FD. They were also both very specific in their intentions of only embarking upon the FD as a route to Honours, and subsequent access to teacher training. Although they both expressed positivity about the ways in which the top up experience enabled them to achieve and feel like more confident and successful learners, it may be that the underlying instrumental driver to their study inclined them to feel less kindly towards the areas studied within their FD, or perhaps that in hindsight, with exposure to a

broader curriculum, they were looking back and seeing their previous FD study as limited: this would certainly be the case for Zoe who felt her grades were 'capped' at college.

### 5.7.3 Staff support

The last significant area to emerge from transcripts about dual institutional experiences pertained to the role of staff in supporting students' studies at both FD and subsequently at top up level.

It was commonly noted that students spent more time, and were more familiar with their tutors whilst studying their FD at college. However, there were contrasting views about whether this was a positive aspect of the FD experience or not, with implications of dependence apparent at times.

Nicola, Rachel, Libby and Zoe all noted this and also relayed that they had firmly believed that the level of support during their top up would be lesser, as some of the excerpts below demonstrate clearly:

*Rachel:* I suppose the thing is, XXX [college tutor] really spoilt us, she was there 24/7, you could ring her at any time...I've even rung her, not knowingly rung her, but she's been on holiday and she's taken my call, no, the woman was brilliant (326-331)

I suppose you don't get that here but I didn't expect it to be like that here.....I probably came thinking that you'd all be horrible and that you wouldn't help me at all! So when I found out you were actually ok, it was! (laughs) (348-353)

*Libby:* ...coming into it, it wasn't as bad as I had expected, because I'd heard loads of horror stories...

*Charlotte:* What kinds of things had you heard?

*Libby:* Tutors don't help you, you won't get to see them, you won't get any support, you can't put drafts in, you know, you've got to work on your own, and it was just like, oh I can't do that!

*Charlotte:* It's like going from primary to secondary when they go, 'They'll flush your heads down the loo' or something (both laughing)

*Libby:* I was sat there at home thinking, don't think I can do this!! But it wasn't and in fairness....the support was actually better in some sense than what we've got, what we've had at XXX college (295-310)

*Harriet:* ...we were so mollycoddled before in the foundation degree, and we had such a fantastic relationship with XXX [college tutor] and she was at our beck and call basically but that's not the case now....you're in the big bad world now and you've got to get on with it, and I've come across some people who still need, kind of their hand holding (826-835)

Both of the viewpoints from Libby and Rachel illustrate that there was clearly a mismatch between what they expected and what the reality was in terms of support in their top-up. With the benefit of hindsight, it is also apparent, particularly in Harriet's excerpt, that these individuals are now able to look back and realise that they had experienced a very different kind of relationship with their tutor, perhaps one of too much dependence, and Harriet's use of the word "mollycoddled" really conveys an acknowledgement that reliance on the tutor was a notable characteristic of her top up experience.

The source of these prior perceptions of the top up support as being so drastically different seems to lie within the conversations students had with their college tutors, as illustrated in Zoe's interview:

*Zoe:* ...they put the fear of God in you really, well they do

*Charlotte:* Who's they?

*Zoe:* They is XXX college, they would say, it's very different, it's umm, you don't get as much support, you don't, you can't go and speak to people umm and so they kind of make you think, right you're very much on your own....But umm actually starting, it's not like that at all, everybody's very approachable and I think, for me, starting as an older student, you have a bit more respect of how busy people are (113-128)

Eleanor's experiences mirrored that of Zoe, as she also noted that tutors were more "available" than she had anticipated, but she herself acknowledged that she had not utilised the support as much as she felt she ought to.

And so several students identified that they had in fact been pleasantly surprised by the amount of support offered to them, and that this was in direct contrast to what they had been told, or what they had expected. The source of this disparity between expectations and reality seems to be twofold from the experiences of these students: firstly, some had explicitly been told by college tutors to expect lesser support and time from tutors during their top-up year, and secondly some acknowledged that they had benefited from quite reliant and cosseted experiences with their tutors at college, which of course would make a change in support more apparent to them.

Those whose interviews yielded the most reflections around the issue of staff support were Rachel, Libby and Harriet. Whilst all three of these had some other similar experiences in regards to the other themes examined in this work (such as prior low expectations of themselves, and a real element of pressure to achieve for future career prospects), it is not possible to identify particular relationships between the prominence to which they afford this issue and other themes. It must be remembered that the students participating in this study came from a range of FE settings and so will all have been exposed to different kinds of tutors, and models of tutoring. The key issue to conclude upon in regards to this theme is the significance of how expectations about support were incredibly dependent upon the way in which they are shaped and formed by prior preparation.

## **5.8 Summary of Findings**

The themes examined in this chapter cover a wide range of issues identified as significant in students' reflections about their contrasting experiences and perceptions of themselves with regards to HE in FE, and subsequently HE in HE. This section presents a summary of these key findings, and highlights key areas to take forward into the subsequent Discussion chapter.

### **5.8.1 The impact of previous educational experiences upon learner identities**

A range of themes arose that could broadly be considered as prior experiences contributing to, or potentially influencing current perceptions of the participants' learner identities. It is argued here that the presence of social class in some interviews is an educational issue, due to the way in which this was contextualised by participants in relation to education and employment opportunities and destinations. Although featuring in the narratives of three participants, it was not possible to really afford this structural factor any particular influence in the extent to which students felt they coped with the transition from FE to HE, although it could be suggested that perceptions of the self as belonging to a particularly working-class background may be a contributory factor to ideas around university as for 'others'. The value of social class at all for this study is also worthy of further consideration, due to the absence of this theme in most participants' transcripts: it is of course possible that data collection at another HEI with a lesser WP demographic would have produced different accounts with a more acute awareness of differences associated with social class in comparison to a majority of seemingly more privileged students, but the predominance of WP students at Laydon University may go some way towards assimilating identification of differences according to social class.

It was common to find that participants had previously held rather negative views of their own ability to learn and achieve academically, some of which were clearly grounded in experiences from school, others which appear to have been generated throughout the duration of FD study. Although some had experienced a shift in perceptions of themselves, towards a more positive opinion, a good deal of anxiety still existed around the standard of the work they were submitting in their top up year.

It also seems pertinent to include the idea of capability, or ability in this overall finding, and to encompass in this the contribution that significant others make. A range of feelings about the impact of influential individuals were apparent in terms of encouragement to begin or continue a route into

HE. Most prominent was the significance of peers, and friendships. This was apparent in the majority of individuals' transcripts, afforded a good deal of time in these interviews, and accompanied by some particularly emotive language, emphasising the importance of familiar peers and their positive impact upon motivation and commitment.

### **5.8.2 Students' understandings of what it means to be a student and a learner**

Many of the emergent themes related to experiences and perceptions of learning, and the extent to which participants had felt they had agency over this.

Of particular interest were two very strong themes that were common to the same three students, evidence of a passion for learning and a feeling that some degree of personal transformation had been experienced. For those who felt they had undergone this degree of change, their accounts were full of emotive and strong language, and so a particularly potent part of the interview for them. Amongst the participants for whom these two themes were apparent was also the least amount of evidence of difficulty in transitioning to the top up year, suggesting some kind of significance between perceptions towards learning and its value, and an ability to cope with the change in study provision and climate.

However, there was broader evidence apparent in some other transcripts, of a shift in perceptions of themselves as learners, with a recognition amongst some that they now felt more capable and confident as learners than they had in previous learning experiences.

Learner perceptions and intentions were also linked to current career roles, or future aspirations.

Interviews exhibited a combination of instrumental career plans to progress to further study or to

keep up in the current workplace, or on occasions less clear intentions; interestingly from Rachel and Nicola who both demonstrated a very strong passion for learning.

Perceptions of what it meant to be a student did vary a little, but overwhelmingly the most prominent feeling related to views of the self as an 'other' and not an authentic or 'proper' student. This was mostly explained with regards to age, but it was apparent that those who struggled to identify themselves as a student were also more likely to have reported that they noticed significant differences in the shift from FD to top-up, and also reported a good deal of reliance upon known peers, raising issues around factors that might influence upon the creation of an authentic student identity and the benefit of this to help cope with transitions.

### **5.8.3 Contrasting experiences of HE and their influence upon perceptions of the self as a learner**

Expectations of HE upon entering the top up were, unsurprisingly, largely shaped by recent experiences on the prior FD programme. A minority of participants held negative or disappointed views of their FD experiences, and these were quite strong in relation to some less than satisfactory aspects of previous study. These prior experiences were no doubt a factor in evidence around some cultural institutional differences relating to the rigidity of application of rules and regulations which were quite uppermost in some participants' minds, but another cultural difference suggested an appreciation of a more regulatory and academic ethos apparent in the treatment from staff in the top up year.

There was a clear recognition of increased levels of reading required and a perception of the top up as more academic than vocational from a curricular perspective, and these themes tended to be most apparent amongst participants who did not perceive themselves as students, and once again,

those whose accounts suggested a good deal of reliance upon peers they had progressed with from the FD.

One finding suggesting a mismatch between prior expectations and actual experience related to perceptions of staff support in the top-up year. There was evidence of widely held perceptions prior to commencing the top up that staff support in HE would be of a much lesser quality and quantity than that which was available during the FD. The evidence from interviews suggests that these fears were largely disproved and that the reality was much more positive: interestingly these views were largely from the participants with very positive and passionate views towards learning, and those who reported noticing significant academic differences.

## 5.9 Points to take forward

It is not surprising that the **nature and impact of prior experiences** on the FD is an area that has emerged: these preparatory experiences and subsequent expectations from the familiarity of the FD to the unknown of the top-up clearly have a significance – the extent of this is a necessary area to explore.

The **importance of existing peers** as a support tool, both emotionally and practically was very prevalent. Amongst this group of participants, this factor seems to have a relationship with students' perceptions about different academic expectations and the extent to which feelings of authenticity as a student are present. This coupled with evidence seeming to suggest top up students have little desire to invest in making new friendships raises the possibility of discussions around the extent to which these students feel socially included in their top up year, and the significance of this.

Conversely, the students who reported little reliance on peers, but portrayed a strong passion for learning suggests the possibility of a **powerful intrinsic resilience, or secure learner identity**, that is

relatively stable of its own accord. There are ideas to take forward here with regards to the ways in which these learning experiences and attitudes may impact upon, or be fostered by varying factors which contribute towards the formation of a learner identity.

These key findings are examined in light of relevant literature in the next chapter of this thesis.

## **Chapter 6 Discussion**

The previous chapter identified key findings as a result of the data analysis and this chapter now progresses the thesis to situate these findings in existing literature and elicit an understanding of the value of the findings. One of the unique aspects of examining this group of 'top-up' students relates to the fact that they are already, "ostensibly", as Penketh and Goddard (2008 p.137) say, members of an HE community, and have been HE students for at least two years previously, at their FE institution. This should mean that findings reflect less of what is already known about areas in which new students entering university struggle with, i.e. literature on first year transitions and experiences with a focus on academic and social vulnerabilities (Palmer, O'Kane and Owens, 2009, Harvey, Drew and Smith, 2006). Available studies in a *similar* vein that examine experiences of students progressing direct into either year two or three of a degree (following HNC or HND study) identify concerns over academic ability, available support, and the need to conform to new 'rules' (Christie et al 2006, LSDA 2002). However, it would not be unreasonable to surmise that such students have not been exposed to similar aspects of HE culture (in contrast to those progressing from an FD) and so these difficulties are to be expected.

Therefore, a spotlight on the experiences of students who have already lived through the majority of their time as an HE student (i.e. two years on an FD) should be expected to reveal findings of a slightly different nature, although it is fair to say that of course there are some overlaps in regards to student anxieties about their own capability. As identified in chapter three, existing studies that have looked specifically at these very precise cohorts are few, (Greenbank, 2007; Penketh and Goddard, 2008; Winter and Dismore, 2010; Pike and Harrison 2011, Christie et al 2013, Largan 2015, and Morgan, 2015). Their key findings reflect those found in this study in relation to a range of areas; difficulty making friendships and mixing with existing progressing peers (Winter and Dismore 2010); a feeling that standards and expectations in FE were inconsistent and not adequate preparation for

the top up (Winter and Dismore 2010, Morgan 2015); a sense that lecturers in HE were more 'academic' (Greenbank 2007, Pike and Harrison 2010); a feeling of difference and inferiority (Greenbank 2007, Morgan 2015), and overwhelmingly amongst all of the existing studies, concerns about academic requirements and expectations. The exception here is Largan's (2015) study where students were progressing internally within the same institution, and so many of these differences were not as visible in their perceptions, although notably the learners in her study did also express significant self-doubt about academic expectations and levels, and also restrictions in their participation in classroom activities. Therefore, the majority of the exposition in this discussion chapter does not seek to simply replicate and reinforce these points, but instead focuses upon framing the empirical findings of this study into alignment with the study's research questions, in order to directly and precisely seek to generate new perspectives and understandings.

## **6.1 Assertions and research questions**

The overarching aim of this study was to consider the extent to which experience of a dual institutional habitus impacted upon perceptions of learner identity amongst top-up students. The findings presented in the previous chapter lead me to assert that the data gathered in this study supports a claim of prior FD experiences impacting upon learners' perceptions of their ability to learn and succeed in HE, and subsequently contributes to their ability to form learner identities that would be perceived as preferential to the HE institution. This assertion directly links to;

- Research Question 1: How do dual experiences of HE impact upon top-up students' perceptions of what it means to be a learner?

- Research Question 3: In what ways are contrasting experiences of HE culture significant for students navigating their top-up year?
- Research Question 4: Is current policy and practice for direct entrant students suited to their prior experiences and needs?

The relationship I am proposing therefore between an experience of two institutional habitus' and the development of a learner identity can be summarised as illustrated in Figure 1 below, whereby the extent to which an individual is equipped to cope with their top-up year subsequently impacts upon the nature of the learner identity they perceive themselves to have, and are able to develop:

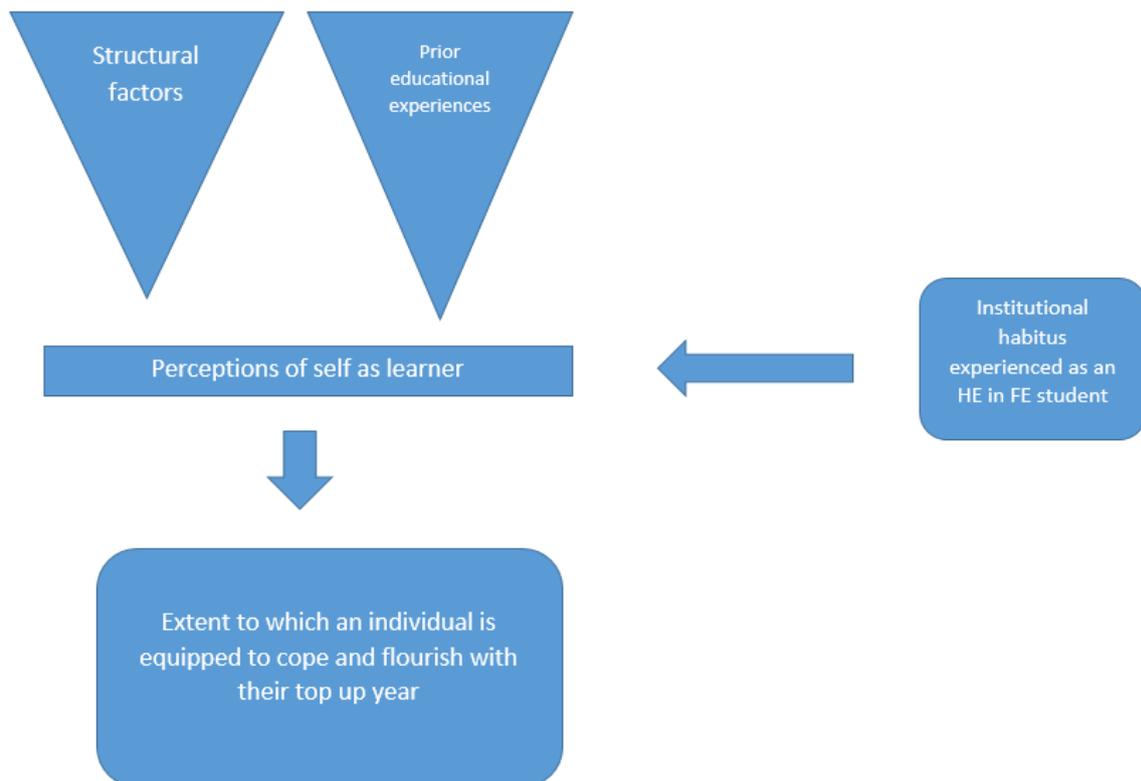


Figure 1: Prior educational experiences and perceptions that impact upon a students' ability to cope and flourish in their top-up year

The next core assertion stemming from the Findings chapter is that the identification of peers as a crucial support tool can contribute toward feelings of authenticity as a student, and help to create a community of existing contacts with shared unique learning experiences. This assertion directly links to:

- Research Question 2: What roles do peer relationships play for students entering directly into their final year of a BA Honours degree?
- Research Question 3: In what ways are contrasting experiences of HE culture significant for students navigating their top-up year?

Discussion in this chapter focusing upon this assertion will evidence the significance of peer support in prior and subsequent experiences of HE, and argue that peer relationships and support shape perceptions of the self as a learner and a student both through shifts in identity and equipping learners with compensatory capital.

### **6.2.1 The influence of prior educational experiences**

The significance of prior educational experiences upon a student's ability to progress (or remain) within HE is an area that has been explored by a number of researchers in recent years (Tett, 2000; Bowl, 2003; Crossan et al, 2003; Reay et al 2009a; Reay et al 2010; David, 2010; Bathmaker and Harnett, 2010, Fuller, Heath and Johnston, 2011). These works have been significantly tied up with the influences of both structural and agentic factors that have an effect upon students' perceptions

of themselves as successful, or effective learners (or not), and evidence of these did indeed present itself amongst the students in this study.

A wealth of research has examined the significance of social class (principally the experiences of those from lower socio-economic groups) upon the ability of students to survive and succeed in HE institutions, such as that from Baxter and Britton (1999); Reay (2003); Crossan et al (2003); Reay et al (2005); and Crozier et al (2008). As identified in the previous chapter, it was perhaps difficult to attribute any significant amount of weight to social class for the participants in this study, as this was not an issue referred to by many in their interviews. However, there is consideration to be had as to whether feelings of 'difference' amongst the top up students when they compare themselves to others may be related to perceptions of self and subtle, unseen social class considerations. Skeggs (1997) argues that class is still a hugely significant factor that cannot be denied. Whilst I am not, to borrow her phrase, mounting a retreat from this stance, it is entirely fair to suggest that social class as a conscious identity component does not feature prominently in this study, and that this may be largely due to the nature (post-1992, widening participation) of the institution where the research took place, as posited earlier. If the same research were to be undertaken at a more elite HEI, the likelihood of progressing FD students to feel out of place due to class differences would no doubt be more apparent: the status of institutions is being increasingly defined in terms of the profile of their student intake (Reay et al, 2001 cited in Read, Archer and Leathwood 2003 p268). However, as in Britton and Baxter's (1999) work, it is fair to say that shared aspects and features amongst the biographies of the women who participated in this study exhibit common experiences such as progressing direct from school to employment, a sense of educational failure, the feeling of HE as a 'second chance'; all of which are resonant of certain educational trajectories which feature more commonly amongst students with a working class background, that their "habitus [was] working to reproduce existing social relations" (Pearce et al 2008 p.257).

Thus, there is certainly apparent in this study evidence that prior educational experiences that have followed a certain path (partly due to structural factors) have exerted some impact upon the perceptions students have of themselves as learners. These views commonly constituted negative feelings towards their own ability to learn effectively, which carried through to contribute to anxieties about academic capability at top-up level. Penketh and Goddard recognise this effect amongst their participants whom they describe as having “a sense that they are studying at a level that exceeds both their own and others’ expectations” (2008, p.321). Thus, these commonly held views of the self as a poor learner further problematizes the emotional and academic transitions for students into a purely HE institution.

To clarify and re-iterate the way in which the significance of social class is perceived in this study, it is fair to say that the kinds of students who tend to commence upon a FD are those whose biographies and life experiences are likely to be characterised by social and educational experiences characteristic of those from working class backgrounds. Perceptions of the self as a learner, then, are created and reproduced by family, the institutional habitus of schools and expectations within communities. This then develops and perpetuates into a situation described by Crossan et al (2008, p.57) whereby these learners perceive themselves as “increasingly distant from the formalised status of learner”. This issue of being ‘outside’ and ‘different’ to other students, and the consequences of this is examined further in this chapter (see section 6.2.5).

## **6.2.2 Perceptions of the self as a learner**

Discussions above have established that developing a sense of self as a learner is intricately connected to prior learning experiences. And, as asserted in Figure 1 (p197), this sense of self is carried through into new learning experiences, namely the top-up year experience of HE that this

study is concerned with. It was apparent that many of the participants in this study had previously held negative views of their ability to be 'academic', and these had been formed through the influence of family, siblings, and school expectations. For several of the participants though, their study at HE level, and particularly the 'success' they experienced during the top up year (evidenced in particular by Rachel, Zoe and Lauren), resulted in more positive perceptions of themselves as learners; as more capable, more organised, and for three individuals, marked quite a significant personal transformation in their attitude towards the experience and value of learning. The potential contributing factors and consequences of these shifts are explored in this section.

Gallacher et al (2002) assert that students' feelings towards being a learner can and do change, and that this frequently involves a shift in their learner identity. The issue of learner identity is not an insubstantial area of consideration, and writers in this area examine the notion from a variety of perspectives.

In its raw form, one of the most influential writers around the concept of identity is psychologist Erikson, and his assertion that identity is not static (1968) is recognised in literature examining the context of educational experience and the impact of this upon identity management and transformation (Baxter and Britton 1999, Britton and Baxter 2001, Scanlon et al 2007, Smith, 2017).

Of particular value to this study is the concept of the learning career developed by Bloomer and Hodkinson (2000) who examined changing dispositions towards learning. By disposition, they mean orientation to practice, that is to *learn*, and they draw upon a symbolic interactionist perspective which would suggest that dispositions towards learning are based upon the meaning learners assign to learning. These meanings are unavoidably influenced by a range of factors: some of which include social class and institutional habitus, as examined within this chapter. Another influence upon this disposition they acknowledge can be found in theories of situated learning, also of relevance to this study, and examined subsequently in this section. These considerations they identify as influencing their development of the concept of a learning career led to their definition of a learning career as:

a career of events, activities and meanings, and the making and remaking of meanings through those activities and events, and it is a career of relationships and the constant making and remaking of relationships, including relationships between position and disposition

(Bloomer and Hodkinson 2000 p. 590)

In this definition can be seen the significance of occasions, the value attributed to these, and the flexibility and movement that is experienced, with varying allegiances from one identity to another (perhaps both intra-personally, and inter-personally). This is not dissimilar to the underlying idea within Wenger's (1998) examination of identities forming trajectories, whereby he asserts that because of these trajectories, identity is temporal and an ongoing development. Acknowledging this potential for an almost constant transitory state of one's identity characterised by fluidity can make examining the notion of a learning identity a challenging task. However, it is crucial to persist in the enquiry of this area, because studies (Tinto, 1993, Thomas 2002, Cavallaro Johnson and Watson, 2007) have found that those students who perceive themselves to have a more prominent learning identity, and a sense of affiliation with being part of a learning community, tend to be more engaged and successful.

This notion of a changeable learning career then, is characterised by variations and developments in a learner's disposition towards learning. There has been much scrutiny of the ways in which shifts in individuals' dispositions towards learning have occurred, often coupled with the interplay of structural factors such as gender, social class and ethnicity (Briton and Baxter, 1999; Crossan et al 2003; O'Donnell and Tobbell 2007; Reay et al 2009; Scanlon et al 2007, Cole and Gunter 2010; Waller, 2010). These shifts were very much apparent in this study, as participants commonly spoke of *past* deficit conceptions they had held of themselves as learners, implying and often explicitly acknowledging that they had experienced a shift and now felt differently, as evidenced most specifically by Rachel and Zoe:

*Rachel:* I've enjoyed just finding out how much I am capable of, because when I was at school I probably thought well I'm the thick one really (553-554)

*Zoe:* I've had a confidence boost here. And, I feel like I've changed as a learner here....I feel like I could actually go on, because I've enjoyed this year (575-579)

Other participants in particular who identified changes in the way they perceived themselves as learners were Lauren and Elaine, the latter referring to herself as now "Intelligent" compared to opposite perceptions she had of herself in her early educational experiences. Therefore, for some of the students, their experiences and progression through their top up year marked real turning points in their learning careers, and crucially, more markedly than in their time on the FD.

One possible explanation for this relates to the increased presence of academe (as discussed further in this chapter around the issue of differing institutional habitus). The students who experienced success in terms of feeling more like an authentic and effective learner all demonstrated the ability to cope well with their transition from FD to top up. This is some feat, given the common backgrounds of leaving school at relatively young ages to pursue work, and also because of the fact that nearly all of the students participating in this study already held quite well defined professional or work-based identities, commonly as an early years professional. Askham (2008) suggests that students who already have a "readily constructed" work based identity may find that this is in opposition to a 'new' student identity. In contrast, the ethos and curriculum of the FD, being a vocationally oriented qualification, could be said to validate and reinforce this vocational aspect and professional identity. And, for most of the participants, their period of study on the top up required them to continue with their employment, and so they carried elements of this vocational self with them alongside these new, emerging 'academic' student identities: a "dual position" (Moore, 2006 p. 156). Similarly, Smith (2017) in his study with TAs undertaking FDs suggested that the FD students worked to preserve their existing identities of mothers, spouses and educational professionals

alongside that of student, a “triple shift” in identity work for them: further evidence of the fluidity and moveable nature of (learning) identities (Gallacher et al 2002).

Relevant here are ideas around the concept of legitimate peripheral participation (LPP) (Lave and Wenger, 1991). Although an examination of social learning theory and communities of practice is considered again in this chapter in relation to the significance of peers, here the associated notion of peripheral participation as a tool to enable individuals to experiment and dip in and out of varying identities has some value, as does Wenger’s (1998) identity trajectory concept. Wenger outlines five types of trajectories; peripheral, inbound, insider, boundary and outbound. The students in this study would tend to fall into, or teeter on the intersection between the first two types of trajectories, which I will briefly explore here.

The first type is peripheral participation, where some trajectories never lead to full participation, but provide access to a community or practice that does make a contribution to that individuals’ identity. It would be fair to say that this is apparent in all of the experiences recounted by participants in this study; their immersion in the HE environment during the top up year is limited in time and there is very much a sense of ‘dipping’ in and out as day students, but never quite participating to the extent of other students (see section 6.2.5 for a consideration of ‘otherness’ and ideas about belonging relevant to the amount of time spent physically on campus). This echoes Christie et al’s (2010 p.10) findings of ‘day’ students who tended to see study as “a 9-to-5 activity, contained within the working week, rather than as an all-embracing experience which immersed them in a new student identity”. This peripheral participation that gives “exposure to actual practice” (Wenger, 1998 p. 100) is said to be achieved through “lessened intensity, lessened risk”. It should firstly be acknowledged here that there is not an insinuation on my part that the students in this study did not engage in ‘actual’ practice; it is more than apparent from their narratives that they were all engaged to varying degrees and putting in work to achieve their academic qualifications.

However, there is clear evidence of an awareness from the participants that their extent of participation could be interpreted as lesser compared to other students; they see this in relation to the lesser number of hours they attend; the fact that they are only present at the HE institution for one year instead of a typical three, their increased likelihood to study at home, remotely rather than physically occupy the Library building and their lack of involvement in social activities.

The second type of trajectory that these top up students nudge towards, but I would argue, may not achieve, is Wenger's idea of an inbound trajectory, whereby newcomers to a community have the intention of becoming full participants. None of the students involved in this study expressed strong wishes for greater involvement in terms of their time commitment or social participation in university life, but I would argue here that some individuals became full participants in the sense of the way that they perceive themselves as learners. That is, those who feel a strong affinity to having a learner identity (such as Nicola and Rachel) and who feel that their identities are strongly invested in their learning perceive themselves to be full participants in regard to their commitment and passion for learning - but this participation is on their own terms, not that expected by the HEI. Wenger's assertion of eligibility for this inbound trajectory is of interest here: it posits that "newcomers must be granted enough legitimacy [by existing members] to be treated as potential members" (Wenger, 1998 p.101). It seems that in this context of top up students, even though they sit alongside peers who are existing members of that community (due to the fact they have already studied in that environment for at least two years), there are few opportunities or urges to become a member of that community, certainly from a social aspect. The students here commented that they had little time to commit to new friendships: this fundamental restriction and lack of willing to take risks and invest in new friendships when the students are only present at the institution for a relatively short period of time (nine months) is understandable, but the consequences of being unable to fully embark on an inbound trajectory may be significant in terms of social exclusion.

So, Wenger's ideas about legitimate peripheral participation are helpful in order to understand what may contribute towards the development, or non-development of learner identities for these top up students. If more complete participation within the HE community (be that at class, course or institutional level) were facilitated, then an increased sense of belonging and a reduced sense of alienation may be possible, both of which are significant factors for inclusion in HE communities, and may impact upon the extent to which a student is willing to engage in their studies (McCune, 2009). The last aspect for consideration with regards to perceptions of the self as a learner relates to those students, recognised by Reay (2003 p. 304) "for whom the process rather than the product had become more important". These students (Nicola, Eleanor and Rachel) were considered in the previous chapter under the headings 'A passion for learning' and 'Personal transformation', due to their expressions of the way in which engaging in learning had impacted upon them more broadly than just gaining a qualification, that they felt a desire to continue studying (and not for career progression purposes), and that the knowledge gained was of immense value not just to the individual, but also to others.

This enthusiastic absorption of subject-specific knowledge and immersion in the process and practice of learning has been found to prompt shifts in the perception of self in other studies amongst adult learners. Some of those who having reached a certain level of maturity have had ample opportunity to establish and reinforce particular notions of the self, have found themselves recognising their evolving perspectives and approaches to various interactions in their day to day lives. Reminiscent of this in the literature is work by Waller (2010) who writes of the developing social awareness identified in his narrative work with a student named Maria. Over a period of four interviews, her reflections evolve such that she becomes increasingly aware of her altered stance and understanding of the world. She gives the example of reading a newspaper as a different experience as her studies progress, an example also used by Eleanor in this study when trying to describe the personal growth she felt she had encountered in her studies: "when you see things on the news or when you're reading an article in the newspaper, suddenly you have a huge insight, a

different dimension I think, that's the word, to your own understanding, and the world". Similarly, Rachel recounted how she felt she looked at things from a "different perspective", echoes of which were found amongst the participants in Moore's (2006) study with adult students, who talked about the way their views had expanded, and the work of Webber (2015, 2017) whose research into identity for mature female students reflects a strong recognition of HE as a means of transforming ways of thinking about both differing perspectives, and the self. Acknowledging this change in mind set and approach to the discourse in daily life denotes a subtle, but clearly recognisable shift in how these learners perceive their self, and their own ability to navigate and understand the world around them.

This transformational effect of HE, and the way it can powerfully impact upon the reconstruction of identities, particularly amongst adult students is recognised by studies in a variety of ways. Exploring these in-depth here would be somewhat tangential, but it is fair to assert that work in this area (for example Bloomer and Hodgkinson's focus upon Amanda Ball, 2000; Cote's 2005 work on identity capital) illustrates this and depicts value beyond learning identities, and more broadly into other aspects of the self. As a final view to bring this section to a close, a conscious reach to take and use this altered self beyond formal learning is exemplified in the reflections of Nicola who talks about her passions to use her knowledge and qualifications potentially in developing countries: "I know it's taken me somewhere where I'll be able to make a change" (337), with a sense of moral responsibility to help other people. This was something also identified in Reay's (2003) work whereby she spoke to similar students for whom the process rather than the product had become more important and how amongst those in her research, there was strong evidence of a commitment to in turn, make a contribution to society as a result of their learning.

The evidence from this cohort of top up students then, to some degree, tallies with what is already known about particular structural factors that have a huge significance upon the way in which the

perception of one's self as a learner develop. However, there are also themes and ideas arising from the unique nature of the top-up experience undertaken by these students, and these are best summed up in two key points.

Firstly, that the 'success' experienced in the top up year was, for some participants, the first taste of what they saw to be a truly 'academic' achievement. And so, their perceptions of the time they were spending at an HE institution (as opposed to HE in their prior FE institutions) was clearly thought of in a different way, as a more challenging and authentic academic experience and in turn, weighty and intellectually stimulating enough to warrant some genuine regard and pride for their achievements; a real turning point in a learning career, and the disposition towards learning held by those individuals.

Secondly, consideration of theories around peripheral participation has yielded some worthy points. Most participants were conscious of their status of peripheral participant through their labelling of themselves as 'others', and their lesser physical presence upon campus. However, for a few individuals, it is fair to posit that they did in fact become 'full' participants with regard to their absorption in learning and their own view of themselves as authentic and committed students with shifting views about the value of learning, and the subsequent value of their own human capital.

### **6.2.3 HE culture in FE and HE - Institutional Habitus**

This theme is concerned with the different kinds of HE institutional habitus experienced by students in their FE and HE institutions, respectively. In order for this to be examined it is necessary to re-visit and re-iterate from chapter three what is meant by HE culture for these learners, given the centrality of the concept for this thesis. Such a concept is becoming increasingly more complex with the variety of HE that is now available to students in a range of settings (i.e. in college or other HE providers such as trusts or organisations with specific course designations or franchises to deliver particular

courses). Therefore, a more useful way to conceive HE culture is to view students' prior experiences through the lens of habitus, to try and achieve an understanding of how HE culture may be similar, or different to FE culture as experienced by students.

The concept of institutional habitus introduced in the third chapter in this thesis emphasised the way in which it can be a manifestation of exposure to multiple values and expectations as a result of educational experiences. This is seen, or felt (although often unconsciously) in the norms and practices of groups of individuals within these arenas, and these norms are then translated into policy and practice, becoming embedded expectations and ultimately resulting in predispositions that are reproduced.

In this study, students have become familiar with the particular institutional habitus of an FE environment, albeit an HE *in* FE environment. Therefore, they are familiar with particular ideals, rules, and expectations that were valued within that FE context: these may relate to methods of teaching and learning, tutor support, expectations and regulations. However, in the same way that there is not just one institutional habitus for all single sector HE institutions, it is also important to point out that two clear cut and unique habituses (respectively, HE and FE) simply do not exist, which furthermore makes institutional habitus in this context not straightforward to conceptualise, given the juxtaposition, or overlap of two sectors that were at one time considered to be for diametrically opposed purposes. This is recognised in some literature in this area such as Bathmaker and Thomas (2009) who use the term "dual habitus" in their work. Although HE in FE spaces are usually demarcated clearly in the form of separate classrooms or buildings, learning resources and other organisational structures, evidence would suggest that creating a truly authentic HE experience within the same campus and culture of an FE college may be problematic: Bathmaker goes onto consider such provision as potentially "a 'hybrid' space created by porous borders between fields" (Bathmaker 2015 p.69), suggesting that aspects of FE habitus may unavoidably seep into what is intended as a separate distinctive form of HE.

It follows that the students in this study are in a somewhat unique position in that their perceptions help us to understand what institutional habitus looks and feels like within both an HE in FE context, and an HE context alone. Interpreting the data from this study certainly gleaned identifiable aspects of Foundation Degree experiences that could be understood as aspects of institutional habitus students felt was specific to their experience of HE in FE, and some of these are considered in light of the literature here.

Prior experiences of HE in FE (i.e. the Foundation Degree), as noted in existing closely related studies (Greenbank, 2007; Penketh and Goddard, 2008; Winter and Dismore, 2010; Pike and Harrison 2011, and Morgan 2015), largely centred around a perception of less stringent academic expectations, more flexible rules and regulations and more accessible tutor support from students (clearly the use of “more” and “less” here indicate that the participants are making these comparative judgements in light of their top up experiences which alters perspectives and expectations from where they may have sat a year or so previously). These aspects of the FE experience are indeed characteristic of those particular institutions’ cultures and values – and student demographic. For example, a recognition that a common characteristic of students who might attend an FE college may be more commonly subject to competing demands such as family and employment, and therefore more flexibility might be applied to deadlines, an issue that one participant, Libby, felt quite aggrieved by in terms of parity for all students. This was also an issue amongst students in Winter and Dismore’s (2010) study who subsequently struggled with this, as they saw these regulations as “zero tolerance”. Similarly, Zoe had identified that the approach to teaching and learning in classes seemed much more geared up towards younger students, and the attendant connotations of that primary audience meant that she felt she was “being talked down to”. These two illustrations exemplify subtle but significant differences in the values and actions of staff and processes in operation within those particular HE in FE environments.

Conflicting and sometimes disappointing experiences of HE in FE habitus were also apparent in relation to the curriculum and certainly academic expectations. Lauren and Zoe both commented upon what they thought to be the narrow and repetitive nature of the curriculum encountered within their FD (“they’re constantly going on about Piaget!”), alluding to a repetitive model as opposed to the breadth they found the opportunity to pursue in their top up year across a wider range of modules. This was reflected in Pike and Harrison’s work (2011) where students commented that in their top up year they were reading for whole topics instead of meeting the requirements for just one specific assignment. This serves as another example of what might be referred to as a more surface learning approach, and creates a steeper learning curve as top up students seek to learn the ‘new’ rules and expectations for them to be able to progress. Encouraging and requiring students to become exposed to a broader curriculum is quite a clear example of a shift in institutional habitus that would challenge students, and require greater persistence and adaptation to this expectation.

Another way in which ‘FE-ness’ might be suggested to influence the experiences of HE in FE students relates to the staff teaching on the HE programmes. Generally, it is common for staff teaching HE in FE to teach across a range of levels, and not just focus upon HE teaching. This creates significant dual demands in terms of adjusting to teaching at potentially vastly different levels, and also restraints on time to develop their own scholarship for teaching at HE level (Feather, 2012). Participants in both this study and existing studies, commented that they felt tutors at university to be “more academic”. Harriet referred to her college tutors as “EY [Early Years] teachers” and Lauren felt her tutors had not been “experts in their field”. These perceptions were echoed by the participants in both Greenbank’s (2007) and Pike and Harrison’s (2010) studies. Although staff in FE institutions experience increasing pressure to undertake CPD, scholarly activity and research, very real and practical barriers often prevent this. Feather (2012) refers to the work of Jameson and Hillier (2003) who say that research and scholarship are not “the accepted norms” within FE, and identifies

barriers to scholarship development as culture and a lack of models. One of the FE lecturers within Feather's study referred to the CPD at the college as "generic....supporting the utilitarian objectives of the college" (2012, p.254), and another said that "[It is] certainly not within the contract to even keep abreast of the latest textbooks, let alone look at papers and, and research stuff" (ibid, p.255) which reflects broader ideas about the *purpose* of a FEC being at odds with the purpose of an HEI. Creasy (2013) suggests quite simply that this is as a result of FE managers focusing upon providing qualifications "rather than engaging with HE itself" (p.47). Therefore, it is apparent that in some FEC's, the extent of knowledge that staff may be drawing upon within these confines, may restrict the learning experience at levels 4 and 5 in comparison to that at university, and this difference is another way in which top up students who believed they were studying at a comparable level may experience a further difficulty transitioning.

In contrast, an area where FE staff were often praised related to the support they offered and their availability to students. It was commonly noted by the participants in this study that students spent more time, and were more familiar with their tutors whilst studying their FD at college. There was reference to tutor availability "24/7", having staff mobile phone numbers and a tutor at their "beck and call". This heavy on-campus presence of tutors at the disposal of students was also a prominent aspect of the FD experience reported by students in other studies (Winter and Dismore 2010, Greenbank 2007, Pike and Harrison 2011), although not necessarily a universal experience, as in a similar study McTaggart (2016) was surprised to find degrees of dissatisfaction with regards to support amongst the HE in FE students participating in her study. The resultant effects of this usually high level of tutor support in FE gives rise to suggestions of dependence and reliability, as recognised by some students in this study who reflected that perhaps they had experienced a relationship characterised by too much dependence, and Harriet's use of the word "mollycoddled" unfortunately reflects many assumptions and perceptions about FE institutional habitus. Upon progression to the top-up, students in both this study and others (Pike and Harrison, 2011, Morgan, 2015) generally

expressed pleasant surprise that HE tutor support had been better than they anticipated, but the implications of easily available tutor support in FE, perhaps one of the most valued aspects of the sector “may inadvertently make the transition to university more difficult by not preparing students for the HE environment” (Greenbank 2007, p.94).

Cumulatively, it could be suggested that these prior HE in FE experiences lead students to believe they have experienced authentic HE, only to be placed in a situation where the institutional habitus makes it clear to them that the HE they have experienced is not the model of HE espoused at universities. One of the key effects of this is the impact upon students’ sense of authenticity, identity and capability. For example, although not identified by the students in this study, research by Greenbank (2007) reported that students felt they were “looked down upon” as direct entrants into a final year programme, further implying that their prior HE experiences were not regarded as equal to other final year students. Similarly, Morgan’s (2015) research takes us back to Bourdieu’s ideas by way of students who felt out of place, like a “fish out of water”. These feelings of difference, otherness and not perceiving the self as a ‘proper’ HE student warrant an extensive examination which features as a part of this discussion chapter, see section 6.2.5.

Thus, there are indications in both existing literature and in the experiences amongst this study’s participants that in fact awareness of quite significant differences between the two experiences both labelled as HE is apparent. Thomas (2002) espouses that sites of education decide themselves what components of institutional habitus are valuable to them and subsequently recognise and reward some behaviours, languages and values more than others. Previous actions and attitudes that were worthy of merit in an HE in FE context become of much lesser value (and perhaps even discouraged, disapproved of or forbidden) in an HE institution. Thus the institutional habitus experienced by these students could be said to further reinforce the status of each institution as distinctly different and occupying very different positions in terms of educational hierarchies, quality and value: HE in FE is

*not* the same as HE in HE, as recognised at a basic level in some of the information and guidance available to students such as that from Which? University (2012);

“You don’t have to head to a traditional campus uni to study for a degree these days – many universities now run franchise-style undergraduate courses in further education (FE) colleges, too. While the end result – a degree (hopefully!) – will be the same from either type of institution, the experience you’ll have getting there will most likely be pretty different”

Students experiencing both of these sectors as part of their HE experience through the top-up route could be said to be both enriched and disadvantaged as a result of their time spent exposed to differing institutional habitus. It is certainly fair to say that for most, the experience of HE in their top up year significantly altered their perceptions of the HE they had experienced previously during their Foundation Degrees.

The focus in this Discussion chapter now moves onto consider the significance of peers and the impact of being peripheral participants, further drawing from the ideas of Lave and Wenger (1991) and Wenger (1998), and considering the implications of peers and various types of social capital as a resource to negate and overcome some of the apparent disadvantages afforded to this cohort of students.

#### **6.2.4 Peers as a support tool**

The importance of peers, and their positive influence upon engagement in HE studies generally has been recognised by Christie et al (2005), Brooks (2002), and Wilcox (2005). In literature focusing upon what would be termed as ‘non-traditional’ students, this is further recognised by Stuart (2012), who suggests that friends can encourage persistence in studying. The role of peer support in educational success is worthy of exploration here not only due to the fact that this was a somewhat unanticipated finding from the study, but also because this is an aspect of HE whereby top-up students might find themselves at a disadvantage due to their characteristics of being ‘day’ students

(Christie et al, 2005), spending little time on campus. Bowl (2003) identified differences in the level of peer support between younger, campus-based students and mature students with family responsibilities, with the latter being at a disadvantage. This is however scarcely recognised amongst the few studies specifically examining the experiences of top up students; Winter and Dismore alone stress the implications of this as students being “excluded from the social networks through which informal, but important information circulated about academic work and courses, and support services and structures” (2010 p.19). This study would support that assertion that top up students are at an increased risk of experiencing feelings of being socially excluded from their new study environment, and subsequently disadvantaged from access to information, or specifics of the institutional habitus of the HEI.

Amongst all but two participants in the study, the value of peers was particularly prominent in their narratives, and experiences emphasised the lack of time, opportunities and indeed inclination to make new friends. Therefore, social top-up experiences have the potential to remain somewhat narrow and familiar, which reduces the opportunities for broader social networks (ibid) and the benefits that these can bring to the HE experience.

This points even further to the significance of existing peers who have accompanied one another from a FD route as a real tool for emotional and practical support. These peers who share similar prior academic experiences and current challenges to study (in the form of employment and family responsibilities, navigating new systems and cultures) give top up students a sense of others with whom they belong and can identify with through shared experiences and common concerns. In the previous Analysis chapter, it was apparent that Libby and Eleanor attributed much of their commitment and persistence to peer encouragement through both face to face contact in their weekly classes, and also keeping in touch via text messages and e-mails during the week, which

allowed them to clarify concerns and discuss ideas, and thereby perhaps overcome some of the disadvantages identified by Stuart (2012) and Winter and Dismore (2010), above.

Models used within the literature to enable understanding of this area vary in the ways in which they locate the roots and value of social support for HE students. Wilcox et al's consideration of social support for first year students (2005) draws on the work of Weiss, a sociologist who has published extensively in the area of social isolation and support. His 1974 work about bereavement posits a number of key functions of personal relationships, and five of these in particular can be seen in the perceptions of participants in this study: social integration; reassurance of worth; a reliable alliance; obtaining guidance, and opportunities for nurture. These are all apparent through feedback from students around peer encouragement, reliability, clarification over assessment requirements, and motivating one another. And so, it could be suggested that there is a crucial, multifaceted, functional aspect to these social relationships with existing peers, a functionality, that these students would be lacking if they were progressing without their existing friends.

The point around social inclusion is interesting with regards to this cohort of students: there was little overt evidence that top-up students wanted to make new friends, which could have facilitated their social inclusion. This raises the possibility of doubts and concerns over belonging and being different, and even suggests some of these students lack any feeling of entitlement to socially integrate due to their perceived differences when they compare themselves to other students. These ideas are explored further in the next section with regards to feelings of being on the periphery. I also introduce and employ the concept of social capital and argue that the application of this is a crucial part of this thesis to enable a more nuanced understanding of the experiences of top-up students.

## 6.2.5 Peripheral participation and belonging

The concept of peripheral participation was introduced earlier in this chapter with regards to perceptions of the self and learner identities. Here, it also has some further bearing with regards to one of the key themes to emerge from student narratives, which was that most identified themselves as different to 'other' students. This therefore has relevance in this section about peers due to the relationship between perceptions of the self as 'other' and the impact these perceptions can have upon social participation, inclusion in university life, and feelings of authenticity as a learner.

Amongst the study's participants, there was little identification of themselves as students: as highlighted earlier, clear feelings of difference were explained due to the fact that this cohort were largely mature students; often parents; living away from campus, and largely employed on a full-time basis with a day release agreement to study. These outward signs of difference all contributed to reinforced notions of 'other' student stereotypes (young, living on campus, engaged in a high level of social activities), which served to set top-up students further apart from their own perceptions of how 'typical' students behave and engage with HE, therefore acting as a barrier to self-identification as an authentic student in their own eyes. It was also these students who were more likely to distinguish themselves as different, whose narratives indicated they had experienced difficulties in coping with the transition from HE in FE to HE in HE. Thus, the value of examining the notion of peripheral participation and belonging here could be as a further element of the top-up transition process that requires exploration and attention.

Feelings of 'otherness' and not belonging abound in the literature around 'non-traditional' students, most commonly with regards to social class and subsequently social capital as a currency to overcome this (Reay, David and Ball 2005; Crozier 2008). This is a point that must be considered in a

little detail here, in some disputation for these particular students, as from a social class perspective, demographic data about the characteristics of students at the HE institution in question would typically characterise learners as predominantly from lower socio-economic groups. Therefore, there is perhaps less scope for feelings of difference on these grounds (social class) to be the cause of peripheral status.

Read, Archer and Leathwood's (2003) examination of 'belonging' at a post-1992 HE institution takes a more nuanced approach towards experiences of HE culture and acknowledges that even in an institution where there are visibly significant numbers of the student body the same age, social class or ethnicity, students can feel isolated and alienated. Mann (2008) explains how this might be the case, locating the cause at institutional level rather than demographics of the student body; "The formal and informal social and academic practices of higher education can be seen to 'authoritatively' produce certain identities of what it is to be and act successfully as a student" (2008 p. 81). These 'practices' that might be observed by the students participating in this study clearly include their observations that the 'norm' is a physical and sustained presence on campus, and the institution's promotion of engagement in social activities, both of which are precluded for most top-up students, or other WP students. This is also recognised across other literature such as Christie et al's 2005 examination of 'day' students in HE and O'Donnell and Tobell's (2007) participants who also identify their lesser number of hours on campus as a factor in not seeing themselves as "proper" students. This was a term also used by students in this study: neither Libby nor Zoe perceived themselves as 'proper' students, and Lauren and Eleanor make clear distinctions between themselves as the 'other' students;

"In my mind, student is this sort of scenario, you know, you're at university living away from home....So when you have that image, perhaps I don't quite fit in there" (Eleanor 855-860)

"I'm not a typical student, because I'm not going to uni *full* time, and because I've got a child and my own home and like, not living in halls, so I don't feel like" (Lauren, 755-56, emphasis in the original)

Subsequently, for students observing these practices, “some will experience their identities as confirmed, some redefined, others as undermined and excluded” (Mann, 2008 p.81). This idea is echoed by Read, Archer and Leathwood who refer to the “culture of the academy” (2003 p.269) as contributing to a feeling of isolation. This may be particularly pertinent for top-up students, who as identified earlier in this chapter, encounter dissonance in their experiences of HE culture from FE to top-up in HE. Read et al further assert that students constructed as ‘others’ (in their work with regards to race) can internalise this definition of themselves: a somewhat self-imposed definition in this case perhaps, but nonetheless a powerful label that may serve to exclude top up students from further engagement for not practical, but psychological factors relating to perceptions of themselves. Wenger’s (1998) thinking would support this whereby he discusses modes of belonging as being more than just engaging in practice, but also as inevitably bound to the picture an individual builds up of their position.

All of these factors then align the students in this study with the findings of O’Donnell and Tobbell’s study where their adult participants “perceived themselves to be peripheral participants in the community, university regulations, and academic procedures [which] sometimes undermined their feelings of legitimacy” (2007 p. 312). This study therefore contends that not feeling like a legitimate participant in HE could be a fair assessment of the position and perceptions of authenticity for some of these top-up learners, and notions of being “out of place” (Morgan 2015) and even looked down upon and “victimised” (Greenbank 2007) due to a top-up status are apparent in the existing literature. A mediating factor I will introduce and explore next that is suggested as a potential asset to enhance resilience in this respect is the concept of social capital.

## 6.2.6 Peers as social capital

Prior discussion has established that amongst top-up students, peripheral participation in a range of tangible characteristics of university life contributes to feelings of difference and a reduced tendency to identify as an authentic or 'proper' student. To bring this discussion back around to one of my key assertions being explored (that social support can compensate for peripheral participant status), this section seeks to examine the concept of social capital derived from peers, and the consequences of *not* deriving capital from peers as a result of peripheral participation.

It is apparent from this study that the social and emotional support offered by fellow progressing students is crucial in the development of their resilient self (i.e. coping in a new HE environment), and the assertion here is that this support from existing peers can go some way towards mitigating the effects of peripheral participation. However, such an assertion cannot be considered without firstly explaining and justifying my use of social capital as a valuable concept to help understand these students' positions.

Social capital is a *resource* that individuals can draw upon, and in this context it is primarily social connections in the form of peer groups and friendships that are being focused upon. In this case, the assertion is that social connections, or a "durable network" (Bourdieu, 1983), consisting of "interpersonal interactions" (Field, 2008 p.16) constitute social capital. This is a basic tenet of the theory agreed upon, although expressed differently by the four main contributors: Bourdieu (1977), Coleman (1994), Putnam (2000) and Field (2008).

Bourdieu's Marxist lens viewed social capital very much as "accumulated labor", with connotations here of investment and return, i.e. time spent building social connections, and the benefits to be

reaped from this. This is also a perspective taken by Coleman who asserts that social capital builds human capital. For top-up students, it is apparent that they have little time to invest in making friends, or creating new stocks of social capital. Bourdieu would then assert that this would result in the continued reproduction of inequalities for such a group, and, although his focus was very much upon reproducing the status and powers held by privileged groups in society, it is fair to say that top-up students seem to begin their studies experiencing inequalities in some ways (e.g. different levels of knowledge and understanding of HE culture and habitus compared to their peers who have already been in the system for two year) and indeed for the most part, continue and end their studies with little change in this respect, that is, most of them never amass such similar levels of knowledge.

Consequentially, the impact of lesser social capital in this context can be seen in both short and long term ways. Evidence suggests that initially students on the periphery may experience difficulties adjusting to a different institutional habitus, and that their reduced levels of social capital, or social capital that has less currency in that climate, cannot ameliorate this. Putnam's two forms of social capital come into play here, in that what the top-up students seem to be experiencing is 'bonding' capital which is somewhat exclusive, reinforcing limited identities and "bolsters our narrower selves" (2000, p.23). Comparatively, 'bridging' social capital, characterised as facilitating inclusion, bringing individuals together and acting as "sociological WD-40" (ibid), could be of particular value to this group in terms of relationships with existing final year students.

Whilst this study cannot provide evidence about the long term impact of this, literature points strongly to the advantages to be gained from social capital in an individual's life trajectory. Putnam (2000, p.22-23) presents a useful perspective on this: "Economic sociologist Mark Granovetter has pointed out that when seeking jobs – or political allies – the "weak" ties that link me to distant acquaintances who move in different circles from mine are actually more valuable than the "strong"

ties that link me to relatives and intimate friends whose sociological niche is very like my own". This outlook could be applied neatly with regards to the fact that top-up students are tending to remain friends with other top-up students, thus reinforcing existing strong ties, and being less likely to foster new, weak – but potentially more valuable – ties. Field (2008, p.54) suggests there is "an emerging body of research which confirms the impact of social capital on human capital" and that social capital can lessen the disadvantages that may be experienced by weak cultural capital, i.e. that if these top-up students could acquire sufficient social capital, then this might compensate for the peripheral participant status they experience and enable not only further stocks of social capital, but also a more facilitated pathway to greater engagement in the communities of practice in operation – if, indeed, that is a desired goal. The alternate, and final point to be made here is that adopting such a stance whereby it is assumed that top-up students should desire and work towards facilitating new social capital upon entering HE, does serve as a minimiser and denigrator towards the social capital that they bring with them in the form of accompanying peers from the FD.

### **6.3 Summary**

This chapter has examined the extent to which the findings garnered from the data collected in this study reflect, confirm, consolidate or refute what is already known about this group of learners and their particular experiences. The final section of this chapter therefore summarises these findings in readiness for the thesis' concluding chapter.

At the beginning of this chapter I asserted that prior experiences of HE culture effect the extent to which FD students cope and flourish in their top-up year, and that this had an impact upon their ability to establish and develop a positive perception of themselves as a learner. Following exploration of this in this Discussion chapter, there are three key findings to highlight here;

1. Apparent in this study is some evidence that *prior educational experiences*, including those on the FD, that have followed a certain path (sometimes due to structural factors) *have exerted significant impact upon the perceptions students have of themselves as learners*. These views commonly constituted negative feelings towards their own ability to learn effectively, which carried through to contribute to anxieties about academic capability at top-up level.
2. For several of the participants though, their study at the HEI, and particularly *the 'success' they experienced during the top up year* (evidenced in particular by Rachel, Zoe and Lauren), *resulted in more positive perceptions of themselves as learners* which translated into greater identification of the self as a learner and better ability to cope with the transition experience.
3. Whilst some became 'full' participants in their own way with regard to their absorption in learning and their own view of themselves as authentic and committed learners with shifting views about the value of learning, there is also evidence that *a degree of peripheral participation caused by lesser immersion in HE* i.e. lesser "exposure to actual practice" (Wenger, 1998, p100) and a lack of inclination amongst students to attempt an inbound trajectory into these communities *impacted upon their inclusion* in the HEI within their top-up year.
4. Discussions have acknowledged that in addition to HE institutional habitus' varying widely within HE, *differences from HE in FE, to HE in HE with regards to rules, expectations, practice and procedures are experienced as significant by learners*. It could be suggested that these prior HE in FE experiences set students up to believe they have experienced authentic HE, only to be placed in a situation where the institutional habitus makes it clear to them that

the HE they have experienced is not the model in operation at the HEI. This subsequently impacts upon their sense of authenticity as competent learners in the new setting and also acts to further reinforce the status of each institution as distinctly different and occupying very different positions in the suite of HE available.

Another assertion based on the data gathered in this study claimed that the social and emotional support offered by fellow progressing students is crucial in the development of a resilient self and a distinguishable learner identity and can compensate for the peripheral participant status or deficits in capital that top up students experience. There are a further three findings asserted in relation to this line of thinking, presented in continuing numerical order here;

5. The significance of peers as a support tool is scarcely recognised by existing literature looking at top-up students, but the findings of this study highlight ways in which *the value of existing peers was crucial to create a sense of identity and belonging for these learners*. It also appears to go some way towards *compensating for reduced capital*, particularly social capital, that top-up students are perceived to be missing as a result of direct entry into already-established cohorts.
6. *Top-up students experience varying degrees of peripheral participation* which contribute to perceptions of their selves as 'other' and 'different' to existing students they join in their final year of study. One contribution to this is institutional habitus which creates a degree of alienation through practices that exacerbate the differences and deficits of prior HE in FE experiences owned by these learners.

To consolidate these assertions as this chapter draws to a close: evidence from this study suggests that distinct and impactful differences between institutional habitus can be seen through the application of different rules and the broadcasting of different expectations that places HE in FE habitus at a level more akin to compulsory or FE learning, which serves only to sharpen the differences felt upon transition to the top up year. In Morgan's (2015) research, some students felt they had been let down by their FE institution and thus inadequately prepared for HE. For some of the students in this study (and in Morgan's) it could be asserted that they had experienced a form of duplicitous HE within their FE context: to recruit to a course that refers to itself as HE implies the provision of learning with an accompanying habitus that could at least be reasonably expected to be close to that experienced by those attending an HE institution, but emerging evidence from cohorts of students who have experienced both may suggest otherwise.

The consequences of such experiences result in a suggestion that for the students in this study, and those in other studies cited, coping with the demands of level 6 study was likely to be a less seamless, and more stressful experience than those who had progressed from level 5 within the same institution, which contributes to a lack of parity with regards to the social and academic capital amongst students who may sit alongside one another in the same classrooms. This further reinforces the view that "HE delivered in FECs is just not quite right – not 'real'" (Leahy 2012, p.169), and some of the perceptions of students in this study would support this assertion, although this notion of what constitutes 'real' HE can, and should be a "contested concept" (Creasy 2013, p.49) given the increasingly divergent provision in the UK.

Overall, this Discussion chapter has illustrated that contributions to learner identity can be seen to be clearly influenced and shaped as a result of a combination of factors: experiences of peripheral participation compounded with exposure to differing institutional habitus and a deficit in valorised forms of capital marry together, and for some learners, this creates a ceiling upon the opportunities

they have to foster and develop an optimum learner identity. The closing chapter to this work, which follows, assigns these assertions to the study's research questions.

## **Chapter 7: Conclusion**

This study has examined experiences of HE in both FE and HE settings from the perspective of a unique group of learners that represent the manifestation of government policy to upskill large cohorts of workers with degree-level qualifications. Broad notions of inclusion, participation and institutional habitus have formed the basis of the thesis and shape the conclusions that will be presented in this last chapter of the study.

Initially, the key findings of the research will be re-iterated and situated within the aims and research questions of the study, presenting evidence-based judgements in relation to the purpose and focus of the study, and considering the specific contributions to knowledge. Implications of the study are discussed with regards to the current HE policy climate, practice in FE and HE settings and also the methodological approach utilised. Finally, the limitations of the study are identified to inform closing reflections and identify possible directions for future research.

As a reminder, the central aim of the study was to:

**Explore the influence of a dual institutional habitus upon the perceptions of learner identity amongst top-up students progressing from a Foundation Degree to an Honours ‘top-up’ programme**

The research questions that underpinned this aim and were implemented within this study were:

- 1. How do dual experiences of HE impact upon top-up students’ perceptions of what it means to be a learner?**
- 2. What roles do peer relationships play for students entering directly into the final year of a BA Honours degree?**

3. **In what ways are contrasting experiences of HE culture significant for students navigating their top up year?**
4. **Is current policy and practice for direct entrant students suited to their prior experiences and needs?**

Subsequent discussion explores the extent to which the study provided responses to these questions.

## **7.1 Answering the research questions and making contributions to knowledge**

The key findings of this study, when taken in conjunction with the analysis and interpretations of similar phenomena in the literature have generated a number of conclusions in relation to the study's research questions, and enabled an identification of how the study has made a new contribution to knowledge in this area. In articulating these findings and contributions to knowledge I remain mindful of the need for caution in the claims made on the basis of my data such that the findings presented are neither tautological nor spreading the evidence for claims about contributions to theoretical frameworks too thinly (Ashwin, 2012). Below, a correlation between each research question, key findings and the contribution to knowledge is presented.

### **7.1.1 Research question 1: How do dual experiences of HE impact upon top up students' perceptions of what it means to be a learner?**

There is apparent in this study some evidence that prior educational experiences that have followed a certain path (that is by not affording access to a traditional three-year degree at university at a

typically earlier stage of the participants' lives), have exerted an impact upon the perceptions these students have of themselves as learners. These views commonly constituted negative feelings about their own ability to learn effectively, which tended to carry through to contribute to anxieties about their academic capability at top-up level. This is not a finding particular to this study, however it does lead to the suggestion of a subsequent assertion that experience of study at HE level, and particularly the 'success' they experienced during their top up year (evidenced in particular by Rachel, Zoe and Lauren), could have contributed to more positive perceptions of themselves as learners. These perceptions in turn prompted feelings that they possessed the credentials to be part of the learning community in an HEI, even if their actions and measures of practical engagement did not bear this out in the behaviour of 'typical' younger students. This study suggests that the personal transformation experienced by these particular top-up students could be directly attributed to their further study in an HEI, and that this was specific to their top-up experience, that is, that validation of the academic identity for some of these learners might not have been achieved to date through their FD in an FEC.

Also, unique aspects of these students' experiences created *different* ways in which they came to conceptualise themselves as valid learners. The sense of having been exposed to "more academic" practice at the HEI and the experience of success in the top-up year for some learners may have been the facilitator that enabled more positive perceptions of the self as a capable learner. A minority who were able to reflect upon and articulate ways in which they felt their viewpoints and approaches had altered as a result of their studies were self-assured in asserting that they felt like students because this is where their mind-set, and a passion for learning allowed their sense of self to be situated.

Furthermore, this study presents a slightly different aspect of the notion of an inward trajectory for those occupying the status of LPP as a top-up: although constrained by a number of practical factors that prohibited steps towards becoming full participants of the community, there is some evidence

in this study to suggest that due to the presence of already existing and fulfilling identities (e.g. professionally, and as a member of their own existing CoP with fellow progressing peers), students of this type may not have the inclination to attempt an inbound trajectory into these communities. This slightly unusual assertion is at odds with perceived norms of participation in university life, but it is valid to suggest that some of the students in this study became 'full' participants in their own way with regard to their absorption in learning and their own view of themselves as authentic and committed learners with shifting views about the significance of learning, and the subsequent value of their own human capital – despite the kinds of capital they bring lacking affinity comparative to that of their peers . This study suggests it would be wise to consider acknowledging that some students may be sufficiently equipped to deal with their studies *without* transforming themselves into an institutional conceptualisation of what a successful student looks like. Because, these students were very successful: of the eight in this study, I am aware that two progressed immediately to post-graduate study and now hold professional roles in those fields. Five of the eight students graduated with First Class degrees, and the remainder with Upper Second classifications. Their own navigation around the edges of the CoP, combined with their security in a number of previously existing communities illustrates that articulation between these communities is possible and can be productive due to their particular learning identities shaped by their unique prior educational experiences encountered before embarking upon the top-up. Therefore, this study emphasises the need to avoid assuming that students have a desire to embark upon this inward trajectory, and raises the possibility that for some students, authenticity and credibility as a learner is gained by means other than acceptance and inclusion into an existing CoP.

## 7.1.2 Research question 2: What roles do peer relationships play for students entering directly into the final years of a BA Honours degree?

This study captures complex understandings of what it means to be a student having experienced the dual institutional habitus of HE in FE and HE in HE. There is clear evidence within the study that top-up students are aware of their different status and that recognising and identifying the self as different, or 'other' in itself acted as a barrier to self-identification with existing students at the HEI, which subsequently for some learners impacted upon the extent to which identification as an authentic learner could be achieved or not. This study argues that students progressing from FDs to Honours tend to be portrayed as, and in some ways perceive themselves as *deficient* in the environment of an HEI, and some of the capital required to successfully navigate this. Yet, a key component of identification with the self as a student, or *authentic*, or *effective* learner lay in validation through ongoing support and contact with peers who had also taken a FD and top-up route. In contrast to the majority of existing literature that depicts friendships and social inclusion as problematic, or an absence within these students' top-up experiences, this study shows how, for some participants, relationships with fellow progressing learners can be seen as rich and vital, both practically on a day to day operational level navigating a different institution's practices and expectations, but also to reinforce a sense of shared identity with others, and in this way to feel a sense of belonging and participation with an *alternative*, yet largely unrecognised CoP. Current conceptualisations of top-up students as peripheral and deficient fail to situate their understanding of these students within an alternative perception of their increased diversity, resilience and different understandings of what it means to be a student and a learner in HE. Therefore, employing the ideas from the theoretical bases of communities of practice and degrees of peripheral participation has facilitated both a consolidation of existing knowledge identified in prior studies about the shaping of learner identities, yet also enabled the emergence of this potential line of thinking which portrays a new and contrasting contribution to knowledge worthy of further consideration in the future.

### **7.1.3 Research Question 3: In what ways are contrasting experiences of HE culture significant for students navigating their top-up year?**

This study contributes further to recognition of differences in the institutional habitus experienced by students studying HE in FE versus those who study only at HE. Through the unique experiences of top-up students who have experienced *both*, this study makes an important contribution to the limited body of knowledge about the ways in which contrasting institutional habitus can be seen, and its impact upon learners' perceptions of their self.

The consequences of experiencing two differing habitus, with sometimes conflicting messages and expectations has been identified as potentially discrediting valuable skills and knowledge gained in the FD, because the experience of some learners in this study suggests that the habitus of the HEI makes it clear to top-up learners that the HE they have experienced is not the model of HE espoused at universities. As noted in relation to the previous research questions, this then has a relationship with perceptions of learner authenticity and known ways of learning which were previously valorised in an FE context. The dual nature of institutional habitus experienced by these students functioned to further reinforce the status of each institution as different and occupying very distinct and somewhat divergent positions in terms of HE provision and perceptions of hierarchy, quality and value.

The second finding in relation to HE culture to be emphasised by this study relates to the ways in which top-up students are placed to navigate and cope with the demands placed upon them through understanding and adjusting to differing institutional habitus. Conceptualising the unique blend and balance of capital that top-up students bring to their HEI study reveals sparse areas of learner identity, social and cultural capital that have not been thickened through prior exposure to HE in HE in comparison to their final year compatriots. Therefore, it would be useful to acknowledge that top-up learners tend to bring with them different and valuable kinds of capital;

- secure professional identities,
- existing peer support and their own CoP,
- experience of learning and perhaps adaptability by flexing to learn in two different settings.

These characteristics, combined with an Honours degree, in many ways present a learner who has navigated the complexities of being a student in environments manifesting contrasting institutional habitus, and subsequently a graduate with potentially greater resilience in terms of their desirability for employment - even if this has been at the cost of their 'fit' with the HEI's institutional habitus.

Therefore, in response to the research question, it is indeed the case that contrasting experiences of HE culture are significant, and can result in turbulent periods for learners working to re-establish the workings of a new institutional culture. However, this study posits that this should not always be conceptualised in an entirely negative manner, as there is also scope to recognise the unique assets top-up learners bring with them.

#### **7.1.4 Research Question 4: Is current policy and practice for direct entrant students suited to their prior experience and needs?**

As explained above, the empirical data and analysis of existing research presented in this study suggests that connotations of direct entrant students as deficient in capital and distinctly different to other learners may impact both upon the way in which the students perceive themselves and their learner identity, *and* the ways in which institutions structure and support their accelerated journeys through their time at an HEI. In addition, clear awareness of gaps in knowledge, experience, and familiarity with institutional expectations were felt by the participants in this study, which in turn shaped their feelings towards the nature of the prior FD provision they had experienced, and the extent to which they had been prepared for their time on a Level 6 course in an HEI setting.

These findings lay at the doors of HE providers important messages about the significance and impact of assumptions around students progressing from FD routes, as policy and practice (both at national and institutional level) in place at the time of data collection for this study, seems to have contributed to a scenario whereby for some learners, there was an experience of almost customary exclusion, rarely questioned.

To make further bold assertions about the adequacy of institutional practice for direct entrant students would be stretching the scope of the data gathered in this study: However, the subsequent section considers broader implications in light of the policy climate throughout which this study has been conducted.

## 7.2 Implications: Policy

This study represents a policy analysis of a unique period in the history of HE development and expansion. Since data collection in 2012, parts of the HE sector have seen ongoing expansion despite significant changes to student funding arrangements in the form of the introduction of the £9000 cap for fees, which following a slight dip in enrolments in 2012-13, returned to its upward trend such that the number of first-time degree entrants to universities continues to rise (UUK, 2017, HESA, 2018). However, statistics published in January 2018 of HE enrolments show contractions across all other levels of undergraduate HE provision from 2012/13 up to 2016/17, as illustrated in the excerpt from the statistics below:

	2012/13	2013/14	2014/15	2015/16	2016/17	+/-
<b>First degree</b>	1,528,495	1,533,855	1,524,225	1,563,900	1,597,825	+69,330

<b>Foundation degree</b>	<b>63,130</b>	<b>51,895</b>	<b>46,105</b>	<b>39,855</b>	<b>36,975</b>	<b>-26,155</b>
<b>HNC/HND</b>	17,455	16,710	15,840	15,820	15,150	-2,305
<b>Professional Graduate Certificate in Education</b>	4355	3105	2365	2030	1730	-2,625
<b>Other undergraduate</b>	190,320	154,355	139,360	126,245	114,600	-75,720
<b>Total all levels</b>	2,340,470	2,299,355	2,266,075	2,280,830	2,317,880	-22,590

Table 8: Undergraduate enrolments in the UK by all modes of study, 2012-13 to 2016-17 (HESA, 2018)

Furthermore, when only part-time students are taken into account, in England there has been a drop of 48,830 from 2012/13 to 2016/17 (the latest year for which data is available), and amongst part-time FD students, a reduction of 15,090 in the same time period, representing nearly half of all of the FD student retraction numbers. With regards to the age of students, whilst the number of full-time students aged over 30 has increased slightly in 2015/16 and 2016/17, there has been a substantial reduction in the number of part-time students over 30 studying, a reduction of 102,985 in the five-year period of data presented by HESA.

When viewed together, the reduction in FD students and those classed as mature, combined with a reduction of all those on 'other' undergraduate programmes portray a shift away from the phenomena of WP participation. HESA attribute this drop to changes in tuition fee arrangements in 2012/13, less willingness from employers to pay for CPD related courses, and a re-classification of some courses in Nursing (HESA, 2018). Universities UK (2017) identifies the influence of economic downturn resulting in fewer part-time students able to self-fund. There may also be an element of saturation in some sectors of the workforce here, after circa fifteen years of working to upskill employees by way of an FD. With specific regards to the degrees undertaken by students in this study, disciplinary trends are also apparent in recent data, with large increases seen in the percentage of students undertaking study in STEM related subjects, and a downturn in learners studying Education of nearly 27% (UUK 2017). Therefore, all the evidence points towards a

contraction in mature, part-time, FD students in the area of Education: noteworthy when one considers that at one point the highest proportion of FD students were undertaking Education-related programmes in line with heavily subsidised government support.

UCAS (2017) highlight that foundation degrees do not feature in recent policy initiatives, and note a shift towards higher and degree-level apprenticeships, suggesting that such trends may even result in the disappearance of FDs. At the time of writing the DfE is seeking views on a consultation for two-year 'accelerated' degrees, arguing that these would represent a significant financial saving due to their compressed nature. If FECs are able to respond to the implementation of this swiftly then the further expansion of HE in FE could become inevitable. This seems probable due to the likelihood of FECs attracting students on lower incomes, or those for whom amassing greater debt over a longer period of time is off-putting or prohibitive. The first tranche of feedback on the accelerated degree proposals in 2016 identified the possibility of such provision appealing in particular to mature students and notes that most accelerated provision tends to be in vocational subjects (DfE 2017b).

These policy trends of shifts in enrolments and potentially drastic changes in delivery are occurring under the spotlight of increased scrutiny via the TEF (Teaching Excellence Framework) and the Office for Students (OfS) which will come into being in April 2018, both espoused by the 2017 Higher Education and Research Act, a piece of legislation subject to little commentary as yet, but in receipt of some criticism for its initial neglect of part-time students, an almost unbelievable omission, rectified in later versions of the Bill (Macleod, 2017). Policy Connect's review of the 2017 Act foregrounds concerns about its impact upon opportunities for social mobility, and amongst its recommendations includes suggestions that HEIs have much to learn from FECs about accessibility for students from LPN neighbourhoods. It also noted the ability of FECs to deliver HE in a much more cost-efficient manner than HEIs. Thus, the delivery of HE in FE, whilst recognised as different to HE in HE by this study and others, can be seen to be an attractive ongoing prospect. This is despite

recognition that such a two-tier system, “raises a public interest concern as students at these institutions [FECs], especially those from low participation backgrounds who would benefit from these facilities the most, may miss out on the personal development and social capital building as a result.” (Policy Connect, 2017 p. 58).

Although there is as yet a lack of analysis about the impact of these current and future developments upon the FE sector, it seems prudent to forecast that some such accelerated provision may situate itself well in many FE colleges. This is part of a wider debate about views of HE in FE and would no doubt reinforce divisions between HE in FECs and HE in HEIs, a perception identified as a reality in this thesis and the recent work of others concerned with the prospects of dual institution identity and delivery (Leahy, 2012; Parry, 2012; Bathmaker 2016; Harty, 2016). If the greater entirety of an HE programme is to be delivered solely in FECs then we may see further retraction of students of the kind examined in this study, as there may be no requirement for them to transition to an HEI to gain full Honours. In such a scenario, familiar institutional habitus and a known CoP would accompany these learners on the entirety of their undergraduate programmes, lessening their risk of exclusion and perhaps creating more stable, although more restricted, learning identities. However, it is likely that a compounding of a compressed degree programme delivered in its whole within an FEC would serve to further stratify hierarchies of HE experience, qualifications and worth, in an increasingly competitive market (Bathmaker 2016).

Therefore, the future of HE opportunities for prospective learners situated in the intermediate-level occupations for whom FDs were conceived looks uncertain. This thesis, and the work of others (Fenge, 2011, Largan 2015) irrefutably illustrates that FDs have been a powerful tool to franchise many learners from WP backgrounds who otherwise may not have felt able to envisage any degree

of participation in HE, let alone an Honours degree. This role that has been played by FDs, as a facilitator of social justice in accessing HE looks to be under threat if recent trends are indicative of the ongoing trajectories of enrolments and provision. It is against this policy backdrop that this study makes an important contribution due to the analysis it presents of a phenomenon in HE policy that appears to have had its prime and may now be at the mercy of other competing policy priorities and tensions.

### **7.3 Implications: Practice**

The implications of this study for practitioners working with HE learners centre around *inclusion* and *information*. This has relevance to both those providers of HE in FE, and those based only in HEIs.

With regards to the first implication: transitions from FE (or 6<sup>th</sup> form) to HE has for years been recognised as a time characterised by adjustment and teething problems. It is now the norm for new first year students to have a suite of preparatory and induction activities which may include, but not be limited to: open days prior to University application; applicant days once their UCAS choices have been made; summer school or other taster activities; induction weeks/ activities at the start of semester; high-level observance of their progress (pastoral and academic) within the first few months; ongoing study skills workshops and social events; and, re-induction activities following a Christmas vacation. These activities indicate the value ascribed to these (usually) full-time, three-year cohort learners. However, for many institutions the value attributed to top-up students may be lesser in some ways. In reality, the students are only attending for one academic year which may amount to as little as nine months. The income to the HEI and the level of investment required – both financially and in terms of other resources – has paled into significance compared to the core business of most institutions focused upon three year undergraduate cohorts, especially due to pressures over retention and funding which prioritises a cycle of three-year completion.

Thus, the priority given to these cohorts may be lessened. However, practitioners (lecturers, tutors, and support staff both in FECs and HEIs) would do well to remind themselves of the unique positioning and potential vulnerability of these learners in order to ensure their institutions are operating in an inclusive manner conducive to enabling social justice and opportunities for social mobility. As this study has illustrated, although the eight learners who participated successfully became Honours graduates, their positioning on a participatory scale and their lesser familiarity with the institutional habitus of the HEI potentially compromised the experiences and benefits they gained from their qualifications.

For HEIs who are still putting effort into recruiting and teaching top-up students, more pro-active and explicit recognition of these learners' 'newness' and the different forms of capital they bring with them could be achieved through greater partnerships and visibility of HE staff in partner FECs, events specifically for FD students, and specific actions that might go some way towards plugging the gaps in capital such as:

- Identity capital – explicitly and publicly recognising not only the complexity but value of multiple and rich identities that these learners bring with them, and ensuring that these are maintained and harnessed for the benefit of both the transitioning learners and those in existing cohorts they are joining at the HEI.
- Social capital – facilitating the ongoing friendships and connections that top-up learners bring with them and also not making assumptions about their desire to make new friendships, but offering accessible opportunities that acknowledge their commitments and mature status.
- Cultural capital – earlier bridging activities that highlight some of the day-to-day differences in academic expectations, study skills and practical adjustments that top-up learners will encounter would be useful preparatory activities in more FE-HE partnerships.

The second implication for practice here is that of information, by which I mean greater support and guidance for those prospective students who may be in the process of making choices about HE study and deliberating between HE study at their local FEC versus HE study at an HEI. Such a decision may carry with it greater risk and potential investment payoff for students who are mature with greater familial or financial responsibilities. As recognised by this study, the provision of, and opportunities afforded by HE in FE (in the form of FDs) can be transformational and serve as an enabler and conduit to potentially otherwise un-reachable professional destinations and even greater social mobility. However, it is important for prospective students of any age to be made aware of the differences between studying HE in FE, and HE in an HEI, to ensure that they can take into account the varying characteristics of each sector that may impact upon their overall gains from HE experience: not just the certificate gained upon graduation. There appears to be little guidance that explicitly seeks to identify and delineate the differences between the two sectors for future learners, and as recognised by Bathmaker, “college-based provision would benefit from being identifiable in its own right, rather than something that is mistaken for university HE” (2016, p. 28), a concern echoed by UCAS when they recognise that despite the successes of FDs in FECs, “it does mean that learners do not always get the full higher education experience. It is important that applicants understand this before they enrol” (p.21). Greater transparency around this – which will no doubt be forthcoming with the ongoing scrutiny of HE – would be a timely development to clarifying the IAG (Information, Advice and Guidance) that learners are exposed to in their decision-making processes.

#### **7.4 Implications: Methodological**

From a methodological point of view, employing IPA in this study represents an attempt to make use of an under-used approach in HE research, and so serves as an example of the way in which the

theoretical triad underpinning IPA (phenomenology, hermeneutics and idiography) can be applied to a study characterised by an educational practitioner researching an element of their own practice. It is my view that this approach offers researchers in HE a theoretically sound and detailed framework upon which to conceptualise research studies, analysis of data and the way in which they situate and present research. It is especially useful to newer researchers who may benefit from the greater structure and guidance offered by the approach. More studies utilising IPA in relation to issues of HE experiences would be useful additions to the literature so as to increase opportunities for reflection and analysis of this methodology outside of disciplines where it remains predominant, such as Health Psychology.

## **7.5 Limitations of the study**

This section in a thesis conclusion might usually point to a small sample size and concerns around representation, but it is necessary to firstly remind the reader again of the tenets of the IPA approach and the value to be had in the idiographic nature of small-scale studies with *context* at their core. Nonetheless, the sample and situation of the study has specificities that limit its value for those who may teach or support FD or top-up students in different disciplines, or of a different age group or gender. The transitory nature of development in HE provision at present may also render the findings of this study less directly transferable to other sectors or cohorts in the future.

As discussed in chapter four with regards to researcher reflexivity and my position during this study, the self that I brought to interpretation and data analysis cannot be ignored, despite my statements of positionality. Initially as an unconscious ally of the HE sector and nature of HE experiences, my lens through which I approached data collection and analysis was not immune to this positionality. The nature of data collection (interviews), whilst congruent with an IPA approach, carries with it restrictions, and it is possible that a longitudinal study with several points of data collection, possibly

incorporating student journals or other means of documenting their reflections could have produced richer data with altered insights. This kind of 'bolder' research design was utilised in Elmi-Glennan's (2013) study within an IPA approach and she concluded that this resulted in particularly meaningful and insightful data.

## **7.6 Closing reflections**

As noted earlier in this chapter, the final point of this study comes to rest upon the doorstep of inclusion, and the way in which exclusion, as felt through a lack of participation and awareness of different institutional practices, can impact upon the construction of learner identity. This work has illustrated that in a contradictory manner, policy and provision designed partly to facilitate and enable greater inclusion has in reality served to exclude some learners, and to impact upon their capital through a process of de-valuing what they bring and then denying access to greater stocks of it. Whilst some of the individual participants in this study exhibited the effect of this in a number of ways, it is unknown to what extent their on-going and retrospective perceptions of HE and its value to them have been impacted upon by their differential and somewhat compromised experiences of developing a learner identity, and becoming an Honours graduate.

Future directions for research in this area would do well to consider a student-led participatory approach to make the differences between HE in FE and HE in HE more transparent to potential students and contribute to the body of IAG from a student voice perspective. There would also be value in exploration of the ways in which secure learning identities could be fostered and sustained for those who are precluded (either by choice or lack of opportunity) from embarking upon an inward trajectory into a CoP in their HEI.

The identification of divisions and differences between the culture and habitus of FE and HE as explored in this thesis is both helpful and unhelpful: whilst students need to be clear of the different kinds of experiences they will have and the capital they may gain depending upon whether they study HE in an FEC or HEI, current progression arrangements and opportunities for the kinds of students who enter HE via a FD serve to principally stratify their HE experiences. This does a disservice to the benefits they can gain from this experience and the rich and unique knowledge and experience they bring with them. Instead of the consequences of the “culturally dissimilar” (Greenbank, 2007 p.95) habitus that are occupied by these students being perceived as problematic and creating a deficit, there are possibilities to recognise and utilise their potentially more complex and valuable forms of capital as assets. This would then convey positive messages about these learners and respect for their knowledge and practices that validate their positions and legitimate status as members of a different, but not lesser CoP.

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## **Appendices**

## **Appendix 1 – Information sheet and consent form for participants**

## **The impact of learner identities upon student experience and engagement**

### **Information sheet for participants**

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This research is being carried out by Charlotte Barrow (senior lecturer in Education Studies in the School of Education and Social Science) as part of a PhD in Educational Research being undertaken at the University of Lancaster.

The research is interested in finding out about students' past and present educational experiences, and how these affect experiences of being a student, and ideas about learning identities (how you perceive yourself as a learner). The purpose of this is so that the researcher (Charlotte) can learn more about students' backgrounds, prior experiences and expectations of higher education in order to improve teaching and learning for students on Education Studies programmes.

Volunteers are asked to participate in one interview sometime from March – May.

This interview would be carried out by Charlotte, at the University, at a time convenient to volunteers. It is anticipated that the interview would last no more than 1 hour. Interviews will be audio recorded and then a transcript of the interview will be sent to volunteers in order for them to review this and amend any inaccuracies.

#### **Participation in this study is entirely voluntary.**

If you decide to participate;

- your interview would be entirely anonymised (you will be assigned a different name) so that no one could identify you;
- your personal information, and who is involved in the study will remain confidential;
- you can change your mind and withdraw from the research at any time until you return the transcript with your approval;
- your data (contact details and electronic/ paper based copies of your interview) will be stored securely so no one else has access to them;
- work that you submit for assessment that will be marked by Charlotte will be put forward for internal moderation by another member of the Education Studies team.

The findings of this study would be used as part of Charlotte's PhD work, and may also contribute to presentations at conferences or publications such as journal articles. In any use of the data, all volunteers would be anonymous and so you would not be identifiable at all.

If you have any further queries please contact Charlotte: [CLJBarrow@laydon.ac.uk](mailto:CLJBarrow@laydon.ac.uk) or XXXXX XXX XXX

If you find any aspect of the interview causes you upset or distress, the University has an excellent Counselling Service that you can contact on [CoRecep@laydon.ac.uk](mailto:CoRecep@laydon.ac.uk) or XXXXX XX XXXX.

If you have any complaints about the way in which this research is carried out, you can contact Dr Carolyn Jackson at the University of Lancaster. She will keep your identity anonymous and feed back your concerns to me. She can be contacted via [c.jackson@lancaster.ac.uk](mailto:c.jackson@lancaster.ac.uk) or 01524 592883.

## The impact of learner identities upon student experience and engagement

### Consent Form for participants

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## The impact of learner identities upon student experience and engagement

Charlotte Barrow, Lecturer in Education Studies, Laydon University

E-mail: [CLJBarrow@laydon.ac.uk](mailto:CLJBarrow@laydon.ac.uk) Telephone: XXXXX XXX XXX

Please read the statements below and tick each box if you agree:

1. I have read the Information Sheet provided/ overleaf
2. I understand my participation is voluntary and that I can withdraw from the study at any time
3. I give my consent to participate in the study and be interviewed
4. I give my consent to the interview being audio recorded
5. I agree to the use of anonymous quotations being used in publications
6. I agree that my data (my interview) will be stored securely and understand that I can ask to see this data

Name of participant (printed):

Signature of participant:

Date:

## **Appendix 2 – Example of IPA analysis on participant transcript**

FD didn't  
make us feel  
like university  
students

A lot of guidance  
about assignments  
in FD - felt  
this was needed

Struggled with  
deadline

1041 there as well, but because them teachers take our in-  
1042 service training, it didn't feel any different  
1043 I: Ah, yeah  
1044 H: And some of the content, some of the content that  
1045 they'd actually put into it was no different to training days  
1046 we'd already done. So in that respect, I don't feel that the  
1047 2 years was a waste of time, I mean the comparative  
1048 studies one was fabulous, I absolutely loved that one,  
1049 because it was something that I had no knowledge on, and  
1050 I learnt a lot, it was a really, really good module, I really  
1051 enjoyed that module, but, the relationships with the fact  
1052 that they were teaching us something on a foundation  
1053 degree level that we'd already done on an in-service  
1054 training day, and it was the same people that were  
1055 delivering it, it didn't feel like we were a university  
1056 student.  
1057 I: No. No, I see. But did you find, you know, you said that  
1058 you know, you perhaps learnt something through doing  
1059 the academic essays, did you feel that was the good  
1060 preparation you've been doing for the kind of essays  
1061 you've been doing here on your top up?  
1062 H: Yes, yes definitely, definitely. There's no way we  
1063 couldn't have, I couldn't have some into this level, having  
1064 so long out of education, umm, I did wonder what the  
1065 difference was between doing a straight three year  
1066 degree, and doing a two years foundation degree and then  
1067 the third year, that's a question that I've still not got  
1068 answered, what actually is the difference in doing a  
1069 straight three year degree, or a two year foundation  
1070 degree and then going into the third year, umm, the  
1071 essays were, like I say, we were kind of a lot more lead  
1072 insofar as how we actually structured them and what the  
1073 content was supposed to put, and I suppose we did need  
1074 that in the first instance, otherwise we probably wouldn't,  
1075 or I probably wouldn't have been quite as academic as I  
1076 know it needs to be  
1077 I; Yeah  
1078 H: That wasn't something that, umm, and the foundation  
1079 degree included in that was kind of a study skills module,  
1080 which was useful, umm, you could take from that what  
1081 you needed to take from that, umm, so that was quite  
1082 good. Ummm  
1083 I: Do you think-, sorry carry on  
1084 H: No, I was just thinking about the deadlines and  
1085 timescales and things, I'm not kind of the person, I don't  
1086 like to work to deadlines, so that's kind of been an issue  
1087 for me, I think being my own boss, I've kind of done my  
1088 own thing, within the regulations that I've got to follow,

Identify characteristics  
of FD.

Characteristics of FD

amount and level

more reading

length of assignments

feels has learnt more in this 1 yr than in FD

Feels as though exposed to more rigour?

related to equated theory with this?

1089 but having to be told you have to do this, it has to be so  
 1090 many words, you have to have so many line spaces and I  
 1091 want it in my the 1st of May!  
 1092 I: And was it not that strict in the foundation degree?  
 1093 H: Oh, yeah it was, oh yeah, yeah, it was, but the amount  
 1094 of work, and the level of study in this third year is  
 1095 different, because them first two years were very geared  
 1096 around the EYFS.  
 1097 I: Right. So do you feel you're having to almost, do, do you  
 1098 feel you're having to do a lot more reading and finding out  
 1099 things from scratch, whereas the foundation degree was  
 1100 probably consolidating a lot of what you already knew?  
 1101 H: Yeah, definitely like that  
 1102 I: So this is more new knowledge is it?  
 1103 H: Yeah. But one of the things that I do find on this third  
 1104 year, is a lot of our modules are kind of around the same  
 1105 thing. Even though they're different, for example, there  
 1106 are two particular modules that are both doing  
 1107 comparisons of different countries with the UK, umm, and  
 1108 it's a bit like oh, how am I going to do that, then? There is  
 1109 a lot more reading, there's a lot more to learn, in the third  
 1110 year, definitely, and I do think that that's because it's not  
 1111 EYFS based, like the first two years were, umm and it was  
 1112 a bit of a shock when we first looked at the modules and  
 1113 the size of the assignments  
 1114 I: Hmm  
 1115 H: and we were thinking, Oh God, how am I going to fit all  
 1116 that in, how am I going to do all that in an 8000 word  
 1117 dissertation, and it is quite a juggling act, but I do feel this  
 1118 year though, has been better than the previous two years  
 1119 I: IN what respect?  
 1120 H: In what respect, that I've learnt more, I feel it's more  
 1121 worthwhile  
 1122 I: Oh right, more knowledge?  
 1123 H: Yeah, I've learnt, umm.  
 1124 I: Sort of broadened horizons from it?  
 1125 H: Umm, I feel like I've done a degree, I feel like I've done  
 1126 a degree, whereas before, because it was all more or less  
 1127 work based and things like that, I just felt like it was an  
 1128 extension of the training that the EYFS consultants give  
 1129 you, umm, some of the things like I was saying before, it  
 1130 wasn't appropriate to do dance, we don't want to dance  
 1131 around a room, you know, and experience that was a  
 1132 complete waste of time. Umm, it was quite a good  
 1133 modules, but the practical sides of it were just, what are  
 1134 we doing this for? I'd rather be learning about a theorist in  
 1135 that subject, umm where this side of it has given us that,  
 1136 so...

Academic associations  
or degree vs FD

Academic associations  
vs FD

Academic associations  
vs FD

<p>certain response ←</p>	<p>1137 I: Hmm. Do you think there's different expectations here? 1138 H: Yes</p>	
<p>differences in staff</p>	<p>1139 I: In what kind of ways 1140 H: Umm (pause) this goes back to your position as a university lecturer, and the foundation degree teachers that we had, not being university lecturers, and although they've got their degrees and they are teachers, they don't work in this environment, and I think this environment is very different, they do their job because they love children and they want, umm, childcare to be good</p>	<p>Academic association of degree vs FD.</p>
<p>high expectations of achievement theory again</p>	<p>1141 1142 1143 1144 1145 1146 1147 I: Hmm 1148 H: Whereas here, yes, from our point of view that can be one of your aims, but also you're expecting that high academic achievement, that knowledge of the theory side of things, and the concepts and all that, not just how to put on a dance session with a group of children. You've got to understand all the other bits that go behind that, why are you doing that dance session, what are they gaining from that dance session, at a much higher level</p>	<p>↖</p>
<p>amused at notion of self as a learner ←</p>	<p>1149 1150 1151 1152 1153 1154 1155 1156 I: More analysis of it 1157 H: Yes 1158 I: Rather than just accepting it 1159 H: Yeah, that's right hmm mmm. 1160 I: Right, so that's one of the differences in the expectations really. 1161 Umm, the last sort of thing I want to talk to you about is, and this is quite interesting given your, sort of, umm your employment and your background, is about your perceptions of yourself as a learner 1162 1163 1164 1165 1166 H: (laughs) 1167 I: Yeah! And this is interesting 1168 H: Accidental! 1169 I: An accidental learner! 1170 Because some people start a foundation degree course, or any kind of course because they love learning, or they're interesting in the subject knowledge, but that's not why you started is it? 1171 1172 1173 1174 H: Hmm 1175 I: And I wondered how you felt about yourself as a learner perhaps at school, or college, compared to how you feel about yourself as a learner doing the foundation degree, and doing this top up? I mean, do you feel you're quite a good, confident learner, or quite competent, or quite well organised, or, what's your approach to learning I guess? 1176 1177 1178 1179 1180 1181 H: Umm, there's one thing that I know for me personally as a learner, that has been throughout my life wherever I've been 1182 1183 1184 I: Even at school?</p>	

**Appendix 3 – Table of Smith et al’s Stage 4 Analysis process with super-ordinate themes**

Rachel 43	Harriet 43	Libby 36	Elaine 56	Lauren 25	Zoe 33	Nicola 30	Eleanor 39
<p>Social class identifies as working class 13-14</p> <p>Learner self-concept wasn't clever one (compared to brother) 30</p> <p>Own children as route helped at pre-school, NVQ 90-91</p> <p>Characteristics of FD found it academic jump from NVQ 120-21</p> <p>Career embarked on FD with career prospects in mind 134</p> <p>2<sup>nd</sup> chance always had it in mind to go to Uni 142-43</p> <p>Influential individuals FD tutor at college, massive praise 172</p> <p>Characteristics of FD small group, less organisational difficulties 200-03</p> <p>Peers close group for FD no time to meet people at Uni 212-13</p> <p>Peers get to know people on FD, not made new friends at Uni 250-53</p> <p>Associations of degree level has</p>	<p>2<sup>nd</sup> chance uni not option/ encouraged at school 121-23</p> <p>Learner self-concept uni. Was for bright people (not self) 126</p> <p>2<sup>nd</sup> chance no career/ FE discussions at college 154-55</p> <p>Career original training wasn't route to something else, was enough on its own 255-58</p> <p>2<sup>nd</sup> chance college/ uni never considered when young 289-90</p> <p>Career noted changes in EY workforce 373-4</p> <p>Career worried getting left behind 431-33</p> <p>Career staff more qualified 446-47</p> <p>Career given staff opportunities 552-54</p> <p>Characteristics of FD disappointing, very EYFS &amp; at lower level than expected 578-79</p> <p>Characteristics of FD wanted more academic 603-04</p>	<p>Social class upbringing in deprived area 33-4</p> <p>Social class v. apparent class divisions at school 49</p> <p>Social class few people went to Uni 94</p> <p>Identifying as a student part of visible identity for children to see as role model 178-181</p> <p>Peers + influence &amp; encouragement 227-8</p> <p>Peers important to progress with friends 248</p> <p>Peers critical support 258-60</p> <p>Staff heard stories of tutors not helpful at Uni 296-7</p> <p>Staff more support than expected at Uni, clear expectations &amp; rules 309-10. 314</p> <p>Staff tutors more easily available in FD 324-5</p> <p>Characteristics of FD negative experiences due to organisation &amp; negative attitude of</p>	<p>Learner self-concept saw self as stupid at school 49</p> <p>Learner self-concept negative perception of own ability to concentrate 79-80</p> <p>Learner self-concept perceives self as not good sitting &amp; listening 81-2</p> <p>Learner self-concept perceived self as fairly average at school 109-10</p> <p>Social class identifies as working class &amp; parents didn't understand system 135-37</p> <p>Social class most peers left school early 156</p> <p>Social class minority had parents pushing them in contrast to own 159-161</p> <p>Learner self-concept lacked encouragement, felt a disappointment to teachers &amp; parents 260-61</p> <p>Own children as route childminder impetus for career 290-92</p> <p>Social class felt working class in</p>	<p>Learner self-concept perceived self as quite clever at school (past tense) 9</p> <p>Learner self-concept things went wrong towards end of school 77-8</p> <p>Career no clear career plans when younger 98</p> <p>Learner self-concept didn't have good approach to FD 234</p> <p>Influential individuals colleagues had positive feedback &amp; were encouraging 261-2</p> <p>Career only did FD &amp; top up to get onto TT 279</p> <p>Learner self-concept deprecating of self &amp; approach to learning previously &amp; impacted by being turned down for courses 292-4</p> <p>Learner self-concept shift in attitude starting top up 312-3</p> <p>Associations of degree FD felt less serious 382-5</p> <p>Associations of degree perceives</p>	<p>Career always wanted to teach 22-23</p> <p>Career had to do course for chosen career route 49</p> <p>Career strategic planning 88</p> <p>Characteristics of FD preparation for top up implied lack of support at Uni 116-117</p> <p>Staff in contrast Uni staff approachable 126</p> <p>Characteristics of FD preparation built up negative perceptions of Uni 152-4</p> <p>Characteristics of FD - lecturers teaching to young students 185-6</p> <p>Characteristics of FD preparation implied lack of support at Uni. 211-12</p> <p>Characteristics of FD - negative views about assessment &amp; 'cap' on marks 242</p> <p>Associations of Degree spiral curriculum of FD vs variety at Uni. 294-5</p> <p>Associations of Degree feels Uni</p>	<p>Own children as route involvement at playgroup 21-22</p> <p>Own children as route involvement in committee 43-45</p> <p>Career always known would be working with children in some way 56-58</p> <p>Passion for learning enjoys learning &amp; researching 70-71</p> <p>Passion for learning has higher aspirations than teaching, sees more knowledge to be learnt 86-87</p> <p>Influential individuals role models, aunts 94-95</p> <p>Peers security of coming with known people 133-34</p> <p>Characteristics of FD + amount of time &amp; familiarity with tutors 140-42</p> <p>Characteristics of FD + preparation for top up 170-71</p> <p>Characteristics of FD +tutors good preparation 178-79</p> <p>Peers most others wanted security of</p>	<p>Career clear intentions 80</p> <p>Career building confidence 148</p> <p>Learner self-concept nervous going back into ed. 163</p> <p>Characteristics of FD stimulating lectures 210-13</p> <p>Characteristics of FD limited value of FD 224-25</p> <p>Associations of Degree lonely, lack of collaboration 308-10</p> <p>Characteristics of FD more interactive lectures 320-21</p> <p>Peers no time to get to know people 329-30</p> <p>Peers support from one person, encouraging each other 365-66</p> <p>Associations of Degree likes variety of lecturers 383-84</p> <p>Characteristics of FD encouraged to top up 397-8</p> <p>Associations of Degree + different knowledge and variety of tutors 399</p> <p>Associations of Degree - difficult for</p>

<p>increased, more academic vs work based 264-65</p> <p>Staff spoilt by FD tutor, always available 326-7</p> <p>Identifying as a student takes it more seriously than younger students 358-60</p> <p>2<sup>nd</sup> chance didn't try at school 461</p> <p>Approaches to study v organised 474</p> <p>Characteristics of FD knew what was expected vs not knowing at Uni = worry 516-18</p> <p>Learner self-concept enjoyed discovering self as capable rather than perception of thick at school 553-54</p> <p>Identifying as a student loves being student 597</p> <p>Identifying as a student feels pride 686</p> <p>Passion for learning sees continuing learning as important 727-28</p> <p>Identifying as a student part of identity to children,</p>	<p>Characteristics of FD restricted &amp; safe experience compared to Uni 616-17</p> <p>Career study linked to awareness of age &amp; future prospects 662-64</p> <p>Career age, dated nature of qualifications 686-688</p> <p>Career long term aims (FE teach) 724</p> <p>Career needs degree, aware good portion of working life left 769-70</p> <p>Characteristics of FD warned about Uni differences, more vulnerable 814-15</p> <p>Peers close group from FD 847-48</p> <p>Characteristics of FD much more input into assignments 884-86</p> <p>Characteristics of FD questions expectations in FD because of grade drop at Uni 910-12</p> <p>Approaches to study v structured &amp; organised 938</p> <p>Identifying as a student aware of v</p>	<p>younger students 380, 385-6</p> <p>Characteristics of FD smaller groups (but nice to have anonymity at Uni in larger groups) 402. 405</p> <p>Peers reassuring to have friends 420-1</p> <p>Peers importance of knowing people in sessions 426-28</p> <p>Associations of degree noticed massive difference at Uni bigger demands 435</p> <p>Staff feels well prepared by FD tutor 457-8</p> <p>Associations of degree more analysis &amp; research at Uni 488-89</p> <p>Learner self-concept uncertain what is required in Uni work 499-500</p> <p>Learner self-concept never confident about work submitted 515-16</p> <p>Associations of degree more reading &amp; new material rather than spiral curriculum 532-35</p>	<p>middle class school 315-6</p> <p>Learner self-concept confidence affected by career advice 502-3</p> <p>Career policy changes felt insecure 535-7</p> <p>Career policy changes felt insecure 542-3</p> <p>Characteristics of FD loved FD 560</p> <p>Career undertook study because of policy changes 575-6</p> <p>Influential individuals colleagues on course encouraged 636--8</p> <p>Learner self-concept didn't know was intelligent 646</p> <p>Learner self-concept realisation that others no more intelligent 660 &amp; 675</p> <p>Characteristics of FD didn't have to move around all the time with FD 789-92</p> <p>Identifying as a student feels at Uni now, didn't on FD 799-800</p>	<p>tutors as more expert 421-22</p> <p>Associations of degree narrower scope of curriculum in FD 434-5</p> <p>Staff feels staff support at Uni better 600</p> <p>Career only studying to get onto TT &amp; job 658-9</p> <p>Identifying as a student doesn't feel like student – sees self as different 677-9</p> <p>Characteristics of FD perceives FD as vocational vs academic. 710-11</p>	<p>students have different reasons for being here, FDs didn't want to be there 364-5</p> <p>Associations of Degree different expectations assessment &amp; attitudes 401-2</p> <p>Learner self-concept influenced by expectations in FD 429-30</p> <p>Learner self-concept shocked to receive good grades at Uni 460</p> <p>Learner self-concept surprised by realisation of own ability at Uni 472-3</p> <p>Career driven by entry requirements for TT 543-4</p> <p>Learner self-concept college marking influenced approach taken in FD (not trying) 556-7</p> <p>Learner self-concept received confidence boost at Uni 575</p> <p>Learner self-concept confidence boost – feels could go on 578-80</p> <p>Learner self-concept perceptions of me from student</p>	<p>familiar peers, happy to meet other people 241-44</p> <p>Learner self-concept didn't always perceive self as good learner 281-82</p> <p>Learner self-concept sees her learning as part of bigger role in society 300-301</p> <p>Identifying as a student proud 316</p> <p>Influential individuals role models in family &amp; creating one herself 335-36</p> <p>Identifying as a student likes being a student 354</p> <p>Passion for learning &amp; prospect of benefiting others 360</p> <p>Identifying as a student perceives self as different due to passion 381-84</p> <p>Passion for learning sees it as an ongoing journey 383-84</p> <p>Identifying as a student surreal, didn't think would come to university 412</p> <p>Personal transformation gain</p>	<p>lecturers in large groups 416-18</p> <p>Learner self-concept self-critical 499-500</p> <p>Associations of Degree noted small increase in 'level' 511-12</p> <p>Associations of Degree big difference in amount of reading 55</p> <p>Associations of Degree more reading, not anticipated 550</p> <p>Staff acknowledges not used available support 559-560</p> <p>Learner self-concept independent, pressure on self to have a go before asking for help 573-74</p> <p>Associations of Degree feels it needs to be difficult 644-45</p> <p>Personal transformation grown as a person 648-49</p> <p>Learner self-concept feels more confident 688</p> <p>Career distinct path (TT) 687-88</p>
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<p>as role model 779-80 Personal transformation changes you, look at things from different perspective 830-35</p>	<p>different &amp; more laid back at Uni 963 Associations of degree big difference in level &amp; reading 1012 Associations of degree EY teachers in FD vs Uni lecturers 1022-25 Characteristics of FD v practice based, felt didn't learn much 1036, 1037-8 Characteristics of FD felt repetitive of professional training, didn't feel like university 1055-56 Characteristics of FD more guided for assignments 1071-73 Associations of degree amount &amp; level of work increased 1093-95 Associations of degree more reading &amp; broader than EY 1108 Associations of degree feels has done degree rather than more work based training (in FD) 1125 Associations of degree high</p>	<p>Characteristics of FD less independent &amp; more flexible 550-553 Characteristics of FD smaller group, more familiar with tutors 556-58 Characteristics of FD regulations not as strict, felt unfair 588-90 Characteristics of FD not accurate preparation for independence expected at Unit 614 Learner self-concept lacks confidence needs reassurance 652-3 Learner self-concept ability to grasp content more of a worry than amount of work 675-77 Career study has helped when relating to colleagues 749-51 Learner self-concept given little thought to self as learner, feels has improved 776 Learner self-concept never been confident learner 787</p>	<p>Identifying as a student feels like student although age 806 Associations of degree fast &amp; pressurised 821-22 Associations of degree doesn't perceive much difference in levels 869 Staff silly of people not to use them 906 Characteristics of FD feels not spoon fed 983 Social class working class background but some confusion middle class messages at school 1031-34 Identifying as a student pride, feels part of identity 1123-5 Peers will miss peers, has support network 1132-36 Peers friends with people of different ages (younger) 1148</p>		<p>Characteristics of FD geared to younger students 653-4 Characteristics of FD young students who didn't want to be there, in contrast with varied Uni students who chose to be here 673-76 Identifying as a student doesn't perceive self as proper student – age 769-772 Approaches to study works well under pressure 792 Approaches to study strategic 807-8 Learner self-concept learning style has altered 821-23</p>	<p>in understanding, part of 'secret club' 417-420 Passion for learning to gain new knowledge 498 Career moral responsibility 503-05 Career ideas about working in other countries 537-39</p>	<p>Approaches to study juggling &amp; conflict with family life 765-77 Identifying as a student student is 'other' stereotype 855-56 Peers encouragement 888-89 Identifying as a student pride 894-95 Passion for learning enjoyed finding out 968-69 Associations of Degree learning how to produce essays 981-82</p>
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	<p>academic expectations &amp; theory 1149-51</p> <p>Learner self-concept selective interest 1185-86</p> <p>Learner self-concept selective interest based on relevance 1207-09</p> <p>Approaches to study visual learner 1213</p> <p>Identifying as a student study just something doing, different to others as not at Uni much and age 1284-85</p> <p>Identifying as a student feels proud &amp; family is proud 1302</p>	<p>Learner self-concept enjoys learning, will be bored when finished 823-4</p> <p>Learner self-concept enjoys study 831</p> <p>Learner self-concept proud of achievement at odds with expectations of others 853-4</p> <p>Identifying as a student proud to be student 859</p> <p>Identifying as a student but doesn't feel proper student, linked to age 897-8</p> <p>Identifying as a student stereotype of student as 'other' 900</p>					
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