GAINING THE 'PIECE OF PAPER': A BIOGRAPHICAL AND CLASSED ANALYSIS OF 'WIDENING PARTICIPATION' STUDENTS' TRANSITIONS TO HIGHER EDUCATION

by

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ABSTRACT

This thesis develops a class-biographical analysis of 'widening participation' students' transitions to higher education (HE). It unpacks the participants' complex educational, professional and family biographies, and depicts the nuances of class instability and credentialism that defined their educational strategies, which centred upon gaining the 'piece of paper' (HE qualifications). Through this class-biographical analysis the thesis focuses on how these participants understood and placed value upon HE and its credential system, rather than focusing on how HE might see them (that is, as bluntly defined 'non-traditional' or 'non-standard' students).

The participants narrated their 'return' to education in relation to their early experiences of compulsory schooling, FE and work which were mediated by family and social class relationships, the 'turning points' that led many to reconsider the possibilities offered by education and their lived experiences of loss, gain and vulnerability. Drawing upon Bourdieu's concepts of capital and habitus, three types of 'widening participation' trajectory are suggested: securers, enrichers and builders with each implying different understandings of class location and credentialism. The thesis concludes by restating the importance of retaining a research interest in mature returners (such as those in this study) in the widening participation landscape.

This thesis is dedicated to

My wife Lisa, my son Daniel and my mother Elizabeth

and to the memory of my late father John and my grandmother Mary

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ABBREVIATIONS AND TERMS USED IN THIS THESIS

BTEC – British Technical Education Council

FE – Further Education

GCE – General Certificate of Education

GNVQ – General National Vocational Qualification

HE - Higher Education

HEFCE – Higher Education Funding Council for England

HEI – Higher Education Institution

HESA – Higher Education Statistics Agency

MASSIFICATION – The rapid expansion of Higher Education

NCVQ – National Council for Vocational Qualifications

NVQ – National Vocational Qualification

NS-SEC – National Statistics Socio-Economic Classification

POST-1992 – the universities that were formally known as polytechnics and colleges of higher education prior to the 1992 Further and Higher Education Act

PRE-1992 – All other institutions classified as 'universities' in the HE sector that are not Russell Group or post-1992.

RUSSELL GROUP – the leading 24 research intensive universities in the United Kingdom (see note below)

TVEI – Technical and Vocational Education Initiative

UCAS – Universities and Colleges Admissions Service

UK – United Kingdom

YTS – Youth Training Scheme

At the time of undertaking the quantitative analysis there were only 20 member universities of the Russell Group. The additional four were granted membership in 2012

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction: 'A piece of paper'

It was six men of Indostan

To learning much inclined,

Who went to see the Elephant

(Though all of them were blind),

That each by observation

Might satisy his mind.

The *First* approached the Elephant,

And happening to fall

Against his broad and sturdy side,

At once began to bawl:

"God bless me! but the Elephant

Is very like a wall!"

The *Second*, feeling of the tusk,

Cried, "Ho! what have we here

So very round and smooth and sharp?

To me 'tis mighty clear

This wonder of an Elephant

Is very like a spear!"

The Third approached the animal,

And happening to take

The squirming trunk within his hands,

Thus boldly up and spake:

"I see," quoth he, "the Elephant
Is very like a snake!"

The *Fourth* reached out his eager hand,
And felt about the knee.
"What most this wondrous beast is like
Is mighty plain," quoth he;
" 'Tis clear enough the Elephant
Is very like a tree!"

The *Fifth*, who chanced to touch the ear,
Said: "E'en the blindest man
Can tell what this resembles most;
Deny the fact who can,
This marvel of an Elephant
Is very like a fan!"

The *Sixth* no sooner had begun
About the beast to grope,
Than, seizing on the swinging tail
That fell within his scope,
"I see," quoth he, "the Elephant
Is very like a rope!"

Moral

So oft in theologic wars,
The disputants, I ween,
Rail on in utter ignorance
Of what each other mean,

And prate about an Elephant

Not one of them has seen!

Saxe (1872, cited in Bain, 1996, p.153-55).

This thesis stems from an interest in student experience and widening participation and is concerned with the transitions to higher education (HE) made by those who could be described as 'widening participation students'. On the surface, few of the participants in this study, fit the mould of the traditional HE entrant, in that they have entered (or are entering HE) from a range of diverse social and educational backgrounds and also most are mature students. This thesis is particularly interested in educational *biography*: the family, school and work/ professional experiences narrated by a group of 'widening participation' students (the research participants) who at the time of interview had entered, or were about to enter HE. This thesis is primarily interested in the participants' concerns surrounding credentials, or qualifications (otherwise characterised in this thesis as the 'piece of paper') and how they understand the value of the 'piece of paper' in relation to their biographies.

The participants in this study were entering HE with the common, primary objective of gaining credentials. However, in fact the 'piece of paper' held multiple meanings for the participants. The argument of this thesis, deriving from biographical analysis of the participants' interviews is that it was primarily the participants 'classed' backgrounds that orientated them in different ways toward their desired credentials and, as such, located them differently within the 'widening participation' HE landscape. John Godfrey Saxe's poetic version of the early Indian fable of the blind men and the elephant is therefore pertinent to this thesis' attempt to reconstruct their motives and journeys in HE. All of the participants spoke of the importance of gaining

a degree (or similar qualification) but their understandings of what a degree qualification meant, its value and its biographical place, varied markedly.

1.2.1 Origins of the research study

Much of the contemporary interest in the 'student experience' of 'non-traditional' students (Bowl, 2001: 2003; Reay, 2001, 2003a, 2003b; Ball *et al*, 2002; Reay *et al*, 2005, 2009, 2010), stems from successive governments' rhetoric concerning widening participation in higher education (HE), and claims about the economic and social benefits that higher education (so governments claim) brings (see for example, NCIHE, 1997). My interest in the identities and experiences of this particular group of students, in part, arises from my own experiences as a 'non-traditional' or 'non-standard' student, as I entered HE as a mature student at the age of twenty-four, through a vocational pathway. My own biographical journey towards gaining the 'piece of paper', arguably mirrored those of the securers (see section 1.4.1 and 1.4.2), in that although I was from an ostensibly middle-class background and possessed the necessary levels of cultural capital, negative experiences of compulsory schooling led me to not participate in HE at a young age. However, later in the life-course I became acutely aware of the value and importance of HE and the 'piece of paper' in relation to the increased employment and professional options it would provide.

Upon reflection, my experiences relate to some of the more complex ideas in this thesis. Like the participants in this research study, I too was a 'symbol chaser' (see section 1.4.5 for more detail) in that I desired the symbolic capital (the 'piece of

paper') and understood the importance and value of gaining credentials in an increasingly competitive job market. Ideas of liminality were also relevant in that I viewed my HE experience as transformational, in that it equipped me with the skills, knowledge and confidence to enhance my prospects for future professional employment and further study and training. My dissatisfaction of the 'old', widening participation categories used to describe student experience also relates to my experiences as an undergraduate student at the age of twenty-four. Whilst I could have been described as 'non-traditional' or 'non-standard', in that I entered HE from a professional background, with vocational qualifications and as a mature student, in some senses, I could also have been described as 'traditional' in that I came from a middle-class background, with relatively significant levels of cultural capital.

'Non-standard' students have usually been categorised on the basis of their entry qualifications, having achieved 'vocational' or Access qualifications, rather than the 'standard' A-Level requirement. Although the term 'non-traditional students' is sometimes used interchangeably with 'non-standard' (Benn, 1995; Mason, 1987; MacDonald and Stratta, 1998), it also implies HE students from 'under-represented' (or what were once under-represented) social groups: students from working-class backgrounds, those from particular ethnic minority backgrounds, mature (those who are twenty-one years of age or over upon entry to HE) and disabled students (Morey *et al*, 2003).

Initially, the research study upon which this thesis is predicated sought to investigate the experiences and identities of individuals who had entered HE from pure-vocational pathways (i.e. BTEC, AVCE, GNVQ and NVQ). However, the process of research rarely runs smoothly and because the eventual sample turned out to be

more diverse in their entry routes, the 'sample' was broadened to encompass a more heterogeneous group of individuals who had entered HE, or were about to enter HE, from a variety of social, educational and professional backgrounds. The participants, therefore, more broadly reflect the diverse student population that characterises much of the HE sector in 21st Century Britain today, where larger numbers of individuals are now entering HE from a variety of so called 'non-traditional' and 'non-standard' backgrounds. All the participants in the 'sample' (numbering nineteen in total), with the exception of one (Joanna, Brightown University) could, in different senses, be classified as 'widening participation' students, where the burgeoning (and now mainstreamed) widening participation landscape that has developed over approximately the past three decades, with the massification of HE (NCIHE, 1997), has enabled many of the participants in this study (like their fellow counterparts), to access university in ways that would not have been available in the past.

As I have previously mentioned, I feel a certain dissatisfaction with the way that the 'binary' terms such as 'traditional', 'non-traditional', 'standard' and 'non-standard' have been used for many years, to categorise and conceptualise student identity and experience. It is therefore appropriate to briefly highlight some examples of how these terms have been used in widening participation literature over recent decades.

1.2.2 Non-traditional and non-standard students

Benn (1995, p.3) uses the term 'non-standard' to describe students or groups who are '...traditionally under-represented in higher education', but also seems to use the term 'non-traditional' interchangeably with this, thus confusing what is meant by the

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terms. Like Benn (1995), other authors such as Mason (1987) and MacDonald and Stratta (1998) have also used both these terms seemingly to describe the same phenomenon. Various other authors have characterised 'non-standard' entrants in different ways. For example, Kearney and Diamond (1990) have used this term to describe students who have taken Access courses, whereas Evans and McCulloch (1989, p.15) allude to 'non-standard' entrants as being those who '...do not possess the normal 2+ A-levels'.

Guest (2000, p.299) provides a useful definition of the 'non-standard' students, suggesting that they:

> ...may be defined as those students entering Higher Education without the requisite number of `A' level points, usually as mature students returning to study after a period in work, or who left the educational system prior to `A' level and are seeking an alternative route to higher study'.

Writing somewhat earlier, Mills and Molloy (1989, p.41) similarly suggest that these students are characterised as '...those who lack the conventional matriculation requirements in terms of GCE passes' These depictions of 'non-standard' students are more helpful, as they just relate to students' entry qualifications, rather than their social or class backgrounds, which could be more related to being 'non-traditional'.

Morey *et al* (2003) have used the category 'non-traditional' as an umbrella term in that they define these students as coming from groups that have been previously under-represented in HE, such as mature students, those from lower socio-economic backgrounds, ethnic minorities and disabled students.

Jones (1992) also comments on those students who have come through by means of flexible entry, described as a 'fourth route' into HE which sit alongside '...academic qualifications, (A levels and equivalent), vocational awards and Access Courses' Jones (1992, p.234). Jones (1992) alludes to flexible entry as a route into HE for adults without traditional entry qualifications. Flexible entry routes were often the means of entry to HE among the participants in the current study, who had mostly accessed and entered HE through a so called 'non-standard' route with little or no formal qualifications.

Scott (1986) uses the terms of 'traditional' and 'non-traditional' with a certain amount of caution. For example, when Scott (1986, p.55) talks about non-traditional students he posits the following argument.

> This non-traditional component, some of which may be highly traditional, is now a large and growing minority – part-time students, mature students, students on non-degree courses, students without standard A- levels. So the ground is changing under our feet...Higher Education is already much less traditional than many people think.

Scott (1986) also asks who are the 'traditional' students and questions the traditional nature of full-time students, young adults, A-level students and 'standard entry' students. Scott (1986) concludes that '...many part-time students, many mature students and many without A-levels are nevertheless fairly traditional students' (Scott, 1986, p.56). Scott's (1986) querying of such categories prefigures the concerns of this thesis, which essentially argues that categorising HE participants as 'non-traditional' or 'non-standard' is not necessarily useful, whereby the binary 'terms' do not fully capture the experiences of university entrants.

The writings of the playwright, Brian Friel about the cultural effects of changing local Gaelic place names into English for the purposes of colonial cartography, suggest a useful way of understanding the importance of describing a landscape in an appropriate way.

> "And it can happen – to use an image you'll understand – it can happen that a civilisation can be imprisoned in a linguistic contour which no longer matches the landscape of ... fact." (Friel, 1981, p.52).

Using Friel's (1981) analogy in the context of the HE landscape of the twenty-first century, it would appear that the 'old', 'traditional' and 'binary' terms, such as 'non-standard' and 'non-traditional' are now not so relevant in describing the complexities associated with experiences and identities of HE entrants. Thus, the argument of this thesis points towards a more nuanced analysis of the 'classed' biographies of these students in relation to their understandings of the value of HE and, indeed widening participation in today's HE environment. The analysis of the participants' biographies in Chapters Four, Five and Six of this thesis (in relation to class, work and education), help to explain the shift in the class-educational landscape and why, drawing upon Friel's (1981) words, there is a need to re-consider the way in which students are described. The aim therefore is not to produce a new set of rigid categories to replace the old but to be sensitive to the myriad biographies and desires that are sometimes concealed by terms such as 'non-traditional'.

1.2.3 Rethinking student 'categories'

The theoretical framework (and argument) in this thesis (described in greater detail in section 1.4.1) therefore steps away from these binary conceptions of 'non-traditional' and 'non-standard' and, instead, adopts a biographical and 'classed' analysis of the participants experiences and identities in compulsory schooling, FE, work and HE contexts. As such, this thesis uses tripartite, biographical, classed-based categories (which will be explained in section 1.4.1) in order to depict the complex aspirations and trajectories of these 'widening participation' students. These categories only make sense in the context that they (the participants) are returning to HE and are about widening participation and biography. As such, it is intended that this thesis will provide a more accurate understanding of the experiences, identities and journeys of the participants towards gaining the 'piece of paper'.

Initially, I drew mainly upon ideas of hybridity in order to describe the participants' experiences and identities in this thesis; however I realised that the use of hybridity did not quite capture the varied accounts of students' experiences. In this thesis I decided, in part, to draw upon ideas about social class liminality, which provide better understandings of the social and biographical significance of HE and widening participation. HE in some senses can be viewed as a liminal space, in that the journey towards gaining the 'piece of paper' is both a transition (Rampton, 1997) and a transformation (Turnbull, 1990) where "thisness" becomes "thatness"' (Turnbull, 1990, p.80).

1.3 Research Questions

As explained, the research described in this thesis shifted away from vocational routes *per se*, towards a wider interest in pathways, motivation and biography. Some of the 'sample' in this thesis fit (in broad terms) the idea of vocational routes and backgrounds and all were concerned with credentials or qualifications (the 'piece of paper'), as a way into the labour market. However, the questions outlined here are a more accurate description of the focus of the research as it developed. These research questions were constructed in order to attempt to capture the participants' experiences and identities in their life course journeys toward HE and their biographical understandings of their HE participation and the proposed credential value of their HE qualification.

- What accounts did the differently 'classed' 'widening participation' interviewees give of their reasons and motives for pursuing level four qualifications in HE?

- How did the participants' family, education and work histories influence their 'classed' understandings of HE qualifications as 'credentials'?

The following discussion (sections 1.4.1 to 1.4.5) describes in detail the argument of this thesis, explaining the three biographical categories of 'widening participation' students in HE.

1.4.1 The argument of the thesis

The focus or argument of this thesis centres on a biographical analysis of 'widening participation' students, in relation to how the participants' educational, professional and family biographies informed their understandings of the value of level four credentials - the 'piece of paper'. A majority of the participants (thirteen out of nineteen) were not 'the kind of people' that Access and widening participation was supposedly designed for: those from working-class and ethnic minority backgrounds (Woodrow, 1988; Bourgeois *et al*, 1999). However, this thesis suggests the importance of Access and widening participation on the interviewees in their journeys towards and through HE. This thesis explains why, although they at first glance appear to be (and, to an extent, are) more secure and middle class, they still experience (because of their classed biographies) insecurity, instability and a lack of credentials. However, they possess a **desire** to gain the 'piece of paper' or symbolic capital in order to feel more secure, as today HE can be viewed as part of the middle-class armoury. Wolf (2002, p.198) supports this assertion noting that 'Middle-class families now perceive degrees as a necessity for their children…'

So, in order to understand the decisions made by these 'widening participation' students to return to education to work towards the HE qualification (the 'piece of paper'), we have to understand their "classed" biographies. With this in mind, my analysis and argument suggests that there are three biographical categories which help to explain the aspirations and trajectories of these 'widening participation' students and that each of these three biographical 'types', shapes the participants' understandings of the value of the 'piece of paper' (their HE qualification). The three biographical/widening participation sub-categories (which, for the purposes of this

thesis are called the **securers**, **enrichers** and **builders**) describe the way in which people from different class fractions understand and negotiate HE, and indeed the value that they place on the 'piece of paper'.

The definitions of these three 'different' categories of the diverse contemporary widening participation student population were developed, using a grounded approach (talked about in more detail in Chapter Three), after an initial detailed examination of the interview transcripts and a three stage biographical analysis which investigated the participants' early experiences of compulsory schooling, FE and work, pre-HE experiences of FE and work (including turning points and HE choices) and HE itself.

1.4.2 Securers

The securers define themselves as coming from middle-class backgrounds (in what might be considered a traditional sense) in that they possess cultural capital (associated with formal education), in that they had a history of education and professional experience in their family. Therefore they desire the symbolic capital of HE (the 'piece of paper') as some kind of proof. The securers are also anxious about downward social mobility and 'getting left behind' their counterparts who already possess the 'piece of paper'. So why have the securers entered HE?

They understand educational degree level qualifications (level 4) as an objectification of their cultural capital. The 'piece of paper' is symbolic capital: as evidence or 'proof' of being educated, qualified and respectable. Carly (Newtown) and Julie (Westside) for example, arguably come from ostensibly middle-class backgrounds, but through

negative or unremarkable experiences in compulsory schooling and FE contexts, chose not to continue with their education (although this was not an active rejection of HE). However, at later stages in the life-course, they are returning to HE in order to 'secure' (by the gaining of symbolic capital) their middle-class identities.

The 'piece of paper', in some senses, validates their claims to being, or remaining middle-class, because in today's society having a degree has become a standard part of the middle-class armoury. The 'piece of paper' is also a perceived defence (subjectively or objectively) against downward mobility. They also desire the ''piece of paper'' to give them increased options upon entry to different fields of professional employment, training and indeed further study. In essence, these participants are 'securing' their 'middle-classness', by moving towards HE and gaining the ''piece of paper''. A brief summary of the securers is located in figure 1 (located on page 20 of this thesis).

1.4.3 Enrichers

The enrichers in this thesis define themselves as having grown up in working-class contexts where earning was very much prioritised in favour of learning. For example, Robert and Simon (both Brightown) upon leaving compulsory schooling went straight into manual employment. Through a variety of experience in different employment fields (such as catering and manufacturing) they have become professionally successful. Robert and Simon, along with the remaining enrichers now, by dint of their successful careers, see themselves as middle-class in that they possess significant amounts of economic capital. Robert (Brightown) for example (in his

biography), highlights his financial stability, gained from the successes in his professional life.

The enrichers also desire the symbolic capital (the 'piece of paper'), but also the cultural capital that participation in HE brings. They are (unlike the securers) anxious about their lack of cultural capital (associated with formal education), and are concerned with maintaining their economic capital/security upon moving to new or different professional fields. The enrichers (not unlike the securers) are also concerned about downward social mobility.

So, why have the enrichers entered (or why are they about to enter) HE? In some senses, they are not unlike the securers in this thesis in that they also require the symbolic capital (the 'piece of paper') in order to maintain their class status (defence against downward mobility). However, they differ from the securers in that they require the cultural capital (associated with HE) in a sense that they desire to be seen as educated and also as a formal recognition of their previous and current professional successes. They also desire the 'piece of paper' to continue in similar professional employment circles. In essence they are 'enriching' their classed status, in order to benefit from the increased benefits of HE credentials (the 'piece of paper'). As with the securers a brief summary is provided in figure 1 (located on page 20 of this thesis).

1.4.4 Builders

The builders in this thesis define themselves (upon entry to HE) as coming from working-class backgrounds. For example Fraser and Tina (both Brightown) have

grown up in working-class contexts and have entered HE (after achieving highly on their respective pre-HE programmes (BTEC National Diploma and 'A' levels. They are in 'old language', the more archetypal students that widening participation was supposed to be for. They desire not only the symbolic capital (the 'piece of paper'), but also the economic capital, with regard to their future prosperity. The builders are also concerned about being left behind, but unlike the other groups, are also concerned with being condemned to the ranks of the 'poor' or the pejoratively termed, underclass of society.

The builders entered (or were about to enter) HE because they required the symbolic capital (the 'piece of paper') in order to gain a foothold in the labour market regarding entry into professional types of employment (such as teaching). This will, in turn hopefully increase their levels of economic capital (in relation to earnings). They also desire the cultural capital with regard to being seen as educated. So HE for them is crucial in economic and cultural terms. With respect to their starting points (the turning point at which they realised they had to enter HE), they potentially have much more to gain than the other groups, but also are potentially at most risk from not participating in HE. So, they are builders in the sense that they are (through their participation in HE and gaining the 'piece of paper' and then in their future professional lives) building upon their capital (in its various forms) up from initially 'low' levels. In this sense, they are unlike the securers and the enrichers in this thesis in that they already possess to a greater extent, differing forms of capital. Like the securers and enrichers, a brief summary of the builders is provided in figure 1 (located on page 20 of this thesis).

1.4.5 Symbol chasers

With these descriptions of the **securers, enrichers** and **builders** in mind, this thesis therefore suggests that all the participants are essentially **'symbol chasers'** in the world of widening participation and HE in the sense that all they desire the symbolic capital (the 'piece of paper'). They have, for the most part, entered HE through widening participation routes, and they all want to avoid the slippery slope of downward social mobility (Beck, 1992; Ainley and Allen, 2010). In this sense what binds the participants in this thesis together is what they do NOT want to be. It is not so much about wanting to become more, or more solidly middle class, but wanting some security and protection (in the form of additional options in relation to entry and in most of the cases, re-entry into the job market) against the fear of downward mobility. As such, the 'piece of paper' was variously located in the participants interview accounts as a way of achieving this (albeit perceived) security and protection. The distinctive, differentiated ways in which the three sub-categories of students understand the value of the 'piece of paper', should be understood in this context of class/ identity instability.

Bourdieu (as will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Two of this thesis), in an attempt to counter claims that his theories of social reproduction in education were deterministic, defined habitus as a kind of practice generating grammar (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990; cf. Swartz, 1997). What Bourdieu was suggesting therefore was that one's classed background shaped a range of different actions or behaviours, or "sentences". In this thesis I am not, of course**,** suggesting that just because someone is middle-class means that their perceptions, behaviour and understandings, in relation to HE are all the same; *however* that there are tendencies

towards certain dispositions in the way that they see, experience and understand HE and indeed widening participation. These tendencies are the different understandings of the 'piece of paper', which are drawn out of the interview transcripts. As such, I can speak confidently, but not deterministically, about their classed locations, because of the biographical analysis of the interview data. The three stage biographical analysis used in this thesis tells us something about their starting points with regard to HE and how, drawing upon their educational and working lives, they came to realise the importance or value of qualifications (the 'piece of paper').

The three biographical/widening participation categories described in this thesis (securers, enrichers and builders), as has been suggested, shape different understandings of the value of the 'piece of paper', but also of widening participation. The reconfiguration of social class and HE and the rhetoric of widening participation and credentialism makes it possible for all of the participants in these different sub-categories to see HE as a place 'for the likes of me', as opposed to not 'for the likes of me (us)' (Reay *et al*, 2001: 2005, Archer, 2003a, Marks *et al*, 2003; Archer, 2007). They see HE in this way as all the participants, from the various sub-categories, distinguish themselves as not being like the 'other', in other words they are different to the underclass or poor workers or, on the other hand, those who already have degrees and high levels of capital. In short, widening participation means that they are all able to go to HE, *but* their reading of credentials, class and work, means that they feel that they *have* to go. In this sense individually they have internalised the rhetoric of widening participation (DoE, 1981: 1984; DES, 1987; CBI, 1989; Fryer, 1997; NCIHE, 1997; DfEE, 1998). The table on page 20 of this thesis (Figure 1)

highlights a brief summary of the three new biographical classed-based sub-categories, which are the core of the argument in this thesis.

Figure 1: The argument of this thesis: The three 'class-based', biographical categories of HE participants

Category of 'symbol chaser'	How they see themselves	Concerns and Anxieties	What they want (The value of) HE	Biographical Examples
Securers	Traditional' middle-class and possess 'embodied' cultural capital	Lack of symbolic capital (the 'piece of paper')	Entry into new careers/further training and qualifications	Lindsay and Carly
Enrichers	Middle –class by dint of their economic success, but do not possess the 'embodied' cultural capital due to growing up in working-class contexts	Lack of symbolic capital (the 'piece of paper')	To maintain their economic security (from their earlier professional careers) upon moves to allied careers/jobs. Also see HE qualification as a kind of formal recognition for their past experience.	Gill and Robert
Builders	Working-class, but aspire to achieve highly despite their relative disadvantage in relation to their lack of economic and cultural capital	Lack of symbolic capital (the 'piece of paper') and about possibly being left behind, condemned to ranks of 'poor' or the 'underclass'	To move into new jobs/careers in professional fields, either directly or through further training and qualifications. They stand to gain the most by participating in HE, but conversely are at most risk from non-participation.	Claire and Fraser

To place the argument of this thesis within a larger context, it is perhaps appropriate to refer to Bauman's concept of a liquid society to describe today's society and how it differs from the more solid, stable and more predictable industrial worlds during the mid-twentieth century. In a conversation with Peter Beilharz, he suggests the following:

> At the moment, I am inclined to describe our kind of social condition as "light," and better still "liquid," or "liquefied" modernity – as distinct from "heavy," and better still "hard" and "solid" modernity of yore: ours is not the "constructed," administered and managed, but a diffuse, all-permeating, all-penetrating, all-saturating kind of modernity...We are, as before, making our ways through a maze, but our labyrinth is not cut in rock or moulded of concrete, but cast out of electronically conducted information (Bauman, cited in Beilharz, 2001, p.339).

Bauman's words are useful in helping to describe the social worlds that these participants are engaged with, where they are negotiating, and moving across the grey, misty and foggy landscape of widening participation. Despite their engagement with HE, and ultimately gaining the 'piece of paper', the participants' situations are liquid, in that their future worlds in a post-industrial society are characterised by uncertainty and unpredictability.

Widening Participation, with its roots in Access provision in the 1970's, was traditionally focused on getting people into education, and then HE, from working-class and ethnic minority backgrounds. However in today's post-industrial worlds the majority are in competition with each other for more specialist forms of employment, hence the drive for increased credentials. The following discussion (section 1.5)

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describes the macro context of this thesis and depicts the shift in the landscape from the industrial worlds of the 1950's, 1960's, 1970's and indeed the early 1980's, to today's post-industrial worlds, which are characterised by more uncertainty and instability (in Bauman's terms more liquid) in relation to employment.

1.5 Macro Context of the argument in this thesis

A variety of commentators (Brown and Scase, 1991; Riseborough, 1993; Ainley, 1994; Aronowitz and DiFazio, 1994; Bauman, 2000; Brown and Lauder, 2001; Avis, 2007) have talked about the shifting class structures, following *macro socio-economic shifts* in the 1970's which were brought about by the move from a largely evaporating industrial world, to a post-industrial, knowledge based society. This post-industrial shift was characterised by a number of factors. Brown and Scase (1991, p.6) comment on how the post-industrial society led to changing patterns in work and employment:

> Over the last century there have been significant quantitative and qualitative changes in work and employment. In particular we have witnessed the decline in primary sector employment such as agriculture, construction and mining and secondary sector employment in manufacturing, but a sizable increase in the proportion of people working in the service sector (distribution, catering, banking, business services etc)...As a result of these changes there has been a substantial shift from skilled and semi-skilled manual jobs to non-manual employment.

The move to '...a 'schooled-up' and 'tools-down' society' (Riseborough, 1993, p.34) signalled the move to a post-industrial world more geared towards '...technical, professional and managerial employment...' (Brown and Scase, 1991, p.6). However, post-industrialism resulted not only in the changes in the nature of the work, but also in the patterns of employment. Aronowitz and DiFazio (1994) depict this shift where the abandonment of industrial worlds and the technological dawn resulted in the move from safe, skilled, full-time work (sometimes referred to as jobs for life), to more fluid work patterns such as part-time work, fixed or short-term contracts and re-engineering. Aronowitz and DiFazio (1994, p.15) suggest that:

> …knowledge rather than traditional skill is the main productive force. The revolution has widened the gap between intellectual, technical and manual labor, between a relatively small number of jobs that, owing to technological complexity, require more knowledge and a much larger number that require less; as the mass of jobs are "deskilled", there is a resultant redefinition of occupational categories that reflects the changes in the nature of jobs. As these transformations sweep the world, older conceptions of class, gender and ethnicity are called into question.

Bauman's (2000) use of the liquid metaphor to capture modernity, is a useful tool to understand the macro socio-economic shifts in society, where the relatively stable and solid industrial worlds of the post-war period encompassing the 1940's, 1950's, 1960's and 1970's gave way to the more fluid, or indeed liquid society which has typified recent decades. As Bauman (2000, p.147) neatly suggests:

> The situation has changed now, and the crucial ingredient of the multi-sided change is the new 'short-term' mentality which came to replace the 'long-term'

one. Marriages 'till death us do part' are decidedly out of fashion and have become a rarity: no more do the partners expect to stay long in each other's company…the pace and frequency of change are almost certain to go on growing before the working life of the present generation is over. 'Flexibility' is the slogan of the day, and when applied to the labour market it augurs an end to the 'job as we know it', announcing instead the advent of work on short-term contracts, rolling contracts or no contracts, positions with no in-built security, but with the 'until further notice' clause. Working life is saturated with uncertainty.

In effect these shifts described by Aronowitz and DiFazio (1994) and Bauman (2000) witnessed '…the emerging proletarianization of work at every level below top management and a relatively few scientific and technical occupations' (Aronowitz and DiFazio, 1994, p.16), otherwise conceptualised by Ainley (1994) as the proletarianization of the middle-classes.

Ainley (1994) and Ainley and Allen (2010) draw attention to the importance of educational credentials (characterised in this thesis as the 'piece of paper') as a kind of perceived (or real) protection against downward mobility (Beck, 1992; Ainley and Allen, 2010) and a route into employment. Ainley (1994, p.23) suggests the importance of educational credentials '…in achieving or sustaining cultural distinctions in the absence of clear-cut divisions between the formerly manual working-class and the traditionally non-manual middle-class'.

The rise of educational credentials appears to be the main reason, in that the participants in this research study (despite their different 'classed' biographies) have come to realise the importance of gaining the 'piece of paper', in order to remain

competitive and in some senses to avoid downward mobility (Beck, 1992; Ainley and Allen, 2010). The rise in the importance of educational credentials coupled with the rise of post-industrialism where new, higher skill jobs were being created (Ainley and Allen, 2010), has created an uncertainty in society, where the meteoric rises in social mobility in the post war decades of the 1950's and 1960's, referred to by Ainley and Allen (2010), were evaporated by a relative lack of mobility in the remaining decades of the twentieth century and indeed the beginning of the twenty-first century. As Ainley and Allen (2010, p.80) suggest:

> The fact that young people need to gain more and more qualifications simply to maintain their place in the occupational order is a reflection of this insecurity, where the aim is to avoid downward mobility into a new 'underclass' of temporary employment on minimal pay as much as it is to aspire to move upwards. Though still aspiring to join the professional/ managerial elite at the top of the occupational structure, most people remain trapped in the working-middle of society.

So, although, as Ainley and Allen (2010) argue there is limited scope for significant upward mobility, it is clear that the value of HE for the participants in this study (and indeed a large majority of university students) lies in the protection that it provides against downward mobility. As Ainley (1994, p.23) neatly suggests:

> The lack of any certification is a virtual condemnation to the dependency of the 'underclass' and exclusion from the new, respectable working-middle of society.

Whilst Ainley and Allen (2010) are not incorrect to focus upon the potential lost generation, concerning the importance of young people gaining qualifications, it is evident, through the rises in mature entrants to HE over the previous decades (including those represented in this thesis) that certification is also of significance to older students too. Mature HE entrants may for example have previously worked in industrial contexts, or in roles which are now less common, and therefore recognise the importance in re-training (getting the 'piece of paper') in order to gain the necessary higher skills (Ainley and Allen, 2010) to remain competitive in the job market and thus provide themselves with a certain degree of protection against downward mobility. Whilst couched in more reserved terms than Hanley's (2011) assertion of the degree being a proper leg up in society, Ainley and Allen's (2010) assessment of the importance and value of the 'degree' (or the 'piece of paper') in today's society cannot be underestimated and it is against this economic and cultural backdrop that the participants in this research study are negotiating HE.

So although all the participants occupy this cultural-economic space, they are arguably located differently within it. So they are similar, but different in nuance, in relation to their classed starting points and how their varied locations shape and differentiate their educational desires, in other words the value of the 'piece of paper' for them. This thesis therefore identifies the unlikely commonalities between (for example) the ex-army officer (Joe) and the young single mother (Leanne), BUT also differentiates them.

The following five sections of this chapter (1.6, 1.7 and 1.8, 1.9 and 1.10), provide a brief introduction to the range of key concepts employed in this thesis. A more in-

depth examination of widening participation, credentialism, social mobility and Bourdieuian influences on education, will be provided in Chapter Two.

1.6 Liminality in HE

The concept of liminality is a useful way of understanding the transformative nature of HE in this thesis. The idea of liminality is drawn upon in this thesis to understand HE participation (of the interviewees in this research study) as liminal in relation to being both a transitional phase (Rampton, 1997) and as Turnbull (1990) suggests a transformational space. Referring to the anthropological origins of liminality in tribal societies, Rampton (1997, p.5) discusses the three-fold nature of transition.

> These rites have three phases: separation, in which initiands leave their childhood life behind; transition; and then incorporation, in which they are returned to new, relatively stable and well-defined positions in society, now a stage further on in life's cycle.

In this sense of this thesis, the transitional space that Rampton (1997) refers to, can be thought of as HE itself, where the participants all enter HE as part of a process of transition and come out of HE with the 'piece of paper' and the opportunity to enter (or return to) professional types of employment (or as Rampton implies, well defined positions in society). Rampton (1997) is therefore describing the transitional process in a very straightforward way. However, Turnbull (1990) suggests that liminality should be seen not necessarily as a mode of transition, but also as a process of transformation, in that it is '...not that the initiate moves from one stage to another,

but rather that he becomes something else' (Turnbull, 1990, p.80). Turnbull (1990, p.78-9) implies the importance of looking at the liminal state in this way:

> "Transition" may be an accurate description of what takes place from a purely objective, material, rational point of view, and it may well describe what takes place at certain stages of such rites, but that does not mean that it in any way describes the overall process as it is experienced by the individuals concerned. Their experience is one of transformation.

Turnbull (1990, p.80) suggests a more encompassing definition of liminality, which implies '...a subjective experience of the external world in which "thisness" becomes "thatness". In relation to this thesis, it is important to recognise that the participants' trajectories from school, college and work to HE, at different stages of the life-course, can be thought of with regard to time and space (making the transition from one location to another, but also in relation to a transformation, where HE (in the sense of gaining the 'piece of paper'), is a mode of transformation into for example, new 'classed' locations, new careers and also, a transformation into being 'educated'. In this sense, HE participation can be seen for these participants as occupying a liminal space, as Turnbull (1990) implies 'liminality itself is...the process of transformation at work'.

It is also worth noting briefly other writings on liminality and its connection with social class. Simon Reynolds, a noted music journalist, in his writings on the relationship between class and music, with particular reference to the post-punk era, coined the term liminal class which, as he suggests, is characterised by a '...socially indeterminate area where upper working class bleeds into lower middle class (Reynolds, 2006, p.xviii). In some senses, Reynolds (2006) is talking in terms that

are not dissimilar to those referred to (previously in this chapter), by Ainley (1994). In describing the relationship between class and the post-punk music period in an interview with Wilson Neate, Reynolds differentiates the liminal class from the working class

> I think punk rock itself was not so much of a working-class movement as everyone has made out. I always go on about this *liminal class* in Britain, this lower-middle class/upper-working class zone. That area is where a lot of music energy comes from (Author's italics) (Reynolds, cited in Neate, 2006).

Ball *et al's* (2010) notion of an intermediate, liminal class (in a study of working-class childcare) problematises the fluidity and fuzzy nature of the middle and working-classes. Ball *et al* (2010, p.2) comment upon this intermediate class as being '...difficult to talk about sociologically and introduces an awkward fuzziness into the middle/working class binary...' The fuzziness and the betwixt- and-between nature of the intermediate class implies that they are difficult to locate (Ball *et al*, 2010) within a society where there is a 'demand for strict classifications, groups with strict frontiers, clearly defined as regards their name'. Bourdieu (1984, p.344). Ball *et al's* (2010) idea of an intermediate class represents, in some senses, what Byrne (2005) calls the missing middle in sociological research. The participants in this thesis who were characterised as enrichers (Chapter Five) were in some senses similar to those in Ball *et al's* (2010) study in that they saw themselves as middle-class, by dint of their professional success and levels of economic capital, but their working-class backgrounds meant that they lacked the cultural capital (which was present in the securers who were brought up in middle-class contexts) afforded by formal education.

1.7 Social Class and HE

So why does class matter? Roberts (2011) highlights its importance as a unifying concept, despite the area of focus.

> …class positions have consequences in all parts of people's lives. Class analysis reveals links between the economic, the political, the social and the cultural (Roberts, 2011, p.3)

The focus on social class in this thesis is important as it highlights both the similar and different ways in which class impacts upon individual biographies; in other words their journeys towards HE and gaining the 'piece of paper'.

Class analysis through much of the twentieth and indeed the beginning of the twenty-first century has been measured quantitatively using both the Registrar-General's social class system and then the NS-SEC scheme, a version derived from the analysis of Goldthorpe *et al* (1987) which has been used to analyse HE class participation since 2001. In this system participants are allocated to particular social classes from information provided by their parents' occupations (Roberts, 2010). Whilst this method of classification has been used to analyse HE participation it has been argued by Waller *et al* (2010) that this crude method of 'occupational' classification may not always be helpful in measuring social class, particularly of HE students and that it may not accurately reflect the 'lived lives' of their participants.

However as Crompton (1996) and Roberts (2011) draw attention to, there are diverse but complementary approaches to class analysis. Alongside the analysis of class structure (such as the NS-SEC classification), there exists those who seek to understand the phenomena through the lens of '…class consciousness and related

behaviour…' (Roberts, 2011, p.11). Contemporary writers in the field of educational sociology (such as Reay, 1998; Ball, 2003; Skeggs, 2004) have proposed subtle analyses continuing to address the importance of class. As Ball (2003, p.17) comments:

> …while there is certainly overwhelming evidence of global economic changes which have both made class more permeable in some settings and reordered class structures, class remains a key factor in the explanation of inequality and conflict.

These contemporary writers on class (drawing upon Bourdieu) focus on class processes and practices, in what Reay (2006, p.289) calls the '…everyday workings of social class'. Reay (2006) highlights how such cultural analyses have helped to uncover what Ball (2003) calls the normality of the middle-classes and conversely, what Reay (2004) and Skeggs (2004) term the pathologisation of the working-classes.

Crompton and Scott (2005) together with Devine and Savage (2005) have drawn upon the cultural turn in sociological research and thus, the importance of culture in class analysis. Drawing upon Bourdieu's approach to understanding the relationship between economic and cultural capital, Crompton and Scott (2005) discuss an approach to class which considers both cultural and economic factors as being central to analysing and understanding class. Ray and Sayer (1999, p.5, cited in Crompton and Scott, 2005, p.192) suggest that culture is concerned with '…practices and relationships to which meanings, symbols or representations are central: in short "signifying practices"'. Conversely, they propose that '…economic activities and processes involve a primarily instrumental orientation; they are ultimately a means to

an end, satisfying external goals to do with provisioning' (Ray and Sayer, 1999, p.6, cited in Crompton and Scott, 2005, p.192).

Crompton and Scott (2005, p.192) describe the importance of understanding both these in contemporary class analysis:

> In respect of social class…, a dual systems perspective would draw a distinction between, on the one hand, the 'objective' outcomes of class processes, such as material differences in income and wealth and the social relations associated with these, and, on the other hand, the 'subjective' and culturally mediated experiences of class relations. From this point of view, what is required is a *combination* of cultural and economic analysis in order to grasp the totality of 'social class' (author's italics).

The contemporary analyses (Reay, 1998; Ball, 2003; Skeggs, 2004) discussed previously reflect these 'subjective' class processes and practices, whilst analysing the more instrumental 'objective' activities, such as choosing schools and getting into HE. This thesis is in the same mould in that it draws together and describes the 'objective' and instrumental activities (i.e. getting the 'piece of paper'), but also talks with respect to the 'subjective' and cultural experiences, the classed behaviours and practices, which envelop the biographies of the 'widening participation' students in this study.

Despite the development of these more subtle analyses of class, Reay (2006) highlights a paradox in how class is viewed in real everyday life and in rhetoric and government policy. As Reay (2006, p.290) notes:

Within such analyses class is seen as everywhere and nowhere, denied yet continually enacted, infusing the minutae of everyday interactions while the privileged, for the most part, continue to deny or ignore its relevance to lived experience. However, to date, these new understandings of class as everyday processes and practice have had little impact on educational policy and practice.

This denial is at the centre of Reay's (2006, p.289) assertion:

…that until we address social class as a central issue within education then social class will remain the troublesome un-dead of the English education system. I am not conjuring up here some shadowy ghost haunting our classrooms but a potential monster that grows in proportion to its neglect.

The biographies described in this thesis of the securers and enrichers in particular, highlight Ball's (2003) idea of the permeability of class in certain settings, in that middle-class and working-class categorisations are not rigid. Like other cultural analyses (Reay, 1998, Ball, 2003; Skeggs, 2004) this thesis focuses on '…the everyday workings of social class' (Reay, 2006, p.289), in that (drawing upon Bourdieu) it illuminates the practices, actions and behaviour in the participants' biographical journeys towards HE, and gaining the 'piece of paper'. This thesis also recognises the continuing existence of class in the importance placed upon gaining the 'piece of paper' (in relation to social mobility). The idea of HE, and the 'piece of paper' as being a route towards upward social mobility, but also as a protection against the fear of downward slippage, were central to the lives of the participants and lie in their motivations for returning to education, and indeed HE.

The participants in this research study were variously located in different classes through examination of their rich biographical interview data. Upon analysis, it became clear, through their biographical 'stories' (their practices, actions and behaviour) and their family histories and backgrounds, how they could be located both in their early lives and their lives at the time of interview. For example the enrichers were located as such because of their transition from typically working-class backgrounds at a young age, to, more recently, successful, middle-class careerists. The three categories proposed in this thesis (securers, enrichers and builders), stem from these backgrounds and make sense in relation to their biographies and their journeys towards gaining the 'piece of paper'.

Skeggs (2004, p.5) argues the importance of moving away from fixed representations of class, suggesting that class analysis should:

> ...aim to capture the ambiguity produced through struggle and fuzzy boundaries, rather than to fix it in place in order to measure and know it.

Whilst this thesis is not about class analysis per se, the ideas captured by Skeggs (2004) are drawn upon, in that understanding the 'classed' biographies of the participants implies that representations of working-class (and indeed middle-class) students are not fixed and that (through a variety of different factors) as such it captures the fragility and instability of the biographical journeys towards gaining the 'piece of paper'.

1.8 Widening Participation

Widening participation has, over the past thirty years or so, become one of the most important issues facing the UK's university sector and various authors have charted the progress of widening participation in HE, with regard to government influence and policy development (see for example, Ainley, 1994: 1999; Davies *et al*, 1997; Reay *et al*, 2002; Lewis, 2002; Bowl, 2001: 2003; Greenbank, 2006). The rhetoric of widening participation invokes notions both of promoting social justice and of increasing economic competitiveness, sometimes in ways that are in tension with each other. In relation to promoting social justice in society, widening participation has sought to encourage and promote HE participation among those groups in society that are traditionally under-represented in HE. As HEFCE (2007, p.8, cited in Nelson and Wilkinson, 2010, p.117-118) have commented:

> ...resources should be targeted at learners with the potential to benefit from higher education who come from under-represented communities. Overwhelmingly these learners are from lower socio-economic groups (groups 4-8 in the National Statistics Socio-Economic Classification, NS-SEC), and those from disadvantaged backgrounds who live in areas of relative deprivation where participation in HE is low.

This thesis is firmly located within the context of a 'widening participation' HE sector, where despite not reaching the 50% target proposed under New Labour, the Higher Education Initial Participation rate in 2010/11 for 17-30 year olds provisionally stood at 47% (DBIS, 2012). Indeed, this thesis suggests that widening participation has been 'mainstreamed' across HE, in that it serves as a vehicle for many different people to enter HE, not just those whom it was initially supposed for (entrants from

working-class and ethnic minority backgrounds). A more detailed analysis and commentary on the history and more recent context of widening participation is contained in Chapter Two.

1.9 Credentialism

The inexorable trend towards pre-career qualifications (Dore, 1976) throughout the early decades of the twentieth century drove the idea of credential inflation where '...academic attainment in the formal education system *has* become more definitely important in determining career destinations...' (Dore, 1976, p.22, authors italics). Dore (1976) implies the move towards mass credentialism was due to the rise in the importance of knowledge and information, fuelled by the move from industrial to post-industrial worlds. The author asserts that:

> We live, runs this explanation, in the age of the knowledge explosion. The range of information and ideas to be mastered by any profession increases at an exponential rate. It is only natural that every profession requires individuals of greater educational maturity than used to be the case, and a longer period of purely professional preparation before starting a career (Dore, 1976, p.24).

Along with Dore (1976), Collins (1979) has also been a prominent figure in defining and analysing the phenomenon of credentialism. Drawing upon the link between credentials and the professions, credentials or entry requirements, are essentially a tool to control the supply of entrants to a profession. As Collins (1979, p.132-3) argues:

not all occupations can become professions in the strong sense of the term. What we have instead is a continuum...or rather several continua of characteristics conducive to a self-regulating occupational community...A strong profession requires a real technical skill that produces demonstrable results and can be taught. Only thus can the skill be monopolised by controlling who will be trained. The skill must be difficult enough to require training and reliable enough to produce results…

What Dore (1976) and Collins (1979) were essentially highlighting (in the macro context of new post-industrial worlds) was the increasing importance of credentials in relation to the ever changing demands of employment. The move from industrial to post-industrial worlds, (as highlighted in section 1.5) changed the employment landscape forever, in that jobs became more technical, highly specialised and demanded greater knowledge and skills. A result of this was the rise in credentialism. In its first guise, widening participation and Access provision were emphasised within the frame of social justice, in that it sought to encourage those from 'under-represented' communities (working-class and ethnic minority backgrounds) back into education. However, widening participation today is increasingly promoted, rationalised and valued much more in relation to providing opportunities to gain access to the job market and as a means of up-skilling the workforce.

In relation to entry to employment, Brown and Lauder (1992) also emphasise the growing importance of the qualification as an exchangeable commodity in the labour market, sometimes conceptualised nowadays as the exchange value of HE (Archer, 2003a: 2006a; Warmington, 2003), where '...the certificate has been seen by a large

number of students and their parents to be more important than what is taught or learnt' (Brown and Lauder, 1992, p.19). The idea of up-skilling the workforce (with regard to knowledge, understanding and skills) was a crucial plank in New Labour's economic and education strategy upon arriving into power in 1997. The Dearing Report (NCIHE, 1997) highlighted the centrepiece of the economic rationale behind widening participation which stressed the growing importance of the relationship between HE and the economy (Fryer, 1997; NCIHE, 1997; DfEE, 1998; DfES, 2003). The Dearing Report (NCIHE, 1997, para. 8) highlights the importance of this relationship in up-skilling the workforce.

> The new economic order will place an increasing premium on knowledge which, in turn, makes national economies more dependent on higher education's development of people with high level skills, knowledge and understanding, and on its contribution to research.

A more in-depth discussion surrounding credentialism and its inherent links with widening participation is covered in Chapter Two of this thesis (see section 2.5). A brief introduction of the importance of Bourdieuian sociology is investigated in the following section of this thesis.

1.10 Bourdieuian sociology

As has already been mentioned (sections 1.4.1 to 1.4.4) the argument of this thesis focuses on the three biographical/widening participation categories which explain the participants trajectories and aspirations, along with shaping their understandings of the value of HE credentials (the 'piece of paper'). In order to achieve this, we have to

understand their 'classed' biographies. Therefore we may draw upon Pierre Bourdieu as a way of understanding these classed biographies regarding the possession (or indeed lack of possession) of capital.

Bourdieu defines capital in its various forms as properties of the social space being investigated (in the case of this research study, the world of HE). As Bourdieu (1985, p.724) asserts:

> ...Capital..., represents a power over the field (at a given moment)…The kinds of capital, like the aces in a game of cards, are powers that define the chances of profit in a given field...The position of a given agent within the social space can thus be defined by the positions he occupies in the different fields, that is, in the distribution of the powers that are active within each of them. These are, principally, economic capital (in its different kinds), cultural capital and social capital, as well as symbolic capital…

It is evident that the possession of various forms of capital provides advantages to the holder (the aces in a game of cards), or, in the case of this thesis the participant in HE. It is therefore appropriate to briefly discuss the various forms of capital. **Economic capital** is (in its most simplistic terms) the financial resources that any one individual has available to them and as Bourdieu (1986, p.47) writes it is '…convertible into money and may be institutionalized in the form of property rights…'. In relocating '…the narrow instance of mercantile exchange away from economics into a wider anthropology of cultural exchanges and valuations of which the economic is only one (though the most fundamental) type' (Moore, 2008, p.102), the concepts of cultural, symbolic and social capital were developed.

Cultural capital in individuals denotes the cultural habits and dispositions (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1979) which manifest themselves in the form of what Weininger and Lareau (2007) call competencies, such as skills, knowledge and also 'taste'. Bourdieu (1986) asserts that cultural capital exists in three forms. Firstly he suggests cultural capital exists in the embodied state which is '…in the form of long-lasting dispositions of the mind and body (Bourdieu, 1986, p.47), which are inseparable from their bearer or the holder (Weininger and Lareau, 2007). Secondly, cultural capital exists in an objectified state, in the shape of physical, cultural goods such as pictures, books and instruments (Bourdieu, 1986). Thirdly, it exists in an institutionalized (and objectifiable) form such as the giving of educational qualifications. It is this form of objectified cultural capital that is also understood as **symbolic capital**, which refers to the honour, reputation and prestige (Bourdieu, 1990) that is implied when gaining credentials. Cultural and Symbolic capital are both important in the sense of this thesis, in that all the participants are 'symbol chasers', in that they desire the symbolic capital of HE (the 'piece of paper'), but have differing levels of cultural capital (depending on their classed backgrounds, detailed in their biographies).

The fourth form of capital that Bourdieu speaks about is **social capital**, which is gained, in a basic sense through social networks or groups. Bourdieu (1986, p.51) asserts that it is:

> …the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition – or in other words, to membership in a group.

Importantly, Bourdieuian thinking asserts the inter-connectability between the different forms of capital and '...in addition...envisages a process in which one form of capital can be transferred into another. For example economic capital can be converted into cultural capital by buying an elite education...' (Reay *et al*, 2005, p.21). Although all the types of capital (in their own right) are important, this thesis focuses more explicitly on cultural and symbolic capital, and to a certain extent, economic capital, as they are relevant in describing the participants' 'classed' biographies, their trajectories and their understandings of the value and importance of the 'piece of paper'

Bourdieu's ideas of capital and habitus (which will be further discussed in Chapter Two) have been drawn upon for example by a range of contemporary authors in the field of widening participation (Ball and Vincent, 1998; Ball *et al*, 2002; Reay *et al*, 2005, 2009, 2010; Bowl, 2001: 2003; Crozier *et al*, 2008). His contribution to more contemporary writings on widening participation is so influential due to his rethinking of class distinctions, identity and education. Since the late 1970's and early 1980's, many of the widening participation policies (DoE, 1981:1984; DES, 1987; CBI, 1989; DfEE, 1996: 1998; Fryer, 1997; NCIHE, 1997) and rhetoric were aimed at those under-represented groups in education (i.e. those from working-class and ethnic minority backgrounds) and providing them with opportunities to get back into, or continue with their education. With particular respect to working-class groups, Lucey and Reay (2000) highlight that their lives are interesting and that much needs to be known about them and as such in '…almost every field of social science research, it is overwhelmingly the working classes who have been the object of that classifying gaze' (Lucey and Reay, 2000, p.139). It is Bourdieu's sociological accounts of class

and education (which draw upon the range of concepts from capital to habitus), which are so relevant for researchers to use, develop and draw upon in contemporary writings on widening participation.

Bourdieu's sociology is discussed at greater length in Chapter Two, which focuses (in part) on two of his most important concepts (and particularly within the context of this thesis) cultural capital and habitus. The discussion will also examine his impact upon education and how (in more recent, contemporary education and sociological accounts) his seminal works have been used. In the discussion, critiques of Bourdieu will also be outlined, and these critiques, in some senses, influence my choice of how (in this thesis) I draw upon Bourdieuian sociology (understanding habitus as a form of practice generating grammar) in an attempt to better understand the experiences, practices and behaviour of the participants on their journeys towards gaining the 'piece of paper'.

1.11 The research settings

So what of the 'widening participation' context of the current study? This section briefly signposts the methodology of this research study (discussed in more detail in Chapter Three), upon which this thesis is predicated. The research study was conducted across five different institutions, (four universities and one FE college) and semi-structured, biographical interviews were carried out with nineteen participants across these research sites. The 'institutional biographies' and subsequent 'widening participation' data on these universities (which are located in Chapter Three), provide some background context to the study, whereby the

'classed' based experiences and identities of the participants (analysed in Chapters Four, Five, and Six), can be more easily understood.

1.12 Structure of this thesis

Chapter Two comprises a broad review of the literature which informs the areas that are drawn upon in this thesis (Widening Participation, Credentialism, Social Mobility and Bourdieuian Sociology). Whilst it clearly is not an exhaustive review, the analysis provides an appropriate depiction of past and more contemporary research in these fields. An analysis of publicly available, widening participation data (see sections 2.7.1 and 2.7.2) provides context to the research study, concerning the diversity of applicants, pre-HE pathways and indeed institutions in twenty-first century HE.

Chapter Three talks about the methodology (the philosophical approach behind this thesis) and the rationale behind choosing various approaches, such as biographies and semi-structured interviews. This section also gives a broad overview of a range of different concerns surrounding fieldwork in qualitative research, such as ethics, informed consent and access. The remainder of the chapter focuses specifically on the research process in that it provides a detailed (almost step-by-step account) of what I actually did. This section also describes the change in focus of my research, in that the participants did not necessarily match the types of HE entrants that I had intended to recruit in the first place.

Chapter Four is the first of the three, central data chapters in this thesis and investigates (through analysis of their interview data) the biographical journeys towards gaining the 'piece of paper', of the securers. The analysis is predicated upon

the participants chronological accounts, in that it seeks to understand their biographical journeys at a number of different stages, these being early experiences of compulsory schooling, FE and work, turning points (the time in the life-course where the participant's realised the importance and value of HE and gaining the 'piece of paper'), pre-HE experiences regarding preparation and choice and experiences of HE itself.

Chapter Five is the second of the three data analysis chapters and like Chapter Four, investigates the biographical journeys towards gaining the 'piece of paper', but this time of the enrichers. The analysis of the enrichers' biographies in Chapter Five follows the same chronological pattern used in the analysis of the securers in Chapter Four.

Chapter Six is the final data analysis chapter in this thesis and investigates the biographical journeys of the builders. Biographical analysis of the builders' interview transcripts followed the same chronological format as Chapters Four and Five. Chapter Six also highlights the notion of the young builders in contrast to the builders in that they were entering HE as part of a more traditional trajectory, where they had gone straight from compulsory schooling, onto pre-HE programmes and then straight to HE at the age of eighteen. The three young builders were different to the builders (and the majority of the securers and enrichers in this thesis) in that they were not mature students and therefore did not reach turning points in the same way, where they realised, later in the life-course, the importance of the 'piece of paper'.

Chapter Seven completes this thesis and in conclusion, revisits the arguments posed by this study that were introduced in Chapter One. The essence of the argument in this thesis is emphasized (i.e. the use of the tripartite, biographical,

classed-based categories) to more clearly understand the nuances of the participants' journeys towards HE and, as such, gaining the 'piece of paper'. Chapter Seven also, albeit briefly, reiterates the influence and importance of Bourdieu in this thesis. Drawing upon current government policy (DBIS, 2011) and various commentaries (Avis, 2011; Thompson and Bekhradnia, 2011; Universities UK, 2011; Streeting, 2012; Wilkins *et al*, 2012) the chapter then moves on to discuss the context today, in that the UK HE sector is currently in a period of uncertainty and instability with the introduction of higher tuition fees (which come into effect in Autumn 2012). Finally, the chapter investigates (based on the findings and issues raised in this thesis) possible future avenues for research into widening participation.

CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

2.1 Introduction

The following chapter provides a discussion which is framed around a historical and contemporary overview of the literature surrounding the broad fields of widening participation and student experience. The overview includes a chronological analysis of widening participation, charting the progressive nature of HE expansion from the beginning of the 1960s up until the present day. The importance of credentialism and social mobility within the context of an expanded HE sector and widening participation are also discussed. Finally, the literature surrounding student experience is highlighted and is framed and influenced by the work of the eminent sociologist Pierre Bourdieu. This wide ranging literature review provides a suitable balance of context, in the sense of the historical and contemporary analyses of widening participation and theoretical arguments, such as the sociological debates introduced by Bourdieu, which have influenced the research study upon which this thesis is predicated.

2.2 Widening participation: From Robbins to New Labour

In 1962, prior to the publication of the Robbins Report, approximately 4% of young people entered HE in the UK (Robbins, 1963). Some fifty years later, data for 2010/11 showed participation at approximately 47%, moving towards the New Labour government's vision of 50% participation in HE by the year 2010. (DBIS, 2012). The Robbins Report of 1963, which was wholly supported by the then Conservative government, suggested that HE should be expanded to allow a greater

number of young people with 'A' level qualifications to benefit from a university education. As Lowe (2002, p.83) suggests:

> The demands of the economy for a more highly trained labour force were to be met through the "Robbins principle", that any 18-year-old who was qualified to enter higher education and wished to do so should be given the opportunity.

To achieve this Robbins (1963) highlighted some primary objectives in that HE would provide the skills that would be transferable to employment and that HE should (through its teaching) promote powers of the mind. It was also recommended that HE should stand for the 'advancement of learning' and the 'transmission of a common culture and common standards of citizenship' (Robbins, 1963, para 27 & 28). As Ainley (1994) suggests, the Robbins report did not propose a right to post-compulsory education for all, such as we know today. However, it did tentatively incorporate some of the principles that were subsequently apparent in widening participation policies over the next forty years, up to the present day. Examples of this would include the notion that participation in HE would promote social inclusion, as well as responding to the changing demographics and people's aspirations, therefore broadening the middle-classes and those seeking so called 'white collar' occupations. Finally it provided a vehicle to align the HE sector with the changing post war economy of the country.

Under the succeeding Labour government (1964-1970), the binary system was introduced which attempted to break down the unitary system. This policy was seen as '…a sledgehammer blow' which was '…aimed at the Robbins conception of a unitary system of higher education' (Simon, 1991, p.247). Anthony Crosland, the

then Secretary of State rejected '…our snobbish caste-ridden hierarchical obsession with university status' (Crosland, 1982, p.159, cited in Ross, 2003b, p.47).

The binary system essentially aimed to break down the conception of the system of HE (cf. Robbins, 1963). The government accepted that there must be 'a system' of HE (Simon, 1991, p.247), but that the system must recognise the two different kinds. Crosland (1965, cited in Simon, 1991, p.247), the then Secretary of State for Education suggested that:

> On the one hand we have what has come to be called the autonomous sector represented by the universities, in whose ranks, of course, I now include the colleges of advanced technology. On the other hand we have the public sector, represented by the leading technical colleges and the colleges of education.

The need for the binary system is pointed to in the following statement:

> There is an ever-increasing need and demand for vocational, professional and industrially-based courses in higher education – at full-time degree level, at full-time just below degree level, at part-time advanced level and so on. This demand cannot be fully met by the universities. It must be fully met if we are to progress as a nation in the modern technological world. In our view it therefore requires a separate sector, with a separate tradition and outlook… (Richmond, 1978, p.126-7, cited in Batho, 1989, p.58).

Therefore the unitary system of HE was split up to accommodate these two different types of provision. This system was to stay in place until the early 1990's. Pratt (1999) drew upon the value of the binary policy which helped to increase

participation and effectively grow and adapt HE into the diversified sector (with regard to the different academic and vocational provision and the different modes of study that are available) we know today in the twenty-first century.

Concerns arose that the HE sector was failing to support the expansion of the post war economy as pointed to by Robbins and that it should contribute more effectively to up-skilling the labour force. To achieve this, HE also had to diversify its student body. All these concerns became explicit components of forthcoming widening participation policies from the late 1970s (DoE, 1981; 1984; DES, 1987; CBI, 1989).

The 1970's saw an emerging consensus about the role of HE in changing society and particularly its role with the economic fortunes of the country. (Simon, 1991). The cornerstone of the 'great debate' on education was laid by Callaghan (1976, cited in Callaghan, 1995, p.202) at his Ruskin College speech in 1976:

> The goals of our education, from nursery school through to adult education, are clear enough. They are to equip children to the best of their ability, for a lively, constructive place in society and also to fit them to do a job of work. Not one or the other, but both ...The balance was wrong in the past...There is no virtue in producing socially well-adjusted members of society who are unemployed because they do not have the skills. Nor at the other extreme must they be technically efficient robots. Both of the basic purposes of education require the same essential tools. These are basic literacy, basic numeracy, the understanding of how to live and work together; respect for others; respect for the individual.

Simon (1991, p.451) states that 'the main issue was to achieve higher standards all round due to the complexity of the world we live in', in that it was crucial that standards were seen to be raised as the economic need of the country demanded a more skilled and knowledgeable workforce. Callaghan in his speech also emphasised the importance of utilising financial resources with the best possible effect. He stated that 'There is a challenge to us all these days and a challenge in education is to examine its priorities and to secure as high as efficiency as possible by the skilful use of the £6 billion of existing resources' (Callaghan, 1976, cited in Callaghan, 1995, p.203). Chitty (2004, p.44-5) comments:

> Essentially, it marked the end of the period of educational expansion which had been largely promoted by the Labour Party…That period was clearly over; there had to be a public re-definition of educational objectives, involving the more skilful use of limited resources.

Chitty (2004, p.45) moves on to conclude:

> ...above all, the speech can be viewed as a clear attempt to construct a new educational consensus around a more direct subordination of education to what were perceived to be the needs of the economy.

These ideas began to forge a new relationship between HE provision and the requirements of the economy.

The binary system in the UK emerged in 1965, where the more vocationally oriented polytechnics were treated as a separate sector from the universities who were more reluctant to respond to social and economic change (Pratt, 1999). However, the 1992 Further and Higher Education Act brought a complete reversal in government

policy. HE once more became a unitary system, where the sectors converged and the polytechnics and other institutions were now allowed to call themselves universities and have their own degree awarding powers (Chitty, 2004). In essence the polytechnics had become universities. However Pratt, (1999, p.261) suggested that this was not necessarily the case.

> In the historical context, the unification of higher education in 1992 could be seen as, simply the most spectacular example of academic drift in British history; the polytechnics finally succumbed to the long standing status hierarchy and became universities. But history is not as simple as that. Indeed, it was less that the polytechnics became universities than that the universities had become polytechnics.

Pratt (1999) asserts that the unification of HE enabled the mass system that is in evidence today, where a large number of universities are now offering vocationally oriented provision, which more closely match the needs of the economy and society. 1992 therefore, represented a sea change in HE policy. Chitty (2004, p.166) writes about the impact, stating that 'In 1992 a Further and Higher Education Act ensured that funding for all HE courses was unified and that all institutions of HE would in future compete for funding for teaching and research'. This was a dramatic u-turn in policy from the government ending the binary policy which had been evident in Britain since 1965 (Pratt, 1999). The polytechnics had many achievements. Pratt (1999, p.259) states that 'by the late 1980's, it was widely accepted that the polytechnics had made a major contribution to expansion of HE and maintained a distinctive tradition'. Polytechnics promoted the principles of widening participation in that they expanded access to new kinds of students. Franklin (2006) for example

noted this stark difference, in that the 'old' elite universities were still recruiting, in the main, students from white, middle-class backgrounds, whereas the new universities (and the polytechnics before 1992) were attracting under-represented (and previously excluded) groups, such as mature students and those from working-class and ethnic minority backgrounds into HE. The period between 1965 and 1992 saw the polytechnic sector (in respect of the number of students) grow fivefold, whereas the universities only grew at half this rate (Pratt, 1999). The polytechnics also essentially introduced new types of vocational courses (Pratt, 1999), which as Scott (1981, cited in Pratt, 1999, p.260) suggested, expanded '…our idea of the scope of higher education'. Essentially it was the polytechnics that helped to create the massification and vocationalisation of HE that we see today.

While, upon its election in 1997, the Labour Party portrayed itself as a break with the preceding Conservative government, it built upon many of the Conservative policies on widening participation and lifelong learning. New Labour (as it was termed by its party leaders) continued to promote ideologically founded claims about the interdependence of HE and economic growth. However, New Labour made much greater play of the importance of social justice and equality of opportunity within widening participation initiatives. This was '...one of the devices used to differentiate the party from the "elitist" Conservatives who are seen as trying to perpetuate privilege' (Hale, 2006, p.94). Three reports were influential in demonstrating this vision, one pre New Labour which was entitled Lifetime Learning (DfEE, 1996), along with the Fryer Report (Fryer, 1997) and the Learning Age (DfEE, 1998). These three reports were fairly seamless in portraying the new consensus in education. In claiming '… "education, education, education!" as its priorities for government' (Tight,

1998, p.473), New Labour spelled out its commitment to addressing the needs of the education system. In promoting widening participation the government suggests that equality of opportunity will be delivered along with the enhancement of the nation's economic status (Hale, 2006).

The Dearing Report (NCIHE, 1997) focused on the role that HE plays within the learning society previously commented upon by Hughes and Tight (1995). Dearing suggested that:

> The purpose of education is life-enhancing: it contributes to the whole quality of life. This recognition of the purpose of higher education in the development of our people, our society, and our economy is central to our vision. In the next century, the economically successful nations will be those which become learning societies: where all are committed, through effective education and training, to lifelong learning. (NCIHE, 1997, 1.1).

Watson and Taylor (1998, p.51) suggest that Dearing's 'vision encompasses an explicit attempt to preserve, but also to update the Robbins legacy'. Dearing inherited the principles essentially espoused by Robbins and adapted them for today's dynamic society and economy.

The Fryer Report in 1997 advised the government on the importance of lifelong learning. The advisory group concluded that:

> This country needs to develop a new learning culture of lifelong learning for all. It is essential to help the country and all of its people meet the challenges they now face, as they move towards the twenty-first century… (Fryer, 1997, p.3, cited in Tight, 1998, p.477).

The incoming Labour government issued its response in the form of a paper entitled 'The Learning Age'. The paper suggests that 'We must bridge the "learning divide" – between those who have benefited from education and training and those who have not – which blights so many communities and widens income inequality (DfEE, 1998, p.7, cited in Tight, 1998, p.481). The idea that there was an inherent link between HE and the economy had become a cross-party orthodoxy by the close of the 20th Century. In summary, HE had been vocationalised.

2.3 'Alternative' pathways to HE: Vocational and Access routes

The 1980s saw a series of British government policy documents which intended to explain and redefine the nature of the relationship between the FE and HE sectors and the economy (Ainley, 1994). These documents included the Department of Education's (DoE, 1981) *A New Training Initiative* consultation paper, the 1984 white paper (DoE, 1984), *Training for Jobs*, the Confederation of British Industry's (CBI, 1989) report titled *Towards a Skills Revolution* and the Department of Education and Science's (DES, 1987) *Higher Education: Meeting the Challenge* White Paper. In addition to this, 1986 saw the development of the National Council for Vocational Qualifications (NCVQ) framework which acted as an umbrella which all vocational qualifications should come under. All these documents had a common theme running through them which was the need for a general up-skilling of the workforce and to achieve this it was recognised that access to FE and HE had to be broadened. This would involve targeting entrants from 'non-traditional' backgrounds, who had in the past not traditionally accessed HE, as well as targeting students from

vocational, or 'non-standard' pathways and not just from the traditional A- Level route (Warmington, 2000).

The development of vocational routes in the FE sector was also viewed by government as a means of widening participation in HE and making skills development an explicit function of university level education. The White Paper suggests that 'The development of the Technical and Vocational Education Initiative (TVEI) and the two-year Youth Training Scheme (YTS), and the streamlining associated with the National Council for Vocational Qualifications (NCVQ) and the Scottish Action Plan, should increase the proportion of young people gaining vocational qualifications and is likely to motivate more of them to seek entry to higher education' (DES, 1987, p.6-7). It is clear in the paper that the government is adhering to the principles laid out by Robbins and Callaghan. The paper states that '...it will be necessary both to adjust the balance of provision to match the needs of the economy and to accommodate students with a wider range of academic and practical experience than before, many of whom will not have traditional qualifications for entry' (DES, 1987, p.9). As well as increasing diversity, the paper also stresses the impact of increasing the number of students. It suggests that:

> '...increased participation in higher education need not be at the expense of academic excellence; indeed the stimulus of change should help to sharpen the awareness of the different types of achievement that properly form part of the output of higher education' (DES, 1987, p.9).

The rise in provision of vocational routes both in schools and the FE sector precipitated a similar expansion in the HE arena. The 1987 White Paper (DES, 1987, p.10) suggested that:

...positive steps must now be taken to increase the number of higher education entrants with vocational qualifications, for example those of BTEC. This route will be best for some of those who might not in the past have entered higher education, but it should not be seen as exclusively for them.

The Access 'movement' (although Access courses are more diverse than that term implies) came into being in the late 1970's, to, as Wagner (1989, p.33) states, 'offer mature students a non-traditional route into higher education'. Leathwood and Hutchings (2003, p.145) have also alluded to the Access route as a viable alternative for the mature student. They suggest that 'Access courses, offered mainly in FE Colleges, were specifically designed for mature students without standard qualifications...' and that 'they have had a great deal of influence in widening participation in HE for mature students'. The government of the day suggested that Access courses were designed:

to bring up to the standard required for entry to courses of professional training and to higher education generally, potential students whose experience could be valuable in such careers but who lack the entry qualifications and have additional special needs which cannot be met by existing educational provision (DES, 1978, cited in Woodrow, 1988, p.317).

The Government White Paper entitled Meeting the Challenge (DES, 1987) recognised the importance of Access provision as the 'third route' into HE, along with the more established academic 'A' levels and vocational qualifications suggesting like Leathwood and Hutchings (2003) that they were essentially designed for '…mainly mature entrants who hold neither traditional sixth form nor vocational qualifications' (DES, 1987, p.10). Brennan (1989) points towards Access courses as

an expression of social engineering to university admissions. Access courses were revolutionary in the way they targeted under-represented groups in HE and presenting HE as a way to improve their educational, social and economic profile. In championing the notion of parity of esteem, Brennan (1989) moves on to argue that the Access course was also prominent in helping refute the notion that the only people able to benefit from HE were those that had studied on the gold standard A Level programmes. In helping to define, and characterise the success of Access, the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS, 2002, p.17), suggest that:

> The Access qualification has established itself as a main entry route into higher education. The initial aim of the Access movement to make higher education accessible to those who, through traditional means, were not gaining entry, has succeeded...Access is for those who constantly find themselves dealt with less favourably than others and the distinctive characteristics of Access applicants, compared to other applicants, confirms the appropriateness of the qualification...

Woodrow (1988) characterised Access programmes in three different ways depicting their importance as part of the FE and HE landscape. Firstly, Access Courses were generally aimed at under-represented groups in HE, '...such as women, working-class, and minority ethnic groups' (Bourgeois *et al*, 1999, p.52), thus providing a vehicle to tackle equality of opportunity for those wishing to pursue a university education, where other forms of qualification were deemed unsuitable. Like Bourgeois *et al's* (1999) and Brennan's (1989) assertions of Access being a vehicle to tackle under-representation in HE, Woodrow (1988) suggests that they were essentially targeted at the 'non-traditional' category of those who were deemed 'non-

standard' entrants to HE, such as those from ethnic minority or low income groups. Secondly, Access programmes were delivered through a collaborative process between FE and HE which aids the transition for students from college to university. Woodrow (1988), points towards Access programmes providing a satisfactory preparation for HE, in that Access provision was, and is, specifically designed for entry to particular types of university level courses, for example nursing and teaching related programmes. Finally, Woodrow (1988) depicts a third characteristic of Access programmes that they offered participants a clear progression and preparation for the demands of HE. This notion has been drawn upon by Warmington (2002), for example, who points towards Access as a vocational type preparation for HE.

Despite these positive depictions of Access, the so called 'third' route has had its critics. For example, Leathwood and Hutchings (2003, p.145), have criticised the qualifications suggesting that they '...have been 'colonized' by the middle classes'. Webb (1997, p.76) has also criticised Access provision in that working-class and ethnic minority groups have not been sufficiently represented.

> ...Access courses have not done enough to change the profile of higher education because it is women, in the main, who are benefitting from the legitimation of these new routes, and they are white and middle class...

Whilst one of the main purposes of Access provision was to increase participation amongst under-represented groups in HE, such as those from working-class backgrounds, to claim it provided only for 'under-represented' working-class and ethnic minority students (such as the builders in this thesis) would be an oversimplification. The mainstreaming of widening participation (through a variety of

guises including Access provision) has also served those from middle-class backgrounds (such as the securers), for whom a more traditional education was not suitable or even possible (Woodrow, 1988; UCAS, 2002). They should therefore, not be solely regarded as for those from other under-represented groups in HE, such as those from working-class, low income and ethnic minority groups, pointed to earlier by Bourgeois *et al* (1999) and Woodrow (1988). McFadden (1995) draws upon the notion of Access as a 'second chance' and his study highlights conflicting depictions of Access type courses in the UK and Australia. McFadden (1995) depicts the hopes, fears and experiences of students which highlight the complex identities that students' possess and that it is not always a rosy picture for all participants on 'Access' or 'Access type' programmes, and that it presents a challenge to some to re-engage with education in the sense of having a second chance.

2.4 Implications of the massification of FE and HE

Despite the much vaunted merits, the expansion or 'massification' of HE has generated anxieties in certain quarters of the HE sector. Morgan *et al* (2004 p.354) suggested that:

> 'The expansion of higher education (HE) during the 1980s and 1990s with government aspirations of a 50% participation rate (by students under the age of 30 by the year 2010) in HE has raised a number of concerns, amongst others, about the potential undermining of HE values, its relationships with society and its role in economic prosperity…'

With this in mind, Mayhew *et al* (2004, p.68) have argued that there '…appears to have been far greater stress on the economic purposes of HE and far less on the advancement of knowledge and on the transmission of learning for its own sake' prompting instrumentalist and vocationalist official attitudes towards HE (Mayhew *et al*, 2004). An off-hand comment in 2003 by the then Education Secretary Charles Clarke was held by some to typify this instrumentalist, economistic model:

> '…Education for its own sake is a bit dodgy' (Charles Clarke, Education Secretary, cited in Ingram, 2003, p.32).

Post-Compulsory Education and HE have undergone a period of sustained growth for approximately 50 years. Ever since the Robbins Report (Robbins, 1963) talked about HE being a crucial vehicle to drive the economic need of the country, educational provision has had to be opened up to the masses. The Department for Education and Skills in 2006 reported that 5 million people were in FE in the academic year 2004/5, compared with approximately 2.2 million in 1990/1. HE has increased at approximately the same rate with 2.5 million students in 2004/5 compared with about 1.1 million in 1990/1 (DfES/National Statistics, 2006). This shows a massive increase of over fifty per cent in the student population in both sectors over a relatively short period of fifteen years.

For massification and, ultimately, widening participation to be fully embraced, many more students from non-traditional backgrounds will need to participate in HE. However there are implications for progression. As Smith and Bocock (1999, p.291) put it:

The existence of new pathways through the system enables individuals to construct broader educational profiles than hitherto even if the extent to which there is freedom of movement is as yet unclear. The result will almost certainly be that patterns of progression, as with the motivations and experiences of the learners themselves, become far more complex than the simple, vertical model associated with the traditional A-level route into HE.

The notion of Credential inflation (Collins, 1979; Dore, 1976), drawn upon in Chapter One, is another important implication of the expansion of HE. The notions of credentialism, social mobility and their inherent relationship to widening participation are now discussed in the following sections.

2.5 Credentialism and Widening Participation

The opening up of HE, in a widening participation sense, to previously under-represented groups from society, was cached in the twinned goals of the New Labour government (which came to power in 1997), in that firstly, and arguably of primary importance (Archer, 2003a), HE needed to increasingly meet the needs of the economy and secondly, it should be a driver for social justice. As the Dearing Report (NCIHE, 1997, para. 8) suggests:

Higher education is fundamental to the social, economic and cultural health of the nation. It will contribute not only through the intellectual development of students and by equipping them for work, but also by adding to the world's store of knowledge and understanding, fostering culture for its own sake, and promoting the values that characterize higher education: respect for evidence;

respect for individuals and their views; and the search for truth. Equally, part of its task will be to accept a duty of care for the wellbeing of our democratic civilization, based on respect for the individual and respect by the individual for the conventions and laws which provide the basis of a civilized society.

Reay (2002) has commented upon the expansion of HE which has, in turn, created a culture of mass credentialism where, under the auspices of widening participation, previously under-represented groups such as those from working-class, ethnic minority backgrounds and mature students have been encouraged to enter HE. In this sense, Reay (2002, p.402) suggests that 'education is increasingly positioned as the new panacea for the masses', in that HE in particular, is seen as a route to individual progression with regard to increasing prospects, both in an employment and social sense.

However, the expansion (or massification) of the UK HE sector in recent decades has fuelled the phenomena of credential inflation (Collins, 1979). In this sense, Dillon (2007, p.33) provides an updated analysis of credential inflation where she asserts that:

As more and more students obtain degrees they enter an increasingly competitive labour market where having a higher award becomes the norm.

Calhoun (2006, p.9, cited in Brennan and Naidoo, 2008, p.294) comments further on this notion suggesting that 'expanded access may imply more open and meritocratic distribution of existing credentials, but of course it actually provides an inflation in credentials and a new emphasis on prestige differentiations among apparently

identical credentials'. This analysis is also neatly captured by Brown's (1995, p.38) comments about the 'relativeness' of degrees and their credentialist value:

> Credential inflation is also intensifying the competition for credentials from elite universities because degree-holders stand 'relative' to one another in a hierarchy of academic and social worth. When market crowding occurs, employers become more discerning about the 'status' of credentials. A degree from Oxbridge or an Ivy League University is judged to have greater 'capital' value than one from a little-known university or college in the market for jobs.

Dillon (2007, p.33) has expanded upon this phenomenon and provided an updated analysis, by suggesting that employers are 'stipulating that graduates must have a 2:1 or above degree and from a prestigious university to be able to distinguish between the large numbers of graduates entering the labour market'. As such, Brennan and Naidoo (2008) have commented upon the fact that questions and debates have emerged surrounding inequalities of access to the more elite universities, work that has been a central focus of the educational charity, The Sutton Trust, (see for example, Sutton Trust, 2010). Reay (2005) has drawn upon this problematic paradox between the expansion of HE, and what she calls the 'deepening of social stratification within HE' (Reay, 2005, p.2), which essentially means that HE is not the same for everyone. In this vein, Reay (2005, p.11) provides a potentially worrying insight into elitism and its possible connotations for widening participation.

> Elitism is built into the very fabric of higher education whether elite or mass. Broadening the base of the student body will have little impact. In fact I would argue that very little will change until the ethos and culture of HE radically

alters. Higher Education is not the same experience for all neither is it likely to offer the same rewards for all.

Walkerdine *et al* (2001, cited in Reay, 2005, p.11) provide a powerful analysis which neatly captures the paradox alluded to by Reay (2005), which exists between expansion and increased participation (conceptualised as widening participation) and elitism and social stratification.

> There is a creeping assumption...that if we open up higher education to working class students then we can all become professionals. This is the biggest fiction of all.

Walkerdine's powerful statement above reminds us, that whilst widening participation and the massification and diversification of HE mean that many more people are able to participate in HE, it indicates that the 'piece of paper' is no longer a guarantee to enter the professions. Instead, as suggested before in Chapter One, it provides a sense of perceived protection against downward mobility (Beck, 1992; Ainley and Allen, 2010).

Brennan and Naidoo (2008) capture these inequalities and increasing stratification and differentiation that is evident in a mass system of HE, coupled with mass credentialism (Reay, 2002). In other words as Brennan and Naidoo (2008, p.294) suggest, 'elite sectors remain, new vocational sectors and qualifications are created for the masses; different *classes of higher education* come to serve different social classes' (authors italics).

Credential inflation is perhaps inevitably a consequence of the expanded UK HE sector that we see today. As to when the inexorable rise stops, is open to debate.

The proposed funding changes which were put forward in the Browne Review (Browne, 2010) and adopted in 2011 by the coalition government in the form of the HE White Paper, Students at the heart of the system (DBIS, 2011), came into existence at the beginning of the 2012/3 academic year. The introduction of increased fees may slow down, or even halt the expansion of HE, which in turn may slow down the credential inflation of HE qualifications. Collins (2011, p.235-6) charts the journey of the phenomenon:

> As credential inflation rises (i.e. as it takes more years to produce the educational degree currency usable on the job market), costs of either private investment or public subvention in supporting the production of educational currency rise, to some point at which counterpressure slow down, stop or even reverse the expansion of education.

The funding changes in the UK HE sector, which are driven by the need to make public sector financial cuts and to shift the emphasis of how HE is paid for (Browne, 2010) provoked much societal debate, including major protests and even riots on the streets of Central London in 2010. These changes may stifle the expansion of HE and credential inflation, in that 'individuals can drop out of the contest for credentials, caught between the cost of education and what pay off they can get (or expect to get) on the job market' (Collins, 2011, p.236). Despite the promises that the principles of widening participation and fair access will be maintained, it is arguable that many potential students, many of those from 'widening participation' backgrounds are more likely to be dissuaded from HE, being caught between the increased cost and proposed benefit of HE pointed to previously by Collins (2011). With this in mind, the next few years are clearly going to be 'game-changing' for the

UK HE sector and it remains to be seen what impact these changes will have upon the shape and landscape of HE in future decades.

2.6 Social Justice, Social Mobility and Widening Participation

There has been a tension in policies to widen participation over a long period between questions of social justice and social mobility. They are often conflated and are talked about as if they are one and the same thing. However the concept of social justice involves creating a more generally equal and fairer society. As Rawls (1972, p.7, cited in Gewirtz, 1998, p.472) comments:

> The subject matter of justice is the basic structure of society, or more exactly, the way in which the major social institutions…distribute fundamental rights and duties and determine the distribution of advantages from social co-operation.

Gewirtz (1998) refers to this notion of distributive justice as being synonymous with social justice and asserts equality of outcome as a 'strong' version of social justice, which '…seeks to ensure equal rates of success for different groups in society through direct intervention to prevent disadvantage…' (Gewirtz, 1998, p.472). Friedman and Friedman (1980, p.159) also comment on the idea of equality of outcome where:

> Everyone should have the same level of living or of income, should finish the race at the same time.

The idea of social mobility on the other hand does not refer to a general equalisation as such, but to individual opportunity. As Aldridge (2001, p.2) notes:

> Social mobility describes the movement or opportunities for movement between different social groups, and the advantages that go with this in terms of income, security of employment, opportunities for advancement etc.

As such social mobility is likened to the idea of meritocracy, in that it seeks to promote personal chances to take up opportunities. As Friedman and Friedman (1980, p.163) suggest:

> No arbitrary obstacles should prevent people from achieving those positions for which their talents fit them and which their values lead them to seek. Not birth, nationality, color, religion, sex, nor any other irrelevant characteristic should determine the opportunities that are open to a person – only his abilities.

With these definitions and distinctions in mind, it is clearly possible to have social mobility (which suggests a kind of fairness at an individual level), but at the same time having a very unequal society. In other words, social mobility does not imply a more equal society, but that if there is genuine 'free' social mobility, there are equal chances to become either upwardly or downwardly mobile. This counters one of the contradictions of the discourse of social mobility is that it assumes that mobility is always upwards.

Lister (1998) contrasts equality (social justice) and equality of opportunity in New Labour policy when they came into government in 1997, which effectively saw:

the rejection of the discourse of promoting equality for that of equality of opportunity – with an emphasis on education, training and paid work rather than redistribution of income through the tax-benefit system (Lister, 1998, p.216).

Thus, the Labour government of the time were rejecting the promotion of social justice (equality of outcome) which was deemed '…neither desirable nor feasible, imposing uniformity and stifling human potential…' in favour of promoting meritocratic notions of social justice (equality of opportunity) which were viewed as '…recurrent, lifelong and comprehensive…' (Brown, 1997, cited in Lister, 1998, p.217). Phillips (2004, p.2) also highlights the debate surrounding social mobility and social justice:

> In both academic and popular discourse, the pursuit of outcome equality has been regarded as a politics of envy, an attack on anyone whose aspirations or achievements stray above a supposed norm…Politicians have been particularly down on the politics of envy, and mostly opt for what they see as the less controversial equality of opportunity: of course people should not expect to end up with the same bundle of commodities or same level of happiness, but it is fair enough that they should expect to have the same opportunities to thrive. Equality of opportunity is then set up as the mild-mannered alternative to the craziness of outcome equality.

The discussion in Chapter Seven discusses the discourses of social justice and social mobility by drawing upon recent government policy documents (DBIS, 2011; Milburn, 2012) in relation to current HE policy. However, this chapter continues to examine the link between social mobility and widening participation.

The social commentator Toynbee (2008) has queried the belief in HE as a lever to drive social mobility. She comments upon the industrialised decades of the 1950's and 1960's where individuals were moving from working class backgrounds into the more available white-collar jobs. In the following slice of social life, Toynbee (2008) asserts a pessimistic view on the downward mobility of the working class, in that education and HE in particular, does not, in the main, entail social mobility:

> ...the de-industrialisation of the 1980s brought the catastrophic downward mobility of the skilled working class, their deskilled children destined to earn far less. Meanwhile, the great growth in universities has become an agent to fix children of the big new middle class into their parents' status more securely than before, while only a few more working class children get degrees. In the 1960s bright school-leavers at 16 could work their way up, but now lack of qualifications keeps them in their place as graduates from better backgrounds seize that job instead. Of course nothing is certain, some make it against the odds – just as some win the lottery (Toynbee, 2008, p.2).

Goldthorpe and Jackson (2007) have challenged economists such as Blanden *et al* (2005) suggesting their claims of income mobility are not the same as social mobility. Goldthorpe and Jackson (2007, p.527) assert that such research:

> ...is, quite explicitly, concerned with intergenerational income mobility rather than with mobility in the sense more usually understood by sociologists – and, it seems, by politicians – of movement between social positions as defined within the context of a class structure or a status hierarchy.

Nunn *et al* (2007) and Blanden (2008) have drawn upon the notions of absolute and relative mobility which highlight the different ways that social mobility is measured and conceptualised. Nunn *et al* (2007, p.16) suggest that 'Absolute social mobility usually refers to the proportions of individuals from one social group moving to another'. On the other hand:

> Relative mobility refers to the likelihood of movement between different social classes. Relative mobility is present with or without changes in absolute mobility and might be juxtaposed with it to offer an analysis of the potential for individual mobility between social groups relative to broader social and economic changes affecting those groups (Nunn *et al*, 2007, p.16).

In an earlier study, Blanden *et al* (2005, cited in Blanden, 2008, p.64) suggested that even though '...university participation rates expanded over the 1980's and 1990's, the lion's share of additional opportunities went to those from richer backgrounds. There was absolute mobility as all groups did better, but the gaps in improvement were so pronounced that relative mobility fell'.

Blanden *et al's* (2005a, p.20) assertion '...that the expansion in higher education has benefitted those from richer backgrounds far more than poorer young people', is supported by statistical analysis which shows that:

> Young people from the poorest income groups have increased their graduation rate by just 3 percentage points, between 1981 and the late 1990's compared with a rise in graduation rates of 26 percentage points for those with the richest 20% of parents (Blanden *et al*, 2005a, p.20).

In this sense, Blanden *et al*'s (2005a; 2005b) findings support Halsey's conceptualisation (mentioned in Chapter One) of social mobility as a myth. In agreement with Goldthorpe and Jackson (2007), Gorard (2008) also recognises the limitations of this study (Blanden *et al*, 2005b), where only income mobility is measured, not the social mobility claimed by the authors. Gorard's (2008) critique of Blanden *et al*'s (2005b) research also emphasises, in his opinion, the importance of research quality, in that he highlights a range of statistical anomalies and international comparisons which use different years when examining the cohorts from different countries. Gorard (2008) asserts that the statistical anomalies in Blanden *et al's* (2005b) study provide an inaccurate picture. Gorard's (2008, p.323) analysis leads him to the proposition that actually 'Taken at face value, a key policy message could be that Britain has a quite staggering level of social mobility'.

Gorard's (2008) claims are significant, in that governmental policy surrounding social mobility, particularly in the later years of the last Labour administration, was influenced in part by the findings of Blanden *et al*'s (2005b) study. Gorard's (2008) critique asserts that the actual picture surrounding levels of social mobility is much more optimistic than the one suggested by the research carried out by Blanden *et al* (2005b). Dorling's (2012) analysis supports Gorard's view that social mobility may indeed be improving, in that he reports a breakthrough in the final term of the Labour government in the latter part of the last decade (2005-2009). He comments upon the fact:

> ...that after years of effort children from poorer areas are going in growing numbers to university. Many more university places have been provided in the last few years. For the first time ever recorded, the majority of those additional

places have been taken up by children living in the poorer half of British neighbourhoods. This will probably be seen in future years as the greatest positive social achievement of the 1997-2010 governments...Participation at universities had been widened in such a way that no one lost out and those who had been most badly served in the past saw their chances improved the most (Dorling, 2012, p.147-8).

In this sense, Hanley (2011) denounces the conceptualisation of social mobility as a myth (drawn upon in Chapter One by Halsey for example), suggesting that a degree is a proper leg up. Archer and Hutchings (2000, p.565) also draw upon this notion in the findings of their study which implied that '...the benefits of having a degree were constructed as an almost mythical ticket to social mobility and a good life'. With this in mind, Hanley emphasises the importance of education as a vehicle for promoting social mobility and contemplates the alternative:

> To deny the power of social mobility as an idea suggests that there will always be a working class and that its members should continue to know their place. Simply working to make conditions within the working class better, rather than striving for the transformation of society as a whole so that individuals are not bound by the circumstances of their birth, suggests that people are essentially happy with the status quo (Hanley, 2011, p.34).

Hanley's comments are drawn from personal experience. In her illuminating book, titled *Estates* (Hanley, 2007), she charts her formative years of growing up on a working-class council estate in Birmingham and then going to university. Her sometimes brutal and comical depiction of life is conceptualised as the "wall in the head" of the working-class (Hanley, 2007).

The wall in the head is built up slowly, brick by see-through brick, over the course of a lifetime. Your knowledge of what's out there, beyond the thick glass walls, is entirely reliant on what you can glean from the lives of the people you know, which usually means your own family members. If you family and friends all live on the same estate, that's a little wall built for you right there. If you have links outside it – friends who live in a different area or type of housing, activities that regularly and repeatedly expose you to new experiences – then you've one less wall to knock down (Hanley, 2007, p.149).

Drawing upon the conceptualisation of the "wall in the head", Hanley (2007) implies that some individuals are constrained in that they are unable to draw upon notions of social capital (often outside the wall). Hanley (2007, p.150) in characterising the constraints of these individuals suggest that along with the wall, '…you can add three more walls and a lid and call it a box'

It is apparent from the discussion that social mobility is a contested notion amongst many contemporary writers. This thesis (whilst it does not suggest that social mobility is impossible) talks in terms more of HE being a vehicle to avoid downward mobility (cf. Beck, 1992; Ainley and Allen, 2010), although even this belief is now being questioned today (Bauman, 2012). This thesis also talks about HE as a pathway to improved options upon joining (or indeed re-joining) the employment sector for all the different groups in this study. The following sections (2.7.1 and 2.7.2) provide an updated analysis of widening participation, in the context of the HE sector in the UK in the twenty-first century.

2.7.1 Widening participation in the 21st Century

It is apparent that 'widening participation' has become more 'mainstreamed' within the world of HE, in that the policies emphasised the twin goals of up-skilling the nation (for economic purposes) and social justice (see for example Fryer, 1997; NCIHE, 1997; DfEE, 1998; DfES, 2003). Widening participation was therefore not only aimed at those groups who had been under-represented in HE in the past (working-class and ethnic minority participants), but was aimed at a much larger audience; in that Dearing suggested that everyone with the potential to benefit from HE should be able to (NCIHE, 1997) a view shared by the proposals for HE reform in the more recent Browne Review (Browne, 2010). In this sense, widening participation today has become much more part of the fabric of HE, than was evident in the 1980s.

It is appropriate therefore to provide a brief overview of the shifts in patterns of entry which occurred since the 1990's, which saw the development of key government policies surrounding widening participation (Fryer, 1997; NCIHE, 1997; DfEE, 1998; DfES, 2003). This brief and basic examination will illustrate HE admissions and the student population features of the 'widening participation' landscape that the participants in this study have negotiated. HE, in a sense has become massified in relation to its size and the diversity of its institutions, programmes and student population. As this implies, the expansion of HE has been driven by a number of factors and features. For instance, since the Further and Higher Education Act 1992, the former polytechnics and colleges of HE have gained university status. This expansion has also since the late 1990s been informed by New Labour's policy target of getting fifty per cent of 18-30 year olds to experience HE. Figure 2 (on page

75) highlights this period of mass expansion in HE and, when compared with number of admissions in the early 1960's (which in 1962 saw only 47,900 applicants), suggests that in the early 21st Century HE entry and experiences have become the 'norm' among a substantial section of the UK's population, rather than the exception. Figure 2 shows that rates of acceptance have remained fairly static (between 73.3% and 79.8%). However, between 1997 (the year that Tony Blair's New Labour government came to power with its slogan, 'Education, Education, Education') and 2009, when Labour's period in office drew to a close, entries (or at least acceptances) to HE in the UK rose significantly from 336,338 to 481,854.

Figure 2: Admissions to HE of UK domiciled students 1997-2009

Year	Applicants	Acceptances	% Accepted	% change of applicants on prev yr	% change of acceptances on prev yr
1997	458,781	336,338	73.3%		
1998	446,457	329,788	73.9%	**-2.8%**	**-2.0%**
1999	442,931	334,594	75.5%	**-0.8%**	**1.4%**
2000	442,028	339,747	76.9%	**-0.2%**	**1.5%**
2001	453,833	358,041	78.9%	**2.6%**	**5.1%**
2002	461,365	368,115	79.8%	**1.6%**	**2.7%**
2003	476,467	374,307	78.6%	**3.2%**	**1.7%**
2004	486,028	377,544	77.7%	**2.0%**	**0.9%**
2005	522,155	405,369	77.6%	**6.9%**	**6.9%**
2006	506,304	390,890	77.2%	**-3.1%**	**-3.7%**
2007	534,495	413,430	77.3%	**5.3%**	**5.5%**
2008	588,689	456,627	77.6%	**9.2%**	**9.5%**
2009	639,860	481,854	75.3%	**8.0%**	**5.2%**

Source: UCAS (2010) with further analysis

Whilst the expansion of the sector, regarding its size is clearly evident, the HE sector is also characterised by a greater diversity in respect to the myriad different pathways into HE, the student body itself and the different types of HE Institution (namely the post and pre-1992 universities).

2.7.2 Diversity in 21st Century HE

Throughout this thesis, different types of HE institution are referred to, so it is appropriate to provide a brief comment on how the UK's contemporary HE sector is constructed. The Russell Group is a selective group of twenty pre-1992 research-intensive universities (listed in the abbreviations and terms of this thesis) and is characterised by many of the UK's most prestigious universities, such as Oxford and Cambridge. The remainder of the pre-1992 universities also consist of 'old' universities such as Durham and those universities such as Lancaster and York which came into existence in the middle of the 20th Century. The post-1992, or 'new' universities, which as alluded to previously, were borne out of the Further and Higher Education Act of 1992, are sometimes characterised, rather simplisticly, as teaching-led institutions and include universities such as East London, Manchester Metropolitan and Oxford Brookes. There is further HE provision in the UK education sector evident at FE and HE Institutions.

A relatively recent report (Foster, 2009) investigating the experiences of students who had entered HE through 'alternative' routes, provides a useful illustration of certain features of the diversification of pathways into HE. 'Alternative' routes were

characterised by those who had accessed HE either as a mature student, or with 'Vocational' or 'Access' qualifications, or no qualifications (Foster, 2009).

The data depicted in figure 3 (on page 77 of this thesis) highlights the diverse nature of entry pathways to different types of university. From this analysis it is important to note that more than three quarters of mature/alternative students go to the new HE institutions (which include the post-1992 universities, HE colleges and HE courses in FE colleges). This proportion is even larger amongst 'young' students from alternative routes, (approximately eighty five per cent went to these institutions). These are in stark contrast to the proportions of 'young' students taking 'traditional' routes who have a predominantly 'A' level background (Foster, 2009); among this group under fifty percent of HE entrants in 2006 went to the newer institutions. So, although the 'widening participation' landscape is diverse, it is still stratified in respect of pathways into the pre and post-1992 universities.

Figure 3: Admissions to HE of English domiciled applicants by Entry route and type of HE Institution in 2006

Institution type	Alternative route/Mature Students	% of total Alternative route/Mature Students	Alternative Routes/Young Students	% of total Alternative route/Young Students	Traditional routes/Young students	% of total Traditional route/Young Students	Total students
Post-1992	29,367	55.22%	25,612	57.11%	69,342	37.57%	124,321
Pre-1992	7,842	14.75%	4,961	11.06%	45,307	24.55%	58,110
Russell Group	3,894	7.32%	2,154	4.80%	49,674	26.91%	55,722
Other	12,075	22.71%	12,116	27.02%	20,247	10.97%	44,438
Total	53,178	100.00%	44,843	100.00%	184,570	100.00%	282,591

Source: Ucas (2006, cited in Foster, 2009, P.112) Table c.7
Please note that this data is for English domiciled applicants to HE and does not include students who have previously obtained HE Qualifications
Other Includes Institutions categorised by UCAS as FE Colleges, HE Colleges and Other HEI's

Figure 4, on page 78 of this thesis, was also sourced from Foster's (2009) report on the student experiences of 'alternative' students. Foster's (2009) analysis highlights an intriguing class picture in 2006 (although the figures for the socio-economic

categories are incomplete) in that the number of mature, 'alternative' students that are located in the top two occupational categories (NS-SEC 1 and 2) is under a thousand less than the number from the bottom two occupational categories (NS-SEC 6 and 7). This analysis therefore casts doubt upon the traditional archetype that mature students are from working-class or disadvantaged backgrounds. This suggestion is echoed in the current research where a considerable number of the mature participants entered HE as successful middle- class returners, following rewarding careers.

Figure 4: English domiciled applicants accepted on Undergradaute programmes by entry route, Socio-Economic Group and Age in 2006

Socio-Economic Group NS-SEC	Mature Students / Alternative routes	% of total Mature Students / Alternative routes	Young Students from Alternative routes	% of Total young Students from alternative routes	Young students from Traditional routes	% of Total Young students from Traditional routes	Total students
1. Higher managerial and professional occupations	2,052	3.86%	4,878	10.88%	40,886	22.15%	47,816
2. Lower managerial and professional occupations	6,079	11.43%	9,037	20.15%	50,341	27.27%	65,457
3. Intermediate occupations	4,889	9.19%	3,937	8.78%	21,058	11.41%	29,884
4. Small employers and own account workers	1,208	2.27%	3,071	6.85%	11,468	6.21%	15,747
5. Lower supervisory and technical occupations	703	1.32%	1,906	4.25%	7,349	3.98%	9,958
6. Semi-routine occupations	6,656	12.52%	5,231	11.67%	16,758	9.08%	28,645
7. Routine occupations	2,293	4.31%	2,674	5.96%	7,481	4.05%	12,448
8. Unknown	29,298	55.09%	14,109	31.46%	29,229	15.84%	72,636
Total	53,178	100.00%	44,843	100.00%	184,570	100.00%	282,591

Source: Ucas (2006, cited in Foster, 2009, P.112) Table c.5
Please note that this data is for English domiciled applicants to HE and does not include students who have previously obtained HE Qualifications

So what else can statistics tell us about the diversification of the student body in the mainstreamed 'widening participation' HE landscape?

Figures 5 and 6 on pages 79 and 80, highlight HE participation by social class and age. These analyses illustrate diversification in HE participation in relation to social class and age. For example, in figure 4, based on 2008 data, just under fifty percent of admissions to HE, were from those in the top three socio-economic classifications.

However, as the analysis in figure 5 suggests, the proportion of participants in these top three classifications amongst those aged 25 and over, drops to fewer than thirty per cent. However, it is difficult to infer anything concrete about social class, due to the incompleteness of the figures (in some cases over fifty percent of the total number of participants are unclassified). It also needs to be noted again that students from working-class backgrounds are disproportionately located in post-1992 universities.

Figure 5: Admissions to HE between 2002 and 2008 by Social Class (NS-SEC) of all students

AGE	Socio Economic Group	2002 ACC	2003 ACC	2004 ACC	2005 ACC	2006 ACC	2007 ACC	2008 ACC
All Students	1. Higher managerial and professional occupations	61,419	59,472	59,679	59,670	57,010	60,492	60,708
		18.52%	**17.81%**	**17.85%**	**16.56%**	**16.50%**	**16.59%**	**14.99%**
	2. Lower managerial and professional occupations	83,476	83,113	84,628	87,107	79,777	84,075	88,455
		25.16%	**24.89%**	**25.32%**	**24.18%**	**23.09%**	**23.06%**	**21.84%**
	3. Intermediate occupations	42,112	40,576	40,790	42,222	37,190	39,020	44,071
		12.69%	**12.15%**	**12.20%**	**11.72%**	**10.76%**	**10.70%**	**10.88%**
	4. Small employers and own account workers	20,056	19,992	19,881	20,668	19,771	20,926	22,403
		6.05%	**5.99%**	**5.95%**	**5.74%**	**5.72%**	**5.74%**	**5.53%**
	5. Lower supervisory and technical occupations	12,830	13,457	13,114	13,454	12,258	12,757	13,195
		3.87%	**4.03%**	**3.92%**	**3.73%**	**3.55%**	**3.50%**	**3.26%**
	6. Semi-routine occupations	34,647	35,254	35,516	38,866	34,949	38,081	51,277
		10.44%	**10.56%**	**10.62%**	**10.79%**	**10.11%**	**10.45%**	**12.66%**
	7. Routine occupations	15,855	15,183	15,199	16,062	15,267	16,182	19,520
		4.78%	**4.55%**	**4.55%**	**4.46%**	**4.42%**	**4.44%**	**4.82%**
	8. Not Classified - Unknown	61,330	66,895	65,488	82,195	89,342	93,011	105,395
		18.49%	**20.03%**	**19.59%**	**22.82%**	**25.85%**	**25.51%**	**26.02%**
	Total	**331,725**	**333,942**	**334,295**	**360,244**	**345,564**	**364,544**	**405,024**

Source: UCAS (2009) with further analysis
Key: ACC - Acceptances

Figure 6: Admissions to HE between 2002 and 2008 by Social Class (NS-SEC) of Mature Students over the age of 25

AGE	Socio Economic Group	2002 ACC	2003 ACC	2004 ACC	2005 ACC	2006 ACC	2007 ACC	2008 ACC
25 and over	1. Higher managerial and professional occupations	1,851	2,062	1,898	1,967	1,394	1,368	2,168
		5.42%	5.88%	5.51%	5.34%	3.87%	3.63%	4.59%
	2. Lower managerial and professional occupations	5,870	6,042	6,155	6,582	4,516	4,687	6,290
		17.19%	17.24%	17.86%	17.86%	12.53%	12.44%	13.32%
	3. Intermediate occupations	5,169	5,207	5,039	5,245	3,499	3,612	4,809
		15.14%	14.86%	14.63%	14.23%	9.71%	9.59%	10.19%
	4. Small employers and own account workers	1,108	1,105	972	1,096	740	809	1,360
		3.25%	3.15%	2.82%	2.97%	2.05%	2.15%	2.88%
	5. Lower supervisory and technical occupations	616	568	542	476	340	325	698
		1.80%	1.62%	1.57%	1.29%	0.94%	0.86%	1.48%
	6. Semi-routine occupations	4,714	4,906	5,022	5,412	4,087	4,688	7,006
		13.81%	14.00%	14.58%	14.68%	11.34%	12.45%	14.84%
	7. Routine occupations	1,509	1,371	1,265	1,398	1,057	1,233	1,645
		4.42%	3.91%	3.67%	3.79%	2.93%	3.27%	3.48%
	8. Not Classified - Unknown	13,307	13,779	13,560	14,687	20,417	20,941	23,240
		38.97%	39.32%	39.36%	39.84%	56.64%	55.60%	49.22%
	Total	34,144	35,040	34,453	36,863	36,050	37,663	47,216

Sourse: UCAS (2009) with further analysis
Key: ACC - Acceptances

The statistics on HE admissions also tell us about the diversification of the student body with regard to ethnicity and gender. Figure 7, on page 81 of this thesis, highlights the ethnic diversification of the student body and suggests that whilst there have been increases in the number of students from ethnic minority backgrounds during the period between 2002 and 2010, not all ethnic minority groups have increased their participation in relative terms, in that they have not necessarily increased at a faster rate than the HE sector as a whole. For example, although students from Asian backgrounds have increased by fewer than twenty per cent over the seven year period, the sector as a whole has increased by approximately twenty-two percent. The proportions of participants from Black and Mixed ethnic backgrounds have increased in relative terms; the numbers of participants from these groups have more than doubled over the period between 2002 and 2010, although numbers of Black Caribbean entrants to post-1992 universities are known

to be far higher than those entering old universities (see for example Modood, 1993; Bhattacharyya *et al*, 2003).

Figure 7: Admissions to HE between 2002 and 2010 by Ethnicity

Age	Eth. Group	2002 ACC	2003 ACC	2004 ACC	2005 ACC	2006 ACC	2007 ACC	2008 ACC	2009 ACC	2010 ACC
ALL STUDENTS	Asian	31,140	31,683	31,968	33,548	33,551	34,074	37,286	39,169	40,737
		9.39%	9.49%	9.56%	9.31%	9.71%	9.35%	9.21%	9.21%	9.59%
	Black	10,699	12,372	13,120	16,065	16,808	18,694	23,014	25,244	27,162
		3.23%	3.70%	3.92%	4.46%	4.86%	5.13%	5.68%	5.94%	6.40%
	Mixed	6,155	6,734	7,447	9,264	9,285	10,715	12,139	13,307	14,185
		1.86%	2.02%	2.23%	2.57%	2.69%	2.94%	3.00%	3.13%	3.34%
	Other	2,060	2,201	2,751	3,583	3,541	3,869	3,878	4,056	4,419
		0.62%	0.66%	0.82%	0.99%	1.02%	1.06%	0.96%	0.95%	1.04%
	Unknown	29,008	25,198	21,870	18,666	19,872	19,425	22,664	17,052	6,640
		8.74%	7.55%	6.54%	5.18%	5.75%	5.33%	5.60%	4.01%	1.56%
	White	252,663	255,754	257,139	279,118	262,507	277,767	306,043	326,235	331,491
		76.17%	76.59%	76.92%	77.48%	75.96%	76.20%	75.56%	76.75%	78.07%
Grand Total		331,725	333,942	334,295	360,244	345,564	364,544	405,024	425,063	424,634

Source: UCAS (2012) with further analysis
Key: ACC - Acceptances

The diversification of the student body is also characterised by gender disparities. Figure 8 (page 82 of this thesis) highlights a widening of the gender gap, in that male participation in HE has fallen in percentage terms from approximately forty-eight per cent in 1997 to approximately forty-four percent in 2010 and female participation has increased over this period from approximately fifty-one per cent to almost fifty-six per cent in 2010. Other analysis of the same UCAS data shows that over the period between 1997 and 2010 the proportion of mature (those over the age of 21) women in HE has increased only by approximately two percentage points from approximately eleven percent to approximately thirteen percent. This pattern of

mature female participation in HE also follows the trend which results in the widening gender gap (see figure 8 below).

Figure 8: Admissions to HE between 1997 and 2010 by Gender

Gender	1997 ACC	1998 ACC	1999 ACC	2000 ACC	2001 ACC	2002 ACC	2003 ACC	2004 ACC	2005 ACC	2006 ACC	2007 ACC	2008 ACC	2009 ACC	2010 ACC
Male	146,466	142,798	143,624	145,177	153,137	154,843	154,552	152,459	164,343	156,890	164,510	178,355	189,419	189,079
	48.29%	**47.88%**	**47.39%**	**47.03%**	**47.05%**	**46.68%**	**46.28%**	**45.61%**	**45.62%**	**45.40%**	**45.13%**	**44.04%**	**44.56%**	**44.53%**
Female	156,852	155,422	159,441	163,541	172,335	176,882	179,390	181,836	195,901	188,674	200,034	226,669	235,644	235,555
	51.71%	**52.12%**	**52.61%**	**52.97%**	**52.95%**	**53.32%**	**53.72%**	**54.39%**	**54.38%**	**54.60%**	**54.87%**	**55.96%**	**55.44%**	**55.47%**
All Students	303,318	298,220	303,065	308,718	325,472	331,725	333,942	334,295	360,244	345,564	364,544	405,024	425,063	424,634

Source: UCAS (2012) with further analysis
Key:
ACC - Acceptances

Using reports (UCAS, 2002: 2003) on Access participation and conducting further analysis, it is evident that 'Access' courses have a role in providing a number of mature women with a suitable pathway to HE. Further analysis of the data (UCAS, 2003) suggests that approximately twenty-four per cent of mature female acceptances to HE in 2002 were from 'Access' courses, compared with approximately four per cent of all acceptances. The popularity of 'Access' is replicated in the research sample, in that all of the mature female participants in the study (nine out of the nineteen participants) had entered, or were intending to enter HE from 'Access' or 'Access type' pathways. All of the statistical data that are presented in this chapter highlight, in very general terms, that the 'widening participation' UK HE sector, is larger and more diverse than say three decades ago, but is still stratified. The various analyses contained in this chapter and later in Chapter Three are, in some cases, drawn from different time periods, in that different sources were used (UCAS and HESA) and that the way data was collected and reported changed. For example the social class data (figures 5 and 6) on pages 79 and 80 were analysed using the old NS-SEC classification. From 2009, the

backgrounds of applicants were classified according to their geographical location. The statistical data shown in this chapter provide some basic context in which to place the participants' biographies, which are explored in Chapters Four, Five and Six.

The discussion now provides a more detailed discussion on the seminal work of Pierre Bourdieu, one of the major sociological thinkers in Education in the past century and examines some of his key concepts in helping to understand and therefore conceptualise experience and identity. Following this, the remainder of the chapter discusses the influences that Bourdieu's sociological analyses have had upon more contemporary educationalists involved in research into allied areas such as 'widening participation' and 'student experience'.

2.8.1 The sociology of Pierre Bourdieu

The remainder of this chapter focuses on the sociology of Pierre Bourdieu and encompasses an explanation of his key concepts of *cultural capital* and *habitus* (which are most important within the context of this thesis) and their relationship to HE. The discussion also engages with critiques of Bourdieu, in that his theories are too deterministic. Bourdieu's response to his critics was to understand habitus as a form of practice generating grammar (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990), which suggests that there are different "sentences" in classed behaviour. This thesis draws upon this concept to understand the slightly different ways in which the participants negotiate their classed, biographical journeys towards gaining the 'piece of paper'.

Finally, the discussion concludes with an examination of the more contemporary widening participation literature (Bowl, 2001: 2003; Reay, 2001, 2003a, 2003b; Reay *et al*, 2001, 2002, 2005, 2009, 2010; Ball *et al*, 2002) which draws upon Bourdieuian sociology to understand student experience.

2.8.2 Cultural Capital and Symbolic Capital

Whilst economic capital is essentially the foundation for all other types of capital, Bourdieuian thinking suggests that looking at the world in a purely economic sense, fails to recognise the importance of the intrinsic worth of other forms of capital – what we might define as the *cultural* dimensions (Moore, 2008). Cultural capital and symbolic capital (an institutionalised form of cultural capital) are such dimensions. As was explained briefly earlier in this thesis (Chapter One), cultural capital exists in three different states. Bourdieu (1986, p.47) explains:

> Cultural capital can exist in three forms: in the *embodied* state, i.e., in the form of long-lasting dispositions of the mind and body; in the *objectified* state, in the form of cultural goods (pictures, books, dictionaries, instruments, machines etc), which are the trace or realization of theories or critiques of these theories, problematic, etc; and in the *institutionalized* state, a form of objectification which must be set apart because...it confers entirely original properties on the cultural capital which it is presumed to guarantee (Bourdieu, 1986, p.47).

As Sullivan (2001) notes, Bourdieu suggests that an individual's cultural capital is linked to their class location, in that those from higher-class backgrounds have larger

amounts available to them (through the acquisition and socialization of culture through the family) than those from working-class backgrounds. As such, they are more easily able to gain educational credentials than those from working-class (or lower class) backgrounds. Jenkins (1992, p112-3) notes the importance of cultural capital in Bourdieu's theory of cultural and social reproduction and how it perpetuates and reproduces class privilege(s).

> It…follows that pupils whose familial socialisation bestows upon them the appropriate level of cultural capital – both more of it and of the 'right' kind – will necessarily achieve more academically than those whose relationship to the cultural arbitrary is more distant.

The gaining of educational qualifications (the 'piece of paper') which lies at the heart of this thesis can be viewed in a Bourdieuian sense, as a form of objectified cultural capital (otherwise characterised as symbolic capital). This objectification of cultural capital through academic qualifications forms what Bourdieu (1986) terms the institutionalized state of cultural capital. In this sense, objectified and institutionalized cultural capital can be thought of as symbolic capital in relation to the accumulation of capital in the sense of honour, reputation and prestige (Bourdieu, 1990). Therefore, in relation to this thesis, symbolic capital is the HE qualification or the 'piece of paper' and (as implied in Chapter One) the participants in this thesis are, as students in HE, regarded as 'symbol chasers'. Bourdieu (1989, p.23) speaks about the power of symbolic capital.

> Symbolic capital is a credit; it is the power granted to those who have obtained significant recognition to be in a position to impose recognition. In this way, the power of constitution, a power to make a new group, through

mobilization, or to make it exist by proxy, by speaking on its behalf an authorized spokesperson, can be obtained only as the outcome of a long process of institutionalization, at the end of which a representative is instituted, who receives from the group the power to make the group.

Grenfell and James (1998, p.18) describe, drawing upon the interconnectedness of class, capital and disposition, the sense in which social activity is ordered by tacit rules and understandings:

Bourdieu often writes about social activity as a sort of game. There is a same sense of being in or out of the game...There are good and poor players, winners and losers, although why this should be the case is never absolutely clear. There are rules which govern how the game is played, what is and is not allowed and how deviancy is dealt with. However, play seems to depend on intuition and game-sense as much as mastery of explicit procedures. By entering the game, individuals implicitly agree to be ruled by it and immediately set up personal relations with it, as well as other players.

Therefore, the rules of the game are played out, unconsciously by the participants, through the products of the field (in this thesis educational credentials, the 'piece of paper'), otherwise conceptualised as symbolic capital (Grenfell and James, 1998). The conceptualisation of good and poor players and, as such, winners and losers (Grenfell and James, 1998) in the field game are essentially advantaged by their high levels of cultural capital and disadvantaged by their lack of it. Bourdieu asserts those with high levels of cultural capital (who are playing this game) exert a form of symbolic violence in that there is a competitive struggle (between in Bourdieuian terms the dominant and the dominated) for the products of the field, the 'piece of

paper' or the symbolic capital of HE. Jenkins (1992, p.104) defines the concept of symbolic violence suggesting that, according to Bourdieu it:

> …is the imposition of systems of symbolism and meaning (i.e. culture) upon groups or classes in such a way that they are experienced as legitimate.

The following section moves on to discuss another of Bourdieu's most important concepts, habitus.

2.8.3 Habitus

Habitus (one of Bourdieu's most important concepts) is linked to an individual's identity and embodied dispositions, which as Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) suggest are subject to a range of experiences which can either modify or reinforce them. Habitus can be thought of as the 'classed' histories that each one of us carries around. The concept of habitus, therefore, offers a socio-psychological version of disposition, rather than a strictly psychological one. As has been explained to earlier in this chapter, Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital exists in three states. The embodied state entails an internalisation where:

> The accumulation of cultural capital in the embodied state, i.e., in the form of what is culture, cultivation, Bildung, presupposes a process of embodiment …The work of acquisition is work on oneself (self-improvement), an effort that presupposes a personal cost, an investment (Bourdieu, 1986, p.48).

In this sense embodied cultural capital constitutes one's habitus, defined by Bourdieu (1990, p.53, cited in Hillier and Rooksby, 2005, p.21) as 'a system of

durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, as principles which generate and organise practices and representations'. As such, habitus is structured in the sense '...by one's past and present circumstances, such as family upbringing and educational experiences' (Maton, 2008, p.51) and the structuring in one's habitus '...helps to shape one's present and future practices' (Maton, 2008, p.51).

With respect to educational contexts (HE in the case of this thesis) those individuals who possess high levels of cultural capital, and therefore a set of dispositions which are linked to education are more likely when encountering the field, to feel comfortable in their surroundings or, feel like a fish in water.

> And when habitus encounters a social world of which it is the product, it finds itself 'as a fish in water', it does not feel the weight of the water and takes the world about itself for granted (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, p.127).

Conversely, in traditional Bourdieuian thinking it is implied that those entering education (HE) from working-class contexts, whereby they lack the requisite cultural capital, are characterised as fish out of water in educational contexts.

Hillier and Rooksby (2005, p.21) describe habitus as 'a sense of one's (and others') place and role in the world of one's lived environment'. This Bourdieuian sense of place is linked to the 'traditional', working-class understandings where HE is not for the likes of me (Reay *et al*, 2001: 2005, Archer, 2003a, Marks *et al*, 2003; Archer, 2007). This goes back to Bourdieu's theory of cultural reproduction where understandings of education (such as not for the likes of me) reinforce the disadvantage of the working-classes. As Jenkins (1992, p.112-3) highlights:

…The habitus of the subordinated class(es), will in generating an acceptance of the system's legitimacy, reinforce their disadvantage by inhibiting their demands for access to the higher reaches of education by defining it as 'not for the likes of us'. At every rung on the educational ladder they will tend to eliminate themselves. The process of cultural reproduction reproduces the class relations of the social structure.

Drawing upon Bourdieu, Desmarchelier (1999, p.282) asserts the importance of education as a method of self-transformation and its consequent impact upon habitus:

The concept of habitus encapsulates the principles of stratification, for the acquisition of cultural capital through education enables the student to develop new facets of self, a new habitus.

Desmarchelier's (1999) assertion is pertinent to the research study, upon which this thesis is predicated, in the sense that many of the participants (the enrichers and builders described in Chapters Five and Six in this thesis) are returning to education, and indeed HE, to gain the necessary cultural capital to maintain or improve their social standing (or the avoidance of downward mobility), in other words they are developing a new habitus or orientation towards HE. The following discussion (section 2.8.4) addresses some critiques of Bourdieuian sociology, which largely centre on the fact that his theories are too deterministic. It also highlights the idea of understanding habitus as a form of practice generating grammar (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990; cf. Swartz, 1997), which is Bourdieu's response to his critics in the sense that his theories were too deterministic.

2.8.4 Critiques of Bourdieuian sociology

Bourdieu's theories of social reproduction have, over the last fifty years or so, exerted powerful influence within the sociology of education. However, whilst not underestimating its importance in any way, it is useful to engage with the literature which critiques Bourdieu's sociological approach. Critics such as Perez (2008), have suggested that Bourdieu places '…too much emphasis on the deterministic and constraining nature of the habitus (the unalterable past necessarily modifies the present through its presence in the habitus)' and that to a large extent as a result the agency of individuals is neglected (Perez, 2008, p.7). Calhoun *et al*, 1993 cited in Perez, 2008, p.7) suggest the following:

> As habitus is understood as the collection of internalised past experiences and capital as an essentially objectivist concept, Bourdieu leaves too little room for individual willpower, reflexivity and ability to change when he evaluates the agent's course of action.

In this sense, Calhoun and colleagues suggest that, Bourdieu tends to "write off" working-class people who see themselves as 'fitting into' HE as some kind of misrecognition, in that he sees optimistic working-class individuals as misunderstanding, or not getting what HE is about. Bourdieu's thinking applies in some senses, in that many working-class individuals construct HE, or different types of HE, as not for the likes of us. It is implied for example in recent widening participation research into the experience of working-class students in elite universities (Reay *et al*, 2009: 2010), that in some cases, working-class individuals arguably have more agency than Bourdieu suggests and that these students have not "got it wrong" and that their identities are valid and "real", in the sense that they

display willpower, reflexivity and an ability to change and adapt to the new field of HE.

In response to his critics Bourdieu countered the challenge that his idea of habitus was too deterministic, by introducing the notion of habitus as a practice generating grammar (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990; cf. Swartz, 1997), as Swartz (1997, p.102) describes '…a kind of deeply structured cultural grammar for action'. Bourdieu's idea of practice generating grammar is in a sense parallel to Chomsky's (1965) notion of a generative grammar. Habitus is seen not only as structured (in relation to embodied understandings based on classed family experiences), but also *structuring* in that '…habitus generates perceptions, aspirations, and practices that correspond to the structuring properties of earlier socialization' (Swartz, 1997, p.103). The critiques of habitus as too deterministic (Jenkins, 1982: 1992; Perez, 2008; Sayer, 2010) were, therefore, countered by Bourdieu, who evolved a more fluid, nuanced understanding of habitus (Swartz, 1997), implying that whilst habitus is structured, and is inside one's head, there are a number of different practices or behaviours that can arguably correspond to one's initial socialization. Swartz (1997, p.102) puts it succinctly by suggesting:

> As grammar organizes speech, the structures of habitus can generate an infinity of possible practices.

The idea of practice generating grammar will be drawn upon again at the end of Chapter Three in the discussion regarding data analysis and the development of theory. The concept is also drawn upon in relation to the 'classed' biographies of the participants on their educational journeys to and through HE contained in the central data chapters Four, Five and Six. The discussion now moves on to briefly discuss

how Bourdieuian sociological thinking has been applied in more contemporary research in widening participation.

2.8.5 Bourdieu updated: Contemporary writings on widening participation

It is clear that Bourdieuian sociology has had a profound impact upon education. This discussion suggests that he has had a particular influence upon a number of different contemporary authors (see for example Bowl, 2001: 2003; Reay, 2001, 2003a, 2003b; Ball *et al*, 2002; Reay *et al*, 2005, 2009, 2010) who have researched into widening participation. Bowl's (2003) analysis of widening participation and social class is informed by Bourdieu. In her illuminating book, 'Non-Traditional Entrants to Higher Education' she offers a two-fold concise explanation of why Bourdieu has been so influential on UK widening participation research. Firstly, Bowl (2003) draws upon how Bourdieu's analysis of individuals from working-class backgrounds means that they are 'outsiders in this game'. In a Bourdieuian sense, they are 'outsiders', in that their working-class habitus is effectively "in conflict" with the field of HE, in that HE in a sense represents middle-class values and that the structures of HE reproduce middle-class advantage.

Bowl (2003) also draws upon the idea that these students also "blame" themselves and think that they are responsible for their own exclusion. This is an example of where the Bourdieuian sociological concept of misrecognition applies, in that classed subjects (working-class students) do not recognise the classed structures or discriminatory process evident in HE, *but* instead accept classed order as natural, and see themselves in deficit and not measuring up. This point is reinforced by

Jenkins (1992) who suggests that the working-classes, in some senses, eliminate themselves, by defining education as not for the likes of me. Bowl (2003) also draws upon why and how HE excludes working-class people, where HE culture is '…constituted through white, male, middle class norms…' and through communities of practice (Wenger, 1998) and social groups. In this sense, individuals who do not fit the "norm" with respect to their age, class and ethnicity may to a certain extent feel excluded.

The following authors (Ball and Vincent, 1998; Reay, 2001, 2003a, 2003b; Reay *et al*, 2005, 2009, 2010; Ball *et al*, 2002; Archer, 2003a; Crozier *et al*, 2008) amongst others have described the phenomenon of 'non-traditional' students accessing HE in a widening participation oriented and massified HE sector. Archer (2003a, p.17) refers to the importance of capital in relation to educational choice.

> Cultural capital refers to the knowledge, language and culture, differentially accessed and possessed, that guides the decisions made and actions taken. Middle-class and working-class families have differential access to various forms of cultural, social and economic capital and resources, which differentially frames the educational choices that different families can or will make.

Bourdieu has had a particular impact upon contemporary research into HE choices (Ball and Vincent, 1998; Ball *et al*, 2002). Ball *et al's* (2002) conceptual analysis of embedded and contingent choosers as discourses of choice is heavily influenced by Bourdieu in that it is argued that HE choices are framed by a variety of social conditions. Bourdieuian notions of cultural and social capital are drawn upon to help understand how different types of choosers negotiate the HE decision-making

process. Ball *et al* (2002) distinguish these choosers in a number of different ways, but argue that high levels of cultural and social capital are characteristic of 'embedded choosers', in that they come from families and communities in which entering HE is part of a normal biography. So, for example, they are likely to be able to draw on 'hot' or grapevine knowledge (Ball and Vincent, 1998). This knowledge is socially embedded in networks (Ball and Vincent, 1998) and is gleaned from their friends and family, characterised by Heath *et al* (2007) as social networks. In this sense, embedded choosers have an inbuilt and engrained tradition of HE, and as such, the choice of going to university is part of a cultural script (Ball *et al*, 2002) or as Du Bois Reymond (1998) suggests a normal biography.

Ball *et al* (2002) contrast embedded choosers with contingent choosers: 'non-traditional' entrants from families and communities in which higher education is less common. They are characterised as having relatively low cultural capital and a lack of access to the hot or grapevine knowledge, readily accessed by the 'embedded' choosers. Instead, they tend to rely more on 'cold', impersonal forms of knowledge, such as prospectus information when making their HE choices. Ball *et al* (2002) argue (perhaps unsurprisingly) that nowadays, given the diversity of HE entrants, these students are more likely to be first-generation applicants from working-class and low income backgrounds and are more likely to place a greater emphasis on more concrete factors such as finance and course content rather than more nuanced understandings, such as the status of different universities.

Drawing upon Bourdieu, Reay (2001) talks about HE choice, with regard to knowing one's academic place, where students will '...tend to choose a university with which they feel comfortable' (Reay *et al*, 2010, p.3). HE applicants imagined sense of place

arguably, as Bourdieu (1984, p.471) suggests '...leads one to exclude oneself from the goods, persons, places and so forth from which one is excluded'. The notion of a sense of place is also linked with the Bourdieuian idea of HE being not for the likes of us (Bourdieu, 1984). A number of contemporary widening participation commentators have drawn upon this idea (Reay *et al*, 2001: 2005; Archer, 2003a; Reay, 2003a: 2003b, Marks *et al*, 2003; Archer, 2007) whereby individuals will exclude themselves from places where they would believe they would feel vulnerable, or where they would 'stand out'.

However, Reay (2003b) also draws upon the apparent paradox for working-class students in HE that has been created by widening participation and the massification of the sector. She draws attention to the fact that the places where working-class students feel more comfortable (where there are people like us) are seen as deficient when compared with the more selective and 'middle-class' dominated, elite universities. Drawing upon Bourdieu and Champagne's (1999) notion of outcasts on the inside, where many individuals, by dint of their working-class backgrounds, are excluded from parts of the education system and instead relegated to other education tracks, which hold less value, Reay (2003b, p.57) updates this within the context of a massified HE sector.

> Bourdieu's 'outcasts on the inside' are now clustered largely in 'ethnic' and 'working-class' universities, shunned by those fractions of the middle classes with high levels of either cultural or economic capital or both.

Reay (2003b) also notes that although mass HE has wrought opportunities for those from working-class backgrounds to enter elite universities, these students face the

dilemma between their desire(s) for advancement and feelings (attached to class) which pathologise them and people like them.

In more recent studies, Reay *et al* (2009: 2010) have (drawing again on Bourdieu) studied the experiences of working-class students within the context of elite HE. Their analysis provides an illuminating insight, where they describe (in certain instances) that working-class students were more like fish in water in educational contexts, in that despite their disadvantaged 'classed' social backgrounds (regarding HE participation) they felt comfortable in academic and social senses. Reay *et al's* (2009: 2010) perhaps surprising findings point toward the fact that not all working-class or 'non-traditional' HE entrants are, in Bourdieuian terms, fish out of water in educational contexts adding further analysis to contemporary writing (which draws upon Bourdieuian sociology) in the widening participation field.

It is evident from the proliferation of 'widening participation' literature which focuses on classed, ethnic and gendered understandings of HE, with regard to choices, transitions and experiences (see for example Bowl, 2001: 2003; Reay, 2001, 2003a, 2003b; Reay *et al*, 2005, 2009, 2010; Ball *et al*, 2002) that Bourdieu's seminal work on the various forms of capital and the concepts of habitus and field (Bourdieu, 1984; 1985; 1986; 1989; 1990), have had a profound effect on the thinking of more contemporary educational researchers. The widespread use of Bourdieu's sociological concepts suggests, that even though these concepts were born, in some cases four decades ago, they are still relevant in helping to effectively conceptualise the experiences of students in today's 21st Century world of HE.

2.9 Conclusion

This chapter has provided a historical-narrative account of widening participation in HE from the early 1960s onwards, and its relationships with social justice and educational credentialism. It has reflected on some of the approaches to 'student experience' research that have used Bourdieu's theory, in order to understand the classed nature of higher education and widening participation. In Chapter Three the thesis moves forward to discuss the methodological considerations of this research study along with a detailed account of the research process (the methods) undertaken. In short, it explains how the design of the current study enabled my own exploration of shifts in the classed experiences of widening participation students.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY AND METHODS

3.1 Introduction

This chapter sets out the underpinning methodological approach which guided the research study. It describes the methods used in the study and discusses the way, in which interview data were analysed, in order to produce biographical narratives of nineteen 'widening participation' students. Research ethics are also considered when issues of access, consent and power in research settings are discussed. The research process is examined in detail, focusing on the different dimensions – from issues surrounding the research design, the sample and data collection, through to the more creative process which constituted the biographical analysis of the interview data and the subsequent development of a theoretical approach for this thesis.

3.2 'Understanding' and 'explaining' social worlds

This thesis does not make grand claims to methodological invention. The research was predicated upon a conventional interpretivist (or 'qualitative') approach to understanding the social worlds of the participants through the collection of biographical interview data. Guba and Lincoln (1998, p.200) suggest that a research paradigm:

> …may be viewed as a set of *basic beliefs*…that deals with ultimates or first principles. It represents a *worldview* that defines, for its holder, the nature of the 'world,' the individual's place in it, and the range of possible relationships to that world and its parts, as, for example, cosmologies and theologies

do…Inquiry paradigms define for *inquirers* what it is they are about, and what falls within and outside the limits of legitimate inquiry.

According to Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2004) one of the components of the research paradigm concerns the epistemological question, which refers to the relationship between the researcher and as Guba and Lincoln (1998, p.201) suggest 'what can be known'. Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2004, p.7), move on to allude to the fact that '…a researcher's epistemological stance is a central aspect of the selection of qualitative methods of inquiry and the overall practice of qualitative research'.

Snape and Spencer (2003) draw upon three central debates which surround interpretive epistemology. Firstly, it is important to recognise the relationship between the researcher and the social world. Snape and Spencer (2003, p.13) suggest that many qualitative researchers subscribe to the view that:

> ...in the social world, people are affected by the process of being studied and that the relationship between the researcher and social phenomena is interactive. In this case, the researcher cannot be objective and cannot produce an objective or 'privileged' account.

Snape and Spencer (2003) suggest, therefore, that understandings of the social world are mediated through the researcher. The second issue surrounds the question of truth. Snape and Spencer (2003) draw upon the inter-subjective or coherence theory where:

> ...'independent' reality can only be gauged in a consensual rather than an absolute way. If several reports confirm a statement then it can be considered

true as a representation of a socially constructed reality (Snape and Spencer, 2003, p.14).

Finally, Snape and Spencer (2003) focus on the ways in which research 'knowledge' is developed, where knowledge gained through qualitative inquiry is arrived at through a process of induction, in the sense that it looks for '...patterns and association derived from observations of the world...' (Snape and Spencer, 2003, p.14) are sought. Therefore, in contrast with the positivist research tradition, where the researcher claims to be detached and objective (Cohen *et al*, 2000), the study of social sciences is, by the researcher '...seen as a subjective rather than an objective undertaking, as a means of dealing with the direct experience of people in specific contexts' (Cohen *et al*, 2000, p.20).

Usher (1996, p.18) states that: 'To explain the social world we need to understand it, to make sense of it, and hence we need to understand the meanings that construct and are constructed by interactive human behaviour'. This research study employs hermeneutic principles, such as those commented upon by Usher (1996, p.18):

Hermeneutic / interpretive epistemology in social and educational research focuses on social practices. It assumes that all human action is meaningful and hence has to be interpreted and understood within the context of social practices.

Snape and Spencer (2003, p.7) draw upon the importance of context and how it influences the understanding of individuals' experience and how we, as researchers can reconstruct these understandings through qualitative inquiry.

The interrelatedness of different aspects of people's lives is a very important focus of qualitative research and psychological, social, historical and cultural factors are all recognised as playing an important part in shaping people's understanding of their world. Qualitative research practice has reflected this in the use of methods which attempt to provide a holistic understanding of research participants' views and actions in the context of their lives overall.

The research questions that underpin this thesis (see Chapter One of this thesis) are concerned with understanding the social worlds of the participants (the researched), within as both Usher (1996) and Cohen *et al* (2000) have argued, the specific context of the individuals' lives.

Beck (1979, cited in Cohen *et al*, 2000, p.20) encapsulates the spirit of the interpretivist researcher in the social sciences.

[T]he purpose of social science is to understand social reality as different people see it and to demonstrate how their views shape the action which they take within that reality. Since the social sciences cannot penetrate to what lies behind social reality, they must work directly with man's definition of reality and with the rules he devises for coping with it. While the social sciences do not reveal ultimate truth, they do help us make sense of our world. What the social sciences offer is explanation, clarification and demystification of the social forms which man has created around himself.

The aim of this thesis (in a methodological sense) was to understand the social worlds of the researched (the widening participation students in this study). The use of interpretive, interview-based, biographical approaches was central to analysing

and therefore understanding the participants' social worlds. With this in mind, the following sections of this thesis (3.3.1, 3.3.2 and 3.4) examine the role of biographical, narrative and interview-based approaches in social research.

3.3.1 Biography and narrative

'It cannot be known in advance whether the experiences to be had *en route* may outweigh the journey's end in their eventual importance and impressiveness. Nor can one know in advance whether the journey may change one utterly, in body or in mind. In this particular sense, it is clear that life itself is an adventure' (Gadamer, 1992, p. ix, cited in Erben, 1996, p.159).

In the current research the participants' sense-making accounts of their social and educational histories, backgrounds and experiences were complex and unpredictable in nature. They were all entering HE from a variety of different educational, professional and social backgrounds; their biographies highlighted that they were indeed different to the traditional, archetypal university student who as part of a normal biography (Du Bois-Reymond, 1998), follows a more predictable pathway. As Erben (1996, p.159) explains '...a studied life is the study of a temporal journey. This journey, the journey of life, is an enacted drama of selfhood that is empirically unpredictable'. In the following analysis Roberts (2002, p.5) alludes to the role of biographical research as a way of helping to understand the social worlds of participants, along with the contextual settings that these phenomena appear within.

The appeal of biographical research is that it is exploring, in diverse methodological and interpretive ways, how individual accounts of life

experience can be understood within the contemporary cultural and structural settings and is thereby helping to chart the major societal changes that are underway, but not merely at some broad social level.

This thesis is biographical in its analysis, in that it attempts to depict the participants' understandings of their own negotiation of family, school, work and higher education, focusing on their explanations as to why they did not enter HE early in life and their perceptions of the value of degree qualifications. An important element of biographical research, looks at the notion of life 'stories' or life 'histories'. According to Atkinson (1998, p.8, cited in Roberts, 2002, p.3) there is a subtle difference between stories and histories, suggesting that 'stories' are derived from:

> ...the story a person chooses to tell about the life he or she has lived, told as completely and honestly as possible, what is remembered of it, and what the teller wants others to know of it, usually as a result of a guided interview by another ...A life story is a fairly complete narrating of one's entire experience of life as a whole, highlighting the most important aspects.

Roberts (2002) depicts the notion of life stories being narrated by the author or the 'researched' and the life history method is constructed and interpreted by the researcher with regard to presenting and reporting the life stories which are told by the individual being studied. Roberts (2002) however suggests that in practice the difference between 'stories' and 'histories' is difficult to preserve when interviewing individuals for example. Harrison (2009, p. xxxii) depicts the connection between life story research and the importance of narrative.

In a sense life story research has always worked with narrative since it is a tool by which apprehension of the world and its communication to others occurs, and it is narrative accounts which are present in life history or oral history interview transcripts and in personal documents of all kinds.

The role of life stories in constructing individual and changing identities is considered by McAdams (1985, p.18, 29, cited in Plummer, 2009, p.24).

An individual's life story has the power to tie together past, present and future in his or her life. It is a story which is able to provide unity and purpose ... individual identities may be classified in the manner of stories. Identity stability is longitudinal consistency in the life story. Identity transformation – identity crisis, identity change – is story revision. Story revision may change from minor editing in an obscure chapter to a complete rewriting of the text, embodying an altered plot, a different cast of characters a transformed setting, new scenes and new themes ... identity is a life story.

The biographical interview approach used in this research study recognises the importance of the participants' life stories, where their narratives enable an understanding of their past and present experiences, and thus provide a deeper insight into how identities are shaped, change and are transformed by this experience. As such Plummer (2009, p.24) notes the continually fluid nature of biography and identity

...people move through lives constructing a shifting web of meanings about the nature of their biographies, the motives behind their actions, their pasts and futures, about their changes, consistencies and commitments. They are

constantly assembling themselves through their life stories which are always social objects...Within this process, the self is an omnipresent. Indeed in modern experiences this indicating to oneself 'the life,' this 'story telling,' may be the clue to understanding identity.

As such, Lather (1991, p.113, cited in McCormack, 2004, p.233) suggests, such stories 'frame meaning possibilities rather than close them'.

3.3.2 Self-narration

The concept of self-narration has been commented upon by a variety of authors (see for example Denzin, 1989b; Gergen, 1994; Kehily, 1995; Eakin, 1999). Kehily (1995) for example comments upon the use of story-telling and autobiographies which are both forms of self-narration, in order to construct individual identities. This notion of the construction of identities is apparent in the following depiction by Gergen (1994, p.186) who suggests that:

> …narrative accounts are embedded within social action; they render events socially visible and typically establish expectations for future events. Because the events of daily life are immersed in narrative, they become laden with a storied sense: they acquire the reality of "a beginning," "a low point," "a climax," "an ending," and so on. People live out the events in this way and, along with others, they index them in just this way. This is not to say that life copies art, but rather, that art becomes the vehicle through which the reality of life is made manifest. In a significant sense, then, we live by stories – both in the telling and the realizing of the self.

Concurring with the views of Gergen (1994) and Kehily (1995), Eakin (1992, p.198, cited in Eakin, 1999, p.100) also emphasises the synchronicity between self-narrative and identity, by suggesting '…that self and story were "complementary, mutually constituting aspects of a single process of identity formation"'. Consequently, Eakin (1999, p.100) comments that 'In this view, narrative is not merely an appropriate form for the expression of identity; it is an identity content'.

The use of biographical approaches (or life stories) in this thesis was crucial to understanding how the participants in this study came to their decisions to enter HE and gain the 'piece of paper'. This approach enabled me to analyse (through the three step biographical analysis described) and therefore gain a better understanding of the participants' journeys, in educational, professional and social senses, which had a bearing on their current social worlds. As McAdams noted (see page 104), biographical (life story) approaches are the best way of making sense of and understanding an individual's past, present and future. The following discussion (section 3.4) moves on to examine the use of interviews as an appropriate method to reconstruct the biographies and narratives of the participants.

3.4 Interviews: reconstructing 'life stories'

King and Horrocks (2010, p.11) explain how interviewing 'fits' interpretive inquiry.

> Interpretative research is generally *idiographic,* which literally means describing aspects of the social world by offering a detailed account of specific social settings, processes or relationships. The focus for research might be to uncover how people feel about the world and make sense of their

lives from their particular vantage points. Therefore, qualitative interviewing fits; conversing with people enables them to share their experiences and understandings.

In accord with King and Horrocks (2010), Miller and Glassner (2004, p.126) argue the case for interviews as a method for understanding realities in social worlds.

Research cannot provide the mirror reflection of the social world that positivists strive for, but it may provide access to the meanings people attribute to their experiences and social worlds. While the interview is itself a symbolic interaction, this does not discount the possibility that knowledge of the social world beyond the interaction can be obtained. In fact, it is only in the context of non-positivistic interviews, which recognize and build on their interactive components (rather than trying to control and reduce them), that "intersubjective depth" and "deep mutual understanding" can be achieved (and with these, the achievement of knowledge of social worlds).

The use of an interview-based approach, in *collaboration* with the participants, helps to create a dramatic, biographical reconstruction of their lives. In this sense, what is important is the way that the participants tell these stories about their lives and subsequently, the way in which the researcher reconstructs these stories.

As Spradley (1979, p.34, cited in Kvale, 1996, p.125) postulates:

I want to understand the world from your point of view. I want to know what you know in the way you know it. I want to understand the meaning of your experience, to walk in your shoes, to feel things as you feel them, to explain

things as you explain them. Will you become my teacher and help me understand?

Kvale (1996) uses the metaphors of a miner and a traveller to illuminate interview research. Firstly Kvale (1996, p.3) constructs the interview as a site for gaining knowledge:

> In the *miner metaphor*, Knowledge is understood as buried metal and the interviewer is a miner who unearths the valuable metal. Some miners seek objective facts to be quantified, others seek nuggets of essential meaning. In both conceptions the knowledge is waiting in the subjects' interior to be uncovered, uncontaminated by the miner. The interviewer digs nuggets of data or meanings out of a subject's pure experiences, unpolluted by any leading questions (author's italics).

The second approach to the interview method '…falls within the constructivist research model in which knowledge is not given but is created and negotiated' (Legard *et al*, 2003, p.139). Kvale (1996, p.4) uses the metaphor of a traveller to depict the interview as a journey.

> The alternative *traveler metaphor* understands the interviewer as a traveler on a journey that leads to a tale to be told upon returning home. The interviewer-traveler wanders through the landscape and enters into conversations with the people encountered...The interviewer wanders along with the local inhabitants, asks questions that lead the subjects to tell their own stories of their lived world, and converses with them in the original Latin meaning of *conversation* as "wandering together with" (author's italics).

The methodology of the current research study encouraged a narrative approach, where, through the interview dynamic, opportunities were sought to create a space for the participants to describe their experiences of their lived world(s). The interviews and subsequent biographical analysis of the data followed a three phase chronological 'biography' where participants firstly described their early experiences and identities in school, work and FE contexts. The interviews then sought to move to investigate more recent pre-HE experiences, concerned with firstly the 'turning points', where the participants reached a point in their life-course where they realised that they had go to HE in order to gain the 'piece of paper'. The biographies also recounted the interviewees' notions of preparation, support and choice for the transition to university. Finally the interviews provided a vehicle for the participants to describe their understandings, behaviour and how they (in some senses) 'fitted-in' to HE contexts, which in some cases was a world very different to what they had experienced previously.

This chronological depiction (the biographical three stage analysis pointed to previously in Chapter One and also later in this chapter) of the participants' complex and multiple experiences and identities, amounted to Kvale's (1996) assertion of the interview as portraying a journey over a period of time, where a story could be told. Interaction is an important facet of the interview approach. Baker (1997, p.131, cited in Freebody, 2003, p.137) suggests that 'Interviewing is best described as an interactional event in which members of a culture draw on and rebuild their shared cultural knowledge, including their knowledge about how members-of certain-kinds routinely speak in such settings'. Freebody (2003, p.137) also alludes to this interactional nature and espouses the following:

The interactions that make up interviews are dynamic, not static, forms of social action: in each interview, all participants, including the interviewer, re-encounter and reproduce social order in and for the site of the interview itself.

Gergen (2001, cited in Knapik, 2006, p.2) draws on the personal nature of the interview. The author suggests that 'Interviews became sites for persons telling their stories to empathetic listeners whose projects were framed as having both personal and political emancipatory potential'.

Wellington's (2000) assertion of the interview method as a 'platform' to communicate draws parallels with the aforementioned views of Gergen who cited the emancipatory potential of the method. The views of Gergen (2001, cited in Knapik, 2006, p.2; Wellington, 2000) resonate with this research study, in that the research interviews provided the participants who have traditionally been under-represented in HE, with a voice, an opportunity to be heard, and to as Wellington (2000) asserts go public with their perceptions and views.

A variety of authors have also commented upon the flexibility of the interview method in that it is possible to gain further, deeper insights into the social worlds of the participants. Robson (2002, p.272) encapsulates the effectiveness of interviews as a method of gaining a deeper understanding of the social phenomenon being studied as well as the meanings that people bring to their experiences:

The human use of language is fascinating in its own right, and for the virtually unique window that it opens on what lies behind our actions.

The use of interview-based approaches in this thesis to capture the biographical journeys (in educational, professional and social senses) of the participants was

invaluable in that it provided a vehicle to understand their life stories. In some senses, I was an interviewer-traveler (Kvale, 1996) in that I was able to travel across the educational landscape and, through my interview questions (structured within the three phase chronological approach) enable people to tell stories about their social worlds. The interview-based approach provided the vehicle, in order that I could as Spradley noted earlier, understand the participants' social worlds (from their own point of view). Therefore the interview was a collaboration between myself (the researcher) and the participants (the researched), in that the interaction enabled me to provide (through the analysis in Chapters Four, Five and Six of this thesis) a dramatic, biographical reconstruction of the participants' lives.

3.5.1 Issues surrounding interpretive, interview-based approaches

As has already been discussed previously in this chapter, one of the strengths of interpretive, interview-based approaches in social research is its capacity to understand the social world through the eyes of the participants. In other words, how they tell stories about their lives and how consequently, we as researchers, understand and reconstruct their lives. Interviews also provide us with rich, detailed stories (self-narratives), which give us sense of people's lives. These stories are invaluable in understanding individual identities and, in this sense give us a feeling of one's individual habitus, in respect of the history that they carry inside themselves along with their own still, small voice inside their head which tells them what they are.

Another important characteristic of interpretive based approaches to research is the ability to apply thick description (Geertz, 1973) to understand social settings. Bryman (2001) draws upon the importance of this idea in interpretive inquiry where detailed description is important to the interpretive researcher, due to the significance for the researched and to contextualise the environment in which the behaviour of the researched takes place. In this sense, context and behaviour are inextricably linked. As Bryman (2001, p.281) notes '...we cannot understand the behaviour of members of a social group other than in terms of the specific environment in which they operate'.

There is a strong tradition of research into widening participation and allied areas, of researchers combining the qualitative methods of interviews, observations and life history methods to help reconstruct and depict the participants' social worlds which are implied in the various aspects of my research, such as access, social inclusion and 'non-standard' and 'non-traditional' pathways to HE. This thesis follows the mould of previous research allied to notions of widening participation, where through the vehicle of semi-structured biographical interviews, rich and detailed narrative accounts of the participants' educational and professional experiences are portrayed, in relation to their 'classed' backgrounds. These experiences are also in some senses, inflected by issues surrounding gender, age, educational background and, to a lesser extent, ethnicity. These, in turn, shape and continually challenge the participants' identities. The biographical interviews of the participants entailed a kind of 'voyage of discovery', in that the nature of the methodological approach allowed for new ideas and avenues of research to be explored (Bryman, 1984). In this sense the initial analysis of the interview data, drawing upon a grounded approach, also

predicated the development of the theoretical approach used in this thesis which is described in more detail at the end of this chapter and elsewhere in this thesis (Chapter One).

It is also evidently important to recognise the potential weaknesses of interpretive, interview-based approaches to research. We, of course as researchers, cannot always be sure that what people say is an accurate reflection of what actually happened. Atkinson and Delamont (2006) have commented upon this often raised methodological question of the truthfulness of accounts. Dean and Whyte (1958) have also addressed this issue and suggest that informants' statements should be regarded as narratives of the self and '…Thus we acknowledge initially that we are getting merely the informant's picture of the world as he sees it' (Dean and Whyte, 1958, p.34).

Not unlike Bryman's (2001) assertion about the importance of context, Roethlisberger and Dickson (1939) highlight the need to understand the interviewee within their particular social contexts, both past and present. As they suggest:

> It cautions him to remember that he is looking at a person who has a past history and that here and now in the interview he is obeying an end product of a particular historical route… [Thus] the individual has been conditioned to a particular way of looking at and feeling about things…But not only does the speaker have a social past; he is also enjoying a social present… If a person's feelings and sentiments are to be understood, they have to be related to his present social reality (Roethlisberger and Dickson, 1939, p.281).

Roethlisberger and Dickson's (1939) assertions about the relevance of both past and present social contexts of the interviewees are, in a methodological sense, useful in relation to the research study upon which this thesis is predicated, in that many of the participants, particularly the older and successful middle-class returners (characterised as enrichers in this thesis), have grown up in different classed, gendered and family contexts, compared with the social contexts that surround their lives now. In this sense, this thesis appreciates the different social contexts, or 'classed' locations that individuals inhabit across time and understands that their identities and experiences, and indeed how they explain them, are inflected by both their past and present social contexts.

Roethlisberger and Dickson (1939) and Dean and Whyte's (1958) insightful views on interview accounts, in a sense, emphasise the fact that we can never be totally sure as to the veracity of any given statement from our research subjects. However, we should as researchers, be concentrating upon the accounts of the social world as the participant sees it and to make sure that it is placed in its appropriate social context (Snape and Spencer, 2003).

3.5.2 Debates on generalisability, validity and reliability in qualitative research

Much has been written about generalisability, transparency, validity and reliability in interpretive inquiry (LeCompte and Preissle, 1993; Silverman, 2000; Bryman, 2001; Lewis and Ritchie, 2003; Polkinghorne, 2007). For example, we all know as qualitative (interpretive) researchers that small interview studies cannot be generalised (except in an analytical sense). Lewis and Ritchie (2003, p.269) neatly

summarise how qualitative research can be generalised in an analytical (rather than a statistical) sense.

> Qualitative research cannot be generalised on a statistical basis – it is not the prevalence of particular views or experiences, nor the extent of their location within particular parts of the sample, about which wider inference can be drawn. Rather, it is the content or 'map' of the range of views, experiences or outcomes or other phenomena under study, and the factors and circumstances that shape and influence them, that can be inferred to the researched population.

Lewis and Ritchie's (2003) assertions of generalisability in qualitative studies (in an analytical sense) draw upon the importance of describing in detail the phenomena being studied as well as providing the context to understand individual's experiences and behaviours. These assertions draw parallels with Geertz's (1973) notion of thick description and Roethlisberger and Dickson (1939) in relation to understanding the social contexts which shape and influence individuals' experiences and behaviours. The issue of transparency in qualitative research can be avoided as Bryman (2001) suggests by providing clear detail about the process of the research (with regard to how the participants were chosen and how the data was collated and analysed). The final sections of this chapter (3.8.1 to 3.8.7 and 3.9) provide a clear description of the research process (in this study) and therefore address the concerns surrounding transparency such as those expressed by Bryman (2001, p.285):

> It is sometimes difficult to establish from qualitative research what the researcher actually did and how he or she arrived at the study's conclusions.

Much like generalisability, notions of reliability and validity present challenges in qualitative research. As Lewis and Ritchie (2003, p.270) have commented:

> The concepts of reliability and validity were developed in the natural sciences. Because of this, and the very different epistemological basis of qualitative research, there are real concerns about whether the same concepts have any value in determining the quality or sustainability of qualitative evidence.

As such, various methodological writers (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Hammersley, 1992) have critiqued the use and relevance of these rigid terms in qualitative inquiry and offer more suitable alternatives for researchers in the qualitative domain. Glaser and Strauss (1967) and Lincoln and Guba (1985) for example refer to the trustworthiness of research findings. Lincoln and Guba (1985, p.290) note:

> How can an inquirer persuade his or her audiences (including self) that the findings of an inquiry are worth paying attention to, worth taking account of?

Bogdan and Biklen (1992, cited in Cohen *et al*, 2000, p.119) draw upon the idea of dependability in respect of how accurately data reflects the social worlds of those being studied.

> In qualitative research reliability can be regarded as a fit between what researchers record as data and what actually occurs in the natural setting that is being researched, i.e. a degree of accuracy and comprehensiveness of coverage.

As with reliability, the ways of measuring validity in the natural sciences, do not always effectively translate into the qualitative domain. Lincoln and Guba (1985,

cited in Lewis and Ritchie, 2003, p.273) comment upon the fact that '…that 'credibility' and 'transferability' translate more appropriately for naturalistic enquiry than 'internal' or 'external' validity which are more suited to quantitative enquiry'.

Credibility in naturalistic inquiry can be achieved by prolonged engagement (Lincoln and Guba, 1985) in the field and understanding the importance of context in relation to behaviour. As Schwarz and Ogilvy (1979, cited in Lincoln and Guba, 1985, p.302) highlight:

> …objects and behaviors take not only their meaning but their very existence from their contexts. It is imperative, therefore, that the naturalist spend enough time in becoming oriented to the situation, "soaking in the culture through his or her pores," to be certain that the context is thoroughly appreciated and understood.

Similarly, Henwood and Pidgeon (1993, p.27) comment upon the importance of transferability in qualitative research.

> Most narrowly, this term refers to applying the findings of a study in contexts similar to the context in which they were first derived. This observation is important in that it places a special onus on the qualitative researcher to fully report on the contextual features of a study…

Considering these notions of validity in qualitative inquiry, Hammersley provides a directive for researchers:

> By validity, I mean truth: interpreted as the extent to which an account accurately represents the social phenomena to which it refers (Hammersley, 1990, p.57, cited in Silverman, 2000, p.210).

The research study, upon which this thesis is predicated, recognises these aforementioned issues (generalisability, reliability and validity) in that this thesis attempts to provide an accurate reflection of the social phenomena being studied (the participants biographical journeys towards gaining the 'piece of paper' in HE), by describing these thickly and providing appropriate context to better understand how these experiences, behaviours and practices are shaped and influenced.

So how did I ensure methodological rigour on a practical level in this research study?

> Rigour is the means by which we demonstrate integrity and competence (Aroni *et al*, 1999, cited in Tobin and Begley, 2004, p.390).

> Without rigour, there is a danger that research may become fictional journalism, worthless as contributing to knowledge (Morse *et al*, 2002, cited in Tobin and Begley, 2004, p.390).

To ensure methodological rigour in this study, I employed a variety of different strategies during the data collection and analysis phases which addressed notions of credibility, transferability and dependability, the qualitative alternatives to validity and reliability. So what strategies did I use to strengthen the credibility of my study? Krefting (1991) and Shenton (2004) have talked about various strategies that can be employed to enhance the credibility of qualitative research. Concurrent with the idea of prolonged engagement in the field, supported by Lincoln and Guba (1985), Shenton (2004) suggests developing familiarity with participating organisations before data collection. This has mutual benefits for '…the investigator and the participants in order both for the former to gain an adequate understanding of an organisation and to establish a relationship of trust between the parties' (Shenton,

2004, p.65). In all of the five research sites that participated in this study there was dialogue, in the form of preliminary meetings with the different gatekeepers. Whilst the ultimate aim of these initial meetings was to gain access to the field, they provided me with an insight and understanding of the culture of the various organisations and provided the gatekeepers the opportunity to gain trust, through asking questions about my research and how data collection would be conducted. Shenton (2004) also draws upon ensuring the honesty of informants. This draws upon ethical considerations, such as making sure participants have the right to withdraw. Shenton (2004, p.66-7) also argues that:

> Participants should be encouraged to be frank from the outset of each session, with the researcher aiming to establish a rapport in the opening moments and indicating that there are no right answers to the questions that will be asked. Where appropriate, the independent status of the researcher should also be emphasised. Participants can, therefore, contribute ideas and talk about their experiences without fear of losing credibility in the eyes of managers of the organisation.

At the outset of each of the interviews carried out in this research study, I explained to the participants their right to withdraw from the study. Through my role as an independent researcher who was not affiliated to the organisations, and the promise of anonymity, I was able to encourage a frank dialogue with my participants, providing the opportunity for them to talk freely about their lives and experiences.

Shenton (2004, p.67) also suggests the usefulness of debriefing sessions with superiors.

…the vision of the investigator may be widened as others bring to bear their experiences and perceptions. Such collaborative sessions can be used by the researcher to discuss alternative approaches, and others who are responsible for the work in a more supervisory capacity may draw attention to flaws in the proposed course of action.

During the data collection and analysis phase, I had regular project meetings with my supervisor with whom I was able to discuss issues arising from the interviews and was able to gain practical advice for future data collection activities. This enabled me to progress and develop as a researcher.

In producing a trustworthy and credible piece of qualitative research a lot comes down to the researcher being able to offer a detailed or as Geertz (1973) suggests, 'thick description' of the context, the data and the data "trail", through which the analysis in this thesis was determined. The strength of this study (through the development of a typology) is provided by a credible depiction of the biographies of a small group of 'widening participation' students. Shenton (2004, p.69) also highlights the importance of thick description in producing credible research:

Detailed description in this area can be an important provision for promoting credibility as it helps to convey the actual situations that have been investigated and, to an extent, the contexts that surround them…Moreover, if the researcher employs a reporting system in which he or she defines a series of types within a typology and illustrates these types using real qualitative episodes, the inclusion of the latter enables the reader to assess how far the defined types truly embrace the actual situations.

So how did I deal with the issue of transferability in this study? Shenton (2004, p.69) suggests that:

> Since the findings of a qualitative project are specific to a small number of particular environments and individuals, it is impossible to demonstrate that the findings and conclusions are applicable to other situations and populations.

However, as alluded to earlier by Henwood and Pidgeon (1993), an emphasis should be placed on the contextual element of the study. As Krefting (1991, p.220) suggests:

> It is critical that researchers provide dense background information about the informants and the research context and setting to allow others to assess how transferable the findings are.

The study (upon which this thesis is based) has provided a large amount of contextual information, including characteristics of the informant, such as gender, age, course and institution, and the HE institutions themselves. Extensive secondary quantitative analysis was also performed in order to provide a picture of the larger, macro context; the HE sector as a whole. Although this study is clearly not statistically generalisable, my typology suggests the possibility of analytic generalisation, in that I have developed useful categories that might apply in other settings.

So how did I address the issue of dependability in this research study?

Shenton (2004, p.72) stresses the importance of providing a full methodological description including '*the operational detail of data gathering*, addressing the

minutiae of what was done in the field' (authors italics). Later in this chapter (see sections 3.8.1 to 3.8.7 and 3.9) this thesis describes in explicit detail, the practical steps and methods that were employed in this research study which would enable a researcher in the future to repeat it (Shenton, 2004).

Thus, the research design may be viewed as a "prototype model". Such in-depth coverage also allows the reader to assess the extent to which proper research practices have been followed (Shenton, 2004, p.71).

3.6 Ethical considerations

Ethics concern the morality of human conduct. In relation to social research, it refers to the moral deliberation, choice and accountability on the part of the researchers throughout the research process (Edwards and Mauthner, 2002, p.16, cited in King and Horrocks, 2010, p.16).

This section provides a brief discussion on a range of ethical issues surrounding social research. This discussion describes the role of gatekeepers in gaining access to research participants, informed consent and issues of power between the researcher and the researched. The issues raised here provide important context for the discussion (later in this chapter) about the research process, where these ethical considerations will be drawn upon when describing (in detail) how I went about accessing, gaining and interviewing the participants that made up my 'sample'.

Homan (1991) talks about the role of gatekeepers in social research in that they control access to the field and in some cases (where they have a legal responsibility) have to be approached in a formal way. King and Horrocks (2010, p.31) talk about

insider assistance where 'such a person might identify organisational members who meet the sampling criteria of the study, pass project information sheets and letters requesting participation to them, and forward queries to the research team'.

Homan (1991, p.69) also draws upon the notion of informed consent, another crucial consideration in social research:

> The essence of the principle of informed consent is that the human subjects of research should be allowed to agree or refuse to participate in the light of comprehensive information concerning the nature and purpose of the research.

The notion of informed consent implies that the subject has a right to withdraw from the research at any time if they so wish. Lastly, and in some senses, most importantly is the ethical issue of anonymity in social research. As Walford (2005, p.83-4) argues:

> It is almost an unquestioned belief that anonymity for individuals and research sites should be the standard ethical practice for educational research…At root, it simply means that we do not name the person or the research site involved but, in research, it is usually extended to mean that we do not include information about any individual or research site to be identified by others.

Issues of power in interpretive, interview-based studies (Wengraf, 2001; Kvale, 2006) are also important to consider. For example Kvale (2006) refers to the power imbalances that exist between the interviewer and interviewee and as such 'the research interview is not a dominance-free dialogue between equal partners' (Kvale,

2006, p.484). Highlighting the notion of power, Kvale (2006, p.485) also presents the idea of the interviewer as holding a monopoly of interpretation where:

> …the research interviewer, as the "big interpreter," maintains exclusive privilege to interpret and report what the interviewee really meant and to frame what an interviewee says in his or her own theoretical schemes.

Whilst ethical issues such as accessing the research sample, informed consent and anonymity are obviously fundamental in social research, Brinkmann and Kvale (2005, p.178) draw upon Geertz (1973) proposing the value of learning and maintaining the art of thick ethical description.

> Learning to describe particulars thickly…is about learning to see and judge rather than learning to universalize or calculate. Interestingly, the art of thick ethical description is similar to what the good (in a nonmoral sense) qualitative researcher should master in order to produce new, insightful knowledge about the human condition.

Not unlike many of the other authors who talk about the importance of context and detail (Roethlisberger and Dickson, 1939; Bryman, 2001; Lewis and Ritchie, 2003; Snape and Spencer, 2003), in relation to a number of issues surrounding interpretive research, Brinkmann and Kvale (2005) propose the value of contextualising and narrativising data, in order to maintain thick ethical description.

3.7 Grounded Approaches to theory generation

A final point to be made about the methodology of the current research is that, while the interviews relied on a biographical-chronological structure, the research otherwise took what might be described as a grounded approach to data analysis (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Glaser, 1992, Walker and Myrick, 2006; Thomas, 2011). Glaser and Strauss's (1967) conception of grounded theory, proposes that (in its most simplistic form) that the discovery of theory comes from data (or that the theory is grounded in its data). Glaser (1992) talks about the conceptualisation of data as being important in the success of grounded theory. Not unlike this, Thomas (2011), in a practical sense, encapsulates the idea of what he terms drawing out theory from data:

> …You are doing more than simply describing – more than painting a picture. Rather you are analysing and synthesising and already constructing potential explanations for your forthcoming findings....Drawing out 'theory' isn't just about making links to 'big' theory, it is about making connections, identifying issues and offering reasoned explanations... Links and associated ideas will have occurred to you throughout your research, and when you discuss your findings, you tie up issues, cement connections, and make explicit the clusters of ideas in your work and that of others. These connections may be to existing bodies of knowledge or models of explanation, or even to formalised 'theory', or they may be to points of interest...you articulate continuing paradoxes, or perhaps offer tentative explanations for differences that continue to exist between your own analysis and that of the literature. All of this generalising process is the drawing out of theory.

Many of the issues portrayed in the previous sections (3.6 and 3.7) will be addressed in the following sections of this chapter (3.8.1 to 3.8.7 and 3.9) when describing (in detail) the practical elements of this research study. A detailed account of the research process will be described from inception through to data analysis highlighting how the methodological approaches drawn upon in this thesis (talked about previously in this chapter) are translated into the practical, step by step, methods that were conducted as part of this study.

3.8.1 Research methods

The first part of this chapter (sections 3.8.1 to 3.8.7) has reflected on methodological issues, debates and challenges. The remainder of the chapter recounts the methods used to access participants, and generate and analyse data. In doing so, it draws attention to the fluidity of interpretive/ qualitative design, and the ways in which the processes of accessing and negotiating field sites and participants encouraged constant rethinking and refinement of the research design.

Firstly, a summary of the research design/sample is discussed (with regard to a brief look at the make-up of the 'sample'), with a reflection on the possible implications for the study. The second part of the discussion (section 3.8.3) draws upon the change in focus of the research study, which became apparent during the initial stages of the data collection phase of the research process, in that the scope of the research needed to be broadened to take account of the more diverse sample in relation to their pre-HE entry routes.

Section 3.8.4 provides a detailed account of how the research 'sample' was accessed, with regard to gaining access to the participants (and indeed the institutions) and the processes that were followed to achieve the final 'sample'. Section 3.8.5 talks about the make-up of the research 'sample' (participants) in more detail, with respect to their pre-HE pathways, their HE programmes, their stage of study (at the time of interview). Section 3.8.6 provides a contextual account of the research settings and highlights a range of quantitative analyses which look at the participating HE institutions within the context of the analyses of the overall HE sector (see sections 2.7.1 and 2.7.2). Finally, section 3.8.7 investigates (in detail) the data collection phase of the research process (the interviews), including for example, issues around interview timings, data recording and ethical concerns such as gaining informed consent. Section 3.9 talks about the data analysis stage of the research and the process of theory development.

3.8.2 The participants

It is worth noting here at the outset about how the 'sample' (the participants in this study) was selected on an 'opportunistic' or 'convenience' basis. As a researcher, I was also reliant on gate-keepers and the processes of gaining contact with them (and indeed the potential participants) were sometimes very slow. This, in some senses, explains the uneven make-up of the participants and the shift away from the purely vocational theme (see section 3.8.3).

The design of this research was cross-sectional and interview-based. It comprised in-depth 'biographical' interviews with nineteen participants (of which twelve were

female and seven were male) across five different institutions (two Russell Group and two post-1992 universities and one FE College). Ten of the participants were students at Russell Group institutions (nine at Brightown and one at Nightown) with a further seven of the participants on programmes at post-1992 institutions (four at Newtown and three at Westside). The remaining two participants in the sample were (at the time of interview) on FE programmes (Access to HE), with the intention of entering HE in the near future. The programmes that the participants had followed prior to entry to university (their pre-HE pathways) were also diverse. Almost half of the participants in the 'sample' (nine out of nineteen), had followed 'Access' or 'Access Type' pathways. Six of the participants had not followed an educational pathway (immediately prior to HE entry) and were coming straight from employment, or in many cases, while still following professional pathways. Three of the remainder of the sample followed more traditional 'A' level programmes. Finally, the remaining individual in the 'sample' entered HE directly from a purely vocational pathway.

So what types of programmes were the participants engaged in, once in HE?

Seven of the participants (of the seventeen who were in HE at the time of interview) were on undergraduate degree programmes connected with the social sciences, such as those connected for example with Education, Teaching and Counselling. Five of the participants (who had all entered HE from professional pathways) were studying on professional and specialist, industry-based, HE diploma programmes. Two of the participants were studying on sport-based, undergraduate degree programmes and a further two were on Humanities undergraduate degree programmes. Finally, one of the participants was studying on a science-based degree programme. A more detailed discussion of their pre-HE pathways and

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programmes of study in HE will be drawn upon later in this chapter (see section 3.8.5).

The participants, at the time of interview (in both their HE and FE settings), were at different stages of their educational programmes. Five were on the first year of their three-year degree programmes, two more were on the second year, and the remaining twelve were on the final year of their programmes. Out of the twelve that were on the final year of their respective programmes, five were on three year degree programmes, five were on two-year courses and the other two were on one year programmes (Access to HE). A more definitive picture of the individual participants' pre-HE pathways, programmes of study in HE and the stage that they were at on their programme (at the time of interview) is provided in figure 9 (see section 3.8.5 of this thesis). Over a period of approximately eighteen months (spring 2008 – autumn 2009), each of the nineteen participants was interviewed once (lasting approximately thirty five to forty-five minutes) and two of the participants were also interviewed as part of the pilot interviewing process at the beginning of the data collection period.

Upon reflection, the opportunistic approach that was used in order to recruit participants for the study had implications for my research, in that it highlighted some imbalances. Firstly (due to the opportunistic approach used), some institutions accounted for a much larger proportion of the sample than other institutions. An example of this is highlighted by the fact that The University of Brightown accounted for almost half of the participants (nine out of nineteen), when compared with The University of Nightown, which only had one participant in the 'sample'. Whilst there are an equal number of 'old' (Russell Group) and 'new' (post-1992) universities in the

sample (two of each), this is slightly skewed in the sample, in that ten of the seventeen participants (who at the time of interview were on HE programmes) were at 'old' universities (Brightown and Nightown), compared with seven at the 'new' universities of Newtown and Westside.

The 'sample' also reflects the participants' engagement on a variety of different courses (from sports-based undergraduate programmes to more traditional subjects like history); with regard to the types of subjects they were studying. However, the 'sample' included an imbalance in that five (out of a total of nineteen) of the participants were studying on a vocationally-oriented programme (University Diploma in Food Safety). So, not only were over a quarter of the sample studying on one particular programme at one institution (Brightown), it was interesting to highlight that this type of programme (distance-learning and vocationally-oriented) was also fairly atypical in elite HE (Russell Group universities). With this in mind the experiences of these participants (four of whom were characterised as enrichers) will undoubtedly be different to those on more traditional, full-time, undergraduate programmes and may account for their different experiences of HE (see section 5.8.1 and 5.8.2) highlighted in this thesis. The majority of the HE programmes (that the participants were engaged on) were quite non-traditional courses (e.g. Applied Golf Management, Food Safety and Food Legislation). The 'vocational' nature of these programmes for instance, may have made them more likely to (in the interview) talk more explicitly in respect of their work ambitions and (in some cases) their work histories.

The sample (also as a result of the opportunistic approach) does not accurately reflect the ethnic diversity of the HE sector, or indeed the institutions in the study, in

that I was only able to recruit one student from an ethnic minority background. Unwittingly, I realise that my choices of institutions (and the skewed nature of my 'sample', highlighted previously) may have unintentionally limited (in relation to other universities) the number of potential research participants that would be able to be recruited from ethnic minority backgrounds. The lack of ethnic diversity in this research sample had an impact upon the findings of the research, in that it was not possible to say anything concrete about the experiences of ethnic minority students, within the context of the aims and argument of this thesis

3.8.3 A change in focus

In its infancy, the research study upon which this thesis is predicated began life as a project which intended to tap into a relatively under-researched phenomenon and investigate the experiences and identities of students who had entered HE, or were about to enter HE via 'pure' vocational pathways. By 'pure' vocational pathways, I am referring to the pre-HE vocational programmes/pathways such as BTEC National Diploma, GNVQ, NVQ, AVCE and so on. However, the process of research rarely runs smoothly and it became apparent after spending a lot of time and effort trying to negotiate access to individuals from these particular educational pathways that the scope of the research focus had to be broadened. In a sense, the research project morphed from a study which had intended to focus on individuals from 'pure' vocational backgrounds into a study which investigated the student experience(s) of those from differing backgrounds, both in the sense of their 'classed' locations, and in their contrasting pre-HE pathways, namely the academic, vocational and professional routes that they encountered before university. As such, there was an

arguable 'shift' in the definition of vocationalism (in relation to this thesis), from one of pure vocationalism to a broader definition which encompassed notions of widening participation, mature entrants and their school and work histories.

Widening the scope of the research study came with its own challenges. Although opening up the scope of the sample had the advantage of being able to access a greater and therefore, more suitable number of participants, there were further implications, which were not obvious at this early stage. Broadening the scope of the research sample meant there would be issues surrounding claims to originality in the analysis of my data. This is due to a significant body of research into the student experience(s) of 'non-traditional' and/or 'non-standard' students over the past three or four decades, which has largely focused on Access pathways (for example Woodrow, 1988; Brennan, 1989; Wagner, 1989; McFadden, 1995; Bourgeois *et al*, 1999; Warmington, 2002; Leathwood and Hutchings, 2003), which are described in more detail in Chapter Two. In contrast, there is a relative paucity of research into the experiences of those from 'pure' vocational backgrounds and therefore, this research was intending to, and would have, contributed to a relatively under-researched field. Unwittingly however, because of the difficulties that arose in gaining a suitable research sample (concerning the access to suitable participants from 'pure' vocational backgrounds), the task of contributing significant originality to the field of widening participation research in this thesis, became increasingly more complex.

3.8.4 Accessing the research sample

This section discusses (in detail) the process of accessing the final research sample for the study upon which this thesis is predicated. At the outset, a number of different universities and FE colleges were approached (approximately fifteen in total) in order to ascertain whether they would be prepared to assist me in my data collection phase of my research. Originally, I selected a number of places to approach, based on accessibility in respect of their location and also where I had developed contacts through my academic life.

After making initial contact (and in some cases having face-to-face meetings) with senior members of staff in these institutions it became apparent that many felt unable or unwilling to get involved. In some cases, they appeared willing to help, but were unable to gain any suitable participants. In the end, five institutions were involved (to varying degrees, according to the number of participants) in the study which ranged from the Russell Group universities of Brightown and Nightown to the post-1992 universities of Newtown and Westside. Finally, Chase College was the FE institution in the sample. Amongst my original selection of institutions, I tried to gain a similar number of different types of institutions (old and new universities), so as to provide a more accurate representation of the HE sector.

Further details of these institutions are provided later in this chapter (see section 3.8.6). Whilst access had ultimately been granted to undertake research within these institutions, the recruitment of willing participants still proved to be problematic. In consultation with a contact representative at each participating institution a number of different approaches were employed to advertise the research study, such as the placement of posters within university buildings, email flyers through, and from

university representative(s) and through word of mouth at internal events such as lectures and seminars.

With this in mind, it was sometimes necessary to access the prospective participants via gatekeepers. Across the different institutions, gatekeepers were involved in various capacities. At both Brightown and Nightown a senior member of staff involved in outreach and widening participation acted as an initial gatekeeper to the field. In the case of Brightown, I was able to access participants through a number of other gatekeepers (who were informed about the study by the initial contact), who were generally course tutors, and knew of, or were able to recruit, suitable students who could take part in the research study. This was similar to what happened (in relation to the recruiting of participants) at Westside and Chase (and in some of the cases, Newtown), in that the accessing of potential interviewees was controlled through an initial gatekeeper, who then provided access to the field, by providing me with the details of members of staff (for example course tutors) who could act as further gatekeepers and in a sense, provide insider assistance (King and Horrocks, 2010) to gain a selection of suitable participants for this study. The one participant who was accessed at Nightown was recruited simply by the university representative through the use of email flyers sent directly to students.

The 'sample' that was gained at Newtown was derived from a mixture of recruitment via email flyers and the use of further gatekeepers. For example two of the participants in the final sample were accessed after an initial meeting between me and the head of one of the pre-HE programmes that was followed by them, prior to HE entry. At the interview process itself a further gatekeeper (one of the tutors on the participants' pre-HE, Access-Type programme) requested to sit in on the interview

process because of their relationship with the two students and their interest in the study. Both parties (the researcher and the participants) were amenable to facilitate this and, upon reflection, it was perhaps understandable that the tutor wished to be involved to protect the interests of those being studied. As Slack and Vigurs (2006, p.13) have commented:

> …the gatekeeper may be reluctant to leave the researcher and participant alone, as, having built up a relationship of trust with the individual, they may be concerned that they are exposing the participant to potential risk…

I was aware, as a result of this understandable intervention, that (in the case of these two participants) the biographical interviews and the stories that they told about their lives may have been slightly distorted, in that they may have felt inhibited to say what they actually felt. Throughout their interviews however, it became apparent the type of relationship that the participants had with their tutor, with regard to issues of trust and friendship. As such, I was more confident that there would not be any negative impact to the research as a result of the presence (in the interview) of a gatekeeper. As researchers, we can feel more confident about the possibly of negative impact, through the use of gatekeepers, by developing positive relationships and trust at the outset of any research inquiry. Trust was formed with the gatekeepers in this research study, through initial project meetings and subsequent communications, throughout the period of data collection.

3.8.5 Diverse Participants?

Section 3.8.4 highlighted the processes involved in accessing the research 'sample'. The following discussion talks (in more detail than was provided in 3.8.2) about the diversity of the research 'sample'. We know from the introduction to this thesis (Chapter One) that the sample is 'diverse', with regard to the social backgrounds of the participants. The sample in this study is also diverse (and thus different to other studies) in that the participants span a wide range of ages (upon entry to HE), where often studies in widening participation have focused on solely 'young' (see for example Archer and Hutchings, 2000; Brooks, 2002, 2003, 2004) *or* 'mature' participants (see for example Reay, 2002: 2003a; Reay *et al*, 2002; Tett, 2004; Bufton, 2006). Perhaps unsurprisingly, given the pre-HE backgrounds and pathways of the participants (which are analysed in Chapters Four, Five and Six), the large majority of the sample (fourteen out of nineteen) are regarded as mature students (in that they are 21 years of age or over, upon entry to HE). Of the mature students five were (upon entry to HE) in their twenties (Carly, Claire, Katie, Leanne and Paula), four were in their thirties (Gill, Lindsay, Terry and William) and five were in their forties (Joe, Julie, Robert, Simon and Sue). The broad range of the ages of the participants in the study helps to contextualise the study and, in some senses, helps us to understand their biographical experiences in their social, professional and educational lives. The gender split in the 'sample' of those that were in HE (ten out of seventeen) was fairly representative of the gender mix in HE (see figure 8 in section 2.7.2), in that based on acceptances to HE in 2008, almost fifty-six percent were female.

However, the diversity of the 'sample' does not end there. The 'diversity' of the sample encompassed other different aspects, in that firstly, the participants had entered HE (or were about to enter HE) from a range of different routes or pre-HE pathways, in both educational and professional contexts. So what was so diverse about the participants' pre-HE pathways?

Nine of the participants (Carly, Claire, Gill, Julie, Katie, Leanne, Lindsay, Paula and Sue), which amounted to almost half of the whole sample of nineteen, had entered (or were entering) HE from Access or 'Access Type' pathways. As discussed previously (section 2.3 of this thesis), these pathways were specifically designed for individuals from backgrounds previously under-represented in HE, such as those from working-class and ethnic minority backgrounds (cf. Woodrow, 1988; Bourgeois *et al*, 1999; Leathwood and Hutchings, 2003) What was interesting is that over half of these participants (Carly, Gill, Julie, Lindsay and Paula) inverted the usual archetypes of Access participants, in that their biographies suggested that they were from more middle-class backgrounds and arguably were not the type of participants that Access Courses were originally intended for.

Six of the participants in this study (Joe, Karl, Robert, Simon, Terry and William) also entered HE from professional pathways (in other words straight from employment). Four of these participants (Joe, Robert, Simon and Terry) represented a back to front trajectory of HE participation, in that they had entered HE after successful careers (see section 5.4 of this thesis). Three of the remaining four participants in the 'sample' (Joanna, Sunita and Tina) had followed (directly prior to HE entry) either at school or FE College, traditional 'A' level programmes. The last participant (Fraser)

entered HE, through a vocational route, namely a BTEC National Diploma and was the type of participant that the original focus of this research was centred upon.

Once in HE, the participants were engaged on a diverse range of programmes or courses (in respect of the various subjects that were being studied). Many, if not all of the participants were on programmes in HE, which were specifically chosen in an instrumental sense, in that they were oriented (in some senses heavily) towards the types of jobs and careers they wished to pursue beyond graduation. Particularly good examples of these were the educational subject-based programmes such as those studied by Julie and Sue (Joint Honours Special Needs and Inclusion Studies with Educational Studies), Lindsay and William (Primary Education) and Sunita (Childhood, Culture and Education). Other programmes heavily oriented towards future careers were the Nursing degree programme studied by Paula, the specialist sports-based programmes studied by Fraser and Joanna (Applied Golf Management Studies and Sport, Physical Education and Community Studies respectively) and the industry-based programme studied on by Joe, Karl, Robert, Simon and Terry (University Diploma in Food Safety and Food Legislation).

The other participants (in HE) were following programmes which would (in more broad senses) prepare them for a broader range of careers. Claire and Tina were following humanities programmes (Social Welfare and History respectively) and Carly and Leanne (Psychology and Counselling). So, in some senses, the types of subjects the participants were studying were indeed, quite diverse, but that these diverse courses were instrumentally linked to their future careers and employment opportunities.

The 'sample' was also diverse in that the participants were studying in HE on different types of qualification and through different modes of study. For example five of the participants (Joe, Karl, Robert, Simon and Terry) were studying on two-year, University Diploma programmes, which were delivered through the mode of distance learning. This type of delivery enabled them all to pursue HE qualifications, alongside continuing their professional roles. The remainder of the participants (those already in HE) were all on traditional, three-year, full-time honours degree programmes.

The final diverse element of the sample was that the participants were studying on programmes at different institutions and, in particular, different types of institutions ('old' and 'new' universities). Eleven of the seventeen participants that were in HE (at the time of interview) were studying at the 'old', elite (Russell Group) universities of Brightown and Nightown. The remaining six participants in HE were studying at the 'new' (post-1992) universities of Newtown and Westside. What is interesting is that several of the participants (in particular those previously highlighted on the industry-based, distance learning programme at Brightown) were studying on this type of programme and through this particular mode of delivery, at an elite institution, in that vocational oriented programmes tended to be more concentrated (pre-1992) in the polytechnics and were more prevalent in the 'new' post-1992 universities. What this shows is the diversity of participants in HE, has led to universities (in particular the more elite institutions) having to think about offering a more diverse curriculum, in relation to providing more industry specific programmes to forge, even more closely, links between HE and employment.

The diversity highlighted in the research sample (upon which this thesis is predicated), in the participants broadness with regard to their age, pre-HE pathways, HE programmes, modes of study and the type of institutions they are studying at, in some senses depict the changing landscape of HE, in that the university sector is also characterised by a 'diverse' population of students who come from different social backgrounds and pre-HE pathways. Once in HE, they also study on a range of different programmes and through a variety of modes of delivery (full-time, part-time, distance learning). Figure 9 (page 141) provides a detailed summary of the participants' pre-HE pathways, programmes of study in HE and the stage they were (at the time of interview).

The data collection phase (the process of interviewing) is discussed in great detail later in this chapter (see section 3.8.7). However, the following discussion (section 3.8.6) provides some additional context in this thesis, in the sense that it describes the research sites that were accessed in this study and their overall context within the HE sector (in relation to the widening participation concerns of this thesis).

Figure 9: Participant Pre-HE Pathways, HE Programmes and stage of course

Participant/Institution (Pseudonym)	Pre-HE pathway	HE programme	Year
Carly (Newtown)	Access Type	Bachelors in Psychology and Counselling	Third
Claire (Newtown)	Access to HE	Bachelors Social Welfare	First
Fraser (Brightown)	BTEC Vocational	Bachelors Applied Golf Management Studies	Third
Gill (Chase)	Access to HE	Not applicable	One Year
Joe (Brightown)	Professional	University Diploma in Food Safety and Food Legislation	Second (Final)
Joanna (Brightown)	'A' levels	Bachelors Sport, Physical Education and Community Studies	First
Julie (Westside)	Access to HE	Bachelors Joint Special Needs and Inclusion Studies with Education Studies	Third
Karl (Brightown)	Professional	University Diploma in Food Safety and Food Legislation	Second (Final)
Katie (Chase)	Access to HE	Not applicable	One Year
Leanne (Newtown)	Access Type	Bachelors in Psychology and Counselling	Second
Lindsay (Newtown)	Access to HE	Bachelors Primary Education (Qualified Teacher Status)	Third
Paula (Nightown)	Access to HE	Bachelors Nursing	First
Robert (Brightown)	Professional	University Diploma in Food Safety and Food Legislation	Second (Final)
Simon (Brightown)	Professional	University Diploma in Food Safety and Food Legislation	Second (Final)
Sue (Westside)	Access to HE	Bachelors Joint Special Needs and Inclusion Studies with Education Studies	Second
Sunita (Brightown)	'A' levels	Bachelors Childhood, Culture and Education	First
Terry (Brightown)	Professional	University Diploma in Food Safety and Food Legislation	Second (Final)
Tina (Brightown)	'A' levels	Bachelors History	First
William (Westside)	Professional	Bachelors Early Childhood Studies	Third

3.8.6 The Research Settings

This section provides a description of the research settings within the context of both the overall UK HE sector and widening participation. The discussion provides a biography of the five institutions and then, using available quantitative data, describes them in the context of widening participation.

The **University of Brightown** is a Russell Group institution, based in the Midlands with a large population of approximately 25,000 students. Nine of the students interviewed in the sample came from this institution. The University of Brightown is a research intensive institution and attracts a large amount of research funding from a variety of sources, both national and international. Brightown has been at the forefront of learning in the United Kingdom since the beginning of the 20th Century and has a wide range of strengths ranging from Psychology, Education and the Arts, through to Medicine and the Sciences. The University of Brightown attracts students from a wide geographical area, as well as benefitting from a large number of international students. The University is almost exclusively located on one large campus. Based on available data shown in figures 10 and 11 (see pages 145-6) in 2008, approximately eleven per cent of undergraduate entrants were mature and approximately twenty-three per cent of 'young' students came from 'working-class' backgrounds.

The **University of Nightown** is a Russell Group University and is located in a large city in the Midlands and has been in existence since the end of the 19th Century. One of the students interviewed in the sample came from this institution. It has a very large, diverse population in excess of 35,000 students, across a number of different campuses. Students come from a wide geographical area, including a large

proportion from outside the United Kingdom. The University of Nightown is renowned nationally and internationally for its academic quality and is a research intensive institution, attracting large amounts of research funding, across a wide range of expertise. Based on available data shown in figures 10 and 11 (see pages 145-6) in 2008, approximately fourteen per cent of undergraduate entrants were mature and approximately nineteen per cent of 'young' students came from working-class backgrounds, a statistic which has been the result of a drive to recruit students from 'non-traditional' backgrounds.

The **University of Newtown** is a post -1992 institution, one of the former colleges of HE, and is located in a medium sized town in the west of the United Kingdom, across two separate campuses. A total of four students in the sample were interviewed at this institution. The institution recruits approximately a third of its intake is from the local and surrounding areas. The university benefits from international links and as a result, has a large proportion of international students. Although not a large institution, the University of Newtown has a student population numbering approximately 10,000. Newtown, like many of its post–1992 counterparts, is primarily a teaching institution, with strengths in curriculum areas such as teacher training and Art and Design, although it is looking to increase its research profile across different specialist areas. The University of Newtown has a strong widening participation ethos and it is at the heart of the institutions' mission. Based on available data shown in figures 10 and 11 (see pages 145-6) in 2008, approximately thirty-three per cent of undergraduate entrants were mature and approximately forty-five per cent of 'young' students came from working-class backgrounds.

Westside University is a post-1992 University and is located in a medium sized city in the Midlands. The institution is set across a number of different campuses across the region and caters for a large population in excess of 20,000 students. Westside has an important role in the local area and recruits over 70% of its students from nearby, making it truly a local university. Westside University, like the other post-1992 universities, is primarily a teaching institution, but has some research capacity across different areas of the curriculum. Based on available data shown in figures 10 and 11 (see pages 145-6) in 2008, approximately thirty-eight per cent of undergraduate entrants were mature and approximately fifty-four per cent of 'young' students came from working-class backgrounds. Three of the students in the sample were interviewed at this institution.

Chase College is a FE College, located in a medium sized conurbation in the Midlands. Two of the students in the sample were interviewed at this institution. The college offers a wide range of vocational and academic programmes from BTEC National Diplomas and Access Courses, through to 'A' Levels. Chase College is located on a number of campuses across the area and has a student population numbering approximately 12,000.

Figures 10, 11 and 12 illuminate various features of the student population at the HE institutions in my sample, namely, the pre-1992 Russell Group institutions of Brightown and Nightown and the post-1992 universities of Newtown and Westside. Figure 10 (see page 145) highlights the proportion of 'mature' admissions to HE and this analysis on the four institutions in the research sample suggests that although the pre-1992 Russell Group Universities of Brightown and Nightown have relatively few numbers of 'mature' students, the proportion of their total undergraduate intakes

in 2006 stood at approximately twelve and ten per cent respectively. This compares with the proportion of 'mature' admissions to Russell Group universities which in 2006, was approximately seven per cent. Conversely, the post-1992 universities of Newtown and Westside, which based on 2006 data had approximately thirty-six and thirty per cent respectively, showed higher proportions of 'mature' students than the post-1992 universities as a group (for whom the proportion of mature students was approximately twenty-four per cent).

Figure 10: Admissions to HE by Individual Institutions in sample and age sector 2002 -2010

Institution	type	2002 TOTAL	2003 TOTAL	2004 TOTAL	2005 TOTAL	2006 TOTAL	2007 TOTAL	2008 TOTAL	2009 TOTAL	2010 TOTAL
The University Of Brightown	MATURE	503	572	621	612	611	590	631	673	623
		8.91%	10.54%	11.00%	11.65%	11.61%	11.16%	10.89%	11.70%	11.37%
The University Of Brightown Total Students		5,646	5,429	5,648	5,253	5,263	5,289	5,793	5,751	5,480
The University Of Nightown	MATURE	311	413	432	517	563	458	1,078	1,095	1,074
		5.59%	7.58%	7.92%	8.82%	9.52%	7.81%	14.26%	14.88%	15.57%
The University Of Nightown Total Students		5,559	5,452	5,457	5,865	5,916	5,861	7,560	7,358	6,898
Newtown University	MATURE	429	365	433	453	432	331	389	530	579
		40.86%	39.12%	42.16%	34.53%	35.56%	30.76%	33.22%	37.06%	37.92%
Newtown University Total Students		1,050	933	1,027	1,312	1,215	1,076	1,171	1,430	1,527
Westside University	MATURE	1,386	1,419	1,252	1,165	1,117	1,268	1,618	2,018	1,581
		36.26%	35.24%	31.90%	28.90%	29.60%	32.20%	37.53%	37.27%	35.66%
Westside University Total Students		3,822	4,027	3,925	4,031	3,774	3,938	4,311	5,415	4,433

Source: UCAS (2012) with further analysis

The analysis of HESA (The Higher Education Statistics Agency) data in figures 11 and 12 (see pages 146-7), depicts the HE participation rates of 'young' and 'mature' students at the institutions in this research study. Figures 11 and 12 only include data up to 2008 and 2005 respectively due to changes in the way data was measured and reported. Figure 11 highlights the participation rate of 'young' students from NS-SEC (National Statistics Socio-Economic Classification) groups 4, 5, 6 and 7 for the period between 2002 and 2008 and compares them against the overall rate for all UK HE institutions. The analysis shows that the pre-1992, Russell Group institutions of Brightown and Nightown have lower proportions of students

entering from lower social class groups (NS-SEC groups 4-7) than the post-1992 Universities of Newtown and Westside, who recruited approximately half of their students from these lower social class backgrounds. Figure 12 highlights the participation rate of 'mature' students who have entered HE with no previous university experience and from low-participation neighbourhoods. Because of the inconsistent nature of the indicators used to depict participation of 'young' and 'mature' students, it would be impossible to infer any accurate comparisons or distinctions with respect to social class. However, the analysis of 'mature' students (figure 12) follows a similar trend to the participation of 'young' students shown in figure 11, where the proportions of 'mature' students from low-participation neighbourhoods, are higher in those who have entered the post-1992 institutions of Newtown and Westside.

Figure 11: Percentage of admissions to HE of 'young' students from Socio-Economic (NS-SEC) Groups 4,5,6 and 7 as a proportion of total 'young' students by Institutions in Sample 2002-2008

Institution/Year	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008
The University of Brightown	22.1	22.6	21.6	20.0	22.1	21.0	23.3
The University of Nightown	16.9	16.2	15.7	16.9	17.4	17.8	19.1
Westside University	51.3	49.4	50.9	50.4	51.6	52.0	53.8
The University of Newtown	43.2	42.3	40.4	39.3	38.2	36.9	45.0
TOTAL UK	29.1	29.2	28.7	29.8	30.3	30.1	33.1

Source: HESA (2009) with further analysis
Please note: HESA data is based upon actual entrants to HE

The analysis in figures 11 and 12 therefore resonate with the assertions made by a variety of authors (also described in Chapter Two), such as Reay *et al* (2001: 2005), Baker and Brown (2007) and Crozier *et al* (2008), who suggest that students from 'non-traditional' backgrounds, for example, those who are mature or working-class, are far more likely to study at post-1992 institutions. Despite these common

constructions of 'non-traditional' students, such as those who are mature or from 'working-class' backgrounds being more likely to inhabit the post-1992 institutions, a number of the participants in this research study, a number of the participants (ten out of nineteen) confounded this archetype and entered the prestigious Russell Group institutions of Brightown and Nightown.

Figure 12: Percentage of admissions to HE of 'mature' students from low participation neighbourhoods with no previous HE experience as a proportion of total 'mature' students by Institutions in Sample (2002-2005)

Institution/Year	2002	2003	2004	2005
The University of Brightown	22.1	22.6	21.6	20.0
The University of Nightown	16.9	16.2	15.7	16.9
Westside University	51.3	49.4	50.9	50.4
The University of Newtown	43.2	42.3	40.4	39.3
TOTAL UK	29.1	29.2	28.7	29.8

Source: HESA (2009) with further analysis
Please note: HESA data is based upon actual entrants to HE and that only figures till 2005 are used here due to a change in the method of measurement used by HESA

3.8.7 The interview process

This section talks about the data collection process in detail and systematically looks at three different aspects of the interview process. Firstly, the discussion highlights the importance of the structure of the interview and how the questions informed the three-stage, chronological and biographical approach to describe the participants' journeys towards gaining the 'piece of paper'. Secondly, this section talks about the step-by step processes that were involved in the physical interviews themselves. The discussion also refers to the ethical considerations of social research interviews that needed to be taken into account when interviewing the participants in this study.

So how were the interviews structured and what types of questions were asked?

Before the physical interviews were conducted, a draft schedule of questions was developed, in order to provide a certain amount of structure to the interviews themselves (in that all the participants were asked virtually the same types of questions). It was decided that the biographical interviews should be structured in such a way that would make the analysis of the transcripts as straightforward as was possible. The schedule of questions (see appendix 1 for an example of this) was designed as a broad guide, in order to give a chronological structure to the biographical interviews, in that participants could, in a sense, tell their life stories and educational, professional and social journeys up to the point of interview. As such the interview questions were framed, so that I could understand firstly their early experiences (compulsory schooling, FE, work and 'rejections' of HE) and their turning points, in other words, the points in their lives where they realised that they needed to gain the 'piece of paper'. The interview questions were then framed around their pre-HE experiences, and attempted to elicit the participants' experiences of their diverse pre-HE pathways and subsequently, their HE choices. Finally, the questions considered the more recent (to the time of interview) experiences of the participants, regarding their experiences of HE itself.

The three-stage biographical approach to structuring the interviews (early experiences, pre-HE experiences and HE experiences) proved to be a useful vehicle to help the participants tell their stories and then for me, as the researcher, to reconstruct these stories through the analysis of their interview transcripts.

So what about the interview process itself?

As was highlighted earlier in this chapter (see section 3.8.4), deriving the research sample was a lengthy, time consuming and fragmented process. As such, the data

collection phase of the research process (conducting the interviews) began before the whole research 'sample' was finally determined. With the exception of the two pilot interviews, that were undertaken in the summer of 2007, the data collection phase (the research interviews) started in spring 2008 and was completed in the autumn of 2009. Therefore, the data collection phase (the process of undertaking research interviews) was disjointed, in that I was unable to complete all the data collection, in a shorter, pre-defined, period. However, making the best out of the situation and once access was granted, I arranged (via gatekeepers in the majority of cases) to conduct an interview with each of the nineteen participants. Each of the nineteen interviews (along with two pilot interviews) was carried out between spring 2008 and autumn 2009 across the five different research settings (see section 3.8.6). The interviews physically took place (with assistance from university staff) in locations that were familiar to the participants (in the majority of cases within their departments or university buildings). As was briefly mentioned in section 3.8.2, and highlighted in figure 9 (see page 141), the participants were, at the time of interview, at different stages of their respective HE and in two cases, FE programmes of study.

Before each interview actually commenced, I took account of the ethical dimensions which are crucial in social research. Firstly, I explained both verbally and in written format, the notion of informed consent and also their right to withdraw from the process at any stage. A brief summary of the research was given to the participants (for information sheet supplied see Appendix 2) and it was felt that this would provide them with a clearer understanding of the types of topics that I wanted to cover in the interview and that as a consequence, they were able to make a more informed decision about whether they wanted to continue with the process.

Prior to the interviews, it was also emphasised that the participants would remain anonymous (in that their names and their institutions would be replaced with pseudonyms) in this thesis. The same assurances of anonymity (with reference to the both the participants and institutions in this study), were also given at an earlier stage of the research process to the gatekeepers in this study, allaying any concerns that they may have had. In agreement with Walford (2005), this thesis (through the anonymisation of individuals and institutions) preserved one of the most fundamental rights of the participants and their respective research sites, with respect to their right to not be named. During the interview process the importance of power imbalances (Kvale, 2006) was also recognised. The subsequent data analysis confirmed my role, in a sense, as the big interpreter (Kvale, 2006), in that I could (through the course of my analytical discussion) frame and interpret the views of the participants within the context of my overall theoretical argument in this thesis (the three class based, biographical categories of widening participation).

The schedule of interview questions was not distributed to the research participants beforehand. My reasoning behind this decision was that I did not want the participants to necessarily have prepared, or scripted answers. Rather, I wanted them to provide an account of their experiences, in relation to what they wanted to say, rather than what they thought I wanted to hear. Whilst Lang (2007) has commented upon the prior distribution of interview questions as a way of generating trust, I felt that describing the project and the types of issues I was looking to address, helped to promote trust between myself and the participants.

It was decided (mainly for accurate transcription purposes) that all of the interviews would be digitally recorded and, on each occasion, the participants were asked (at

the outset of the interview) if they minded and none of them objected to the use of recording equipment as a means of noting their responses. Extensive, hand-written notes were also taken in each of the interviews, in case of the failure of the audio recording equipment. Due to the fluid nature of interpretive, interview based, social research, none of the interviews was completely alike, and lasted for varying periods of time. Most of the interviews lasted approximately forty to fifty minutes, which allowed sufficient time for the participants to tell their 'life-stories', in educational, professional and social senses.

This section has provided a detailed account of the research process, with regard to accessing the sample, describing the sample (in relation to its diversity) and detailing the process of data collection, focusing on the structure of the interview, ethical considerations and the physical interview process itself. The next part of the discussion (section 3.9) talks about the second phase of the research process, looking at the data analysis and the development of theory in this thesis.

3.9 The Research process: Data Analysis and Theory Development

Analysis is a challenging and exciting stage of the qualitative research process. It requires a mix of creativity and systematic searching, a blend of inspiration and diligent detection. And although there will be a stage dedicated to analysis, the pathways to forming ideas to pursue, phenomena to capture, theories to test begins right at the start of a research study and ends while writing up the results. It is an inherent and ongoing part of qualitative research (Spencer *et al*, 2003, p.199).

The final section of this chapter discusses the research process with regard to data analysis and how, drawing upon the notion of grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Glaser, 1992; Walker and Myrick, 2006; Thomas, 2011) the data informed the development of the theory in this thesis. The straightforward and common-sense process of theorisation highlighted by Thomas (2011) earlier in this chapter (see section 3.7) in some senses, describes in a neat fashion the process of theory development in this thesis, in that my 'classed' based analysis is informed (through a grounded approach) by the data collected in the research interviews and has also drawn upon existing bodies of knowledge, such as the contemporary widening participation literature (Ball and Vincent, 1998; Ball *et al*, 2002; Reay *et al*, 2009: 2010) and as Thomas (2011) suggests, more formalised theory, such as the socio-cultural analyses of Pierre Bourdieu.

The process of data analysis started during the data collection phase, where shortly after the interviews, the audio transcripts were fully transcribed. I decided to do this myself so that I would be able to get 'close' to the data and gain a rich understanding of the social worlds of the chosen participants. Whilst the transcription process was very time consuming, I believed that it was the best approach to take. During these initial stages of data analysis (transcription of interviews), it became evident that the participants had shared (through the course of the interviews) a number of interesting and illuminating experiences, feelings and views and that these would feature in the subsequent analysis.

Upon initial analysis and reading of the interview transcripts, it became apparent that the data pointed towards a three stage biographical analysis in that it was possible from the participants' interview data to understand their social, educational and

professional worlds at three different stages. These of course, happened at various different stages of the life-course depending on the age at which the various interviewees in the sample decided to go to HE. The three stage analysis subsequently, at first, consisted of understanding the social worlds of the participants, with regard to their experiences of compulsory schooling, family, early FE and work, thus, in some senses, understanding many of the participants' decisions to reject HE at a younger age. Secondly, the analysis focused upon the participants decisions to return to education, in particular HE. This part of the analysis reflected on what many of the interviewees implied as turning points in their biographies, where they realised the importance of gaining the 'piece of paper' (the degree or HE qualification). This stage of the analysis also investigated the various experiences associated with preparation for HE and, drawing upon Bourdieu and more contemporary analysis (see for example Ball and Vincent, 1998; Ball *et al*, 2002), examined the complexity of the participants HE choices. Lastly, the more recent (at the time of interview) experiences and identities in HE were examined, looking at the transitions to university and in loose senses, notions of 'fitting-in' to HE. As has been highlighted the three stage biographical analysis informed, by using each participant's biography as a case in itself, a more thematic analysis in that a number of commonalities emerged, such as the instrumental value of HE (gaining the 'piece of paper') and issues surrounding pre-HE preparation and HE choices. The approach employed in this thesis, concerned with understanding and analysing the biographies of the participants, resonates with Waller's (2010) study which reflected upon the educational biographies and trajectories from schooling to HE of two mature women returners to education.

The biographical and thematic analysis informed the overarching theory that is the basis of the conceptual analysis in this thesis and it is worth reiterating at this stage. The theory that I have developed in this thesis, analyses the participants in this study, as three different types of 'widening participation' student and are understood in relation to their 'classed' biographies and that they are in HE (or about to go to HE) in order to gain the 'piece of paper'. The first group are for the purposes of this thesis, termed securers, who are, in some senses born into traditional middle-class contexts, in that they possess significant levels of cultural capital, which in a Bourdieuian sense, is inculcated or embodied into one's being, but do not, as yet, possess the 'piece of paper', which is part of the armoury of the middle-classes in twenty-first century Britain. Therefore the securers are, in some senses, looking to secure their middle-class identities, by gaining the 'piece of paper', or the symbolic capital associated with certification. Secondly are those who (at the time of interview) have entered, or are about to enter HE on the back of successful professional careers. These participants are characterised (for the purposes of this thesis) as enrichers. These participants view themselves as middle-class by dint of their significant levels of economic capital due to their professional successes, having being originally brought up in working-class contexts, and starting off in some senses, in working-class jobs and careers, much like the lads referred to by Willis (1977). These participants are pursuing HE to 'enrich' and shore up their middle-class identity and provide some kind of formal recognition for their previous success, in relation to gaining (through their HE participation) both the cultural capital (present in their more middle-class counterparts – the securers) and the symbolic capital that the 'piece of paper' embodies.

The third and final group is made up of participants who have been termed (for the purposes of this thesis), builders. These participants are essentially from working-class contexts, on whom much of the focus of widening participation research has concentrated upon in recent times. These interviewees are, like the other 'widening participation' groups, ultimately seeking the 'piece of paper', but also the various forms of cultural, social and economic capital that can be developed through HE participation, which are not already part of their identities.

So, how was the typology arrived at?

From the outset I developed biographical analyses from all of the interview transcripts. Following initial analysis, I identified a number of commonalities and differences between the interviews and there appeared to be three distinctive narrative shapes. These different narrative shapes were characterised by a number of salient features which suggested the similarities and differences between the interviews. Firstly, some of the interviewees described their backgrounds as being middle-class, but for a number of reasons, such as negative experiences of schooling and FE, they were unable to continue with their education (HE) at a young age. Secondly, some described the family pressures and indeed the expectations to take up employment upon leaving compulsory schooling. These participants however, also described their biographies as being characterised by relatively successful professional careers. Lastly, the remainder of the interviewees described their backgrounds as typically working-class and were, for example in six cases, first generation entrants to HE. These students are what we would understand as archetypal widening participation students over recent decades.

Therefore, the typology of three categories (the securers, enrichers and builders) was arrived at through my initial analysis of the data. In other words, I did not just impose these three categories; they were founded in the interview data.

The key features of the securers were that they were brought up in middle-class contexts, but that their formal education was curtailed due to a variety of circumstances, such as negative schooling experiences and family tensions. Therefore, the securers were not 'actively' rejecting; more that they were unable to continue with their education at a young age. The biographies of Julie and Lindsay, highlight, in different ways, how they represent examples of the securers which have been developed in this research study. Julie's biography for instance, recalls a complex experience of compulsory schooling, which left her feeling unconfident, unfulfilled and consequently unable to continue with her education, despite wanting to and being expected to continue along an academic path. Her biography which describes the disappointment with her early experiences of education also highlights a determination to rekindle her passion to continue her education at a later stage in the life-course. Lindsay was also located as a 'securer', but in a different way to Julie, in that her portrayal of her early educational experiences highlighted the influence of family upon her educational/career choices. Her story explicitly describes a family tension, which manifested itself into a conflict between differently middle-classed career aspirations. The tension effectively turned into a rebellion by Lindsay, whereby she fell into an unanticipated career/employment pathway (hairdressing). However, like Julie, Lindsay was able to realise her early career aspirations and move into HE on route towards a career in teaching.

One key feature of the enrichers' stories was that they grew up in working-class contexts which were characterised with a family pressure and expectation to enter employment upon leaving compulsory education at the age of sixteen. Another key feature of their biographies is their subsequent transitions into successful careerists, in that they have developed through their employment, significant levels of economic capital.

Robert's biography epitomises the key features of the enrichers in that his early experiences were characterised with an expectation to enter employment (manual work) upon leaving school, by both his family and his careers officer, who provided him with the limited choice of which pit (coal mine) he wanted to go down. Despite these humble beginnings, Robert's biography is resonant of a successful career, in that he now (at the time of interview) feels economically secure. Gill also highlights the family pressure to enter employment, despite a desire to continue with her education. Like Robert, Gill's biography also highlights a successful career.

The builders grew up in similar working-class contexts to the enrichers, which in some senses constituted their 'active' rejections of HE. However, they were different to the enrichers in that their post-school and pre-HE worlds were characterised, by temporary, short-term and unfulfilling jobs or employment. HE was therefore seen by the builders as a potential escape from this in that it would equip them with the necessary skills, knowledge and confidence to enhance their employment opportunities. Sue's biography highlights for example the influence of class and gender upon her decision to reject education at an early age. Her biography describes the importance of the discourse of widening participation, in that she felt able to re-engage with education (and indeed HE), in order to improve and transform

her career options. Leanne's biography also highlights the impact of class and family circumstances (where she draws upon the unaffordability of HE) which in some senses shaped her understandings of her educational choices at a young age. However, like Sue, Leanne was also able to draw upon widening participation discourses in order to continue her education, access HE and improve her employment prospects.

The biographies of the young builders highlighted in this thesis, were different to the builders in that they entered HE at the age of eighteen and from uninterrupted and straightforward school and FE pathways. Their early lives (in respect of their compulsory schooling and FE contexts) coincided with the growing rhetoric and emphasis surrounding education, HE and the gaining of credentials. The widening participation drive of recent decades has also enabled them to feel that are able to continue straight into HE and increase their employment options, unlike those who grew up in similar contexts (some of the builders and the enrichers), in a period where HE was not as accessible.

This thesis has centred its thematic analyses on social class, in respect of the qualitative, interview-based accounts of the participants' biographies. Whilst variables of gender and ethnicity (which have often been interlinked with research into social class), and the key theme of risk were alluded to throughout this study, it was decided to foreground the analysis in class terms. Social class was ultimately analysed through the development of a typology derived from the participants' 'classed' biographies and their journeys towards HE and gaining the 'piece of paper'. The thesis focuses its analysis more specifically on 'class', so as to intimately capture the relationship between education and 'classed' biography. In other words

this thesis highlights the relationship between the participants' 'classed' biographies and their journeys towards HE and gaining the 'piece of paper'.

Bottero's (2009) study of class in the twenty-first century highlights that how viewing phenomena through a number of analytical lenses has led to class being ignored. She suggests that:

> The debate about the 'white working class' isn't really about class at all. But it should be. To really make sense of the problems of the 'white working class', we need to understand how social change, and long term shifts in economic structure, have affected class inequalities more generally…It is unequal class competition which explains the situation of the white working class, and it is simply misleading to characterize it instead as a question of ethnic identity and entitlement (Bottero, 2009, p.15).

Bottero's (2009) assertions suggest how such analyses can hide questions of class difference and inequalities. As such, Perry and Francis (2010, p.7) suggest that analyses of this kind:

> …demonstrates the continued need to foreground social class in an analysis of educational attainment, whilst maintaining a broad awareness of the complex way social class intersects with gender and ethnicity to reproduce inequalities in educational attainment.

Although the analyses of the data in this thesis are foregrounded in class terms through the development of a new typology, it is clear in this study, the various ways in which class intersects with discourses of gender and ethnicity, and also risk in describing the phenomena.

The analysis of the three different biographical and 'widening participation' groups, shape slightly different understandings of the value of an HE degree, in a Bourdieuian sense, with regard to the development of various forms of capital. They also shape slightly different understandings of widening participation in the sense of who is HE for, why participate in HE, and whether or not university is viewed as for the 'likes of me'. Bourdieu's idea of habitus as practice generating grammar (referred to in Chapter's One and Two) is a more useful way of understanding 'classed' participation in HE. Applying Bourdieu's notion of habitus as practice generating grammar to the classed analysis in this thesis, in a sense suggests for example that just because someone is working-class, does not mean that their perceptions and behaviour with regard to HE, will be all the same, or rigidly determined, BUT that in a Bourdieuian sense, there is a limit. In other words, there are certain tendencies in the way that they see and experience HE, and indeed widening participation – in the case of this thesis, the different understandings of the 'piece of paper'.

Biographical analysis tells us something about the participants' habitus and their "starting points" and the value that they place on the 'piece of paper' and HE. In this sense, through the analysis of the biographical interview data, I can speak confidently (but, of course, never 'definitively') about the participants' classed locations. Biography, and the meanings and value the participants place upon the 'piece of paper' (their HE qualification), produce a range of different meanings and values which have encouraged them to enter an HE sector, characterised in relation to widening participation as being now more mainstreamed and part of the fabric of the UK HE sector. Because of the mainstreaming of widening participation, HE has become more accessible. In this sense, the participants can use their agency, which

lies, in some senses in their 'turning points' and their decisions to go to HE, along with their 'classed' understandings about what the 'piece of paper' means. They can now do this, because of widening participation, in the sense that HE is accessible to the many and not the few. It is this mainstreaming of widening participation, coupled with the biographical analysis of the interview data that helps understand for example how the successful careerist, ex-navy officer (who was brought up in working-class contexts), finds himself in HE, alongside the more middle-class mature student, who began her vocational life in hairdressing. The diversity of HE, coupled with the diversity and complexity of individual biographies, highlights how this is possible and demonstrates more nuanced understandings of student experiences and identities.

3.10 Conclusion

This chapter has argued the potential of interview based research to produce credible insights into participants' social worlds. The strength of this thesis lies, in large part, in the illuminating narratives which arose from the participant interviews. These enabled their location within 'widening participation' HE to be understood within the context of their biographies (in relation to their class, gender, educational and work backgrounds). The current study adheres to Geertz's (1973) notion of thick description in interpretive inquiry and, as Brinkmann and Kvale (2005, p.178) suggest, helps to '…produce new, insightful knowledge about the human condition'. This thesis now moves forward in the following central data chapters (Four, Five and Six), to examine the 'classed' educational biographies of the research participants

and their biographical understandings of the value of the 'piece of paper' (the HE qualification).

. CHAPTER FOUR:

SECURERS: BIOGRAPHICAL ANALYSES OF WIDENING PARTICIPATION JOURNEYS

4.1 Introduction

This thesis explores the value and understandings that the participants attached to their sought-after HE qualifications (their 'pieces of paper'). This chapter, and the two that follow it, develop an analysis of the participants' accounts of their educational biographies: suggesting how experiences of family, schooling and work, differently inflected by issues of class, led them back into education. In summary, the next three chapters map three different, dynamic relationships between the participants' and their desired credentials. The participants are differentiated as securers (Chapter Four), enrichers (Chapter Five) and builders (Chapter Six).

These three categories are class-based: defined, in a sense, according to their social class backgrounds, career or work backgrounds, affluence and their current or future aspirations. Analysing the identities and experiences of participants in this way emphasises and differentiates the value each 'group' places on credentials: the 'piece of paper' that HE offers. Thus they are all symbol chasers, in that they wish to acquire the symbolic capital of the HE qualification but they are pursuing HE credentials for different reasons. The three central data chapters (Chapters Four, Five and Six) are organised in a chronological format which focus on early experiences, turning points, pre-HE pathways and choices and HE itself respectively.

The **securers** might be described as coming from solidly middle-class backgrounds but they tend to feel that they lack the *symbolic capital*, the degree qualification that is an expected part of 'middle-class' capital and identity. So, in this sense, they are in HE and want the symbolic capital (the 'piece of paper'), in order to 'secure' their middle-class identity. This chapter describes and analyses the biographical journeys of the securers towards gaining the 'piece of paper'.

The **enrichers** are those who, unlike the securers did not grow up in 'middle-class' families. However, their working/ professional lives have afforded a certain social mobility, at least in an economic sense. Thus they have significant levels of economic capital but lack the *cultural capital* associated with HE. They are enrichers in the sense that going to HE and gaining the 'piece of paper', will more solidly cement their location, in that they will gain the cultural and symbolic capital associated with HE to match their already significant levels of economic capital. Chapter Five of this thesis examines in greater detail, the enrichers' biographical journeys towards gaining the 'piece of paper'.

Finally the **builders** are from more working-class backgrounds (lower socio-economic backgrounds). As such, they fit the archetype of the widening participation or Access student: at least as it was envisaged in the 1980s and 1990s (Woodrow, 1988; Bourgeois *et al*, 1999). For these students, HE and its credentials are envisaged as the source of cultural, symbolic and economic capital. They are characterised (in this thesis) as builders in the sense that they potentially have more to gain (by obtaining the 'piece of paper') than the securers and enrichers. Chapter Six of this thesis highlights, in greater detail, the builders' biographical journeys towards gaining the 'piece of paper'.

4.2 The securers

This chapter focuses upon the securers, who were brought up in securely middle-class contexts. Given the analyses offered by Ainley (1994) and Baumann (2000) of 'post-industrial' class instabilities, the securers might be read as people who are acutely aware, at an intuitive level, of being caught up in a changing class society. They *feel* a loss of security and view gaining educational credentials as a means to re-secure their (middle) class privileges. Entering HE becomes, therefore, something of a 'defensive' action:

> Middle-class subjectivity, and the day-to-day practices which construct that subjectivity, is so heavily cloaked in convictions of 'normality' (this is a magic cloak, like Harry Potter's, it makes the wearer instantly invisible) that it can be difficult to imagine that it might be 'defensive' at all. (Lucey and Reay, 2000, p.139-40).

Lucey and Reay's (2000) analysis of middle-class subjectivity highlights why there is a relative lack of research into the middle-class educational practices in relation to widening participation. It is partly that, for historical reasons, middle-class students are not heavily associated with widening participation and perhaps partly that social scientists have sometimes subscribed to the same 'cloak of normality' that enfolds middle-class subjectivities. In short, educational research has tended to focus its gaze on the more 'interesting' working-classes (Lucey and Reay, 2000) and their journeys through the widening participation landscape.

For varying reasons (such as fractured experiences of compulsory schooling and FE), the middle-class participants in my study (the securers), did not go to HE at a young age as part of a 'normal' educational biography (Du Bois-Reymond, 1998). In their biographies, the securers clearly underline turning points in their life courses, where they realised the importance of gaining an HE qualification (the 'piece of paper'). Whilst they already possessed forms of cultural capital (as a result of being brought up in middle-class contexts), they came to believe that they required this form of symbolic capital in order to (re)secure their classed status and provide themselves with a protection (albeit perceived) against downward mobility (Beck, 1992). As was mentioned in Chapter One, the possession of a degree is clearly part of the middle-class armoury in twenty-first century Britain. The examination of the securers adds to research into the experiences of middle-class students in HE (Power *et al*, 2003; Brooks, 2003) and supports their contentions about the homogeneity of this group who are '…normatively 'at home' in higher education (Morrison, 2011, p.43). This study also adds to the literature, in the sense that where the previous studies (Power *et al*, 2003; Brooks, 2003), focus upon the experiences of young middle-class HE students, this thesis looks at a broader cross-section of the middle class in relation to the ages of HE participants. The heterogeneity of the securers (highlighted in this chapter) suggests that the idea of habitus as practice generating grammar (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990) is a particularly useful way of understanding the number and variety of different practices, experiences, understandings and behaviours of this group.

4.3 The securers' biographies

The following section of this thesis (and in a similar vein for the enrichers and builders in Chapters Five and Six) provides a brief biographical snippet or timeline which is intended to give an insight into the pre-HE worlds of each of the participants characterised as securers. Their biographies suggest that despite their middle-class backgrounds, their reasons for rejecting and then choosing HE were inflected by a range of experiences (some of which were negative) surrounding compulsory schooling, FE and in some cases, family circumstances.

Carly's (Aged 25, Final Year, Undergraduate Degree in Psychology and Counselling, Newtown University) biography implies a complex set of experiences which have brought her to HE (and wanting to gain the 'piece of paper'). By her own admission she was frustrated by her fractured experiences of compulsory schooling. Carly also exhibits a complex mix of family, education and work, in that she had to juggle various competing priorities such as her Access type course and part-time work, with raising young children. Carly draws upon her mother (middle-class parentage) as an inspiration for her to achieve and provide a long-term future for her and her family. She clearly has aspirations to gain further qualifications and work in a professional setting, allied to her chosen HE programme.

Julie's (Aged 40's, Final Year, Undergraduate Degree in Special Needs and Inclusion Studies with Education Studies, Westside University) biography intimated her complex, and at sometimes fractured, experiences of compulsory schooling which, at the time, made her feel that she was not good enough to go to university, even though she wanted to. However, later in life, she has realised the importance of

gaining the 'piece of paper' in being a vehicle to gain professional employment in the education sector as a teacher.

Karl's (Aged 20's, Final Year, University Diploma in Food Safety, University of Brightown) biography, despite his middle-class background, was characterised by an initial rejection of HE, in that he wanted to gain access to the professional ranks, by working his way up from the bottom. In this sense, he was not unlike the participants in Chapter Five (the enrichers), who in their early lives, through their working-class contexts, chose earning and not learning. In a sense, Karl's decision to take this pathway has reaped dividends, in that his participation in HE (through his work), means he is able to enhance his career prospects, but not incur the significant costs associated.

Lindsay's (Aged mid 30's, Final Year, Undergraduate Degree Primary Education with Qualified Teacher Status, Newtown University) biography implies a rejection of HE, which was in some senses influenced by a complex family dynamic, in that her father wanted her to take a professional route (law) different to the one that she wanted (teaching). Lindsay, by her own admission rebelled against her father and took a more vocational pathway into hairdressing. Her subsequent professional life encompassed a variety of different roles in a number of fields, but she now sees HE (and gaining the 'piece of paper') as central to her future professional career options and a desire to become 'educated' and realise her long-term career aspirations.

Paula's (Age Late 20's, First Year, Undergraduate Degree in Nursing, University of Nightown) biography is in some senses unique, in that she is entering HE for the second time, having undertaken another programme at a younger age. By her own admission, she did not achieve as much as she would have liked, and her

participation this time around is couched with regard to commitment and dedication in order to pursue a professional career (and further qualifications) in Nursing upon gaining the 'piece of paper'.

William's (Aged 31 years of age, Final Year, Undergraduate Degree Early Childhood Studies, Westside University) biography highlights a reasonably successful professional career, after a fairly uneventful experience of compulsory schooling. His limited pre-HE professional options have influenced his perceptions of the importance of gaining the 'piece of paper'. William also adopts a fairly instrumental approach to his HE, in relation to the future professional career options (teaching) that will become available upon completion of his HE programme.

Joanna's (Aged 19, First Year, Undergraduate Degree Sport, Physical Education and Community Studies, University of Brightown) biography highlights an interesting **contrast** with the securers described in this chapter, in that although she also comes from a secure, middle-class background, she is not pursuing HE (like the others) as a means of 'securing' her middle-class identity, but is much more like the traditional, 'archetypal' HE student, in that she is eighteen and has entered university after completing an academic 'A' level programme. Her biography implies that she is entering HE as part of a normal and expected biography (Du Bois-Reymond, 1998). As such, Joanna is not characterised in this thesis as a 'securer' (or indeed an 'enricher' or 'builder') in relation to her 'classed biography'. However, like most of her counterparts, Joanna sees the value of gaining the 'piece of paper' and her increased future prospects which lie in becoming a teacher or coach.

4.4.1 Securers' early experiences: compulsory schooling, work and FE

All of these six participants – the securers - have, for the purposes of this study, been characterised as part of an "embedded" middle-class. However, they were entering HE, in some senses, from 'non-traditional' or 'non-standard' pathways, that have traditionally in the past, not been associated with middle-class HE participation. The six participants were entering university after a break from education. Five of these participants (William, Julie, Carly, Lindsay and Paula) were entering HE as mature students, in that they were twenty-one years of age or over upon entry. Karl the remaining interviewee in this group, like Joanna, was categorised as a 'young' student, despite his break from education.

It is useful to draw upon Bourdieuian notions of cultural capital to help understand the securers' 'rejections' of, or 'non-participation' in HE at an earlier stage in their lives. Their 'non-participation' in HE at an early age, was not based on seeing HE as unreal or unreachable in class terms but tended to be couched in relation to very particular biographical barriers to continuing their education (such as fractured experiences of schooling and FE) that caused them to feel that HE was not appropriate at that particular point in the life course. In other words, they had a sense of their 'normal' middle-class biographies having been (temporarily) waylaid by circumstance. So why did these securers not participate in HE at an early age? The securers identified several different factors which resulted in them not continuing with formal education after school. The following sections of this chapter (4.4.2, 4.4.3, 4.4.4 and 4.4.5) highlight some of these factors such as family tensions and fear of debt.

4.4.2 Early experiences: family tensions

Lindsay's story is an illuminating one, in that her transitions between school and FE, and her subsequent fractured, unsettled and varied employment, were influenced by an argument with her father upon leaving compulsory schooling. Her interview narrative implies a complex parent/child dynamic and the subsequent impact it had on her post-16 choices.

> It...was a stupid, stupid thing...I had an argument with my father and...he wanted me to be a solicitor and I didn't want to be a solicitor. I wanted to do something that I wanted to do, which was teaching and he thought then that teaching wasn't the route and all this and that, and he wanted something a bit more out of his children and we had this argument...I said on careers day that I was going to go and find the first course that I went into in the room and it just happened to be hairdressing...and I signed up...(laughs) (Lindsay, Mid 30's, Final Year, Undergraduate Degree Primary Education with Qualified Teacher Status, Newtown University).

Lindsay's story inverts the stereotypes of working-class family backgrounds, in that it is assumed that some aspirant young people are discouraged by their families who perceive that HE is, in a Bourdieuian sense, not for the likes of them (Reay *et al*, 2001: 2005, Archer, 2003a, Marks *et al*, 2003; Archer *et al*, 2007). The conflict and tension arose due to family differences in 'middle-classed' aspirations in that Lindsay wished to become a teacher, as opposed to her father wanting her to be a solicitor. Lindsay's subsequent rebellion against her father led her down a vocational pathway which left her unfulfilled and in some senses disenchanted. Lindsay's early experiences resonate in some senses with Bowl's (2003) notion of vocational cul-de

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sacs, where for various reasons 'Participants were caught in a credentials trap, pushed down a narrow vocational path, which often involved low paid, gendered employment' (Bowl, 2003, p.56). Lindsay's complex experience adds a further dimension to Bowl's (2003) notion of vocational cul-de sacs, in that her decision to pursue the vocational pathway was not necessarily because of negative perceptions of her academic ability, but was as a result of feeling unable, due to family tensions, to pursue her chosen career. Lindsay's frustrations led her to choose a vocational pathway, without a clear direction mapped out for the future. Lindsay's story portrays her as a salient example of one of the three categories of HE participants, in that she is a 'securer' (from a middle-class background), who lacks the symbolic capital that comes from attaining a degree. She therefore ends up being a middle-class student, entering HE, through a widening participation route. The narratives offered by Julie, William and Carly in section 4.4.3, highlight a range of barriers to participation in HE at a young age.

4.4.3 Early experiences: barriers to participation

Upon examination of the interviewees biographical data, it was evident that despite their middle-class backgrounds, some of the participants' (Julie, William and Carly) decisions to reject education at a young age came about, not because of a lack of cultural capital (indeed, they possessed this), but because of the perceived barriers to HE, which were shaped by their complex and sometimes fractured experiences during compulsory schooling and, in some cases FE.

Julie's story highlights an illuminating picture, in that despite her background which pointed to HE as part of a normal biography (Du Bois-Reymond, 1998), in that she wanted to, and was expected to go to university, a complex combination of feeling marginalised and un-nurtured at school led her to feel that university was unsuitable at that time in her life.

> I did want to...I sort of never thought I'd be good enough to go into university, because I don't think I was quite disciplined enough... I think it was more self-esteem for me...I didn't...feel I was good enough and I didn't have the support of my teachers either really. When you're at school, especially at say between sort of thirteen and sixteen, you really do need somebody, a good teacher who takes you under their wing and really helps you to try and focus...I felt a bit unfulfilled really, which was a shame. I think if I'd have said well that's fine, it's definitely not for me, I would have been alright, but I remember sort of just not feeling like I'd had very good advice from the teachers or support...I mean at the end of the day you have to accept even when you are young...I mean I was only sort of sixteen it's a big decision... (Julie, 40's, Final Year, Undergraduate Degree in Special Needs and Inclusion Studies with Education Studies, Westside University).

The picture of frustration and lack of support that Julie paints in the context of her compulsory schooling, in a sense suggests how crucial these factors are in providing young people with the confidence to continue in education. Not dissimilar from Julie's story, William's narrative also points towards HE being unsuitable where he recalls (in his own terms), his educational failure as a reason for rejecting HE and pursuing a combination of employment and vocational education.

I wasn't ready for it at that time...I mean that's the only way I can explain it. I didn't feel I was clever enough to do it to be honest with you...I did a year of 'A' level and got really bad results in the mocks..., so I thought there's no point in me carrying on doing something which I'm going to fail, I might as well leave and do something...so I left and got a job, it was a job with training, which was the NVQ at the time... (William, 31 years of age, Final Year, Undergraduate Degree Early Childhood Studies, Westside University).

Julie and William's (both Westside) excerpts about their reasons for not continuing with their education at an early age were in some senses, cases of what Ball *et al* (2000) constructs as 'learning fatigue'. However, especially in the case of Julie, it was apparent through biographical analysis of her interview transcript, that although she was frustrated and unable to participate at a young age, she did not see her rejection of HE as permanent, in that her middle-class background and levels of cultural capital implied a kind of middle-class confidence, which meant that HE was clearly seen as something that was possible in the future. Julie's experience chimes with one of the participants in a recent study of middle-class HE rejection (Morrison, 2011). This temporary rejection of HE, in other words the decision to not go to university was not a once-and-for-all one (Morrison, 2011).

Upon biographical analysis of Carly's interview, it was also evident that her complex and fractured experiences during her compulsory schooling and beyond had a significant impact upon her rejection of education. However her experience and subsequent rejection of education, stands in contrast to Lindsay's familial tensions and conflict.

...I left school I did at fifteen...I didn't do my GCSE's...so I was....I was ...not so much a rebel...but I was mischievous and very influenced... I always wanted to do more, but school didn't entertain me at all (laughs)...I was more interested in going into more adult education, cos I didn't get on so good in school... (Carly, aged 25, Final Year, Undergraduate Degree in Psychology and Counselling, Newtown University).

Carly's narrative paints a fractured and unsettled picture of her experiences in compulsory schooling, in that the school curriculum, for different reasons, caused her disillusionment in more traditional forms of education. Her story also highlights, in a sense, her educational aspirations in that she wanted the chance to, in an educational sense, 'go her own way' and study what she wanted.

I wanted to specify...rather than doing the average...English, Maths, History, Geography...I'm not really interested in...I wanted to do something that I knew that I was going to be interested in, that would keep me motivated... (Carly, aged 25, Final Year, Undergraduate Degree in Psychology and Counselling, Newtown University).

Carly was subsequently handed this chance to study something that was interesting and relevant to her, through a local educational initiative to help young teenage mothers re-engage with education. This pioneering local educational initiative, provided an avenue for Carly and Leanne (one of the working-class participants in Chapter Six), to continue their learning, where traditional provision was deemed to be, in a number of senses, unsuitable. Carly's experience of this initiative will be drawn upon later in this chapter in the analysis of pre-HE pathways and preparation (see section 4.6). The biographies of Julie, William and Carly highlight the complex

and negative experiences that can arise in compulsory schooling and indeed in FE settings, and the subsequent impact that these have upon individual educational decisions and future lives. In the following two sections (4.4.4 and 4.4.5) the remaining two securers (Karl and Paula) tell slightly different stories of their early experiences.

4.4.4 Early experiences: earning not debt

Karl, by not drawing heavily upon the influence of his early compulsory schooling experiences, implies the insignificance of these within the context of his initial decision to reject HE. However, it was evident through examination of Karl's biography that his original decision to reject HE, was not dissimilar to those offered by in particular, the male enrichers in Chapter Five, in that their original working-class roots led them to reject HE in favour of work (otherwise characterised as earning not learning).

> I didn't want to go to uni because of money...because I didn't want a £10000 debt at the end of it all...At the time I had no interest whatsoever in going to university at all. I felt like I'd done my learning and was ready to get a job...It was pure luck that I got or should get a professional qualification as well, without losing out on too much money (Karl, early 20's, Final Year, University Diploma in Food Safety, University of Brightown).

Karl's emphasis upon the importance of working, is more a case of 'earning not debt', given that he is a middle-class 'securer', rather than the early experiences given by the enrichers (see Chapter Five) which were working-class connotations of

earning and not learning. However, it is evident that his sponsorship through his employer has provided him with the opportunity to earn and learn. This explicitly, in instrumental and economic senses, enables him to climb the employment ladder, but in another sense enables him to benefit from the more implicit advantages of a university education, such as the creation of symbolic capital (upon attainment of the 'piece of paper'). As such, Karl's biography points toward a 'classed' hybridity, in that his initial rejection of HE was couched in economic terms, in the sense that he invoked a similar relationship to HE (like the lads who rejected HE in favour of work at an early age in Chapter Five), but that he recognises the value that gaining the 'piece of paper' will bring, with respect to increasing his levels of cultural, symbolic and economic capital.

4.4.5 Early Experiences: a missed opportunity

Paula is entering HE as a mature student, despite having previously gone to university at the age of eighteen. In this respect, she is slightly different to the other securers who did not enter HE at the age of eighteen, in that she has already been to university. Her biography also implies a difference when compared with many of the other securers (in particular Carly, Julie and Lindsay) in that she was able to make the transition to HE at a younger age. As such, her biography does not indicate the barriers to HE that were implied through the stories of Carly, Julie and Lindsay (as detailed previously in this section) who for a variety of reasons, such as fractured compulsory schooling and family influence, led them to not pursue further educational avenues. Paula's reasons for re-engaging with HE are illuminating in the

sense that upon reflection, she feels that her previous university experience was wasted, in that she did not achieve as much as she would have liked.

> ...I kind of drank for three years... (laughs)...and didn't concentrate much on it... (Paula, Late 20's, First Year, Undergraduate Degree in Nursing, University of Nightown).

Paula's early educational and work experiences (in some senses very typical and traditionally middle-class) have left her wanting more and recognising the need to engage with HE again, but this time in a different vein. Her instrumentalist rationale for going 'back' to university is captured later in the chapter (see section 4.5.2). It is perhaps worth noting that Paula's decision to enter HE at a younger age (the first time around) was part of a normal and expected biography (Du Bois-Reymond, 1998), in that she entered HE upon completion of her 'A' levels, but as she implies without a career pathway or particular goal in mind. Her decision and rationale for re-entering education (her turning point) through Access and then HE at a later stage of the life-course, is instrumental in the sense that it is fuelled by her desire to gain the necessary 'piece of paper' (the symbolic capital), in order to access her chosen career, Nursing. Put simply, Paula suggests HE was easier second time around as she was certain what she wanted to get out of it.

4.4.6 Early experiences: a summary

The biographical analysis of the early experiences and identities of these "embedded" middle-class participants (the securers) point towards a variety of different reasons for not continuing with education at an earlier age (in other words

they were not actively rejecting HE) and suggests that despite their advantageous 'classed' backgrounds (in the sense of HE participation), these interviewees, with the exception of Paula, felt that HE was not for them. This was in more individualised senses, rather than the working-class tendency to construct HE as not for the likes of us that have been described by, for instance, Reay *et al* (2001: 2005) and Archer *et al* (2007). As will become evident in Chapters Five and Six of this thesis, the reasons that are emphasised by the participants for rejecting HE at an early age, are noticeably different depending on the individuals' 'classed' backgrounds and also, their relationships towards HE. An example of this is the importance that the enrichers in Chapter Five placed on earning and not learning.

The discussion of the participants' biographical journeys now centres on their turning points, where they made the decision to go to HE. In some senses they also realised the value of the 'piece of paper', with regard to their future career prospects and opportunities for social mobility. The following discussion (see sections 4.5.1, 4.5.2 and 4.5.3) highlights the participants turning points, emphasising the points (in the life-course) where they realised they needed the 'piece of paper'.

4.5.1 Securers' turning points: Re-engaging with education

The securers, then, tended to voice a sense of having been derailed from normal middle-class educational biographies by circumstances that were very personal to them. This contrasted with the kinds of working-class students described by Reay *et al* (2001: 2005), who saw their early entry to HE as having been presented by class barriers per se. In a sense, the securers still saw entry to HE as normal but

explained that their biographies had deviated, often for very specific family or financial reasons. So how did they explain their 'return' to middle-class educational pathways? Central to their biographical accounts were moments that the securers identified as turning points, when the possibility – indeed the necessity – of entering HE became intensely real.

Turning point experiences (Strauss, 1959) are in some senses likened to Denzin's (1989a) notion of epiphanies. Denzin (1989a, p.15) comments on the epiphany suggesting that it arises from:

> Those interactional moments that leave marks on people's lives..., have the potential for creating transformational experiences for the person...Having had this experience, the person is never again quite the same.

Hareven and Masaoka (1988, p.272) suggest that:

> *Turning points* are perceptual roadmarks along the life course. They represent individuals' subjective assessments of continuities and discontinuities over their lives, especially the impact of earlier life events on subsequent ones.

The turning points, at which the securers began to believe that they needed the HE qualifications, were indeed, epiphanic moments. The discussion in this chapter therefore moves on, in a chronological sense, to analyse the participants' 'turning points', where at different stages of the life course the interviewees made the decision to re-engage with education and ultimately, HE.

Cohler (1982; Masaoka *et al*, 1985, cited in Hareven and Masaoka, 1988, p.272) draw attention to the fact that 'In some cases, turning points are perceived as critical

changes, in other cases as new beginnings'. Hareven and Masaoka (1988, p.274) argue that:

> A turning point is not an isolated event of short duration. Nor does it entail a sudden jump from one phase to another. A turning point is a process involving the alteration of a life path, of a "course correction." A turning point requires, therefore, certain strategies and choices.

In this sense, turning points differ to the concept of normative transitions, where the movement of individuals throughout the life course are within the boundaries of socially constructed timetables (Hareven and Masaoka, 1988). Transitions are defined as normative if:

> …a major portion of a population experiences them, and if a society expects its members to undergo such transitions at certain points in their lives (Hareven and Masaoka, 1988, p.272).

In this thesis turning points are defined as the moment when the value of the HE qualification became 'real' or 'meaningful' to these participants. In short, the turning point is characterised as the life point at which the participants say 'I need a degree!' Apart from Joanna (biography highlighted in section 4.3), whose transition as part of a normal biography (DuBois Reymond, 1998) could be regarded as normative, all of the interviewees in this research reached turning points (at different life stages), where they recognised the importance and value of HE and are altering their life path or, as Hareven and Masaoka (1988) suggest, a course correction.

4.5.2 Turning points: credentialism and changing careers

William, Paula and Lindsay were entering HE as mature students in their twenties and thirties. Their biographies depict 'turning points' where they reached crucial stages in either their professional or family lives, or both. It is evident through analysis of the biographical narratives of William, Paula and Lindsay that they were all highly influenced by credentialism, in the sense that they all displayed instrumentalist understandings about the value of HE qualifications. Their stories recall those reported by Britton and Baxter (1999) whose research highlights an important connection between credentials, employment (professional careers) and middle-class identity. Britton and Baxter (1999, p.187) suggested that a small number of the mature students in their study (who were also middle-class) arguably felt a '...need for accreditation as a passport to the middle-class professional career to which they felt entitled'. William, Paula and Lindsay saw the 'piece of paper' as a kind of passport to the careers (Teaching and Nursing) that they wished to (and felt entitled to) enter, upon graduation.

William demonstrates in his narrative a turning point in that he felt that his career, although reasonably successful was stagnating, in the sense that he felt he was unable to progress further professionally. Coupled with this, William's decision to leave his employment and seek new horizons in the form of HE, were undoubtedly informed, influenced and motivated by two different sources.

> One was my sister, who's the head teacher, who's been telling me for years to get into teaching, because she thought that I would be good at it...and she gave me a lot of support and advice of what I should be looking at and...The other was actually my work colleagues...because they knew that I was better

than what I was doing. They ...actually pushed me to apply, and they actually covered my work, to allow me to do the applications and things like that in works time and things like that...so they were really supportive...and I basically turned round and said you know you're like twenty –seven, if you don't do it now, you're never going to do it....so basically it gave me the kick up the behind to actually...jump into the unknown and do something basically... (William, 31 years of age, Final Year, Undergraduate Degree Early Childhood Studies, Westside University).

It is evident that William's decision to enter HE was influenced by people within his social and professional circles. Biographical analysis of his interview narrative also reveals that his participation in HE was happening at the right time in his life, in that he felt comfortable in himself to progress and that he also recognised the benefits for himself and his family in that HE participation would bring about enhanced career prospects which would protect their future.

To a certain degree, Lindsay's story resonates with that of William's in that her decision to re-engage with education provides her with the opportunity to, in a sense, make up for lost time, release untapped potential (Green and Webb, 1997; Britton and Baxter, 1999) and pursue an academic pathway to enter the teaching profession, realising her early ambitions as a teenager. The turning point at which Lindsay's ambitions became reality, came about when she decided to take a career break after a complex and fractured employment history coupled with juggling bringing up her children. Her narrative implies the decision to pursue HE, in some senses, was influenced by a chance discussion.

...I was helping out in a local school as a teaching assistant and after talking to the headmistress and everything she sort of said like 'why don't you try you know to go into teaching', so that's when I actually went onto the Access course...because it was the sensible solution... (Lindsay, Mid 30's, Final Year, Undergraduate Degree Primary Education with Qualified Teacher Status, Newtown University).

Lindsay, in a similar vein to William and Paula (whose experiences are captured shortly), draws upon her recognition of how the degree level qualification will enhance her prospects in her chosen future career. Later in this chapter (see section 4.8.3), Lindsay also emphasises the importance to her of being educated, drawing upon her middle-class identity.

Not unlike William, Paula made the decision to enter HE after, in her view, a reasonably successful period of employment. The turning point for Paula, not dissimilar to William and Lindsay, came when she wanted to change career direction. At this point, HE became real and meaningful to Paula, in the sense that she recognised and understood the importance of gaining a degree which would enable her to make the transition to her chosen new career pathway. Her biography displays a clear, instrumentalist, straightforward, if not simplistic focus and commitment towards her new career and academic goals which lie in stark contrast to her experiences of HE at a younger age (see section 4.4.5), where by her own admission, she did not make the most of her time at university.

In the case of William and Paula in particular, it was clear that they had entered HE (not unlike the enrichers described in Chapter Five) after being successful in professional fields, but for William and Paula (as well as Lindsay), it was apparent

that they saw their future career/life trajectories lying elsewhere. In this sense their decisions to enter HE were based upon their recognition and understanding about how their HE qualifications would confer, some kind of exchange value (Warmington, 2003) upon graduation and subsequent entry to new professional fields (teaching for William and Lindsay and nursing for Paula).

The analysis of the participants characterised in this thesis as enrichers (examined in Chapter Five), also resonates with Britton and Baxter's (1999) study in that they were using the 'piece of paper', to, in some senses, provide a formal recognition of their prior achievements. However, the importance of credentialism, which runs through the narratives of almost all, if not every participant in the study, in some senses, contrasts the findings of Britton and Baxter's (1999) study in which issues that focussed on credentialism were deemed to be less important amongst the mature students. However, the findings of this research study, upon which this thesis is predicated, suggest that credentialist notions appear to be much more crucial to mature students in today's more diverse and complex world of HE (according to the participants' narratives) and also are not gendered, as in the case of Britton and Baxter's (1999) study.

The stories of William, Julie and Lindsay also, in some senses draw parallels with those participants in Waller's (2006) study of student experiences on Access to HE programmes. Like Waller's (2006) participants, the mature learners sometimes talked in paradoxical terms in that, on the one hand they expressed a certain amount of regret that they did not go to HE at the age of eighteen but conversely spoke in terms that implied that they were not ready for university at a young age.

4.5.3 Turning points: realising educational aspirations

In some senses, Carly's story is different to those of William, Lindsay and Paula that are depicted above. Whilst Carly (like the other securers) is undoubtedly pursuing HE in instrumentalist senses, in that she sees the 'piece of paper' leading to increased opportunities and new careers, analysis of her narrative suggests that her reasons for returning to education are also couched in a desire and aspiration to study 'interesting' subjects, which were not catered for in school.

Carly's biography points towards (by her own frank admission) a complex experience of compulsory education (see section 4.4.3) in that she was disengaged with compulsory education (in an academic sense) and longed to study subjects that were relevant and interesting to her personally. Upon leaving school, Carly's further education experiences, although curtailed initially by becoming a parent, gave her the impetus and drive to take it further, when time allowed. Although it is clear that returning to education was always Carly's intention, it is clear that her mother's inspirational story (in that she also returned to education, whilst raising two young children and became professionally successful), drove her to want to achieve the same for her family.

> ...I remember when I first had the baby...I felt like I didn't have a purpose...or passion...I need something to feel that I'm working for and I suppose that has come from my Mum being the way she was, cause she was a single parent herself, with two children and she went on. She did absolutely loads of qualifications so it made me want to go for more, basically because of her and what she did for me...I want to do the same for my children (Carly, aged 25,

Final Year, Undergraduate Degree in Psychology and Counselling, Newtown University).

Carly's narrative depicts a transformation in that, through her mother's story, she realises that she is able to overcome the barriers associated with her experiences of compulsory schooling and being a young parent and that she was able to realise her educational aspirations, which were not catered for in the traditional school curriculum. Carly's narrative also suggests a class hybridity. On the one hand, she talks about her mother as very highly qualified and working in the professions, suggesting that she sees her background as middle-class. *However*, her 'classed' identity becomes more complex, if not hybrid, because she went into casual work after compulsory schooling and although her mother has gained a degree (and other professional qualifications), we do not know when she did them. Carly could be described as having a hybrid class identity, despite the sense of middle-classness, in that she is returning to education to claim some kind of entitlement or birthright. In this way, she is not unlike William, Paula and Lindsay and the middle-class mature students in Britton and Baxter's (1999) study, in that the HE qualification would provide a passport to a professional type career to which she felt she was entitled. Carly also displays a highly altruistic attitude towards her rationale behind her decisions to enter HE, where, not unlike the participants in the study of Evans (2010), her decisions were couched in how HE would not only benefit herself, but her immediate family.

The discussion (in section 4.6) takes a chronological leap forward to examine the experiences of pre-HE pathways in relation to how they prepared the securers for

university study. Section 4.7, drawing upon Bourdieu, discusses the complex dynamic of HE choices.

4.6 The securers' Pre-HE pathways

Sections 4.5.1, 4.5.2 and 4.5.3 referred to the securers' turning points, in that they reached points in their life-course where they realised the importance and value of HE (and indeed the 'piece of paper'). The turning points in a sense were about getting 'back on track' in relation to their middle-class biographies after their often personal experiences of compulsory schooling, FE and work (see sections 4.4.1 to 4.4.5). The following discussion talks about how the securers negotiated their biographical journeys after reaching these turning points (the decision to go to HE), with respect to how their pre-HE pathways (usually level 3 qualifications such as Access) prepared them for HE.

Four out of the six securers (Julie, Paula, Lindsay and Carly) entered HE via Access or Access type pathways which, as was highlighted in Chapter Two, were originally aimed particularly at women and those from working-class and ethnic minority backgrounds (Bourgeois *et al*, 1999) for example the builders such as Claire, Katie, Leanne and Sue (referred to in Chapter Six of this thesis). The participation on Access by the four securers supports the argument made by Leathwood and Hutchings (2003) of Access Courses being colonized by the middle-classes. The remaining two securers (Karl and William), were entering HE from professional routes (much like the pre-HE pathways of the enrichers described in Chapter Five), in other words, straight from, or whilst in, continuous employment.

The participants who make up the heterogeneous securers in this study, are far removed from the traditional homogenised understandings of middle-class HE students (not unlike those in Power *et al*, 2003; Brooks, 2003) in the sense that they are entering HE, in the main, as mature students (over the age of twenty-one) and from a variety of so-called 'non-traditional' and/or 'non-standard' pathways in educational and work contexts. This stands in contrast to the traditional archetypes which tend to assume, clearly wrongly in some cases, that students from middle-class backgrounds have entered HE at the age of eighteen, through traditional academic pathways, such as 'A' levels. The discussion that follows investigates the participants' pre-HE pathways, in respect of their preparation for HE, in the sense of the transferable skills that they acquired in order to ready them for the academic rigour of university study.

Many of the participants in this research study spoke in terms in which they regarded their pre-HE programmes as providing them with a broad preparation for university, in that they implied they gained support and a range of transferable skills which would be invaluable upon transition to HE. This was particularly evident amongst those who entered HE via 'Access' or 'Access-type' programmes. It is evident from research over recent decades (see for example Scott, 1986; Evans and McCulloch, 1989; Jones, 1992; Warmington, 2002), that Access pathways provide a viable alternative to university entry for those who are not suited to more traditional educational pathways. The following narratives from Paula, Julie and Carly, suggest that 'Access' or Access type programmes are invaluable in preparing individuals for HE, and that these programmes, although designed with working-class and those from ethnic minority backgrounds in mind, do not just benefit people from these

groups, but have become a credible pre-HE pathway for many mature students. As such, the argument posited by Leathwood and Hutchings (2003), where Access programmes were being colonized by the middle-classes, in some senses is supported by the narratives of Paula, Julie and Carly who were located in the 'embedded' middle-class group (the securers).

Paula, despite having first been to university at a younger age, felt that her Access programme provided her with a useful and specialist preparation for her chosen HE course and subsequent career, in that it offered participants a structured and 'gentle' pathway back into education and provided the specialist knowledge and skills which were tailored to the needs of those who were going to follow vocationally oriented HE programmes. Paula, who at the time of interview, was studying on a nursing degree, talks about how she valued the way her Access programme was structured and how it prepared her in an academic sense for HE study.

> ...the way that they deliver the Access Course is they accept a lot of students that are coming back into education...haven't done science since they were sixteen, for instance, and that could have been twenty years ago...So it's broken down in a way that you understand...I think possibly, students who have done Access, or maybe some type of NVQ route, possibly have the better understanding of the portfolio side of things cos you have to have a portfolio that you keep basically throughout your career...and because Access and NVQ courses have that type of thing as well, it has been easier for students who have gone down that route to understand that particular module... (Paula, 29 years old, First Year, Undergraduate Degree in Nursing, University of Nightown).

Paula's narrative provides a two-fold analysis of her Access programme. In one sense her story implies an emphasis on offering learners, who were in some instances, re-engaging with education after a long absence, a conducive environment to study. Her narrative points towards her 'Access' programme as providing her with a tailored quasi-vocational preparation (Warmington, 2002) not only for her future career in Nursing, but also for her occupation as an undergraduate (cf. Warmington, 2002).

Julie (Westside) also draws upon the value of Access in providing her with a broad education in in the sense that she was able to gain the necessary tools and basic academic skills in preparation for HE.

> ...I didn't realise Access to education incorporated such a lot of things...you go back and you have to do a basic I.T. course and people my age don't tend to have so much experience with computers and...your basic English...I do wonder the Access Course is more beneficial to students my age..., because as…it incorporates such a lot of things, practical help as well as education (Julie, 40's, Final Year, Undergraduate Special Needs and Inclusion Studies with Educational Studies, Westside University).

Julie implies in her narrative a belief that her Access course is more suitable for mature students like herself, in that it provides an avenue for individuals (who maybe have been out of education for a while), to re-engage with studying. The biographies of Paula, Julie, Carly point towards their various pre-HE programmes (Access or Access-type pathways) equipping them with the appropriate skills so that they would be effectively prepared for HE. The discussion now moves forward to examine (drawing on Bourdieu) the HE choices of the securers.

4.7 Securers: HE choices

Section 4.6 talked of the preparations made by the securers for HE, with respect to the skills, attributes and knowledge that would be required for undergraduate study. Continuing on the chronological path, this section moves on to discuss the HE choices of the securers (with regard to where and what they would actually be studying in HE). Much like section 4.6, where the securers emphasised the importance of support in respect of equipping them for undergraduate study, the securers, in this section, draw upon their reliance on the specialised, personalised and 'hot' knowledge (Ball and Vincent, 1998) about HE, in order to make more informed choices.

In respect of the complex dynamic of HE choices, the securers (despite their middle-class backgrounds) were not entering HE as part of what Du Bois-Reymond (1998) calls a normal and expected biography. As such, they were different to Joanna (who was described in section 4.3 of this thesis) in that they were not archetypal HE students, who were eighteen and had also followed traditional 'A' level pathways. With respect to Bourdieuian influenced analyses of HE choice (Ball and Vincent, 1998; Ball *et al*, 2002), the securers do not necessarily conform to the norms associated with understandings of 'hot' knowledge (Ball and Vincent, 1998) and embedded and contingent choosers (Ball *et al*, 2002). As such, their HE choices are constructed in slightly different ways to how one might expect when using Ball *et al's* (2002) analogy.

With this in mind, biographical analysis of Julie and Lindsay's interview narratives, in some senses, implies a more complex dynamic of classed HE choices. Despite their 'embedded' middle-class backgrounds, their experiences and identities with regard

to HE are different to those of Paula, and especially Joanna. Both Julie and Lindsay's narratives highlight the fact that they relied on significant people outside their family and social networks (usually their tutors on their pre-HE programmes), for guidance and information in order to support their HE choices. The significance came in that these tutors provided the knowledge (arguably 'hot') about HE (and the support in applying for HE), which as mature learners, independent from their families was invaluable, in that they were unable like Joanna for example, to draw upon family and social networks for this kind of knowledge.

This reliance upon 'significant others' (Ball *et al*, 2002, p.338) by Julie and Lindsay is, in some senses, more characteristic of Ball *et al*'s (2002, p.337) 'contingent choosers' in that they have been characterised as drawing on minimal support (with regard to social capital) to make their decisions (Ball *et al*, 2002). The experiences of Julie and Lindsay therefore, in some senses, call into question the categories of embedded and contingent choosers espoused by Ball *et al* (2002). In one sense, by dint of their middle-class backgrounds, they would be regarded as embedded choosers of HE. However, the fact that they are returning as mature students, often independent from their families and relying upon the support and knowledge provided by significant others outside their social and family networks, one could argue that they are more like contingent choosers. Julie's first excerpt implies her choice as supported, but very individualised, in common with the findings of mature learners in David *et al* (2003).

> ...the family were very supportive…although...a couple of members of the family said...oh do you want to do it at your age…it's not going to be easy...There was very practical, common sense kind of advice. Sort of the

reality of hard work and discipline that's involved...I think in the end the decision just had to be mine... (Julie, 40's, Final Year, Undergraduate Special Needs and Inclusion Studies with Educational Studies, Westside University).

Julie's second excerpt highlights the importance of her Access supervisor, in supporting her HE decision-making.

[I] had a supervisor as well, so it was still nice to have somebody there that could tell you what universities were looking for...you're appointed a supervisor in your second year and they were very helpful. She gave me advice on how to apply to UCAS, and what I'd have to put on my supporting information and what would really sell...and she did give me some ideas...at that point...(Julie, 40's, Final Year, Undergraduate Special Needs and Inclusion Studies with Educational Studies, Westside University).

In respect of her HE choices, Lindsay, like Julie, also implies an independence from her family and draws upon the importance of her Access tutors giving her the right information, support and advice in order to support her HE decision-making

…Not really family and friends...It was the staff…on the Access course, that I spoke to, who told me pretty much all that I needed to know… (Lindsay, Mid 30's, Final Year, Undergraduate Degree Primary Education with Qualified Teacher Status, Newtown University).

The experiences of Julie and Lindsay add an interesting slant (drawing upon Bourdieu), on middle-class participation in HE, in that their experiences are clearly different to those of younger, middle-class participants, such as Joanna, who are far more likely to draw upon their family and social networks (Heath *et al*, 2007), such as

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parents and friends (Brooks, 2002, 2003, 2004) to aid and influence their HE choices. The analysis of Julie and Lindsay's narratives point to, in some senses, them being 'hybrid' choosers of HE, in that their identities and experiences continue to call into question Ball *et al*'s (2002) categories of embedded and contingent choosers suggesting that they may not be as clear cut as they appear at first glance.

4.8.1 Securers in HE

So far, this chapter has charted the biographical journeys of the securers, which encompassed their early experiences (taking them on pathways away from formal education) and their turning points upon which they realised the importance of HE, and indeed the 'piece of paper'. Following a chronological format, sections 4.6 and 4.7 described how the securers negotiated their journeys towards HE. In the case of the majority of the securers, this involved their experiences of support on level 3, pre-HE programmes, with regard to equipping them for undergraduate study as well as providing them with the 'expert' knowledge to inform their HE choices. This, and the following sections (4.8.2, 4.8.3 and 4.8.4) describe the final stage of the securers' biographical journeys, with respect to how they experience and negotiate ('fitting-in' and standing-out) their particular HE settings.

The discussion in this chapter so far has highlighted the heterogeneity of the middle-class participants in this study (the securers), supporting the criticisms of the implied homogeneity of the middle-classes in relation to HE participation (Power *et al*, 2003; Brooks, 2003). With the exception of Joanna (who for the purposes of this thesis is not categorised as a 'securer'), the middle class securers are entering HE, not at the

age of eighteen, and not from traditional academic routes ('A' levels), but instead exhibit complex work, educational and family backgrounds. The following analytical discussion draws on the experiences of the participants in the Bourdieuian sense of habitus and their interaction with field in that they have moved, or are about to move, from one field (their pre-HE settings) to another (HE itself). At this moment, it is worth referring to Bourdieu's analogy, which describes the moment when one's individual habitus meets with the field (HE):

> ...when habitus encounters a social world of which it is the product, it is like a "fish in water": it does not feel the weight of the water, and it takes the world about itself for granted (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, p.127).

This implies that young middle-class entrants to HE have a habitus which fits in with the middle-class world of HE, and as such, feel like fish in water (or in other words are comfortable in their new surroundings). However the world that Bourdieu was commenting upon in the 1970's, 1980's and even the early 1990's was, in many senses, different to the HE we understand today. The diversification of HE, which sees students enter from a variety of different educational and professional pathways and at different stages in the life course means that the middle-class, or bourgeois student described by Bourdieu, in a pre-expanded HE sector in France, was, in some senses, different to the middle-class student in today's UK HE sector. The fish in water analogy (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992) therefore, is perhaps *not* a useful way of describing the heterogeneous middle-class group in this sample. It also implies that in a continually diversifying HE sector (increasingly characterised by widening participation), that class groups, not just those from middle-class backgrounds, are now much more heterogeneous in nature and as such, members

of these groups understand, experience and exhibit a range of behaviours in relation to HE.

Therefore, this thesis contends that it is much more appropriate to see these experiences and behaviours, in the context of viewing habitus as a form of practice generating grammar (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990). As implied earlier in this chapter and in Chapter One, just because someone is middle-class (or indeed working-class for that matter), it does *not* mean that their perceptions, experiences and behaviour will be *rigidly determined*, and therefore individuals will not appear to be the same (in other words they will have different understandings of the 'piece of paper').

The narratives in the remainder of this chapter highlight the premise of habitus as practice generating grammar (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990) in that the behaviour of the securers in HE, are not going to be all the same, and indeed will be different to the young, bourgeois, middle-class students that Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) describe as fish in water. The mature entrants amongst the securers in this research study, tended to frame their experiences, behaviour and practices in HE, for example within wider contexts such as being a mature student and their complex, family, social and professional lives outside HE. Therefore, despite their middle-class backgrounds, fitting in to HE is a challenge, as opposed to younger students at the age of eighteen, who are coming straight from school or college environments. As such, the behaviours and practices of these participants are indeed different, highlighting the fact that their habitus does not rigidly determine their actions, but rather frames a variety of possibilities.

4.8.2 Maturity and family: fitting in and 'standing out'

Julie's story (highlighted by the following excerpts) explains how the complexity of being a mature student with family responsibilities has impacted (in different ways) upon her perceived ability to fit in to her HE surroundings. In her first vignette Julie draws on the paradox between 'fitting-in' and 'standing out' in HE, where as a mature learner she was thrust into a predominantly young person's world.

> ...I found when I came on my open day three years ago...I did feel uncomfortable, cos a lot of the...they're all geared towards the young people...there's like a DJ and all the music, and...there was a lady handing round panic alarms and a lot of stalls...and I felt that I should go along and say hello and get involved, but I really felt like I really stood out...I've found that...to break those barriers down I've got to make an effort...In my first year if I went over to the traditional 'A' students and said hello and really made an effort...they were great...(Julie, 40's, Final Year, Undergraduate Special Needs and Inclusion Studies with Educational Studies, Westside University).

The above extract highlights the dichotomy between 'fitting-in' and 'standing out', where Julie feels that she stood out when encountering the field of HE, but was (upon making a significant effort) during her HE course, able to break down the barriers, in order that she could feel more comfortable (fit in) amongst her younger counterparts.

William (also at Westside) also talks (more briefly) about his perceptions upon entry to the new field of HE, from a non-manual professional background. Not unlike Julie, William also draws upon the paradox between 'fitting-in' and 'standing out' in HE.

However, he differs to Julie in that he talks about 'standing out' in relation to his age and education, but that in some senses his life experience (which the younger students did not have), gave him an advantage.

> I thought it was going to be really difficult to start for me, to get into the mentality of being...like on the university course, against my peers, who are coming straight in from education, but I actually found that I had the advantage, because I had got life experience...and they didn't. That was a huge thing, even now in the third year...because I've got ten years of life experience which they still don't have...because they have come straight to uni...they get stressed and panic over different things..., where[as] I go no, you've got to do this, this and this. I can just sit back and go OK... (William, 31 years of age, Final Year, Undergraduate Degree Early Childhood Studies, Westside University).

Julie intimately alludes to how the complexity of family life (often an issue for mature students) impacts upon her ability to 'fit-in' to HE in an academic sense, with respect to being able to complete the required work.

> ...it's been very...it's been quite challenging getting the time to sit down and actually read... especially when I have got quite a few sort of major family health problems as well, so you have got the guilt...instead of being challenged and trying to concentrate and learn a subject really well, and then you have got your assignments to do and your deadlines...you have also got that emotional pull of...family issues, so that has been very challenging...(Julie, 40's, Final Year, Undergraduate Special Needs and Inclusion Studies with Educational Studies, Westside University).

Julie's narrative highlights the complexity of many mature students' lives outside HE, where their participation implies a real challenge in relation to their ability to juggle and manage a range of competing priorities and, in some senses, make significant sacrifices.

4.8.3 Being 'educated': notions of 'fitting-in' and 'standing-out'

In her narrative, Lindsay (Newtown) too, not unlike Julie and William, draws upon the paradoxical notions of 'fitting-in' and 'standing out', but in a very different way. Lindsay talks about 'fitting-in' to an academic world, where her degree, (or the 'piece of paper'), not only provides her with the opportunity to move into a new career (she wishes to become a teacher), but also provides her with a middle-class confidence in that she is regarded by others as educated. In the following narrative it is evident the impact that HE has had on her self-confidence as well as her future professional options.

> It's mainly the degree really for the career...and it's also given me the...I think the confidence to actually now talk to people as if I am now educated, rather than as a hairdresser [or] something… Everybody says, oh that's what you did...and 'oh you're good with your hands', as if you can't think (laughs)…So I do feel now that people treat me differently because I am actually seen as educated (Lindsay, Mid 30's, Final Year, Undergraduate Degree Primary Education with Qualified Teacher Status, Newtown University).

Whilst it is clear that Lindsay's participation and comfort in HE has provided her with a type of middle-class confidence, it has also come at a personal cost to Lindsay in

that her feeling of being 'educated' has resulted in tensions within her social networks.

> …I've almost lost a few friends now who feel that...one of them has admitted that she doesn't feel she can speak to me anymore because she thinks that I almost like...I'm now educated and do you know what I mean whatever she's got to say is not going to be interesting anymore...People do tend to treat you differently...my friends have dropped by the wayside... (Lindsay, Mid 30's, Final Year, Undergraduate Degree Primary Education with Qualified Teacher Status, Newtown University).

Although Lindsay does not talk about 'standing out' in HE contexts, it is implied (through her interview) that she now feels (because she is educated), that she stands out in more social arenas, outside HE. Lindsay's story chimes with many of the mature students in Baxter and Britton (2001) in that she describes the two-fold way in which HE has changed her with respect to her increased confidence and the feeling of being educated, or what Baxter and Britton (2001, p.93) call 'taking on a new language of academia'. As such, Baxter and Britton (2001, p.93) suggest that:

> This can be conceptualised sociologically as a process of acquiring new forms of cultural capital through education, which has significant effects on their sense of self, as well as on relations with friends and colleagues who still inhabit the 'old' world.

One of the consequences of being educated, drawn upon by Lindsay in this study and many of the mature students in Baxter and Britton's (2001) study, is what is known as the imputation of superiority (Baxter and Britton, 2001), where they are

seen differently by those around them. Lindsay's story adds a slight variation to Baxter and Britton's (2001) study, in the sense that the feelings of being educated and being seen as superior were more evident amongst the mature students from working-class backgrounds, where the '...changes in understanding, knowledge and confidence involve a process of the development of new forms of cultural capital in the individual which often seem more noticeable to friends than to the person themselves (Baxter and Britton, 2001, p.94). Despite her middle-class social background, Lindsay's story in some senses suggests that her HE participation has further cemented her middle-class position, in the sense that it has given her an added confidence and self-belief.

4.8.4 Securers in HE: a summary

It is apparent that the narratives supplied by Julie, William and Lindsay (in relation to 'fitting-in' and 'standing-out' in HE contexts), differ from the normal understandings of young middle-class or bourgeois students such as Joanna who 'fit in' to HE much more comfortably in both academic and social senses (or in Bourdieuian senses like fish in water). In this sense, the use of this Bourdieuian analogy to describe the experiences of the securers in this study is unhelpful. The application of Bourdieu and Passeron's (1990) notion of habitus as practice generating grammar is a more appropriate way to conceptualise, and therefore understand, the experiences, behaviour and practices of these participants (not only in HE, but on their 'journeys' to gaining the 'piece of paper'). This is because unlike the more 'deterministic' analogy about middle-class students being fish in water, understanding habitus in this way suggests that it does not rigidly determine how we act in a given situation,

but that the 'grammar' of classed habitus can produce a range of different "sentences" (practices, understandings or behaviours). Despite the fact that the securers are all from backgrounds associated with middle-class cultural capital, their heterogeneity, informed by the diverse range of entry routes (both educational and professional), their ages upon entry to HE, coupled with their family contexts, mean that the range of different "sentences" (practices, understandings and behaviours) of the securers in relation to HE and the 'piece of paper' are different and not rigidly determined.

It is also worth recounting Turnbull's (1990) understanding of liminality, which is not only the process of transition from one space to another, but also a process of transformation. In the sense of this thesis, gaining the 'piece of paper' is ultimately a transformative process, in the sense that it enables the perceived and real transformation in different ways. For example gaining the 'piece of paper' (the HE qualification) means that individuals across all the differently classed groups (securers, enrichers and builders) will hopefully move from less secure locations (pre-HE) to more secure locations, upon gaining the symbolic capital, and being able to exchange this for access to new employment in professional spheres (thus exerting symbolic power). Gaining the 'piece of paper' also in some senses implies a transformation, where the process of gaining the qualification and actually achieving it, symbolises the move from being not educated to educated. Throughout various stages in this chapter, all of the securers (as with the enrichers and builders in Chapters Five and Six of this thesis) right from their turning points (their realisation that they needed the 'piece of paper') through to gaining the qualification *implied* the transformative 'process' of HE, in that it served as a vehicle to gain access to further

and more professional employment and educational opportunities and as Lindsay (Newtown) for example suggested the chance to be seen as educated, which provided her with increased confidence.

4.9 Conclusion

> Middle-class subjectivity, and the day-to-day practices which construct that subjectivity, is so heavily cloaked in convictions of 'normality' (this is a magic cloak, like Harry Potter's, it makes the wearer instantly invisible) that it can be difficult to imagine that it might be 'defensive' at all. (Lucey and Reay, 2000, p.139-40).

It is worth recounting the words of Lucey and Reay (also highlighted earlier in this chapter), which highlight the paucity of research into the middle-classes (particularly in relation to HE participation) see for example Power *et al* (2003) and Brooks (2003), in the sense that there is not anything unremarkable about their experiences. However the analysis of the biographical journeys of the securers in this chapter (from their early experiences of compulsory schooling, FE and work, through to their experiences of HE itself), have highlighted (through a diverse and complex set of experiences) the importance of understanding the fluidity and diversity of class, where despite, at first glance individuals may appear to be similar, they are in some senses also quite different. Conceptualising the experiences, behaviour and understandings of these participants using Bourdieu and Passeron's (1990) notion of habitus as practice generating grammar, is (within the context of this thesis especially) a more appropriate way of helping to understand these participants'

complex social worlds within the context of a twenty first century, contemporary and diverse (and mainstreamed with regard to widening participation) HE sector.

The experiences of the securers (in this thesis) imply that, in some senses sociological understandings of middle-class students in HE being like fish in water are not always helpful, in that they fail to capture the complexities and ambiguities of HE participation of those, who have a strong subjective sense of not quite adhering to 'normal' middle-class educational biographies. The securers, who came from once-secure middle-class backgrounds, were (like working-class entrants to HE) also 'widening participation' students, in that they did not conform to the traditional middle-class HE student, who was eighteen and came from traditional 'A' level routes. It might be too simplistic, therefore, to adhere to the idea that middle-class entrants have simply 'colonised' widening participation, as if encroaching on an educational site 'belonging to' working-class students. Whist they were relatively privileged, the securers also found themselves destabilised by shifts in class, work and education and saw themselves as socially vulnerable. This sense of vulnerability provided the logic behind their 'widening participation' educational strategies. This does not necessarily fit with the founding intentions of the widening participation 'movement' in the 1970s but it fits the changed class-educational landscape of the 21st Century.

Chapter Five which follows a similar format, charts and analyses the biographical journeys of the participants characterised in this thesis as enrichers, who were entering HE after successful careers, and were seeking the 'piece of paper' (the symbolic capital) in recognition of this, but also in an instrumental sense, to increase their options when moving to new and different forms of employment. They were

also pursuing the cultural capital that HE implicitly brings, which would make up for their lack of cultural capital (relative to their counterparts classed as securers), due to being brought up in working-class contexts, where formal education, after schooling, was shunned in favour of going out to work (earning not learning).

CHAPTER FIVE:

ENRICHERS: BIOGRAPHICAL ANALYSIS OF WIDENING PARTICIPATION

JOURNEYS

5.1 Introduction

Much has been written on the experiences and identities of mature students in HE (see for example MacDonald and Stratta, 1998; Bowl, 2001: 2003; Reay, 2002: 2003a; Reay *et al*, 2002). They are conceptualised as 'widening participation' students in that they do not neatly fit the stereotypical or archetypal traditional student profile, in that upon entry to HE, they are not aged eighteen and come from low-income or working-class backgrounds. HE is seen by many of these students as a means by which to move away from lower paid or low-skilled work, referred to for example by Archer (2003b, p.123) as '"crap" (hard, dirty or dangerous) jobs', into more professional types of employment. However, whilst this may be true of many mature students, the participants in this research who were characterised as enrichers, inverted prevalent notions of student instrumentalism which suggest that credentials, or the 'piece of paper' (in the form of qualifications), improve individuals' career or professional options.

By contrast, the enrichers (Gill, Joe, Robert, Simon and Terry) were entering HE, after already having experienced relatively successful professional careers. So, their reasons for participating in HE were not purely couched in notions of financial betterment (Archer, 2003b) but, in symbolic terms, as a form of 'recognition', or 'validation' of their professional knowledge, competence and status. Level 4 qualifications (those offered in HE) would also serve, in an instrumentalist sense, as

a vehicle to gain alternative, but similar employment: to enable sideways moves in employment.

The enrichers were ambiguous in class terms – or, rather, liminal. They came from traditional working-class contexts but, by dint of their professional successes, they had experienced social mobility in economic terms and this was how they described their trajectories. However they lacked cultural capital concomitant with their economic status and, as such, there was an additional status to be gained by entering HE and gaining credentials. However, all of the enrichers, with the exception of Gill, are on a distinctly, vocationally oriented HE programme (HE Diploma in Food Safety and Food Legislation) which was linked to their past employment and careers and their intended future professional lives. In this sense, their movement into HE did not signal a complete departure from their work/ professional backgrounds. Gill, at the time of interview, was about to enter HE on a less specific degree programme (Management Science), but that was still in some senses, linked to her past employment and her future career opportunities and goals.

By participating in HE and gaining the 'piece of paper', the enrichers are, in some senses, seeking to 'enrich' their lives with respect to their professional and social status. The 'piece of paper' that the enrichers are seeking, is perceived by the participants as a way of maintaining and protecting their economic status, in the sense that their qualification will provide them with increased credibility in order to continue in their current professional roles, or, in the case of Gill (Chase) in particular, to succeed in new employment. What the biographies implied (like the securers described in Chapter Four), is that the terms middle-class and working-

class are arguably *not always* helpful in capturing the 'classed' experiences and identities of entrants, in today's HE sector.

Throughout their interview accounts the enrichers sought to explain their reasons for 'non-participation' in post-compulsory and higher education earlier in their lives, by drawing upon their traditional working-class backgrounds. These explanations were often sinewed with references to their experiences of what Sennett and Cobb (1977) termed 'the hidden injuries of class'. Participants, for example, described how they perceived HE in a Bourdieuian sense, as not for the likes of them (Reay *et al*, 2001: 2005, Marks *et al*, 2003; Archer *et al*, 2007), or as alien to people like them (cf. Hutchings and Archer, 2001) and some (particularly, the older males in the sample) emphasised the importance of the economics of work (Willis, 1977; Merrill, 1999). As such, their biographies draw attention to the complex nexus of school, family, work and financial forces in which their educational identities were constructed.

5.2 The enrichers' biographies

This section provides thumbnail educational and professional biographies of the participants, before entry to HE. Their decisions (as will be evident in section 5.3) to 'actively' reject HE at a young age, were undoubtedly different to those described by the securers in Chapter Four, in that their working-class contexts that they grew up in, encouraged earning and *not* learning (i.e. formal education).

Robert's (Aged 48, Final Year, University Diploma in Food Safety, University of Brightown) biography highlights (like all of the other enrichers in this thesis), the influence of family and class on his early life, where upon leaving compulsory

schooling he was thrust into manual work. Robert typified the mantra of earning in favour of learning and thereby rejecting formal education, and indeed, HE, by undertaking a range of different employment, from being a coalminer to running a restaurant. Robert also epitomises the successful careerist highlighted in this thesis, in that he is entering university after already achieving highly in professional fields. As will be highlighted later in this chapter, this represents a back to front trajectory of learning and understandings of widening participation and HE, where the degree or the 'piece of paper' is usually regarded as the passport to a professional career. Despite his success professionally (and therefore economically), Robert (drawing upon his working-class roots) views his HE participation in a very instrumentalist sense, in that the 'piece of paper' gives him added leverage and credibility in existing and new professional spheres.

Simon's (Aged 40, Final Year, University Diploma in Food Safety, University of Brightown) biography, not unlike the other enrichers in this thesis, points towards his working-class roots as the catalyst for rejecting formal education, and HE, and moving straight into work upon leaving school. Simon's biography implies a more stable work history, in that he stayed in similar employment (manufacturing) and progressed to his position of self-employed consultant. Simon (again like Robert drawing upon working-class discourses of instrumentalism), now sees the importance of HE, in respect of how the 'piece of paper', gives him the means to gain the necessary accreditation, which will support and develop his consultancy work.

Joe's (Aged 40, Final Year, University Diploma in Food Safety, University of Brightown) biography highlights like some of the other enrichers, a rejection of formal education in favour of working, but unlike Robert and Simon, this was in the armed

forces. During his engagement Joe worked his way up the ranks, gaining a range of technical expertise and qualifications along the way. Despite reaching (in his words) the top of the tree, Joe's biography also highlights a very rational and instrumental approach to HE and the 'piece of paper', where he wants to give himself options, in relation to being competitive in the professional employment sphere, upon leaving the armed forces.

Terry's (Aged 39, Final Year, University Diploma in Food Safety, University of Brightown) biography, not unlike Joe's, implied a rejection of HE as 'not for the likes of him' and gaining employment, which culminated in joining the forces. Like the other enrichers in this study, Terry has enjoyed a successful career, but still draws upon his working-class roots, in adopting an instrumentalist approach to HE, and gaining the 'piece of paper', in that it gives him additional options upon entry to professional employment upon leaving the forces.

Gill's (Late 30's, Access to HE, Chase College) biography differs slightly from the other enrichers highlighted in this thesis, in that although her working-class roots led her to 'earning and not learning', she displayed a desire to continue with her education from a young age. However, parental influences, coupled with fractured experiences of compulsory schooling, led her to seek work upon leaving education. Gill saw her forthcoming participation in HE (and gaining the 'piece of paper') in both an instrumental and personal sense, in that she realises the value of a degree in giving her added options and credibility upon re-entry to the employment market, but also that it will be a realisation of an ambition or dream, held from an early age.

The following section of this thesis highlights the aforementioned phenomenon of earning not learning, in that drawing upon their upbringing in working-class contexts,

the enrichers implied the importance of work and, as such, the 'active' rejection of learning.

5.3 Early experiences: earning not learning

Some of the participants invoked financial insecurity as a key reason for not pursuing education after the age of sixteen; the literature suggests that this is frequently a feature in the lives of mature, 'widening participation' students brought up in working-class environments (Archer and Hutchings, 2000; Brine and Waller, 2004). In this sense, the early experiences of the enrichers described in this chapter, were indeed very different to those of the securers described in Chapter Four, in that they grew up in working-class contexts and due largely to financial concerns (earning not learning), they actively rejected HE. This contrasts to the majority of the securers (Chapter Four) in that their decisions to not continue with their education (and therefore not participate in HE at a young age) were constrained by perceived barriers, such as family tensions (section 4.4.2) and negative experiences of compulsory schooling (section 4.4.3).

For these participants, HE was not typically seen as a necessary progression for young people, whereas employment was viewed, as a logical progression after leaving compulsory schooling (Archer *et al*, 2001). For example, when asked about his post-sixteen options, Robert talked about his decision to go straight into work:

> It was more of an economic reason. I was brought up in South Yorkshire from a very working-class background and it was basically to go out and get a job to earn money for the family...I'll be quite honest, I'm not going to lie to you.

(Robert, 48 year old male, Final Year, University Diploma in Food Safety, University of Brightown).

Robert never saw himself going to university suggesting it was '...not at all me' (Robert, 48 year old male, University Diploma in Food Safety, University of Brightown), which also demonstrates the alien nature of education for some people. He moves on to suggest that these influences provided him with a simple, but limited choice:

> It was my choice which of the two coal pits...there were two coal pits next to each other. It was a matter of which one I picked. That was actually said to me...we used to have a careers man that come and his question to me was which pit are you going to go down Robert? (Robert, 48 year old male, Final Year, University Diploma in Food Safety, University of Brightown).

Simon, another participant at the same institution as Robert, also pointed to the economic reasons that informed his post-schooling options. He suggests that '... back then it was leave school as soon as you can and then start work' (Simon, 40 year old male, Final Year, University Diploma, University of Brightown). Robert and Simon's working-class stories of entering employment at a young age recalls the pupils described in the seminal work of Willis (1977), who argued that the mutual alienation between a particular fraction of the white male, working-class and their schools co-constituted a rejection by working-class 'lads' of the cultural and symbolic capital offered by the education system. The lads' rejection of formal education fitted them perfectly for the culture of industrial manual labour, the shop floor for which they were destined upon leaving school:

One should not underestimate the degree to which 'the lads' want to escape from school – the 'transition' to work would better be termed the 'tumble' out of school – and the lure and the prospect of money and cultural membership amongst 'real men' beckons very seductively as refracted through their own culture (Willis, 1977, p.100).

The construction of HE as being alien, 'not for them' (Hutchings and Archer, 2001, p.87) was apparent in Terry's narrative where he describes a culture (in his case, the 1980s) in which higher study was still seen as the province of 'boffins'.

I think back then, it was the dark ages where university was seen as something where you need A levels, you need to be a bit of a boffin to get into university, and I also think it came down to background, you know social like, where you were brought up and you know I am quite common and down to earth and looking back 20 years ago, I think I would have been looked down on in university (Terry, 39 year old, Final Year, University Diploma in Food Safety, University of Brightown).

Terry's narrative is redolent of the views of the participants in the studies of Marks *et al* (2003) and Hutchings and Archer (2001), where 'common sense' constructions of HE were deeply alienating to those from working-class backgrounds. Terry's perception that he would be looked down upon in university stemmed from his working-class identity, and the fact that education and in particular university, '... was seen as totally separate' (Terry, 39 year old, Final Year, University Diploma in Food Safety, University of Brightown). In this sense HE, was seen as a completely different world and entirely set apart from the social worlds of working-class participants.

While men such as Robert were old enough to have entered the industrial settings described by Willis (1977), the experiences of female, ethnic minority and younger participants are not captured by Willis' analysis. Gill, for instance, exhibited a class identity sinewed by family tensions and frustrated educational aspiration:

> ...So, I wanted to stay on and improve my grades at 'O' Level and do a couple of 'A' Levels, but Mum wanted me to go out and earn, to bring some money into the house. So after an argument, I went down the job centre, got a place on a YTS scheme and left home after 6 weeks of my YTS scheme, cos I got myself a bedsit. So she lost out in the end anyway (chuckles). So I was bright, lost interest, found life difficult. I always wanted a degree, I always wanted to do my 'A' Levels but my life focus changed, had to be on earning a crust, keeping a roof over my head, survival techniques really... (Gill, late 30's, Access to HE, Chase College).

Gill describes herself, for instance, as a 'bright' pupil fighting against her mother's insistence on 'bring(ing) some money into the house'. Her shift away from formal education was the result of force of (family) circumstances, not an active rejection of formal education on her part. Gill's recollection of her mother's words who suggested that she should '...go to the University of Life... [and]...what do you need a piece of paper for...' (Gill, late 30's, Final Year, Access to HE, Chase College), in some senses encapsulate her classed location, where class and gender influenced her decisions not to enter HE at a young age. However, now (at the time of interview), as a mature, successful returner (as highlighted in section 5.4 of this thesis), she is able to exercise her own agency and therefore pursue HE in order (ironically reversing her mother's views before) to gain the 'piece of paper'.

Gill's account highlights, in some senses, the heavy gendered and classed influence upon her early experiences and her (or her mother's) decision not to continue her education, although she expressed a desire to continue her learning journey. These experiences sit in stark contrast to the more contemporary experiences of many of the young working-class (and indeed middle-class) women participants highlighted in this thesis.

5.4 From 'working-class' jobs and backgrounds to 'middle-class' careers

A feature of much of the literature that explores the biographies of 'non-traditional' students is a focus on those who were motivated to return to formal education as reaction to their experiences of low paid, poor work – dead end jobs (cf. Archer and Hutchings, 2000; Warmington, 2003). However, this research study includes a little remarked aspect of mature, non-standard entry to HE; where entrants' post-school working lives included successful careers (cf. Egerton, 2001a; 2001b; Reay, 2002). All of the participants described as enrichers (Robert, Terry, Joe, Simon and Gill), portrayed themselves in such terms. Analysis of their experiences adds an important nuance to the old working-class 'Access student' archetypes, where young people were discouraged from pursuing FE (and therefore HE) and going into paid employment. It also draws attention to the gap between the industrial class structures of the 1970s described by Willis (1977) and Bowles and Gintis (1977) and the shifting, post-industrial worlds in which the participants of the current study made the transition from school and FE settings to work. The following narratives highlight the career trajectories of these participants

Earlier in this chapter (see Section 5.3), Robert depicted himself as someone who, upon leaving school, was faced with the male, working-class 'choice' of entering heavy industry as a miner. Throughout his professional career his classed identity, in some senses became more fluid in that he became successful by dint of experience gained in a variety of different fields. In many ways he came to epitomise the 'portfolio worker' (cf. Avis, 2002), who no longer being able to rely on a 'job for life' in the way that characterised previous generations of miners, moved through a series of job roles and sectors, emerging as a chef, and a skilled worker in the service sector.

> I...left grammar school and worked down the coal mine... then did a four year apprenticeship to work as a blacksmith/plate welder which I passed. I took redundancy from the National Coal Board after the strikes in 1985. I moved down to Cornwall and basically got involved in catering, with no qualification in catering at all and then progressed through self-learning as a chef and ended up buying a restaurant and having the restaurant for 10 years. Then sold the restaurant and took...a catering franchise for 7 years (Robert, late 40's, Final Year, University Diploma in Food Safety, University of Brightown).

Terry, also from the University of Brightown, has had extensive professional experience working in the armed forces. This provided Terry with a wide variety of skills and experiences which has enabled him to have a fulfilling and successful career.

> I wanted to travel. It was a spur of the moment decision to join the forces. So the best option to travel was to join the navy, so I joined the navy, and I am now at the end of my 22 year engagement and looking at progressing into

another career in Civvy Street. My career in the navy has involved numerous catering services, dealing with front of house more than anything, accommodation areas...managing accounts, work bills, logistics, stores, working abroad with major functions for VIP's...promoting the navy worldwide, 'flying the flag as we like to call it'...and being there for all the major functions, lunch parties, dinner parties and major receptions and things like that (Terry, Late 30's, Final Year, University Diploma in Food Safety, University of Brightown).

In much the same vein as Terry, Joe's career in the services offered an uncomplicated or stable career pathway, where he was able to advance, unlike Robert's career which was more complex where he moved between a variety of different roles and employment sectors.

I left school from a comprehensive school with CSE's, joined the army and over the last sort of 23 years...and progressing through the management...achieving food hygiene and those sort of things you know through my trade...and obviously leadership and management experience within the forces (Joe, 40 years old, Final Year, University Diploma in Food Safety, University of Brightown).

Much like Joe, although in a different professional environment, Simon's career trajectory was also characterised by upward progression.

(I) left school at sixteen...did a YTS scheme for twelve months and at the end of that went into food manufacture on the shop floor. I spent sixteen and a half years there working my way up, to head of hygiene for the factory (Simon, 40

years old, Final Year, University Diploma in Food Safety, University of Brightown).

Terry, Joe and, in some senses Simon, were able to, unlike Robert, rely on jobs, or careers for life, with regard to the fact that they employed in stable industries. Gill, who like her male counterparts, grew up in working-class contexts also emphasises successful aspects of her professional life.

I was a self-employed project manager of major computing projects that rolled out over Europe for Barclays Bank, for American Chemical Companies and that was quite successful (Gill, late 30's, Access to HE, Chase College).

Many careers that were entered routinely by otherwise unqualified school-leavers, in the 1960's, 1970's and 1980's, at a time before the huge increase in credentialism (Dore, 1976; Collins, 1979; Ainley, 1994), are now more likely to recruit those with graduate level qualifications for the same roles. This results in over qualification in employment (Brynin, 2002). However, with the degree rapidly becoming more standard, it is becoming a more important commodity in order to not get left behind. In some senses, this is one of the reasons which meant that these participants felt that they had to gain extra credentials (as they were seeking new employment), in order that they were able to compete in the job market with younger graduates.

The phenomenon highlighted by the enrichers' biographies in that they were returning to education (and indeed HE), on the back of successful professional careers is an all too often ignored characteristic of widening participation research. Widening participation research has tended to focus on old 'Access' archetypes

where individuals are accessing HE to escape deficit jobs, described by Archer (2003b, p.123) for example as '"crap" (hard, dirty or dangerous) jobs'. The following discussion highlights the turning points of these participants, where despite their career successes, they have realised the importance of gaining the 'piece of paper' in an economic sense, but have also realised that HE (through the guise of a mainstreamed widening participation sector) is now much more accessible, where it maybe was not so at an earlier age.

5.5.1 Enrichers' turning points

So what of the turning points, where the enrichers decided that HE was now for the likes of them and within their reach, rather than their working-class constructions highlighted earlier in the chapter?

It was clear, from the discussion earlier in this chapter (see 5.3), that these participants, unlike their more middle-class counterparts (described in Chapter Four) talked about their active rejection of education (and therefore HE) at a young age, as being heavily shaped by class, and by the economics of work and family. However, now, after successful professional careers which have seen them climb the ladder of social mobility in an income sense, otherwise characterised as intergenerational income mobility (Goldthorpe and Jackson (2007), they have realised, at various stages of the life-course, the value and importance of HE and gaining the necessary credentials (the 'piece of paper'). The enrichers are also seeking the 'piece of paper' to protect themselves against perceived downward mobility (cf. Beck, 1992). The massification of HE and the mainstreaming of widening participation, has helped to create a more diverse student profile (in relation to age,

social profile, pre-HE qualifications, or in the case of Robert, Joe, Terry, Simon and Gill, significant professional experience). In this sense, the enrichers' turning points are not only informed by the realisation that they need the 'piece of paper', but that they now see HE (through the auspices of widening participation) as 'for the likes of them'. Terry highlights a perceived shift in how HE was, and is now viewed.

> ...It's promoted better and [there's] better advertisement... I think back then, it was the dark ages where university was seen as something where you need A levels, you need to be a bit of a boffin to get into university, and I also think it came down to background, you know social like (Terry, 39 year old male, Final Year, University Diploma in Food Safety, University of Brightown).

5.5.2 Turning points and career changes

Like many of the securers highlighted in Chapter Four, all five of the enrichers discussed in this chapter, talked mainly about their decisions to pursue HE (their turning points) as being linked to a personal desire and decision to change the focus of their careers. For two of the participants (Joe and Terry), their decisions to enter HE were linked to gaining the necessary credentials in order to continue their professional successes after long engagements in the armed forces. In some senses, their turning points (their decisions to enter HE) were more crucial, in that their employment (pre-HE), was about to come to an end. Terry's narrative points towards this sense of relative urgency in that he realises the importance of planning his future beyond a career in the services.

…Over the last two to three years,[…] you have to get off your backside and think what am I going to do when I leave the service…and obviously get as much qualifications and certification around you as you can (Terry, 39 year old male, Final Year, University Diploma in Food Safety, University of Brightown).

Not dissimilar to Terry, the turning point, where Joe realised the value and importance of credentials (the 'piece of paper') came near the end of his engagement with the services.

…I decided to do this course before I leave the army next year… so I had it in good time… Whether you are going into local authority or manufacturing, a lot of the requirements are the higher certificate. So, it makes sense if that was the route I was going to go through to plan properly and get the course under my belt, before I left the army...and more and more employment is going towards needing a degree so I will be competing actually out there with graduates. (Joe, 40 years old, Final Year, University Diploma in Food Safety, University of Brightown).

In this sense, gaining the 'piece of paper' for them, as well as the other enrichers was framed in instrumental and economistic terms, in that they realised the importance of the qualification in enabling them to pursue further careers and also, as Joe implied in his narrative, to be competitive against their younger counterparts who also possessed degrees or similar qualifications.

Biographical analysis of Gill's narrative(s) also suggested this notion of competitiveness alluded to by Joe, where she realises the importance of gaining the 'piece of paper', in relation to her future career and employment prospects. She suggests that:

> The working world is much more competitive now...years ago you could get away with a couple of 'A' Levels and do well, now organisations are looking for minimum of a degree... they don't even look at your C.V...Even if you have got experience... if you haven't got a degree, HR just put it into the bin, So I need the degree (Gill, late 30's, Access to HE, Chase College).

Gill's narrative highlights how, in some senses, the 'piece of paper' (in the form of the degree or HE qualification) will recognise and to an extent confirm, her previous career success. However her reasons for pursuing HE, culminating in her turning point at which she realised she needed the 'piece of paper', were also couched in more personal terms, in that (drawing upon her working-class roots) she will be able to realise an ambition unfulfilled at a younger age.

> ...the bottom line is *personal sense of satisfaction* whoopee dip! ...To a lot of people it's a piece of paper that anybody goes for...For me, given my background, it's the world... (Italics for her emphasis) (Gill, late 30's, Access to HE, Chase College).

Gill's second narrative emphasises how the mainstreaming of widening participation in today's twenty-first century HE, has meant that people like her, who came from working-class backgrounds where HE was seen as alien (Hutchings and Archer,

2001), or not for the likes of me (Reay *et al*, 2001: 2005; Marks *et al*, 2003; Archer *et al*, 2007), are now able to view HE as much more accessible, and within their reach. Despite the career and employment successes of the participants, highlighted in section 5.4, they need the 'piece of paper' to be and remain competitive and thus secure their future prosperity and class location. The next stage of the discussion focuses on the participants' preparation and HE choices, drawing upon contemporary Bourdieuian analysis (Ball and Vincent, 1998; Ball *et al*, 2002).

5.6 The enrichers: preparation for HE

Four out of the five participants characterised as enrichers in this thesis (Robert, Joe, Terry and Simon), entered HE directly from professional pathways. These participants were all combining their academic studies with their professional careers and family lives outside of HE and were all studying on the same distance learning programme at The University of Brightown (University Diploma in Food Safety). Throughout the narratives, some of these successful careerists turned middle-class returners drew upon their experiences of the world of work and how they incidentally equipped themselves with a variety of skills, characteristics and personal attributes, which would be transferable and would serve them well during their HE experience. This was despite their lack of experience of pre-HE programmes, which equip individuals with a range of skills and knowledge for HE (Access, Vocational and 'A' Level programmes). Joe and Terry (University of Brightown) who, at the time of interview, were both studying in HE (at, or near the end of their engagements with the Army and Navy respectively) referred to a wide variety of transferable skills they could take into HE. Joe intimates that his professional 'career' experiences have

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meant that he feels equipped to deal with the challenge of HE. Joe refers to personal characteristics such as being 'self-disciplined' and 'driven' as well as possessing significant leadership experience. (Joe, 40's, Final Year, University Diploma in Food Safety, University of Brightown). The attributes of being 'self-disciplined' and 'driven' expressed by Joe were particularly important as he was studying on a distance learning programme.

Both Joe and Terry throughout their interviews alluded to the pressures of their previous professional careers along with the responsibility that comes with such a vocation. The ability to work under pressure, along with their stated commitment and dedication to their HE programmes, meant that they felt prepared to engage with university study. All of the successful professional returners to HE, also talked about their time management skills, which would help them to manage their university studies against a backdrop of work, family and social commitments, which were outside their academic lives. All the transferable skills, experiences and attributes that these successful returners have gained in their professional lives, have helped to equip them for the challenge of HE. Robert, Simon, Joe and Terry, who were all at the University of Brightown, relied extensively upon their own experiences to prepare themselves for university study. In this sense, their pre-HE experiences were very different to the majority of the other participants in this thesis, in that they had not entered HE through an educational pathway and had come straight from professional worlds.

Despite also being characterised as a successful career returner, Gill's experience of preparation for HE was different to the other enrichers in this study and more like the

experiences alluded to by the securers and builders who also prior to HE entry, were engaged on 'Access' or 'Access type' programmes.

> ...I'm building study skills, I'm making sure that I can write and critically think to university standard. It's different to 'A' Level because I believe...'A' Level to me seems very much [about] regurgitating facts…,criticise them a little bit and you're OK...Whereas Access for me, is broader and more diverse in training your mind to think 'outside the box' in preparation for university. (Gill, late 30's, Access to HE, Chase College).

Gill depicts Access as a kind of 'training', providing her with a more rounded and critical approach to learning, which will prove important in her HE experience. Whilst she recognises the benefits of a more 'academic' programme, she suggests that this was not an appropriate programme of study to equip and prepare her adequately for HE. Student experiences of Access have often been couched with regard to a second chance education (see for example McFadden, 1995). However, biographical analysis of Gill's interview transcript highlights an interesting phenomenon where Access pathways and programmes can be viewed as a 'rehearsal space' in relation to how they equip and prepare individuals with the academic ability and self-confidence required to meet the demands of HE.

> ...this is like a rehearsal to test whether I have my family's support as well. Cause...I'm having to rearrange my life...my husband has to adjust, we have to adjust to each other...and if you go straight into university, straight from 'A' Level..., I think it might have been a bit of a culture shock for my husband to understand what work was involved, even though he has done a degree

himself...so, it's effect on the family as well (Gill, 30's, Access to HE, Chase College).

Gill's narratives imply some particularly interesting comments about her participation and re-engagement with education. Her story highlights and emphasises the dual importance of the role of the Access programme in both her 'professional' and 'family' life. On the one hand, Gill perceives Access as a vehicle to prepare her 'academically' to enable her subsequent participation in HE, but also sees her involvement as a kind of rehearsal to see whether she and her family are able to manage the significant re-adjustment to their lives, which HE participation will almost certainly bring about.

5.7 Enrichers: HE choices

The discussion now moves forward chronologically to critically examine the participants' HE choices. Drawing upon contemporary Bourdieuian analyses of university choices, regarding knowledge (Ball and Vincent, 1998) and types of HE choosers (Ball *et al*, 2002), this section of the thesis, like the corresponding section in Chapter Four (see section 4.7), continues to highlight and problematise the conceptual ideas espoused above.

Many of the enrichers in this thesis (particularly Robert, Simon, Joe and Terry) were choosing HE institutions within very clearly prescribed parameters. Therefore their choices were limited due to their professional and family commitments as well as the specialist nature of the course, which was only available at a limited number of institutions. As such, Robert, Simon, Joe and Terry could be conceptualised as

contingent choosers, in that they (because of their professional and family commitments outside the world of HE) are operating within narrowly defined socioscapes and social horizons (Ball *et al*, 2002), in the sense that the location, is a big determinant in the HE choices of these participants. In this sense, their HE choices are not dissimilar to those of many mature students (including the ones in this study), who due to their complex lives outside of HE, are constrained in their choices of university. The following narratives from Joe and Terry highlight the importance of 'location', even though in some senses, they would be some distance from their professional and family lives.

> ...the location was the main choice for coming here...there's only a couple of universities that do this course and this was the local one from where I live in South County (Joe, 40 years old, Final Year, University Diploma in Food Safety, University of Brightown).

> There is one in Midtown and one in Brightown, and obviously being closer to Portown, which is where I'm based it makes sense to do it in Brightown (Terry, 39 year old male, Final Year, University Diploma in Food Safety, University of Brightown) (Place names have been given pseudonyms so as to preserve anonymity).

To a certain extent both Joe and Terry's wishes to remain 'local', in some senses were constrained by location in that they had to go where the course was. Whilst the emphasis on location frames these participants as contingent choosers, the narratives of Terry and Simon point towards a level of support, in the sense of a form of hot knowledge (Ball and Vincent, 1998) from significant others (Ball *et al*, 2002) as well as from their social networks (Heath *et al*, 2007). Terry demonstrates in the

following narrative how his employer supported his choices enabling the transition to HE, where they provided him with the necessary knowledge to prepare him for the move to university.

> ...the actual education centre we have...are really helpful and they do try and promote education and personal development they really do emphasise it. Had it not been for them giving me all the information that I asked for, i.e. what courses may be beneficial, I don't think I would have ended up on this course in the first place. (Terry, 40's, Final Year, University Diploma in Food Safety, University of Brightown).

It is evident that Terry placed a heavy emphasis on the importance of this kind of hot knowledge that was provided to him by his employers, regarding HE choices. This form of hot knowledge, provided by specialist others (Ball *et al*, 2002), which resonates with the experiences of the embedded middle-class participants, Julie and Lindsay (described in Chapter Four of this thesis) continues to problematise the notion of contingent and embedded choosers espoused by Ball *et al* (2002), in the sense that these categories are not as clear cut as may appear at first glance.

Biographical analysis of Simon's interview transcript also points toward a tension between the notions of contingent and embedded choosers, whereby in the absence of embedded HE knowledge (in the form of inculcated cultural capital present in many middle-class families) he is able to draw on his social networks (Heath *et al*, 2007), in particular his wife who has provided him with significant levels of support and knowledge about the profession as well as the mechanics of HE. He credits his wife as being a big influence upon his career and HE choices, in that she grew up in middle-class contexts, went to university at the age of eighteen and worked as an

Environmental Health Officer. In this sense, she was in a good position to provide the kind of specialist advice, support and knowledge which had an impact upon Simon. In this sense, Simon's story, like Terry (and Julie and Lindsay in Chapter Four) points toward him gaining the kind of knowledge, support and advice usually reserved for embedded choosers of HE. In this sense, this analysis continues to add credence to the problematising of Ball *et al*'s (2002) conceptualisation of HE choosers.

Gill (Access to HE, Chase College), who, at the time of the study, was completing her Access programme, points to how she was able to gain significant and indeed useful knowledge and support about the mechanics of getting into HE, and how this aided her preparations for the subsequent transition to HE.

> ...we were briefed on what we were aiming for and...what a challenge that would be in terms of skills that's required, so I have been given that...Student services have provided a lot of information regarding the universities, about the UCAS application system and the mechanics of getting into higher education. They have been brilliant on providing references; they've been hand holding in writing personal statements, we have been coached through every step to apply. As for interviews, I thought...crikey I've never done an academic interview before...but is it the same, I could go to student services and someone sat down with me and explained the approach, what to wear, what to go armed with...(Gill, 30's, Access to HE, Chase College).

Gill's narrative above highlights an interesting sentiment whereby 'Access' programmes and their staff, can provide students with 'personalised' and 'specialised' knowledge about the HE process, such as advice about different

universities and the admissions process, which may have been unavailable through their family or social networks (Heath *et al*, 2007), which as was implied in the previous chapter, not only applies to those from working-class backgrounds. As was also alluded to earlier, this type of knowledge has traditionally been regarded as reserved for those described by Ball *et al* (2002) as embedded choosers where university is seen as expected and part of a normal biography (Du Bois Reymond, 1998). The last stage of the participants' biographies sees them entering the new field of HE. The following discussion draws (not unlike Chapter Four) on notions of 'fitting-in' to HE and how these enrichers managed their transitions to HE.

5.8.1 Enrichers in HE

In some senses, the experiences of transition to HE (for the majority of the enrichers) was different to normal HE transitions, in that they were not explicitly, or wholly moving (in a Bourdieuian sense) from one field to another. Their participation in HE, through a distance learning programme, enabled Joe, Robert, Simon and Terry to combine their professional roles, with their pursuit of the HE qualification (the 'piece of paper'). However, at the time of interview, they had engaged in a new field (HE), with which, by dint of their working-class backgrounds and relationships to formal education, they were unfamiliar and some of the participants captured this lack of familiarity in the narratives. However, despite their working-class relationships to education, 'fitting-in' to HE for those on the distance learning programme at the University of Brightown was not highlighted as a particular problem, in that their mode of study and attendance at university was different and far removed from traditional methods of engagement in HE. Therefore, 'fitting-in' to HE (for these

enrichers), was much more straightforward than it was for the working-class builders in Chapter Six and even the securers from middle-class backgrounds described in Chapter Four. The nature of their professionally and vocationally orientated programme, meant, in some senses, that 'fitting-in' would be unproblematic, in that all their counterparts on the course were from very similar professional backgrounds and that they were all engaging with HE in the same way.

Gill's experiences however, were more akin to those of the middle-class securers and working-class builders in this thesis, in that she talked about 'fitting-in' and 'standing out', regarding different aspects of her HE experience. What this continues to show (not unlike the experiences of the securers) is that despite their working-class relationships to formal education, the participant's (enrichers) exhibited a range of different behaviour, experiences, identities and practices in respect of their relationship(s) to HE and, as such, add further support to understanding the participants' habitus as forms of practice generating grammar (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990), in the sense that their behaviours are not all the same (and are therefore not rigid).

5.8.2 Enrichers 'fitting in': The importance of relationships

The following narratives from the biographies of the enrichers highlight how comfortable they are (particularly in the case of Joe, Robert, Simon and Terry) in their forms of HE, despite their working-class influenced rejections of education at a younger age. Joe, Robert, Simon and Terry (all University of Brightown) highlighted how they were able to 'fit-in' to their form of HE (distance learning), in both academic

and social senses, where their relationships with their tutors and their counterparts on the course, fostered a sense of belonging and membership within their specific community of practice (Wenger, 1998).

Whilst notions of 'fitting-in' and 'standing-out amongst the securers (see Chapter Four) were more located within the context of family and age for example, it was apparent through biographical analysis of the interviews of the enrichers, that their experiences of 'fitting-in' were not as influenced or affected by these factors (such as those drawn upon by the securers), but, were linked more to their relationships within HE. As was mentioned before, this is probably due to the nature of the course and mode of study, in that Joe, Robert, Simon and Terry were all attending HE on a periodical basis for intensive study (usually three days per month). Therefore, in some senses, they were all able to 'fit-in' straightforwardly to their HE worlds, knowing that their close knit relationships with their peers and tutors would foster a sense of belonging (or 'fitting-in' within their community). This is not to say that the securers and builders (in Chapters Four and Six of this thesis) did not talk about their relationships in HE, but they placed much less emphasis on them, as opposed to the four enrichers on the distance learning programme (Joe, Robert, Simon and Terry).

These four enrichers imply a much stronger sense of 'fitting-in' to HE, via their membership of their 'course' specific, community of practice. This is ultimately achieved by a shared repertoire (Wenger, 1998) of knowledge, skills and routines. As Wenger (1998, p.83) notes:

> The repertoire of a community of practice includes routines, words, tools, ways of doing things, stories, gestures, symbols, genres, actions or concepts that the community has produced or adopted in the course of its existence,

and which have become part of its practice…It includes the discourse by which members create meaningful statements about the world, as well as the styles by which they express their forms of membership and their identities as members.

Thus, membership of the community (and 'fitting-in') is achieved by the relationships that the individual participants form with their peers and members of staff within their discipline allied to the experiences that they bring to, and gain within, the community of practice. Biographical analysis of Robert and Terry's interview narratives imply the importance of 'fitting-in' to HE, in an academic sense, where they are all able to draw upon the community's shared repertoire to support their studies. Robert draws upon the influence that one of his tutors has had on him.

> ...we have got this main tutor who is very approachable, and is available all the time. There is help and guidance. In all honesty, I can't speak highly enough, that's from a personal point of view. I mean credit where credit's due the course itself is absolutely superb. Everything that people said to me...it's more. It's been great (Robert, late 40's, Final Year, University Diploma in Food Safety, University of Brightown).

Similarly, Terry also talks about the support provided by the tutors in relation to their commitment and enthusiasm which, in turn, fosters '...feelings of belonging and co-operation...' (Holmberg, 1989, p.162, cited in Smith, 2004, p.31), particularly crucial in distance learning programmes.

Robert and Terry's reflections encapsulate the importance of an effective student/staff relationship, especially as these individuals are studying on a distance

learning programme which as Bell and Tight (1993, cited in Forrester *et al*, 2005, p.294) suggest '...involves studying wholly or mostly in isolation from tutors and other students'. Holmberg (1989, p.162, cited in Smith, 2004, p.31) also draws upon the notion of support in distance learning programmes and suggests that it is important '...for students to feel a rapport with both their teachers and the providing institution', developing the idea of 'emotional involvement' (Holmberg, 1989, p.162, cited in Smith, 2004, p.31).

Peer relationships also have a very important part to play with respect to 'fitting in' to both the academic and social worlds of HE. In an academic sense for example, Terry draws upon the value of his relationships with his fellow participants, in that he is able, along with his peers, to draw upon the shared repertoire of the community of practice. The participants' range of backgrounds and experiences mean that he is able (like all the members of the community) to benefit from the expertise, in the form of knowledge, skills and routines of the group as a whole.

> ...I haven't got a chef's background. My catering services background is more like hospitality shall we say...so for me, the actual depth of knowledge in food, the standard you need of food in general I found really difficult...The support of being able to chat to these lads and ask them advice and...(say) Can you explain what this food is?' 'I've never heard of this food product before, what's involved with it?' We've all got backgrounds in a way, slightly different...and we all come together to provide the answers if we need them. (Terry, late 30's, Final Year, University Diploma in Food Safety, University of Brightown).

In their narratives Robert and Terry imply the value of peer relationships within the community with regard to the social aspect of HE. Terry for example talks about the bond that has been developed and enhanced between the 'lads' on the course, in that their common goals and the fact that they are all in the same boat, means that they get on with each other well and, as such, 'fit-in' to HE in a social sense.

> We all stayed together in the same hotel when we arrived the first time ... [and] ... We'll all go out for a curry, first night, a traditional curry, when we get up here... I think it's just the fact that we bonded. (Terry, late 30's, Final Year, University Diploma in Food Safety, University of Brightown).

Both Robert and Terry highlighted the importance to them of peer relationships in developing bonds and friendships on the course. So, whilst they '...were not 'proper' full time students who participate in a full social life that takes place in and through the social microcosm of the university' (Waller, 2006, cited in Christie *et al*, 2007, p.20), in that they were mature students on distance-learning programmes (i.e. not the 'norm'), their strong relationships enhanced their feelings of 'fitting-in' to HE in both academic and social senses. Their experiences of 'fitting-in' to their HE contexts are quite different to those of the other 'enricher' Gill, the securers (and indeed the builders), in that they were engaged on an intensive distance-learning programme which emphasised the importance of strong relationships with staff and peers.

5.8.3 Maturity: 'fitting-in' and 'standing out'

Gill (Chase), who at the time of interview was about to enter HE, describes how she will manage notions of 'fitting-in' and standing-out. Her narratives imply that in some senses, she does not expect to fit in (and in her own words, recognises this) and expects in some ways, to stand-out. However, the light-hearted nature of her narratives below, suggest that she plans to take these in her stride and will attempt to 'fit-in' where she feels she can, without compromising her own identity.

> ...I don't intend to be ... I don't know...I won't be changing me...I won't suddenly become Ab Fab, with a bottle of bolly, (laughs) to be in with the cool crowd...but I will be...I'm looking to empathise with them so that I can fit in. I think I am probably going to be seen as an Auntie or mother figure when it gets a bit tough...But it could also swing the other way...who wants the rents at university, that's... I'm learning their language; you know...Parents? ... (Gill, late 30's, Access to HE, Chase College).

Gill's narratives continue to highlight the dichotomy that lies between 'fitting-in' and 'standing-out' in HE contexts for mature students, in a similar vein to the securers in Chapter Four, where her mature student status (her age) in different ways makes her 'fit-in' and 'stand out' in HE. However, it is also apparent that her perceptions of 'fitting-in' and 'standing-out' in HE contexts differ to the actual HE experiences of the 'lads' (Joe, Robert, Simon and Terry), which is down to Gill's intention to engage with traditional forms of HE (full-time undergraduate programme), as opposed to the more intimate form of HE, as described in the experiences of Joe, Robert, Simon and Terry. The fact that their experiences and perceptions of 'fitting-in' and (in Gill's case), standing-out are different, further supports the argument for understanding

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their experiences, perceptions, behaviours and practices in Bourdieuian terms. So although it is not appropriate to describe them as either fish in or out of water in educational contexts, it is useful to understand their habitus as a form of practice generating grammar, in that despite their similar classed backgrounds and present lives, they exhibit different behaviour, experiences and practices, within their various HE contexts.

It is also interesting to note that despite the enrichers original working-class backgrounds and initial rejections of HE, they do not make many explicit references to class, with regard to 'fitting-in' and standing-out, unlike the builders in Chapter Six, who are entering HE straight from working-class contexts, who talked much more about their experiences of 'fitting-in' and 'standing out' as being imbued by class.

5.9 Conclusion

This chapter has focused on the enrichers in this study who present an ambiguity in class terms, in that their traditional, working-class backgrounds led them, upon leaving compulsory schooling, to 'actively' reject formal education, in favour of going straight into employment (earning not learning). This was clearly different to the securers reasons for 'rejecting' HE (highlighted in sections 4.4.1 to 4.4.6) which were explained in relation to barriers to entry, as opposed to the 'active' class-based rejections, highlighted by the enrichers. Analysis of their biographical journeys towards HE highlighted that they had become professionally successful (in economic senses) in their respective fields. However, this was not enough for them. Despite their clearly high aspirations in professional senses, they were highly aspirational in

an educational sense too. Upon reaching their turning points, the enrichers described the importance of HE, in relation to gaining the symbolic capital (the 'piece of paper') to firstly gain a kind of formal recognition for their prior achievements but also to maintain their economic status and therefore be able to continue in, or move into allied areas of employment and thus gain a type of perceived protection against downward mobility (Beck, 1992).

The enrichers differ from the securers (see Chapter Four) in that they desire the cultural capital associated with HE participation, contrasted to the embodied cultural capital of the securers. The expansion of HE and mainstreaming of widening participation has introduced massive diversity to the HE sector, in relation to participants' social backgrounds, age upon entry to HE and pre-HE pathways and in respect of the more diverse curricula on offer and the different modes of engagement that are available. This increased diversity in HE has meant that many individuals (like the enrichers in this study) are now able to view HE as much more accessible than in the past. So, the enrichers are like the securers in the sense that they are 'symbol chasers', who desire the 'piece of paper' to guard against the perceived threat of downward mobility, but their biographies highlight the differences in their trajectories towards achieving their goals (in relation to their classed and professional backgrounds). As such, they will gain slightly different attributes from their participation in HE (apart from the physical 'piece of paper'), with respect to the accumulation of cultural capital associated with formal education.

CHAPTER SIX:

BUILDERS: BIOGRAPHICAL ANALYSIS OF WIDENING PARTICIPATION JOURNEYS

6.1 Introduction

This chapter focuses on the biographical journeys towards gaining the 'piece of paper' of the builders. The builders, in general terms had entered HE, or were about to enter HE, from working-class, low-income and ethnic minority backgrounds and therefore are the closest examples (in this thesis) to traditional understandings of widening participation students, in that they are entering university from backgrounds which have been traditionally regarded as under-represented in HE (Bourgeois *et al*, 1999). Claire, Sue and Leanne for example (see sections 6.3.2, 6.3.3 and 6.3.4) talk, in a negative sense, about their complex compulsory schooling experiences in classed terms, invoking such ideas as having a 'stupid' academic identity and knowing one's place. Their complex experiences of schooling led them onto fairly unstructured pathways, with Claire and Leanne combining forms of post-compulsory education, such as NVQ's and GCSE's with temporary jobs and Sue moving (against her wishes) into secretarial work. Their experiences of compulsory schooling were completely different to those of Fraser, Tina and Sunita (young builders), who had entered HE at the age of eighteen after being academically successful in school and post-16 educational contexts.

Their turning points of four of the builders (Claire, Katie, Leanne and Sue), where they realised, at different stages of the life-course, the importance and value of gaining the 'piece of paper' were constructed instrumentally, in that they felt they

needed the qualification in order to enter professional employment spheres. In some senses, the remaining three young builders (Fraser, Sunita and Tina) turning points were different, in that they all entered HE at the age of eighteen and were continuing into HE as part of a natural educational progression, but *not* as part of a normal biography (Du Bois Reymond, 1998). However, saying this, all the builders in this thesis had entered HE, or were about to enter HE, to gain the symbolic capital (the 'piece of paper') and the cultural capital associated with HE participation, in a sense, so they could be seen to be educated. Upon graduation, their intentions were to move into professional employment such as teaching (in the case of Sue and Tina) and accumulate economic capital. In this sense, they have more to gain out of HE than the securers and the enrichers in this thesis, but also more to potentially lose, by not participating. Biographical analysis of the interview data suggests that (perhaps not unsurprisingly) the builders and young builders draw upon notions of class in their narratives to a greater extent than the securers and the enrichers. However, despite this, it appears that this is not an insurmountable obstacle for these participants. They clearly recognise the barriers, but they also possess the long-term vision, in other words they see the bigger picture that will unfold in front of them by gaining the 'piece of paper'.

Bourdieu and Passeron's (1990) notion of habitus as practice generating grammar is (like in the analyses in Chapters Four and Five), a useful conceptual tool to help gain deeper understanding of the different practices and behaviour of the builders in this thesis. In this sense, the 'working-class' habitus of HE entrants in an increasingly diverse and mainstreamed widening participation environment means that the builders in this thesis are much more heterogeneous in nature and do not

necessarily replicate traditional (archetypal) understandings of working-class students in HE. These students are not always (in Bourdieuian senses) outsiders in HE, *in fact* in this sense, due to the mainstreaming of widening participation and despite their often fractured class and educational backgrounds, they are able to use their agency in order to become successful in HE, gain the 'piece of paper' and, especially in the case of the young participants, enhance their imagined futures (Ball *et al*, 1999).

The examination and analysis of the builders' biographical journeys towards gaining the 'piece of paper' that follow in this chapter, continue to highlight the usefulness of the three 'new', Bourdieuian, widening participation categories (developed in this thesis) in providing more nuanced accounts of student experience within the context of a highly diversified and mainstreamed, widening participation HE environment. As with the previous two chapters (Four and Five), section 6.2 provides a biography of each of the builders in this thesis, to place their practices, behaviour and experiences within the context of their educational, professional, social and family lives.

The biographies of Fraser, Sunita and Tina, who for the purposes of this thesis are characterised as young builders are analysed and examined at the end of this chapter (see sections 6.8.1 to 6.8.5). Although they are similar to the builders in this thesis (Claire, Katie, Leanne and Sue) in that they come from working-class backgrounds, they are different in that they have entered HE at the age of eighteen and are not, unlike the others, mature students. It is therefore appropriate to analyse and describe their biographies separately, but also consider that their stories offer an interesting opportunity for comparison and contrast with the older builders, in relation

to their early experiences of compulsory schooling, their pre-HE programmes and HE choices and finally, their experiences of HE itself.

6.2 The builders' biographies

The following section (not unlike the securers and enrichers described in the previous data chapters) provides a biographical timeline which intends to portray the pre-HE worlds of each of the participants characterised in this thesis as builders. Their biographies (perhaps unsurprisingly) suggest their understandings and experiences of HE (and indeed widening participation) were, in much greater senses than the securers and enrichers, set in the context of their working-class backgrounds. The builders also in certain instances, (like many of the enrichers), drew upon their early rejections of HE, being inflected by the fact that they grew up in working-class contexts. Not unlike the securers and enrichers in this thesis, some of the builders also rejected HE because of their negative and fractured experiences of compulsory schooling.

Claire's (Early 20's, First Year, Undergraduate Degree Social Welfare, Newtown University) biography is also highlighted by negative experiences of compulsory schooling, in the sense that (in her own words) she was average and, as such, was one of the ordinary kids that Brown (1987) talks about. Negative feedback from her teachers (upon which she draws in this chapter) left her disillusioned with education. However, her pre-HE pathway (Access Course) enabled her to gain the specialist preparation, knowledge, support and self-confidence, in order to move towards gaining the 'piece of paper' (the HE qualification) at university.

Fraser's (21 years old, Final Year, Undergraduate Degree in Applied Golf Management Studies, University of Brightown) biography implies that (in his own words) he feels very lucky to have got to where he is today, based on his working-class background. The emphasis that he puts on the support, knowledge and guidance that he received on his FE, pre-HE programme (BTEC National Diploma), which arguably made up for his lack of embodied cultural capital, shows how much he appreciates this, now that he is thriving in 'elite' HE contexts. He also implies the importance of widening participation, where the financial scholarships he has been awarded, enable him to participate in HE and gain the 'piece of paper'.

Katie's (Early 20's, Access to HE, Chase College) biography implies a set of complex educational and personal experiences at an early age, where disaffection with secondary schooling led her to originally drop out of at the age of fourteen. This was intertwined with challenging personal circumstances, in that she was brought up in a care environment. Despite completing 'A' levels at the age of seventeen, Katie felt that this programme left her underprepared for HE (both in personal and practical senses). Her pre-HE pathway (Access Course) provided her with the necessary confidence and support, in that she was able to apply and gain a place at an elite HE institution.

Leanne's (25 years old, Second Year, Undergraduate Degree in Psychology and Counselling, Newtown University) biography implies a complex set of experiences which were shaped within class, family and educational contexts. Her reasons for wanting to return to education (and indeed HE) and gain the 'piece of paper' are part of the bigger picture of the increased educational and professional options that will be afforded to her upon graduation. Leanne's pre-HE biography highlights her early

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fractured experiences of both compulsory schooling and work, which were coupled with raising a young child. Her educational lifeline arguably came in the form of the 'Access type' course (also done by Carly), which gave her the confidence and opportunity (in both academic and practical senses) to move onto an undergraduate programme in HE.

Sue's (Aged 40's, Second Year, Undergraduate Degree in Special Needs and Inclusion Studies with Education Studies, Westside University) biography implies her rejection of education (and indeed HE) as being 'classed', in that her father's attitude was a significant influence upon her not continuing with study. However, later in life, she draws upon the importance of widening participation discourses, which have (in her opinion) enabled her to continue with her education, firstly on an Access course and then in HE, moving towards gaining the 'piece of paper' and a career in teaching. In some senses her biography implies that her journey is also about making up for lost time, in that she wishes that the opportunities were more readily available to her at a younger age.

Sunita's (19 years old, First Year, Undergraduate Degree Childhood, Culture and Education, University of Brightown) biography highlights her move towards HE participation and gaining the 'piece of paper' being situated within the contexts of being from a working-class and ethnic minority background. Not unlike Fraser, Sunita draws upon the influence of individuals outside of her social network which helped her to gain a place in 'elite' HE, something she (despite her educational background) perceived as unlikely. Sunita (as with many of the other participants in this study) exhibits an instrumentalist orientation to HE, where she envisages the

range of additional educational, training and professional opportunities that will be open to her upon gaining the 'piece of paper'.

Tina's (18 years old, First Year, Undergraduate Degree in History, University of Brightown) biography highlights how her working-class and low-income background, precluded her (in her eyes) from applying to Oxbridge (despite her outstanding academic record), even though she was encouraged to apply. Whilst she is comfortable at Brightown, she draws upon widening participation discourses, recognising the shifts in access in that she was able to participate in HE (and indeed 'elite' HE), but that her Grandfather was not afforded the same opportunities. In this sense, whilst she credits widening participation with enabling her to study at Brightown, it is clear that she really wanted the opportunity to go to Oxbridge, but that her perception was that her background meant that she would be unsuccessful. Tina views the 'piece of paper' in very straightforward instrumental terms, in that it is a pathway and passport towards further education and training and ultimately to a career in teaching.

The next section of this chapter investigates the early experiences of the builders, in the contexts of compulsory schooling, work and FE and, in the case of Claire, Leanne and Sue, provides some clues as to their reasons for their non-participation in HE at an early age.

6.3.1 Early experiences: compulsory schooling, work and FE

This section draws upon the builders' early experiences of compulsory schooling, work and FE, as it is regarded as important in the context of their biographical journeys to HE and gaining the 'piece of paper', to understand their starting points.

Not unlike the enrichers (see section 5.3) the builders (particularly in Sue and Leanne's accounts in 6.3.3 and 6.3.4 respectively) were actively rejecting HE, referring to their classed backgrounds. The builders' narratives (see sections 6.3.2, 6.3.3 and 6.3.4) highlight specific different reasons such as having a 'stupid' academic identity and the impact of class and gender upon their reasons to reject HE at an early age.

In the following sections of this thesis (6.3.2, 6.3.3 and 6.3.4) Claire, Katie, Leanne and Sue describe their early experiences (in particular compulsory schooling) in largely negative terms and, to a large extent, explains their decisions to not participate any further in education at a young age. The discussion draws upon the various aspects of their early experiences of compulsory schooling within the contexts of family, gender and class and brings to life the claims about HE not being for the likes of them (Reay *et al*, 2001: 2005, Marks *et al*, 2003; Archer *et al*, 2007).

6.3.2 Early experiences: being average and 'stupid'

Claire's (Newtown) story for example is about the development of a 'stupid', non-academic identity. In the following narrative, Claire paints a picture of her experiences of compulsory schooling being 'average' which arguably contributed to her decisions not to continue her education (and indeed HE) at a young age.

> I think school is very bad for people that are...I was always average...and I think because I wasn't...I'm saying I wasn't the brightest, there was something there, but school didn't really encourage it so...My teachers at school told me I would never pass my GCSE's, never mind 'A' Levels, so basically...and I did

the GNVQ because I didn't have good GCSE's, I didn't have good enough to

go on... I left and went into work, because I didn't really know what else to do

and then the NVQ, it just came...I went into the careers centre...and told them

I wanted to be a teacher and they told me to do the NVQ route, which would

be better...because I told them I really didn't think I was good enough to go

into college or uni or anything basically, because of what things had been said

to me...' (Claire, Early 20's, First Year, Undergraduate Degree Social Welfare,

Newtown University).

Claire's account resonates with that of Leathwood and Hutchings (2003, p.146) who found in their study that 'Some respondents..., had clearly been discouraged by their teachers' and careers officers' advice, which could be seen to have contributed to their own self-identities as 'stupid' and not capable of academic study'. Similarly, her account chimes with those working-class women in Archer's (2006b) study where respondents felt '…that they might be made to feel stupid at university…' and that 'These anxieties seemed to flow from their own experiences of 'feeling stupid' at school…' (Archer, 2006b, p.77). In highlighting her lack of support and help at school, Claire's account also supports the argument concerning gender disparity commented upon by Skelton and Francis (2005, cited in Archer, 2006b, p.77) in that '…in comparison to boys, girls do tend to receive less attention and support from teachers…'

Claire's story of disenchantment and frustration of her education also recalls Brown's (1987) analysis of the experiences of 'ordinary', 'average' pupils, who comprise what he calls the invisible majority of working-class pupils (Brown, 1987). Brown's 'ordinary kids' were neither high fliers nor disruptive and, as Brown (1987) suggests,

it was their unexceptional performances that led them frequently to be neglected or casually dismissed by their schools. However, Brown's term 'ordinary kids' is also deliberately ironic, in that their 'average', 'unexceptional' school careers were also the products of schools that neglected their needs. Claire's perception of herself as 'average' led her to believe that formal education was not a field in which she could excel, which more than likely informed her perception about HE. In the following discussion (section 6.3.3), Sue describes the impact of gender and class upon her early experiences (with particular reference to her post-compulsory schooling options).

6.3.3 Early experiences: gender and class

In the following narrative, Sue referred more explicitly to a highly gendered family dynamic, in which there was 'no need' for girls to engage in education (aside, from 'traditional' secretarial courses).

> ...it was the case of girls..., when I was my age...when I left school; it was a case of girls stayed at home. So there was no point in having a decent education, because I'd have to stay at home anyway so...Well it was my dad really...He was a big influence on everybody in the family at the time, so it was well known there's no need for you to do that, so they sent me off to go and do secretarial stuff...which is what I did do...but then once I had the children, then everything changed... (Sue, 40's, Second Year, Undergraduate Degree in Special Needs and Inclusion Studies with Education Studies, Westside University).

Sue's account demonstrates that whilst her educational 'chances' and 'choices' were constrained in her younger years, she placed an importance on her education and professional development. Once her children were old enough, Sue was able to focus upon her education and fulfilling her previously wasted and untapped potential (cf. Green and Webb, 1997). The experiences described by Sue resonate with Merrill's (1999) accounts of mature women students reflecting upon the constraints they faced upon their earlier education.

> Reflecting upon their school experiences many of the women believed their educational aspirations and, hence their life chances were constrained by being female. For most this was compounded because they were also working-class. Throughout their early lives gender and class relationships interacted to limit educational and occupational opportunities. A traditional low-paid job followed by marriage and motherhood were limits to their horizon. (Merrill, 1999, p.90).

Although the older builders (Sue) and enrichers in Chapter Five (Robert, Terry, Simon, Joe and Gill) were mostly slightly younger than those described by Willis (1977) and Merrill (1999), it was apparent that the relationships between family, schooling and work that they had experienced (and which had distanced them from HE as young people) were not very far removed from the worlds of 'lads' and 'secretaries'. Young working-class women were often viewed as having a future which lay in domesticity and home-making, while young men were expected to fall into working-class jobs (rather than careers).

6.3.4 Early experiences: working-class 'place'

Leanne's (Newtown) narrative of growing up in working-class contexts highlights (drawing on Bourdieu) the idea of knowing one's place. In her interview she recalls a conversation with her parents (at an early age) about education, in that financial implications would make HE participation unfeasible.

> I remember talking to my parents about it when I was young and I distinctly remember them telling me, we weren't rich enough for me to go to university. So as a child, it was something that I never thought I would be able to do...because we weren't rich enough... (Leanne, Mid 20's, Second Year, Undergraduate Degree Psychology and Counselling, Newtown University).

Such narratives of schooling and entry to the labour market exhibit a sense of 'one's relationship to the world and one's proper place within it' (Bourdieu, 1984, p.474, cited in Reay *et al*, 2005, p.91); it is what Reay *et al* (2005) describe as a Bourdieuian sense of place: a place distanced from HE. Later in this chapter, the discussion (drawing on Bourdieu) talks about the participants' HE choices (see section 6.6). The concept of knowing one's place is also highlighted in the analysis of some of the builders' narratives, which suggest that whilst it did not have a definitive bearing on their HE choices, the builders were aware of the relationship between their working-class backgrounds and the more 'elite' universities. In other words they appeared to demonstrate insecurity with regard to how they (from working-class backgrounds) may fit into 'elite' HE contexts. As such, they were exhibiting a Bourdieuian sense of place (cf. Reay *et al*, 2005) in relation to where they saw themselves in the highly differentiated HE sector.

The excerpts and discussion in the above sections of this thesis (6.3.1, 6.3.2, 6.3.3 and 6.3.4) illuminate how a variety of different factors can lead to young working-class constructions of HE as "not for the likes of us" (Reay *et al*, 2001: 2005, Marks *et al*, 2003; Archer *et al*, 2007). The emphasis on class, in their rejections of HE, highlight similarities with the enrichers in Chapter Five, in that they suggested their 'classed' backgrounds led to an active rejection of education at an early age and an emphasis on earning.

The following discussion (Section 6.4) moves on to discuss the builders' turning points, in relation to their decisions at varying stages of the life-course to enter HE.

6.4 Turning Points: The decision to pursue HE

The discussion in this section of the builders' turning points is important in the context of their biographical journeys, in that it represents the moment(s) at which they realised the importance and value of HE (and indeed the 'piece of paper'). It also captures the transformations from their mainly negative experiences of compulsory schooling, FE and work (see sections 6.3.1, 6.3.2, 6.3.3 and 6.3.4) to where their future aspirations lay, with respect to professional employment and further training/study. Therefore this section talks about the mature builders in this thesis (Claire, Katie, Leanne and Sue) in that, at varying stages of the life-course, they reached epiphanic moments (or turning points), where they realised the importance and value of going to HE and gaining the 'piece of paper'.

Claire (Newtown) was previously portrayed in this chapter (see section 6.3.2) as one of the ordinary kids (Brown, 1987) in compulsory schooling contexts and also in her

own words suggested she was always average. Despite compulsory schooling being an uneventful experience, where she was neither a high-flier nor disruptive (Brown, 1987), Claire always felt that she was able to achieve academically. This is represented in her post-school biography, where she expresses her desire to become a teacher and go to HE.

> I did a GNVQ in school in Business...slightly different and then I went to work in pubs and bars and things like that and then I went into a nursery to train for my NVQ...so I trained as a nursery assistant. I got my level 2 and then... I wanted to do teaching then so I decided to come into Uni and do the Access course... (Claire, Early 20's, First Year, Undergraduate Degree Social Welfare, Newtown University).

Claire's narrative implies an unsettled work history, which could have stemmed from her negative experiences of compulsory schooling. However, Claire reaches a turning point where her narrative implies that she wanted to make something of herself (become a teacher) and escape the low paid work that she did before. Her following narrative highlights how her desire to make something of herself and go back into HE sits in the context of access and participation in today's twenty-first century HE.

> ...I do think it is a lot easier to get here than it was...I think there is a lot more available now like vocational routes rather than just being good at school cos I think schools...years ago - I think you had to do well in them to be even considered for a place...I think people are getting a lot more support now than they did before, from parents and institutions... (Claire, Early 20's, First Year Undergraduate Degree Social Welfare, Newtown University).

Whilst her 'average' experiences of compulsory schooling, did not provide her with the necessary qualifications and mind-set to move on to HE at a younger age, it is clear from Claire's narrative that she understands the shifts that have been made in FE and HE, whereby widening participation enables, not just those young people from working-class and ethnic minority backgrounds, who have achieved at an early age (such as Fraser, Sunita and Tina), but also those such as Leanne and the securers, Carly and Julie, for whom compulsory schooling was not a straightforward (but in some senses fractured) experience.

Katie (Chase College) paints a similar instrumental picture to Claire, in that she describes her turning point (the moment that she realised that she needed to get the 'piece of paper') in relation to where she does not want to be and conversely how it will transform her career/job options in the future.

> I think my decision to go and do a degree was definitely based on seeing the difference between friends who had got that level of education and friends that hadn't and their prospects and career choices and all that stuff... [It's] Just the prospects for the rest of my life, like doing mind-numbing jobs is just...(laughs and sighs)...I just can't handle it...So it really is about you know getting a qualification, getting a degree and the opportunities that that'll provide really...and as well I spose there's an element of I don't want to get to sort of thirty or forty and wish I'd done something, I know quite a few people who feel like that and I'd rather do it than not (Katie, early 20's, Access to HE, Chase College).

Leanne (Newtown) also portrays in her interview transcript an instrumentalist orientation as her rationale for deciding that she needed to gain the 'piece of paper'.

However, her story suggests a number of different influences upon her decision to re-enter education. Leanne's turning point was influenced in two senses, where firstly she demonstrated a shift from the young girl who, as a child was told that she would not be able to go to HE because of the cost (a view of her working-class parents), to a realisation of the importance of gaining credentials (in this case the 'piece of paper') to gain employment in today's society.

> I think people have needed to up there game as well, you know...especially with the credit crunch and all that at the moment, if you haven't got something extra... lots of people working in factories and places like that are losing their jobs...(Leanne, Mid 20's, Second Year, Undergraduate Degree Psychology and Counselling, Newtown University).

Secondly, she talks of the influence of her friend Carly (one of the securers in this thesis), who told her about the local educational initiative for teenage women and how this would enable her to gain subsequent access to HE, a fact that she clearly was unaware of.

> I didn't even know that you could come to university without doing your 'A' Levels... till you told me and I was like what?...really?...wow!...(laughs)...get me on!...You know I didn't even know you could... (Leanne, Mid 20's, Second Year, Undergraduate Degree Psychology and Counselling, Newtown University).

Although at first glance Leanne's story appears complex, it is evident how her understandings of HE have changed, where although HE was out of reach before (due to her arguable low-income, working-class background), the rise of

credentialism and the mainstreaming of widening participation meant that HE (at the stage of her turning point) was a realistic opportunity.

Sue (Westside), one of the older mature students in this research study, not unlike Leanne, exhibited a shift in her understandings of HE from her early non-participation in education (see section 6.3.3) which was undoubtedly imbued by class, through to her realisation that she needed to gain the 'piece of paper' with respect to her future employability. Sue also implies the mainstreaming of widening participation and her family circumstances, meant that the opportunities to achieve this were now much more available.

> ...It's opportunity at the time. Like when I left school there wasn't the opportunity for me to go because obviously I went to a secondary school. There's also a thing now where your job is not for life, whereas before it was, so there's going to be lots of changes, people are going to be expected to change at least three or four times, with the job market as it is at the moment...I wouldn't say it's easier to go to university, but I think that you can build up your confidence to be able to make those sort of choices...and I suppose like I said... my family are older as well, so...the opportunity is there as well for me to just carry on...so it's all about widening participation isn't it?... (Sue, Aged 40's, Second Year, Undergraduate Degree in Special Needs and Inclusion Studies with Education Studies, Westside University).

Sue's narrative also points towards the shifts described in Chapter One between the industrial worlds (in which she grew up in the 1970s), where jobs were much more stable and 'for life' and the post-industrial worlds that we inhabit today. As such, employment was no longer stable, the notion of a 'job for life' had largely evaporated

and the advent of technology meant a diversification in working patterns from full-time work to part-time and fixed-term contracts. (see for example Aronowitz and DiFazio, 1994).

The turning points of Claire, Katie, Leanne and Sue are all (perhaps not unsurprisingly) couched in instrumental terms, in that they realised the importance and value of gaining the 'piece of paper' in order to gain a kind of passport to a successful professional career such as teaching. These turning points or decisions to return to education (and indeed HE) resonated with many of the working-class girls in the study by Evans (2010), where the participants:

> ...often envisaged higher education in instrumental terms as a means of acquiring the capital to embark upon the career pathway of their choice, and all imagined themselves into middle-class, professional careers... (Evans, 2010, p.61).

As Evans (2010) notes these aspirations were constructed against commonly held representations of working class people. As Leathwood and Hutchings (2003, p.228, cited in Evans, 2010, p.61) note:

> ...low rates of achievement and/or educational progression among working-class groups are represented as resulting from their lack of appropriate attitudes, aspirations, motivations or abilities.

The turning points of the mature builders in this thesis suggest that they have grasped the importance and value of HE, in respect of the symbolic capital available (the 'piece of paper'). The mainstreamed widening participation HE sector provides a conduit where all the builders (like the securers and enrichers) are able to

strategically exercise their own agency, in a non-deterministic sense. As such, they are negotiating their biographical journeys to HE, by exhibiting a range of different behaviour and practices to achieve their long-term goals of gaining the 'piece of paper' and moving into professional employment fields. The discussion in this chapter now moves on and analyses (drawing upon Bourdieu) aspects of preparation and choice of the builders on their various pre-HE pathways.

6.5 The builders' Pre-HE pathways: preparation for HE study

The following discussion of the pre-HE pathways of the builders, is important in the context of their complex biographical journeys in that, upon reaching their turning points (where they realised the importance and value of HE), they, like many of the securers in Chapter Four, needed to complete suitable level 3 qualifications in order to academically prepare and gain the necessary skills and knowledge required to enter HE.

The builders in this thesis entered, or were about to enter HE (at the time of interview) from a diverse range of pre-HE pathways. Not unlike some of the securers and enrichers in this thesis, Claire, Katie, Leanne and Sue have entered (or are about to enter) HE from Access or Access-type, pre-HE programmes. In traditional widening participation discourses, these builders are the archetypal 'Access' students, in that they are pursuing alternative modes of study, where other, more traditional pre-HE programmes were deemed unsuitable for them. So what experiences did the builders in this thesis have of preparation for university on their various pre-HE programmes?

Like Julie (one of the securers referred to in Chapter Four), Sue described her Access programme as providing her with a broad education which enabled her to develop certain skills and confidence in areas which she felt were weaker, in preparation for HE study.

> ...I think the Access Course was good. It gives you an all-round education doesn't it really...whereas the others are more specific. So, and to me...if you know where your strong points are you need to work on ones which are your weakest...the ones you wouldn't feel quite so confident in doing and mine like I said was maths... but it was really good because what I have gained...I can still use... (Sue, Aged 40's, Second Year, Undergraduate Degree in Special Needs and Inclusion Studies with Education Studies, Westside University).

Analysis of Katie's narrative, emphasised the broad nature of Access programmes, mooted by Sue and Julie in Chapter Four. Her explicit description of the specialist support in relation to preparation for HE (in an academic sense), is clearly of significant importance to Katie's academic pursuit of gaining the 'piece of paper'.

> [I've gained] ...confidence big time...Before I started the course, I really didn't know how to write an essay and you know when you've got an essay that scares the crap out of you, cause you don't even know where to start, and you start and you think that's wrong...But actually we've been shown how to write an essay which is really simple, but I really don't think that if I hadn't had that on this course I think I would really struggle in the first year of uni, whereas I actually feel I am going to be like really confident and able to handle it. So I think that's another advantage of the access course...it's about building confidence and really knowing how to handle stuff you know... The first term

that you're on this course, you do study skills, which is just really all the basics, you know how to take notes, how to write different kinds of essays, how to do a presentation, all stuff that I'm going to need at uni...and it's really really helpful. (Katie, early 20's, Access to HE, Chase College).

Katie's portrayal of the significance of her Access programme, whilst emphasising the broad and specialist preparation for HE, also highlights her previous dissatisfaction with the lack of support in respect of applying to HE. As will be evident later in this section, Katie also draws upon how the Access programme provided her with the necessary support and guidance (in relation to applying to HE), and conversely, where her more traditional 'A' level programme at school had let her down.

Claire's narrative succinctly highlights (in similar ways to those expressed by Sue and Katie and indeed others in this thesis) the value of Access as a suitable preparation for HE, and for as Warmington (2002) has suggested, occupation as an undergraduate.

...They were absolutely fantastic here. They prepared you to do the degree really, rather than preparing you to do the exams. Whereas if you do 'A' Levels, they tend to prepare you to do your 'A' Levels rather than preparing you to do a degree, if that makes sense... (Claire, Early 20's, First Year, Undergraduate Degree Social Welfare, Newtown University).

The narratives provided by Sue, Katie and Claire, in some senses, portray their 'Access' (pre-HE) programmes as being invaluable with regard to how they perceived that they were prepared for HE and chime with the favourable accounts

provided by some of the securers and enrichers discussed in previous chapters..

The narratives of Sunita and Tina (both Brightown) who entered HE from traditional, 'A' level programmes talked (in section 6.8.3) in much less dramatic terms about how their pre-HE pathways prepared them for HE. The following section of this chapter focuses specifically on HE choices and highlights for example, the role of significant others (Ball *et al*, 2002) upon the builders.

6.6 Builders: HE choices

This section continues along a chronological pathway by discussing the builders' HE choices. Understanding their HE choices within the context of their biographical journeys is important in that they are influenced (in varying degrees) by their classed backgrounds. Much like the securers (see section 4.7), the builders drew upon specialised and personalised forms of 'hot' knowledge (Ball and Vincent, 1998) from significant others (Ball *et al*, 2002), such as their tutors on their pre-HE programmes. Again, much like the securers, this was in some senses, an extension of the support gained in preparing for HE, in that they were being equipped with the necessarily skills and attributes to succeed in undergraduate level study.

The following discussion continues to look at the builders' pre-HE pathways and, drawing upon Bourdieu, talks about their HE choices. With particular reference to Katie's narrative, the discussion focuses upon their understandings of the importance of the guidance and support they received. Unlike the securers and enrichers in this thesis, the builders perhaps unsurprisingly, talked in terms which explicitly invoked their class backgrounds. Participants exhibited Bourdieuian senses

of place (cf. Reay *et al*, 2005), in that they talked about their choices as being, in some senses, constructed within the boundaries, where they could be themselves with 'people like us'.

Katie's (Chase College) story highlights (not in a dissimilar way to those expressed by Tina, Sunita and Fraser in section 6.8.3) the impact that personalised and specialised knowledge and guidance can have upon HE choices, where one lacks the embedded cultural capital. Katie's narratives however highlight an interesting phenomenon in that she contrasts her experiences of preparation and indeed HE choice (or indeed lack of it) on the two different pre-HE programmes she has studied on. Her first narrative implies how, in some senses, the fact that she was not at the top of the class, meant that she felt HE was not a realistic proposition.

> The school that I went to kind of like was a good school and creamed off like an elite squad and trained them up for interviews and stuff for Oxbridge and everybody else was kind of left to their own devices...It was one of the main reasons why I didn't apply to go to uni when I was eighteen because I just couldn't be handling the personal statement, I didn't know what to write, I didn't know what to put, so I just left it... (Katie, early 20's, Access to HE, Chase College).

Katie's experiences of her first pre-HE programme in school ('A' levels) in some senses, are allied to Claire's experiences of being one of the ordinary kids (Brown, 1987), which were commented upon earlier in the chapter (see section 6.3.2). Because she was arguably seen as average at school, Katie felt marginalised or cast aside. However, in complete contrast her second narrative suggests the importance of context, in that her Access course gave her the necessary support, guidance and

'hot' knowledge to give her the confidence to apply to HE (and indeed elite HE), despite the fact she was insistent that she would not get a place.

> Well in terms of this course like the support in terms of applying and getting into HE, is like immense. They...tell you exactly the things you need to be doing in terms of your application...our personal statement is done within our English Class [and] they make sure it is the right standard, they have all the information from applying to how to go about getting funding, and everything, they really do cover that here. Basically, the staff will bend over backwards to help you to achieve what you need. That's a huge difference I think between my 'A' Levels and this is that the staff are totally supportive, whereas on 'A' Levels it was kind of left up to you to do it, big time. When I started the course, I really didn't think I'd get into uni, I don't know why I thought that...but I was convinced I wouldn't...and I was just going to apply to sort of uni's like...Crowtown...because the difference between Crowtown and Wilton is quite a big one..., but you get five choices and I thought I might as well stick Wilton on there, because I knew I had to stay local, so I thought I might as well. I never thought in a million years that I'd get in and... yeah I got a place (Katie, early 20's, Access to HE, Chase College). (place names are replaced by pseudonyms for purposes of anonymity).

Katie's narratives, like those of the securers in Chapter Four and the young builders (see section 6.8.3) adds weight, and continues to support the argument, that the use of 'contingent' and 'embedded' choosers as ways of understanding HE choice are not always helpful in capturing the more finely grained accounts of student experience. In traditional widening participation discourses, Katie would generally be

regarded as a contingent chooser in HE (Ball *et al*, 2002) who would rely more on 'cold' rather than 'hot' knowledge (Ball and Vincent, 1998) concerning HE, in that she lacked the cultural capital embedded in those from more middle-class backgrounds associated with HE participation. However, the role of significant others (Ball *et al*, 2002) with respect to providing personalised, 'hot' knowledge, in some senses, makes her an embedded chooser. It is this complex dynamic which suggests that Ball *et al*'s (2002) notion of contingent and embedded choosers are not always helpful in capturing and understanding more finely grained accounts of student experience.

Brooks (2005) and Reay *et al* (2005) have also commented on Ball et *al's* (2002) characterisations of HE entrants, in that they argue the heterogeneity of social class (of which this thesis also points towards) means that HE choices are indeed far more complex than the homogenous implications of middle-class 'embedded' and working-class 'contingent' choosers. The remainder of this chapter focuses on the builders' experiences of 'fitting-in' to HE contexts.

6.7.1 Builders in HE

Some of the literature suggests that 'non-traditional' students (those from working-class, ethnic minority backgrounds and mature students for example) have more difficulty 'fitting-in' to HE contexts (see for example Bowl, 2003; Lehmann, 2007; Crozier *et al*, 2008). In addition, Tett (2004) and Reay *et al* (2009: 2010) have drawn upon the experiences of non-traditional students in elite HE contexts, where it is assumed that these HE entrants are different to the entry norm (young entrants with 'A' level qualifications).

However, the mainstreaming of widening participation and the importance of credentialism (in the sense of this thesis, gaining the 'piece of paper'), has meant that these 'non-traditional' students are now less of a minority in HE, although this is not always true in all HE contexts. Reay *et al*'s (2009: 2010) study of working-class students in elite HE contexts *in fact* implies that these students are not necessarily fish out of water in educational contexts. However, it is not always helpful to understand students from working-class contexts (the builders in this thesis) in these somewhat vulgarised Bourdieuian terms. It is more appropriate to understand their 'classed' participation in HE as habitus as practice generating grammar (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990), where although the builders are similar with respect to their working-class origins, their backgrounds *do not* rigidly determine their behaviour, experiences and practices. Although there will be similarities in the ways in which their 'builder' habitus intersects with the field of HE, they will not always understand their situations or act upon them in the same ways. So, the remainder of this chapter (through analyses of the interview data), seeks to understand the ways in which the builders in this thesis negotiate their journeys in HE, regarding their descriptions of how they 'fit-in' or 'stand-out' in HE contexts.

6.7.2 Builders: 'fitting-in' - HE as a transformative stage

As was described in section 6.7.1, some of the contemporary widening participation literature suggests that those from 'non-traditional' backgrounds have more difficulty 'fitting-in' to HE contexts. 'fitting-in', in the sense of the builders' experiences of HE, is about them being or becoming comfortable and confident in their new surroundings. Describing HE as a transformative stage entails a shift, as Turnbull

(1990) suggested in Chapter One, where thisness becomes thatness. 'fitting-in', in some senses, highlights the transformative nature of HE in that the builders and indeed, the young builders (despite their differing educational and personal backgrounds) were able, thanks to widening participation, to use their own agency and become comfortable and confident in their HE surroundings and thus be potentially successful.

These concepts and analyses are important, in that they remind us of the importance of widening participation (in social justice terms) for groups traditionally under-represented in undergraduate study and how HE can potentially transform individuals' lives in personal, social and professional contexts and be a vehicle to turn aspirations into reality. The stories highlighted by Claire and Leanne in this section and by Fraser in particular (see section 6.8.4), suggest that despite their backgrounds they were able to 'fit-in' to their specific HE contexts and their illuminating narratives highlight the ways in which HE has transformed their lives.

Claire's (Newtown) narrative epitomises her belief in the transformative nature of HE, where her experiences as an 'ordinary' kid in compulsory schooling (Brown, 1987) are, in metaphorical senses, a world away from how she describes her transformative experience of HE, in the multiple senses of how it has changed her outlook on a personal and professional level.

> ...when I came in last year, I was the shy little girl (laughs) and now I'm more confident, I can go out and do whatever I want to do. Let's put it this way, this time last year I would never have even considered going into secondary school, so and now I love it, I think it's amazing and yeah I wouldn't change it... It has changed my life. As I've said, I've got more confidence and...I know

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I am not stupid...whereas before I was because I didn't do my exams in school and my Mum was very disappointed with me... My career options are changing all the time, I still want to be a teacher... I am trying to look forward... [and]...I want to be a University Lecturer so hopefully when I am older and more experienced and qualifications behind me, I am hoping to do that and travel... (Claire, Early 20's, First Year, Undergraduate Degree Social Welfare, Newtown University).

Claire's truly aspirational narrative highlights the transformative nature of HE, in that it has transformed her life in a number of different ways. Her narrative began by suggesting that she was one of the ordinary kids at school (Brown, 1987) and the shy girl who began HE, to the one, once in HE(at the time of interview), who had the confidence to take on anything.

HE in some senses for Leanne is also a truly transformative experience. Her early biography implies a complex experience of compulsory schooling, which was coupled with becoming a mother. In the following narrative, Leanne talks about how HE has given her a level of confidence and self-belief in her future academic and professional options (even though she does not know exactly what), which was not at all apparent in her early experiences.

...I'm looking at it more in the bigger picture...I want to do the masters and PhD as well ...because I really do enjoy the psychology, but I've just started working for victim support and I'd really like the idea of...being a probation officer in a prison...But I am still going to continue with psychology and counselling, I'm just not sure what I want to do with it at the moment (Leanne,

Mid 20's, Second Year, Undergraduate Degree Psychology and Counselling, Newtown University).

Like Claire, Leanne's experience from the young sixteen year old girl, who dropped out of compulsory schooling through to the one (who at the time of interview) talks about going on to do a Master's Degree and PhD, highlights again how HE can be regarded as a truly transformative process. The importance and influence of widening participation upon her ability to negotiate HE is not lost on Leanne, in that she has been able, through her pre-HE and HE programmes, to draw upon a wide network of financial and practical support (in relation to bursaries and childcare), which has enabled her to participate and concentrate her efforts on gaining the 'piece of paper'.

Both Claire and Leanne have described HE as a truly transformative experience in that they now (at the time of interview) see themselves as having increased confidence, belief in their ability and are ready to encounter new challenges upon gaining the 'piece of paper'. Their stories also encapsulate the importance of widening participation, in that despite their complex early experiences, which, in some instances were sinewed by class, they were able to use their agency to resume their education and indeed, access and negotiate their way through HE.

6.7.3 Builders: 'standing out' and marginalisation in HE

Whilst this thesis has suggested that the builders (under the auspices of widening participation) are all, using their individual agency and are able to negotiate their way through and as such, 'fit' into HE, it appears that this at times can appear to be more

difficult for some than others. Leanne (Newtown) and Sue (Westside) for different reasons, talked about 'standing-out' at times in HE. For example, Leanne draws upon how a comment from one of her peers (with reference to her pre-HE qualifications) made her feel as though she 'stood out' from the rest of the group.

> When I was talking within a group of people in my course when we first started, I said I had done an Access Course, one of the girls who actually did 'A' Level said 'Oh, so you've cheated to get on here then'…It made me feel bad…I didn't want to tell people then… (Leanne, Mid 20's, Second Year, Undergraduate Degree Psychology and Counselling, Newtown University).

It is evident from Leanne's narrative that this sort of off-hand and somewhat naive comment affected her confidence somewhat and made her feel as though her pre-HE qualification, was in some way inferior to others. Her story also highlights the paradoxical nature of 'fitting-in' and 'standing-out', in that she marvels at the transformative nature of HE and how she fits in, but also emphasises how attitudes towards her pre-HE qualifications, made her vulnerable, and arguably made her feel like she 'stood-out' amongst her peers.

Sue (Westside) talks about 'standing-out' or feeling marginalised in HE in respect of her age as a mature student in her forties.

> I was a bit conscious of the fact of my age...there seemed to be a lot of younger people in the class and also because we seemed to be the only ones answering the questions at the time and you thought you didn't want them to think you were a smart alec that's the other thing...so 'oh well trust her to be able to answer that'...but then if we sat back and didn't say anything and

thought well we'll let somebody else like the younger ones...there would be no flow to the lecture at all, because they'd be just sat there staring and they wouldn't answer anything. I mean whether that was because they didn't know the answers, or whether it was because they were younger, or it was uncool... (Sue, 40's, Second Year, Undergraduate Degree in Special Needs and Inclusion Studies with Education Studies, Westside University).

However, as the course has progressed, her feelings of standing-out have been suppressed, in that peer relationships over time have developed in the group and that she is able to mix more comfortably with her colleagues than was previously apparent.

…The students that were a bit more stand-offish towards you, especially like the younger ones… in level one, you can [now] sit and have a decent conversation with and you can chat about different things and you get to move around in different groups …so you're not afraid to speak to people. So there isn't that sort of thing there now… everybody speaks to everybody... (Sue, 40's, Second Year, Undergraduate Degree in Special Needs and Inclusion Studies with Education Studies, Westside University).

Although the experiences of the builders highlight notions of 'fitting-in' and 'standing-out' in similar ways to those of many the securers and Gill (one of the enrichers), Claire and Leanne (and indeed Fraser in section 6.8.4) emphasised more emphatically the notion of HE being, for them, a truly transformative experience, in both academic and social senses and also, how it changed their future outlook. The following discussion interrogates the biographies of the young builders in this thesis (Fraser, Sunita and Tina) and they are used to draw comparisons and contrasts with

the builders' biographies, regarding the differences and similarities in their early experiences, pre-HE programmes and HE choices and their experiences of HE itself.

6.8.1 Young builders: same but different?

This section of the chapter analyses the biographies of three of the builders in this thesis (Fraser, Sunita and Tina). For the purposes of this thesis, they are characterised as young builders, in that they were from similar working-class backgrounds to the other builders, but they had entered HE, straight from post-compulsory education (FE college) and at the age of eighteen. The fact that they were entering HE at the age of eighteen meant that, in some senses, they were entering HE as part of a normal educational biography. However, this is not true in class terms, in that they are entering HE from working-class backgrounds, traditionally not associated with HE participation. Their biographies highlight both similarities and differences with those of the other builders (Claire, Katie, Leanne and Sue). The discussion that follows analyses their biographies and attempts to tease out these similarities and differences between the young builders and the builders.

One of the most important aspects that the analysis brought to life was the absence of turning points (in the same sense as those of the builders) in the young builders' biographies. This sat in direct contrast to the biographies of the builders (and indeed the securers and enrichers), who emphasised the importance of turning points in their life-course (see section 6.4), in that they had reached the stage where they realised the value and importance of HE and gaining the 'piece of paper'. The young builders, arguably by dint of their age, did not conceive of turning points in the same

way. Fraser, Sunita and Tina had all entered HE from a 'normal' educational trajectory, in that upon completing compulsory schooling at the age of sixteen, they moved straight onto pre-HE programmes ('A' level and BTEC), in school and FE and then straight into their chosen HE programmes. Like the builders (and indeed the securers and enrichers), the young builders also realised the value and importance of the 'piece of paper', but they were in a better position, due to their educational achievements and the levels of support they received, to continue, on an uninterrupted trajectory, with their education at an early age.

6.8.2 Young builders: Early experiences

By sheer dint of their age upon entry to HE, the early experiences of the young builders (compulsory schooling and FE) were indeed different, in some senses, to those of the other builders, in that they formed the successful foundation upon which their engagement in HE was based. Unlike the builders who talked in fairly negative terms about their early experiences of compulsory schooling and FE, leading to non-participation in education, the young builders (in the absence of negativity), early experiences appeared on the face of it, to be relatively straightforward. In contrast with Sue in particular, who at the time of interview was in her forties, and the enrichers in this thesis (see Chapter Five), who also grew up in working-class contexts, the young builders have grown up in an era of widening participation where the importance of education, and indeed HE, has been massively emphasised. Analysis of Sunita's biography highlights this point, where the importance of education was emphasised by her school.

…At our school, they used to tell us that the more education you do, the more opportunities you are going to have in life. If you don't have education, in the short term you will be fine, like you'll go to work, but in the long term like basically you'll earn more money if you put your effort in education… (Sunita, 19 years old, First Year, Undergraduate Degree Childhood, Culture and Education, University of Brightown).

The importance of education is also emphasised by Sunita's parents (with respect to their encouragement and support). This emphasis upon her education (which was underpinned by widening participation and mass credentialism), lies in stark contrast to Sue's story earlier in this chapter, in that she expressed a highly gendered and classed dynamic where her father suggested that education was unimportant and irrelevant for women, because they were destined for stereotypical, secretarial work, before a life of domesticity (Merrill, 1999).

6.8.3 Young builders: pre-HE pathways and HE choices

Prior to HE entry, the young builders (Fraser, Sunita and Tina), were studying on pre-HE programmes that were entered upon leaving compulsory schooling at the age of sixteen. Sunita and Tina, who entered HE from traditional 'A' level programmes, talked (unlike the Access participants in section 6.5) more about their academic preparation for HE, with regard to the specific subjects they studied and how the various skills they developed would be transferable upon entry to HE, whereas the Access participants talked about their preparation in much broader terms, such as an all-round education. Whilst the young builders did not portray their

pre-HE programmes ('A' levels) in the extremely positive fashion that was evident amongst the other builders (or indeed the securers and enrichers), who came from 'Access' pathways, they did not talk in terms that implied that they felt underprepared (in academic senses) for HE.

Whilst the young builders (in particular Sunita and Tina), talked about their general experiences of preparation in their pre-HE programmes, in unremarkable terms, it was evident through biographical analysis of their interview data, that a great deal of importance was attached to the role of significant others (cf. Ball *et al*, 2002) in the HE choice/ application process. Much like the builders described earlier in the chapter (see section 6.6) and indeed some of the securers in Chapter Four, Fraser, Sunita and Tina all drew upon the role of their tutors as being significantly involved in their HE choices.

Tina (Brightown) in particular draws upon the dilemma that working-class students have, particularly in relation to entry into elite HE contexts, in that she felt her desire to go to Oxbridge was curtailed by (in her own words) her low-income background. On the other hand, despite Tina's rejection of Oxbridge, by dint of her class and income family background, her tutor's specialist knowledge about Brightown, arguably provided her with a form of cultural capital, which she lacked in her family and social networks (Heath *et al*, 2007).

> ...my history teacher actually did his PhD here...well he did all his training here, but he did his PhD here as well... He was telling us a lot about the university and about what we would be expected to do and that kind of thing, so that was nice to hear really...It gave you an insight before you got here...Nobody in my family has been to university and my friends are all my

age, so I didn't really have much guidance from them...[So] I knew that this was a good university and I really liked the campus, so I thought well I'll come here. (Tina, 18 years old, First Year, Undergraduate Degree in History, University of Brightown).

Despite her working-class background pointing towards her being a 'contingent' chooser (Ball *et al*, 2002), the specialist and personalised knowledge she gained in the HE choice process from significant others (Ball *et al*, 2002) namely her tutor, meant that in some senses (like some of the securers in Chapter Four), she could arguably be also categorised as an 'embedded' chooser of HE. The importance of the cultural capital passed to Tina by her tutor (in the form of specialised and personalised knowledge) is not to be underestimated. In some senses, this was instrumental in Tina feeling that the University of Brightown (an elite, Russell Group University itself) was a place where she could feel comfortable, and at home, despite her (classed) rejection of Oxbridge, in some senses, on similar grounds.

Sunita drew upon her working-class, Indian background, when discussing her HE choices and the influence of significant others upon her decision making. Sunita talks in respect of her anxieties about feeling out of place at an 'elite' university (Brightown) and refers to her original plans to apply 'local'. Applying 'local' to Sunita, was meant, not in a purely geographical sense (in that she wanted to live at home whilst studying), but also in the sense of going to a local post-1992 university where she believed she would feel more comfortable, as opposed to Brightown (an elite Russell Group institution). Sunita's 'classed' understandings of 'elite' HE, in a similar, but slightly different way to Tina, are perhaps entirely understandable in that students from 'non-traditional' backgrounds often see these institutions as alienating,

hostile and unwelcoming (Archer and Hutchings, 2000), but without the influence of her tutor (providing her with a form of hot knowledge), the prospect of going to an elite university may never have been realised.

> He helped me with my personal statement quite a lot and I got it checked out from my careers advisor as well, and he was the one who told me that I could go...He goes, 'why are you going to apply to just a normal university?' I was going to apply just local, he was like if you apply here... and I was like 'I don't think I will get the place', and he was like, 'I think you should definitely apply there'...(Sunita, 19 years old, First Year, Undergraduate Degree Childhood, Culture and Education, University of Brightown).

Tina and Sunita's narratives highlight the importance of their tutors as significant others (Ball *et al*, 2002) in the HE choice process, and, as such, resonate with the experiences of support and guidance (in relation to gaining forms of personalised or 'hot' knowledge about HE) that were expressed by the builders and in some instances, the securers (see Chapter Four). The following discussion highlights the experiences of the young builders in HE.

6.8.4 Young builders in HE: a transformative process?

As was discussed earlier in Claire and Leanne's narratives (see section 6.7.2), in some senses, HE has been a transformational experience in that it gave them the confidence and self-belief in order that they would be able to succeed both academically and professionally. This sat in contrast to their negative stories of

disillusionment in compulsory schooling and FE contexts highlighted earlier in this chapter for example, by Claire (see section 6.3.2).

Fraser's (Brightown) narrative continues to highlight the transformative nature of HE, in that he talks about how his life in HE, particularly in a social sense (now that he is in his final year) is completely different to the world he knows back home. As such, you would think 'fitting-in' may be a challenge for Fraser. However, Fraser seems to now be completely at home in elite HE, particularly in social contexts, belying in some senses Bourdieuian conceptualisations of working-class students being fish out of water.

The Bourdieuian analogy of fish in water, relates to when one's habitus (classed dispositions) meets a new field, in this case, HE. Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) suggest that those who enter a social world, of which they are a product, are like fish in water. Reay *et al's* (2009: 2010) study challenges this assertion in that (through the analysis of working-class students in 'elite' HE), they suggest that counter-intuitively, some working-class students feel 'at home' in elite HE because it fitted with their academic identities and social aspirations, even though they were from ostensibly disadvantaged, 'non-traditional' backgrounds.

The students in Reay *et al's* (2009: 2010) study felt comfortable in elite HE settings in ways they felt they never had in their home communities, where their academic and intellectual interests were not valued. Fraser's experience resonates with those working-class students in elite HE in Reay *et al*'s (2009: 2010) study

> I have gained so much...socially and just the lifestyle here is totally different to what I have had at home...My friends are different, everything is different and I

have changed socially and mentally...just so much and more prepared for the big wide world...I'm the captain of the first golf team as well, so socially I've always been accepted because I'm the best golfer in the university....I've never had a social issue cos... if you do the degree, you're expected to be of that background, so you get treated the same anyway... I've lived a great life (smiles and laughs)...because of the scholarships I've won and I don't really want to leave university... (Fraser, 21 years old, Final Year, Undergraduate Degree in Applied Golf Management Studies, University of Brightown).

Fraser's illuminating narrative implies a kind of social confidence in elite HE contexts, which would be more reminiscent of students from more traditional middle-class backgrounds. His social confidence in HE stems from his perceived 'status' in the context of the golf team and on the degree programme too.

Fraser's experience of elite HE has been a transformative one. He (not unlike Claire) is revelling in, and is determined to make a success of himself in HE, in that he sees his university participation as part of the bigger picture. The impact of widening participation (in relation to the loans and bursaries that he has been awarded) during his time in HE, is not lost on Fraser, in that he draws upon his working-class roots and suggests how lucky he has been and that if the financial support had not been available, then he would not have entered HE.

Oh...I've made so much money out of loans and bursaries it's frightening... I'm different because I'm on an athletic scholarship which gives me about five thousand pounds a year an academic which gives me about one thousand pounds a year, so all in all that's a lot of money...I'm also on non-repayable bursaries and loans...I've been lucky...I've been able to lead a very good

lifestyle, because of my extra bursaries...I have still been able to compete at golf...But ...when I take away my bursaries and stuff, it's not really that much money really that you've got...especially when you consider the rent at Brightown is frightening... (Fraser, 21 years old, Final Year, Undergraduate Degree in Applied Golf Management Studies, University of Brightown).

Tina (drawing upon her 'classed' background like Fraser) also comments upon how the discourse of widening participation has shifted and recognises that this enables her to participate in HE today, but that this opportunity was not afforded to her Grandfather in the past.

...I mean I don't feel excluded here and I am glad that it has been opened up to all people because...obviously I wouldn't have been able to come if it hadn't been...My Granddad he talks to me about how different it was, he's very very clever, but he obviously couldn't afford to go to university...but he's very intelligent and I think that was a shame that he couldn't..., so I'm glad that I have had the opportunity... (Tina, 18 years old, First Year, Undergraduate Degree in History, University of Brightown).

The following discussion (like the builders earlier in this chapter) draws upon the young builders' experiences and feelings of 'standing out' in HE.

6.8.5 Young builders in HE: 'Standing out'

In a similar vein to Leanne (Newtown) whose experiences of 'fitting-in' and 'standing-out' were described earlier in this thesis (see section 6.7.2 and 6.7.3), analysis of Fraser's biography also points towards displaying a kind of hybrid identity with regard

to his perception on how he fits in (section 6.8.4) and how he stands-out in HE (section 6.8.5). Despite his apparent increased social confidence, Fraser perceives that he is struggling academically (which stems from his experiences of preparation on his pre-HE programme), even though he believes he is going to achieve highly.

> I really struggle on my course with academic writing, I can't write...I really struggle with it...I'm on the way to a 2:1, but I lose so many marks through not being able to write and I think if I would have done 'A' levels, I would have learnt that, even though I did do essays and assignments at college, they just don't seem to be of the same standard...I don't know, I really don't know...And now, coming to exams...I didn't revise for my GCSE's and I didn't have to revise for college, so this is a bit scary...I haven't done revision before... (Fraser, 21 years old, Final Year, Undergraduate Degree in Applied Golf Management Studies, University of Brightown).

So, although Fraser in some senses 'fits-in' in that his biography highlights a high level of social confidence (stemmed from his golfing 'status'), he also feels that he 'stands-out' too, in that he appears anxious about his academic work.

Sunita's (also Brightown) narrative also highlights an interesting phenomenon, in that she talks about 'standing out' (in academic senses). Her narrative draws some parallels with those of Sue (one of the builders) who in section 6.7.3 talked about 'standing-out' in HE, in that she was a mature student who was one of a few who were actively involved in discussions during lectures. As such, Sue (Westside) perceived that she, and her fellow mature students, 'stood out' amongst their peers. Sunita's narrative replicates a very similar situation, but inverts Sue's story, in that

she feels like she 'stands-out', in that she is anxious about being passive in lecture discussions, when compared to a few of her peers that take a more active role.

> ...There's a lot of students…whenever we have lectures they ask questions…If the tutor asks a question, all the class goes silent and no-one speaks… [but] ... there's five students that always ask questions and me and my friends always talk ... like they always ask questions ... and not that were jealous or anything, it's just like were thinking how can they always ask questions? And …we know … if we ask a question it's going to sound really dumb cos we just sit in lectures listening and writing notes. I don't just like sit back, I just like listen, but I do actually understand what's going on ... (Sunita, 19 years old, First Year, Undergraduate Degree Childhood, Culture and Education, University of Brightown)

Sunita's perceptions of 'standing-out' that are pointed to in the above narrative also stem from her classed perceptions of how she would 'fit-in', being that she was (in her words) the first member of her family to attend a really good university.

> ... When I did actually get the place here I was just really scared to come, cos I thought I am going to find it so hard ... I thought everyone else was going to be really clever and I thought I was going to be dumb, or something ... (laughs nervously) (Sunita, 19 years old, First Year, Undergraduate Degree Childhood, Culture and Education, University of Brightown)

Tina (also Brightown), despite her high record of academic achievement, exhibited in her narrative an initial struggle in making the transition (in an academic sense) from college ('A' levels) to university.

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I think that we were spoon-fed a lot at 'A' Level...and that's really different from what you get here ...and I've found the jump quite difficult...I did well in my 'A' Levels, but I've come here and it's been...it's been a real different experience...it's just been hard to get used to...I didn't feel prepared at all. I mean the first term, I'm not going to lie...I didn't like it at all. (Tina, 18 years old, First Year, Undergraduate Degree in History, University of Brightown).

Tina's initial experiences of HE, in that she found the transition to university academic life difficult, highlights the complexities for some students, when moving from a very protected and sheltered environment of school/FE college, to HE, where young people especially, are thrust into a world of independence in academic, social and financial terms. In a further narrative, Tina also highlights an increasingly more common phenomenon, where young students are living at home whilst at university (Patiniotis and Holdsworth, 2005). This decision (made for financial reasons) means that she feels a sense of 'standing out' in that she has not developed as many social relationships as she would have liked.

If I was living in halls...then I would have built up relationships obviously to do with the course...I'm just missing people...and if you're with the all the time it's going to make you get on with people better. And I feel slightly excluded living at home really (Tina, 18 years old, First Year, Undergraduate Degree in History, University of Brightown).

The biographical analysis and discussion of Fraser, Sunita and Tina's narratives (young builders) in this thesis highlights how they in some senses, are similar to the builders (Claire, Katie, Leanne and Sue), but also in some senses, how they are very different. The discussion surrounding the builders and the young builders in this

chapter emphasises the fact that despite them being from similar, working-class backgrounds, their "sentences" (or their practices and behaviour) in relation to how they negotiate their journeys towards gaining the 'piece of paper' are indeed different.

6.9 Conclusion

The traits of the builders in this thesis belie the 'sociological commonplace' referred to by Straw and Kendrick (1988, p.44, cited in McCrone, 1994, p.68) in that the builders viewed their journeys towards gaining the 'piece of paper' in ways that were aspirational and long-term. HE was, for many of the builders (as with some of the securers and enrichers), a transformative stage in their life-courses, where gaining the 'piece of paper' opens up a range of different education, training and professional opportunities to them. Whilst the current UK economic outlook is bleak, the builders (along with the securers and enrichers in this thesis) are, by dint of their journeys towards gaining the 'piece of paper', creating additional opportunities for themselves and therefore protecting themselves against downward mobility. They are also creating for themselves imagined futures (Ball *et al*, 2000) which, as a result of their HE participation, are arguably '...relatively clear, relatively stable and relatively possible' (Ball *et al*, 2000, p.210).

As with the securers and enrichers (see Chapters Four and Five respectively), this chapter highlights the different ways in which the builders and indeed the young builders negotiate their journeys towards gaining the 'piece of paper'. Indeed, the young builders' biographical journeys (highlighted in sections 6.8.1 to 6.8.5) capture the ways in which the builders, who appear at first glance to be similar, are, in some

senses very different. Drawing upon the concept of habitus, this chapter (along with Chapters Four and Five) highlights the distinctions of classed behaviour. These distinctions are indeed the different "sentences" that are produced by the builders' practices, actions and behaviours, hence the idea of habitus as practice generating grammar (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990).

The final chapter of this thesis reiterates the main argument of this thesis; the development and the use of securers, enrichers and builders as ways of understanding the biographical journeys towards gaining the 'piece of paper'. Chapter Seven also considers this thesis within the context of a period of uncertainty in the UK HE sector, in particular the introduction of (from the start of the 2012 academic year) increased UK undergraduate fees. Finally, this thesis ends with some considerations for future avenues for research in regard to this study.

CHAPTER SEVEN: CONCLUSION

7.1 Introduction

The final chapter of this thesis revisits the original aims and questions that informed this study. In effect, it provides a restatement of and critical reflections on the arguments posed in Chapter One of this thesis. As such, this chapter restates the 'vision' of this thesis (section 7.2.1). The discussion then moves forward to re-establish the claims to originality in this thesis (see section 7.2.2). Its original contribution to the field of widening participation research stems from a dissatisfaction with the 'old' classifications of student experience (such as 'non-traditional' and 'non-standard') and the development of 'new', classed-based categories (the securers, enrichers and builders). These 'new' categories attempt to foreground the subjectivities of 'widening participation' students, invoking the context of their classed biographical journeys HE entrants towards gaining the 'piece of paper'. 'Old' widening participation categories, such as 'non-standard' and 'non-traditional', define students according to how they fit into the UK's post-compulsory qualification pathways; this thesis is concerned with how post-compulsory education and indeed HE, fits into 'widening participation' students' lives.

Chapter Seven also reflects upon this thesis' theorisation of social class and higher education. Section 7.3.1 revisits the use of social class and liminality in the thesis and how they impacted upon the participants' biographies. Section 7.3.2 again considers the influence of Pierre Bourdieu. The discussion briefly explains (and reminds us) how, reservations about the deterministic nature of his work notwithstanding, the understanding of habitus as practice generating grammar still

suggests fruitful ways of understanding the finer grained nuances of 'classed' behaviour.

Having offered these concluding thoughts on the thesis' central arguments about the complex biographical meanings of credentialisation for 'widening participation' students and the 'capital' generated by returning to HE. Sections 7.4.1 and in particular 7.4.2, examine the current widening participation and HE context, particularly since the election in 2010 of Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government and the publication of the White Paper, "Students at the heart of the system" (DBIS, 2011), focusing on what it means for notions of social justice and social mobility. Various critiques of government policy are also drawn upon to discuss the (largely negative) impacts upon social mobility and widening participation (Avis, 2011; Thompson and Bekhradnia, 2011; Universities UK, 2011; Streeting, 2012; Wilkins *et al*, 2012). Section 7.4.2 also discusses the possible implications of current government policy upon the kinds of mature, 'widening participation' students that this thesis describes.

Lastly, Section 7.5 investigates possible avenues for future research into widening participation which arise from findings and issues presented by this thesis. Finally, the last part of this chapter (section 7.6) provides a brief summary of how this study has expanded our understandings of undergraduates' aspirations, motivations and experiences, our understandings of contemporary HE, widening participation and mature students.

7.2.1 The vision of this thesis

This thesis attempts to provide deeper understandings of student experience. It moves away from defining widening participation students with respect to the education system's pathways, but instead sees widening participation students in relation to their lives and their biographies. In contrast, the 'old' categories that have described student experience, such as 'non-traditional' and 'non-standard' are, in some senses, more about how students fit into HE. However, this thesis inverts these traditional understandings; it is about how *they* see HE, rather than how HE sees them. As such, the participants' narratives reflect how they negotiate (at different stages) their biographical journeys towards HE, and indeed gaining the 'piece of paper'. This helps to contextualise my dissatisfaction with, and therefore rejection of the 'old' categories ('non-traditional' and 'non-standard') that have been used to describe student experience. In developing biographical categories to describe the participants' journeys towards HE, this thesis also contributes to a revival of a focus upon mature students. Despite the trend which has shifted attention away from mature students (see discussion in section 7.4.2), a focus on them is still worthy. This thesis, like the HE think-tank, Million +, argues the case for mature students to be regarded (in a holistic sense) as widening participation students (Million +, 2012).

Section 7.2.2 restates the importance of the biographical categories in this thesis in helping to understand student experience.

7.2.2 Understanding student experience

"And it can happen – to use an image you'll understand – it can happen that a civilisation can be imprisoned in a linguistic contour which no longer matches the landscape of ... fact." (Friel, 1981, p.52).

As highlighted earlier in this thesis, Brian Friel's words in the above extract are a useful way of understanding the reasoning behind the development of the 'new' categories, in that they better capture more the diverse accounts of student experience, depicting the lived, classed experience of human beings in increasingly credentialised education and work settings. Brian Friel's words make sense, in the fact that the 'old' language of widening participation ('non-traditional' and 'non-standard') and student experience arguably, no longer matches its actuality. As has been mentioned previously, widening participation is no longer just about increasing the participation of those from under-represented groups (albeit this is still very important). Now that widening participation has become more mainstreamed (through massification and the rise in the importance of credentials), it means that we have to rethink how we describe these HE entrants.

This idea of mainstreamed widening participation is highlighted in particular, by the experiences of the securers who (see Chapter Four) despite their middle-class backgrounds, found themselves (through changes in class, work and education) feeling vulnerable. This sense of vulnerability explains their desire for the 'piece of paper' and their 'locations' as widening participation students. The securers' biographies emphasise the use of Friel's (1981) words in that, whilst they are not the types of students that widening participation was intended for, their experiences fit

into the changing class and education landscape of the twenty-first century in the United Kingdom.

These 'new' categories developed from the initial analysis of the participants' interview data. The descriptions of securers, enrichers and builders attempt to embed participants' motives for entering HE and their complex routes towards credentials in their accounts of their 'classed' backgrounds. All of the study' participants were 'symbol chasers', in that they sought the symbolic capital of HE (often characterised in this thesis as the 'piece of paper'). The 'piece of paper' was variously located in their interview accounts as a means of improving their employment options, as validation or securing of their hard-won social status, or as a protection (perceived or real) against downward mobility (Beck, 1992). Thus gaining a degree/ Level 4 qualification was both a shared aim and an aim that revealed different perceptions of education, work and credentialism.

The **securers**, who entered HE from middle-class backgrounds, were, in some senses, looking to secure or protect their middle-class identities by gaining the 'piece of paper' which today has arguably become an integral part of the middle-class armoury. The **enrichers** were different to the securers in the sense that although, by dint of their professional success (and significant levels of economic capital), they perceived themselves as middle-class, they had grown up in working-class contexts, which meant that they lacked the cultural capital associated with formal education. So like the securers, the enrichers desired symbolic capital (the 'piece of paper'), but they were also seeking the cultural capital associated with HE participation. The **builders** were different from the securers and the enrichers in that they wanted the symbolic, cultural and hopefully the subsequent development of economic capital

upon completion. In this sense, the builders had most to gain by HE participation, but arguably were most at risk, if they had chosen not to enter HE.

The analysis of the participants' biographies in Chapters Four, Five and Six of this thesis, tell us something about their differently 'classed' journeys towards gaining the 'piece of paper'. For example, the early experiences of compulsory schooling, FE and work (and as such their rejections of education and HE) of the enrichers and builders were often couched in notions of class, in that the participants in both groups grew up in working-class contexts. However, the securers talked more about the material barriers and family tensions which meant that (at a young age) they decided not to participate in HE. Unlike, the enrichers and the builders (described in Chapters Five and Six respectively), the securers (who were ostensibly from middle-class backgrounds) did not actively reject HE, rather than a variety of different factors meant that they were unable to continue. As well as these, the biographical analysis in Chapters Four, Five and Six of this thesis highlights (at different stages of the participants' trajectories) a number of similarities and differences between (and indeed within) the tripartite categories.

7.3.1 Social class and liminality

The use of contemporary models of class analysis, such as those described by Reay (1998), Ball (2003) and Skeggs (2004) have proved useful in providing an appropriate framework for the analysis and argument in this thesis. Drawing upon Bourdieu, these sociological commentators have described the importance of class processes and practices, in what Reay (2006, p.289) has otherwise termed the

'…everyday workings of social class'. As was discussed earlier in this thesis (section 1.7), this thesis follows in the same tradition in that it investigates the 'objective' activities of the participants (i.e. getting the 'piece of paper'), but also the 'subjective', the 'classed' behaviour and practices that make up their biographies.

Liminality is used in this thesis as a way of describing HE (in some cases) as a kind of transformational space, in which "thisness becomes thatness" (Turnbull, 1990, p.80), in that gaining the 'piece of paper' (the credential) provides the holder with the skills, knowledge and confidence to transform their lives in both professional and social senses. The idea of HE as a liminal, transformative space (Turnbull, 1990) suggests that by gaining the 'piece of paper', HE students are providing themselves with opportunities to move upwards within society (a kind of social mobility), in relation to the increased opportunities in future professional employment and training.

The use of Bourdieu (in relation to the concept of habitus as practice generating grammar) in this thesis, which is reviewed in the following section, helps to understand more closely the finely grained nuances of classed behaviour of the participants in this study.

7.3.2 The use and critique of Bourdieu

This thesis has already talked (in detail) about the influence of Bourdieuian sociology, upon this study and other contemporary research into widening participation (see for example Bowl, 2001; 2003; Ball *et al*, 2002; Reay *et al*, 2005)

As noted earlier in this thesis, traditional Bourdieuian sociological thinking centred upon theories that were considered by some to be very deterministic (Jenkins, 1982: 1992; Perez, 2008; Sayer, 2010). Bourdieu's response to his critics was to argue that one of his core concepts, habitus, should be viewed in a less deterministic fashion. Consequently, Bourdieu and Passeron (1990) emphasised habitus as a form of practice generating grammar, which essentially meant that one's experiences, practices and behaviours were not rigidly determined by their classed background. Moreover, the concept implies that the 'grammar' of classed habitus can produce a range of many different 'sentences' (experiences, practices and behaviours), but that there are a finite amount.

In this sense, the biographical, classed-based categories proposed in this thesis (securers, enrichers and builders) are Bourdieuian, in the sense that they are ways of understanding the variations and nuances (the different 'sentences') in which individuals negotiate their journeys towards HE, and indeed, gaining the 'piece of paper'. As such, despite the criticisms mentioned earlier (see also Chapter Two) and the risks associated with determinism, Bourdieuian sociology is still worth utilising in that his concept of habitus helps us to understand the ways class becomes an embodied disposition and the complex way in which those dispositions, those 'personal' histories, intersect with social fields and produce new layers of biographical experience. For the participants in this thesis, HE offered both 'rationally' calculated benefits and forms of self-realisation that were bound up with fears of loss, regret at past roads taken and hopes of future security and future stability.

7.4.1 HE: the current policy context

That said, entering UK higher education today offers no simple guarantee of security or stability. The future of the UK HE sector is at the time of this thesis is clouded in uncertainty and insecurity, with respect to the changes in funding methodology for HE institutions (most visible externally as increased tuition fees for students) which commence in September/ October 2012. This can be viewed two-fold in that students are voicing their disagreement, by applying to HE in fewer numbers than in 2011. As UCAS (2012) reports there was a year on year fall of 6.6% in applicants to HE from 700,161 to 653,657. Secondly, HE institutions are concerned with this fall in student numbers, which vary considerably across the HE sector.

Section 7.4.2 charts the changing agenda in HE. Firstly, the discussion provides a brief analysis of social justice and social mobility within the context of current government policymaking. Following this discussion, the thesis analyses and draws upon various critiques of current government policy, with particular reference to the 2011 White Paper, *Putting students at the heart of the system* (DBIS, 2011).

7.4.2 The changing widening participation agenda

The widening participation agenda has been based on notions of social mobility rather than social justice. David *et al* (2008) have highlighted the government trend towards widening participation policymaking over the past fifty years. David *et al* (2008) highlight the impact of the Robbins Review of HE (Robbins, 1963) the conservative governments of the 1980's and the Dearing Review into the future of HE (NCIHE, 1997), in promoting social mobility through education. Across each of

their policy messages on increasing access to higher education, opportunity through the notion of meritocracy was implied. For example, the Robbins report in 1963 suggested that:

> courses of higher education should be available for all those who are qualified by ability and attainment to pursue them and who wish to do so (Robbins, 1963, cited in David *et al*, 2008, p.6).

Similarly, the Dearing Review in 1997 also emphasised this idea whereby they were offering the 'opportunity of higher education to all those who have the potential to benefit' (David *et al*, 2008, p.6). The current conservative led coalition government formed in 2010, appear to be continuing this trend in promoting social mobility and particularly it seems, at the expense of social justice. The current White Paper, "Students at the heart of the system" (DBIS, 2011) and Milburn's (2012) report, both continue to promote how education and in particular HE, can be powerful engines for social mobility.

> For any given level of skill and ambition, regardless of an individual's background, everyone should have a fair chance of getting the job they want or reaching a higher income bracket…Higher education can be a powerful engine of social mobility, enabling able young people from low-income backgrounds to earn more than their parents and providing a route into the professions for people from non-professional backgrounds (DBIS, 2011, p.54).

For education to be a leveller of opportunity, all those with ability, aptitude and potential need to have equal access to what it can offer (Milburn, 2012, p.12).

Despite the continued rhetoric of HE being an engine for social mobility (DBIS, 2011; Milburn, 2012), Hart (2013) suggests that the Coalition's policy is not a 'magic bullet' to help achieve this. There is more required.

Students from lower socio-economic backgrounds, without a family history of HE, are more likely to go to less prestigious institutions. Thus, there is a 'sorting, process that goes on at entry to HEI's in relation to different places of study, subject areas, types and level of qualification. Rather than increasing social mobility, current CEP may be reinforcing class and social hierarchies in the working population of graduates. This creates two sets of tiered social hierarchies, one for all social classes without a degree and one for all with one (Hart, 2013, p.178).

So what about Social Justice? For Hart (2013) widening participation is more than just about increasing HE participation amongst those from lower socio-economic groups. She argues that we need to better understand the structural inequalities that exist and the 'injustices associated with social class, gender and ethnicity [that] are deeply embedded in the culture and histories of British society (Hart, 2013, p.194). Smith (2012, p.11) has also commented on this phenomenon whereby despite an increase in participation, HE is no more equitable:

It is certainly the case that a university education is now open to more people who might never previously have thought about attending, but we need to ask

serious questions about the type of university experience that they have. Evidence suggests that despite increased access to HE, universities are still internally stratified according to social characteristics based largely on class…

It appears that despite the rhetoric about the importance of social justice across the current government, its continued rejection in HE policy, means that whilst we have a university sector that promotes fair access and fosters social mobility, it is also a sector that continues to reinforce inequality. As Hart (2013) has implied widening participation can only be part of the solution in addressing inequality and therefore promoting social justice.

Griffiths (2003, p.113) sums up the need for action and not just words to increasing social justice in education:

> Action is needed because analysis and understanding are not enough. Nor is empathy. Nor, even, is feeling empowered, without some hope of action and change. Without people taking action, there is no hope of getting more fairness into educational practices. In other words, social justice is a verb. Furthermore, it is an active verb, not a passive one. It must have a subject: justice does not *get done* unless *somebody* does it (author's italics).

In regard to the pursuit of increased social justice in HE, it appears that Griffiths' (2003) words have fallen on deaf ears. Whilst there seems to be plenty of rhetoric and analysis there has not been enough real action to reduce educational inequality. As such, it stands in stark contrast to recent government's strides to improve access to HE and foster social mobility.

So, what about current government policy in HE? The 2011 White Paper, *Putting students at the heart of the system* (DBIS, 2011) signalled the new Coalition government's response to the independent review of HE finance (Browne, 2010). The idea of putting students at the heart of the system was twofold, in that students would firstly be the ones shouldering a new financial burden (in relation to increased fees), but secondly they would, it was argued, benefit from fair access, social justice (mobility) and widening participation, in that there would be financial support for those in most need. This section focuses on these ideas, along with their implications for the kinds of participants in this study (i.e. mature, 'widening participation' students).

Current government policy and rhetoric (including the recent White Paper) is on a continuing trend which marginalises mature students. Thirty years ago, in the 1980s, the Access movement and HE regarded mature students as crucial in respect of up-skilling the workforce, highlighted by policy at the particular time (DES, 1987). The New Labour government which came into power in 1997, upon a wave of optimism, centred their HE policy on getting fifty percent of 18-30 year olds into university by 2010 (a goal that was not quite achieved). However laudable this goal was, it continued the trend towards a focus on younger people, in that their primary concerns were on equipping this section of the population (with regard to the skills and qualifications that were required) to be able to contribute to the anticipated future economic demands of the nation (NCIHE, 1997).

Despite passing references to part-time and mature students, it seems that the recent White Paper (DBIS, 2011) continues the focus on young students in relation to widening participation. As discussed previously, government policy has been

moving in this direction for a while with its focus on Aimhigher and New Labour's emphasis on getting fifty percent of 18-30 year olds into HE (NCIHE, 1997). Despite the importance of Aimhigher in the widening participation drive, the funding for the programme was stopped in 2011.

Whilst the current White Paper (DBIS, 2011) recognises the potential impact upon young new HE entrants from low-income backgrounds, it does implicitly appear to discount mature students, in that there is an emphasis on policies which are targeted more at younger entrants. Examples of how mature, 'widening participation' students (such as those in this study) are affected are discussed throughout the remainder of this section.

In relation to the concerns of this thesis, perhaps the most crucial strand of the white paper (DBIS, 2011) investigates the importance of social justice (mobility) and widening participation within the context of the proposed funding changes. In a continuation of the Labour government's emphasis on the idea of HE as a driver of economic competitiveness and social mobility, the White Paper (DBIS, 2011, p.54) states:

> Higher education can be a powerful engine of social mobility, enabling young people from low-income backgrounds to earn more than their parents and providing a route into the professions for people from non-professional backgrounds.

The white paper proposed a twofold approach to widening participation. Firstly, there is going to be an increased responsibility on HEI's to widen participation (amongst those from disadvantaged backgrounds) particularly among the more selective

universities (e.g. Russell Group). Underpinning this, the White Paper (DBIS, 2011) highlights the notion of access agreements which essentially exist between the government (through OFFA) and the HEI's. Institutions in England which intend to charge students more than a basic minimum £6,000 annual tuition fee will have to provide details of the extra steps they are taking to attract more students from these under-represented groups (DBIS, 2011). With many universities seemingly charging over this basic threshold (and indeed many the maximum £9,000), it would appear on the face of it, the apparent commitment of the UK HE sector to increasing widening participation further. Secondly, behind the rhetoric and policy surrounding increasing social mobility and widening participation, are the practical implications for these students regarding increases in financial support. This takes two forms. Firstly, students from low-income backgrounds (from families with incomes of £25,000 or less) will benefit from increased maintenance grants. Secondly, in line with the idea of access agreements highlighted previously, a new national scholarship programme will exist to improve access, and financially support those from low-income backgrounds. This will be required to be funded by the institutions themselves (those who are charging over the basic £6,000 annual tuition fee). The White Paper also proposes upfront loans for tuition fees for part-time undergraduates, which ends the disparities in relation to funding support between full and part-time students (DBIS, 2011). This, in some senses, recognises mature students, in that (based on 2009-10 figures) over eighty-five per cent of part-time students are over the age of twenty-one. However, part-time mature students account for under half the total mature student population in HE (Million +, 2012).

Despite the laudable claims of the White Paper (DBIS, 2011) in respect of social mobility and widening participation, there are a number of commentators (Avis, 2011; Thompson and Bekhradnia, 2011; Universities UK, 2011; Streeting, 2012; Wilkins *et al*, 2012) who have provided critiques on the impact of the coalition governments' HE policy upon social mobility and widening participation. Avis (2011, p.433) highlights the paradoxical nature of the coalition government's commitment to social justice, considered in the context of proposed changes to HE funding.

> …the cuts in English Higher Education and increased fees will have a deleterious effect on the participation of disadvantaged and working class young people who are more likely to be debt adverse than their more privileged counterparts.

Wilkins *et al* (2012, p.6) agree with the sentiment of the words of Avis (2011) in that they '…expect that the higher education decisions of working-class students will be more influenced by financial factors than (other) higher social classes'. Wilkins *et al's* (2012) analysis points to a reversal of what the coalition government's policies are trying to achieve with regard to social mobility and widening participation. As such, and drawing upon previous studies concerning financial concerns and HE participation (Callender and Jackson, 2008), Wilkins *et al* (2012, p.6) propose the following:

> Facing substantially higher tuition fees, working-class students will be the most likely to consider not entering higher education… [or] …to seek cheaper higher education opportunities.

Whilst the assertion above by Wilkins *et al* (2012), may well be true, the prospect of higher tuition fees potentially affects a wider class fraction, with regard to mature students, who in some cases, may also be middle-class (the securers). The prospect of increased tuition fees for many mature students, in this study, may be too much to bear, in addition to their current financial commitments. In a similar vein to Avis' (2011) assertion of disadvantaged and working-class people being debt averse and Wilkins *et al's* (2012) arguments above, Million + (2012, p.42), suggest that 'mature students are known to be more debt averse than young students'. The report implies that this may go some way to explaining the 11.4% fall in mature applications (for 2012-13 study) on the previous year, compared with a 6.6% fall in younger applicants (Million +, 2012). As such, the report is openly critical of the government's stance in respect of mature students.

> The Government invested in a campaign to publicise the new undergraduate fee and finance system to younger learners but very little resource has been invested in informing prospective mature and/or part-time students about the new system. Given that the majority of mature students study full time and that mature students represent a fifth of all full-time undergraduates this is a serious omission (Million +, 2012).

Mature students now may be more likely to consider part-time undergraduate study, in order to spread the cost of their education, or postpone their return to education in order to save for it, or wait until their financial circumstances allow them to participate. Whilst it is true to suggest that mature students are debt averse and that they may find the increased costs too much, in a purely hypothetical sense, it is possible that they may still see HE and gaining the 'piece of paper' as necessary.

The securers for example, could draw upon their middle-class levels of cultural capital and recognised the increased benefits, despite the increased costs. The enrichers would, due to their relative lack of cultural capital, possibly still be inclined to participate, in that they possess significant levels of economic capital, gained from their successful careers.

The uncertainty in the UK HE sector is also captured by Universities UK (which represents the leaders of universities), who have also been critical of the White Paper on Higher Education (DBIS, 2011). In this sense, they raise concerns that the coalition government's drive for a market driven system of HE, may be at the expense of social mobility, and could reverse much of the good work widening participation has ultimately achieved over recent decades. Universities UK (2011, p.4) argue that:

> On the one hand the government is committed to increasing social mobility and sees universities as critical to this. However, UUK believes that these proposals may inhibit social mobility by reducing choice, and minimising institutional flexibility over admissions decisions. It is essential that the gains made in social mobility through expansion of the system in recent years are locked in for the future.

With the White Paper (DBIS, 2011), the coalition government has in some senses, created a paradox which contests the extent to which current HE policy will promote social mobility. On the one hand, the rhetoric suggests that 'Higher Education can be a powerful engine of social mobility, enabling young people from low income backgrounds to earn more than their parents and providing a route into the professions for people from non-professional backgrounds' (DBIS, 2011, p.54).

However, Universities UK (2011) argues that the policy could restrict the choices of potential students in that there will be a narrowing of places in what Coughlan (2011) calls the middle ground. The middle ground refers to the institutions which will be unable to expand, unlike those institutions offering courses at an average under £7,500 per year and those who are attracting students with 'AAB' grades at 'A' level (Coughlan, 2011). These shifts may impact disproportionately on mature students (such as the mature securers, enrichers and builders in this study) in that they are less likely to possess traditional qualifications ('A' levels) and are more likely to attend modern universities (Million +, 2012). While a few of the modern universities will be able to expand (with average tuition fees less than £7,500 per year), this policy will more likely, limit the potential HE choices of mature students, when places are reduced in the middle ground. Many of the mature students in this study (particularly amongst the securers and builders) were studying on HE programmes at their local universities. Access to local institutions was highlighted in some of the biographies as crucial because of their commitments outside HE (such as family responsibilities). Restricting the number of places at these, often modern universities which are part of the middle ground referred to by Coughlan (2011), may jeopardise the participation of mature students (such as those in my study) who due to material constraints, are likely to be operating within narrow circumscribed spaces of choice (Reay *et al*, 2005).

In their analysis of the White Paper (DBIS, 2011), Thompson and Bekhradnia (2011) also comment on the impact upon widening participation. Whilst they recognise the range of increased loans, grants and bursaries will make a difference to those that are in receipt of them (Thompson and Bekhradnia, 2011), they raise a concern about

the funding of 'AAB' students, in what appears, at least on the face of it, to be counter to what widening participation seeks to address.

> …the 'merit' scholarships made without reference to need, that universities seem likely to award to attract AAB+ students, seem likely to – be mis-targeted, favouring the better off (Thompson and Bekhradnia, 2011, p.33).

Universities UK (2011) assert that the 'AAB+' policy potentially has unwelcome connotations for widening participation and diversity. The report highlights that entrants from disadvantaged backgrounds among the 'AAB+' population are already under-represented, where '...young entrants in the bottom two quintiles account for 25 per cent of all young entrants but only 15 per cent of the AAB+ population' (Universities UK, 2011, p.13). As such, Universities UK (2011) assert that potentially there is a risk that there will be a 'reduced attractiveness of higher education to those from under-represented groups, due to perceptions that the system is designed to promote the greatest amount of choice for those from more advantaged backgrounds' and that it will also arguably lead to 'increased polarisation within the sector, in terms of the proportions of students from disadvantaged backgrounds at each higher education provider' (Universities UK, 2011, p.13).

It is worth noting the impact upon mature, 'widening participation' students (such as the ones in this study) of the emphasis upon the AAB+ policy. This policy marginalises mature students in that it focuses on those who have achieved highly in traditional, 'A' level examinations and that mature students are more likely to enter HE with 'non-traditional' qualifications (Million +, 2012). As the Think Tank report highlights:

> In 2009-10 the overwhelming majority (85.8 per cent) of young first degree undergraduates had A- levels or equivalent qualifications…at Level 3 as their highest pre-entry qualification…Just a quarter (28.6 per cent) of mature students studying for first degrees in 2009-10 had A- levels or equivalents as their highest pre-entry qualifications…(Million +, 2012, p.8).

Consequently those achieving grades AAB or better are most likely to be young students. All of the mature, 'widening participation' students in this study, across the securers, enrichers and builders at the time of interview, had entered (or were about to enter) HE via diverse educational and professional pathways, but not from traditional 'A' level qualifications. In this sense, the potential support with regard to funding (to counter the cost of increased tuition fees) will arguably be less available to these students. However, relatively high achieving young students, from low-income backgrounds, such as the some of the young builders in this study (described in Chapter Six) who enter HE from more traditional pathways ('A' levels), are more likely to be able to take advantage of the packages of financial support available, stemming from the AAB+ policy. As the 'AAB' policy is still in its infancy, there is, at the time of writing this thesis, no concrete data which supports this. However, in 2001 (the last time that the qualifications of HE entrants were published separately), approximately ninety-five percent of those students with two or more 'A' levels that went on to HE, were classified as young students (under the age of twenty-one). Doubtless, in the future, as the policy matures, data on these students will become more available and more accurate analysis and comment can be made.

Streeting (2011) draws upon the focus of fair access to the selective universities in the White Paper. Whilst not denouncing its importance, he suggests that too heavy

an emphasis on getting a relatively small number of high achievers into selective universities may come at the expense of the majority who 'have the ability to benefit more broadly from higher education' (Streeting, 2011, p.6). As such he suggests:

> There is a risk that too narrow minded a focus on a certain notion of social mobility could lead to a deeply individualistic approach that picks a few winners and leaves the rest behind… (Streeting, 2011, p.6).

Streeting's (2011) comments in reference to fair access to selective universities, also highlight the emphasis that is placed on young students, in that mature students are far more likely to inhabit the newer universities (Wakeford, 1993; Coffield and Vignoles, 1997; Read *et al*, 2003; Gallacher, 2006; Parry, 2010; Million +, 2012). The university think tank, Million + has championed the cause of mature students in HE and highlight various threats that stem from the new funding regime to their future and continued participation. The report (Million +, 2012) highlights the potential damage to mature student participation in both FE and HE, of the government policy to withdraw funding from 2013/14 for level three programmes (e.g. Access, 'A' levels) for those mature students over the age of twenty four. As the report suggests:

> That individuals over the age of 24 who aspire to enter higher education will face the prospect of either paying higher Level 3 course fees upfront or taking on one or two years of FE loans as a precondition for entry to higher education is likely to act as a major disincentive to future participation in higher education by mature students (Million +, 2012, p.42).

Whilst some students are able to enter different forms of HE with little or no formal qualifications, it is often crucial for older mature students who have been away from

education for a relatively long time (such as Gill, Julie, Paula and Sue in this study), to study on pre-HE programmes which reacquaint them with learning and prepare them for HE. Increasing the cost of these pre-HE programmes serves as a financial double-whammy for these individuals, which may, in some cases be just too much of a deterrent.

All of the critiques of the White Paper (DBIS, 2011) drawn upon here (Avis, 2011; Thompson and Bekhradnia, 2011; Universities UK, 2011; Streeting, 2012; Wilkins *et al*, 2012) suggest potentially worrying signs for current policymakers, in that the current HE reforms may not achieve as much for social mobility and widening participation as intended, and may indeed risk undoing much of the work done in this area over the past decades. It is, of course, impossible to accurately determine the exact impact of the new funding regime on the types of students in this study (i.e. mature, 'widening participation' students), but it appears that they are not on a level playing field, when compared with their younger counterparts, both in FE and HE. The following discussion (section 7.5) investigates some possible future avenues for research into widening participation, which have arisen from this study.

7.5 Future avenues for research

This thesis highlights a range of potentially different avenues for future research into widening participation. It has investigated and analysed the biographies of mature returners to education (and indeed HE) and has raised some interesting observations. It is appropriate therefore for future widening participation research to investigate the way HE is seen by students, with regard to their lives, experiences

and biographies in addition to the more traditional methods, which focus on how HE views students (with respect to 'non-traditional'/ 'non-standard' pathways).

Despite the trend of government policy and rhetoric seemingly moving away from a focus on mature students, this thesis makes arguments for the continuation of research into their experiences surrounding HE participation. In light of recent government policy changes (highlighted in sections 7.4.1 and 7.4.2) and the arguments posed by Million + (2012) there is arguably the need for further research into ways of attracting mature students into HE. It will also be important for future research into widening participation to examine the effects of the current government policy in relation to the impact that it has upon the types of students in this study (mature students and those from low-income and working-class backgrounds).

This study (as described in Chapter Three) had a relative lack of ethnic diversity with regard to the 'sample', in that only one of the nineteen participants was from an ethnic minority background. With this in mind, it would be valuable to undertake similar research with a more diverse group of participants. This might contribute to our knowledge about the distribution of 'widening participation', ethnic minority students within the HE sector. The research study upon which this thesis is predicated employed an opportunistic approach to 'sampling' and as has been highlighted, resulted in a very broad 'sample', in relation to the types of institutions and the HE programmes that the students were engaged on. It would be useful for future research to focus more specifically perhaps on different kinds of universities, or more 'traditional' types of degree courses. A study of this nature could possibly help to understand the extent of the relationship between individuals' undergraduate

subject choices and their intended career pathways and whether (as in the case of the participants in this thesis) they are so inextricably linked with each other.

In the majority, the participants in this research study were, in a sense, on 'vocationally oriented' programmes which were linked to their intended professional destinations upon graduation, such as teaching. Many of the participants were returning to education (and indeed HE), in order to retrain for entry to new careers or up-skilling in order to increase or update their existing knowledge and skills to continue on their professional, career pathways. In this sense, it would be interesting to revive research into the importance of up-skilling and retraining, which was a feature of government policy and rhetoric in the 1980's (see for example, DES, 1987). Conversely, it might be interesting to conduct future research into how HE can attract mature students whose interests are academic, rather than work-orientated.

7.6 Conclusion

What is the contribution of this thesis to the existing research on student experience and widening participation? This thesis contributes towards the growing body of widening participation research in the mould or tradition of such contemporary writers as Marion Bowl, Diane Reay and Stephen Ball (see for example Bowl, 2001: 2003; Reay, 2001; Reay *et al*, 2001: 2002: 2005; Ball and Vincent, 1998; Ball *et al*, 2002). It expands upon current understandings of HE, widening participation and mature students, through the development of the new, 'classed' biographical categories, which can be understood only in the context of participant biographies

and transitions towards HE and gaining the 'piece of paper'. The development of these categories (the securers, enrichers and builders) are useful in the sense that they provide more finely grained understandings of student experience. As has been highlighted previously, the analysis of the participants' biographical journeys to HE in this thesis (characterised by the securers, enrichers and builders) inverts usual understandings of widening participation. Essentially, they explain how HE fits into their lives, experiences and biographies.

This thesis, rather than reverting to the 'comfortable' categories that have described widening participation and student experience for decades (i.e. 'non-traditional' and 'non-standard') adopted a biographical approach which sought to understand how HE was seen by the participants, as opposed to how HE sees them. As such, I would suggest that there should be a continued emphasis on finding new approaches to research into these fields. It will therefore be particularly important to further develop our understandings of why particular students enter HE and why they value it so much. New approaches to widening participation research (such as the one used in this thesis) can also potentially impact upon practice. By increasing our understandings of how students see and value HE, research can provide additional and useful knowledge which might help the sector to more effectively attract and support the kinds of 'widening participation' students this thesis has talked about.

Appendix One: Draft Interview schedule

1. Can you tell me a bit about your education and what you have done since leaving school?

2. Please tell me a bit about the current course that you are on?

3. Why did you choose this particular course?

4. What do you hope to gain from your experience of HE?

5. What do you hope to do when you have completed your studies at HE?

6. What support in terms of advice, guidance and information about HE was provided to you while you were at FE/6TH form by the following?

    a) The Institution?
    b) Staff?
    c) Family and friends?

7. How did you choose your current HE course and institution? What criteria/factors did you base your decisions on?

8. What are your feelings about the choices you have made? Do you have any regrets at all?

9. Why do you think that many more people are entering higher education today than say 40 years ago?

10. What do you think are the main challenges that you face as a student in higher education?

11. Do you feel that there is an assumption that students have come from a traditional academic background? What makes you feel this?

12. Do you feel that your institution provides you with adequate support to help you with your studies?

13. What kind of relationships do you have with your:

    - Academic Tutors

    - Fellow Students

Appendix Two: Information Sheet for Interviewees

My name is Robert Eden and I am a PhD Student in the School of Education at the University of Birmingham and my research is looking into the student experience of higher education.

My research, through the interview method will investigate student perceptions of their experience, including such aspects as choices and decision making at various points in their educational life, as well as influences of family and friends. The notion of support will also be discussed.

Your responses will be anonymous as pseudonyms will be used when the research is being written up. You also have the right to withdraw from the interview at any time should you so wish.

I am very grateful for your assistance with my PhD Research and thank you very much for sparing the time to talk to me. If you have any further questions, please feel free to ask, or contact me directly by email.

Many thanks

Robert Eden
School of Education, University of Birmingham

Email:

Appendix Three: Transcription Interview 6 – University of Brightown (Folder 1 – 006 on recorder)

Pseudonym: Tina
Gender: Female
Parental Occupation: Civil Servant
Ethnicity: White
Age: 18
Course: Bachelor Degree History – Year 1

RE: Please tell me a bit about the current course you are doing now?

T: OK erm.... I'm doing Bachelor of Arts History, erm... Finding it quite difficult but I've got into my stride a bit more now even though it's coming to the end of term. Erm, there's a lt more reading than I thought there would be which I found difficult to get used to, but I think that I'm getting better at it.

RE: OK

T: So yeah, it's harder than I expected.

RE: Why do you think that is? Do you know or...

T: Erm.... I think that we were spoon-fed a lot at 'A' Level, erm, and that's really different from what you get here – erm, and I've found the jump quite difficult. Erm, I did well in my 'A' Levels, but I've come here and it's been a.... it's been a real different experience.... it's just been hard to get used to.

RE: Yes, OK. If you don't mind me asking, what did you get for 'A' Levels?

T: Four 'A's

RE: (laughs)....That's pretty good! OK, so why did you choose this particular course?

T: Do you mean 'A' Levels or here?

RE: This course here

T: Well, it was a toss-up really between History and Sociology. I loved both of them at 'A' Level, and I really want to teach at Secondary, and obviously at most Secondary schools they don't teach Sociology, so I decided on History.

RE: OK, were they both here, or did you look anywhere else?

T: I only looked at other Universities in the area, erm....

RE: I've got a question I'm going to ask a bit later about that, but it was just interesting. Yeah.... so - mainly for the love of your subject?

T: Yeah.

RE: OK, right.... What do you hope to gain from your experience of Higher Education?

T: I want to teach. I think that my confidence has improved as well, wich I'm quite happy about. Erm, I mean that I've never been really shy, but I do think that my confidence has improved so I've picked that up already.

RE: You are coming to the end of your first year aren't you?

T: Yes.

RE: And this is sort of similar, what do you hope to do when you have completed your studies at HE? Is that definitely what you want to do?

T. Definitely yeah....

R: Are you looking to do a PGCE or something?

T: PGCE, yes.

RE: Here?

T: Yes, probably.

RE: OK. Right.... When you left school.... I don't know whether you did your 'A' Levels at school or whether you went to College?

T: I went to college.

RE: Why did you choose to do 'A' Levels as opposed to.... Did the thought of doing anything else like a BTEC, like going to work, cross your mind, like doing a vocational qualification? What made you choose 'A' Levels?

T: Not another qualification definitely. Erm, I didn't expect to do as well as I did in my GCSEs because in year 10, I was told that I wouldn't get 5 'C's which doesn't add up obviously... (both laugh). They told me that I wouldn't get 5 'Cs erm, so I wasn't definitely necessarily going to College. I applied anyway in year 11 and I got decent GCSE grades, and decided to go to XXXXX. Erm, so that's basically why, the teachers kind of put a doubt in my mind at first but that's what I decided to do.

RE: OK....that's interesting you say that, because I have heard that in other places as well.....

T: Yeah..

RE: So you were almost thinking that you may have gone out to work?

T: Yeah......and then I didn't look at anything other than 'A' Levels when I applied to college, cos I like doing different subjects.....and I think that's the one thing I miss here, cos at 'A' Level, I liked doing the four different ones.

RE: Yes....Is it just because you liked doing the separate subjects? It didn't even cross your mind to do a BTEC National or something like that?

T: No....No.....

RE: OK.........(pause).....OK....Can you tell me a little bit about your 'A' Level courses, what sort of things you did and what you did there that helps you here in a way?

T: I did sociology, erm history obviously, erm ICT and English Language and Literature.....Erm I think probably, obviously my history helped me because that's what I'm doing, erm but English definitely helped me. My English improved so much between GCSE and 'A' Level erm and that has obviously helped because with History as we do so many essays and that has helped me construct those better. Erm, Sociology I'm not sure, I just loved it, I really really enjoyed it at 'A' level, erm I think it has given me more of an open mind to different people erm, which has helped obviously here cos there are so many people here from different backgrounds. Erm and ICT on a practical level I suppose has helped with essays as well, presentations and that kind of thing.

RE: Yes......that's quite an all-round sort set of subjects it gives you......that's interesting........Although you said about being spoon fed.......

T: Yeah....

RE: .....the subjects you did have given you a help with the subject you are doing now.......

T: Yeah.....Yeah......

RE: That's good...........ok.....next question.....what support in terms of advice, guidance, information was provided to you while you were at sixth form or further education college? I've got here split into three different.....the institution – so your college as a whole? So things like student services, I've got the staff that were there and I've got your family and friends if they had any influence on you and whether they gave you any advice, support.

T: The institution itself was really good.....and I think that was partly because they are competing with colleges such as XXXXX which is seen as better and they want as many students as possible to go into university, so I was really impressed with the student support there, the office really helped me when I was applying through

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UCAS and whatever they gave me a lot of support. Erm, the staff....do you mean teachers?

RE: Anybody that helped you.......

T: ....my history teacher actually did his PhD here, well he did all his training here, but he did his PhD here as well, so he gave us, cos he knew I was coming...he was telling us a lot about the university and about what we would be expected to do and that kind of thing, so that was nice to hear really....cos it gave you an insight before you got here.....family and friends....erm, nobody in my family has been to university and my friends are all my age, so I didn't really have much guidance from them.......

RE: That's interesting......so what about your friends? Have they not been to university either?

T: Some of them have, but they are the same age as me.......

RE: So you've not got any friends that have been already?

T: No No....They are either at work.....or they are in their first year....

RE: So really you relied heavily on your institution?

T: Yes I did.....yeah......

RE: ......pause....ok...Right so, how did you choose your current HE course and institution? So we know what you chose, but how do you choose it.....what criteria and factors did you base your decisions on? Did you base it on the support you had from the staff and the institution, did you come and see things like open days, see prospectuses.......so what sort of things?

T: I had prospectuses....and I came. I had prospectuses for all the local universities, erm, only I wanted to go local as...we literally can't afford....my mum and dad couldn't give me any help to move away, erm saying it's cheaper for me to live at home, erm so yeah open days and prospectuses really and it was the best one....other than XXXXXX, which I would have had to move away for, it's the best one in the area I think for reputation, so cause of my 'A' Levels....I decided to come here.

RE: Yes....... (pause)....that's becoming more and more popular now with the cost of going....

T: Yeah.....

RE: You didn't want to move away at all, if you had had the chance.

T: Maybe if I'd had the money, but money is such an important issue so I just couldn't afford it, so it wasn't an option.

RE: OK......What are your feelings about all the choices you have made?....Do you feel that you have made the right choices when you finished school and things like that. You don't wish that it had gone any differently?

T: Erm...Yeah, I'm really glad that I went to XXXXX rather than XXXXX, erm I know that somebody who I went to school with got 11 A*s at GCSE, but then went to XXXXX and then got 4 B's, which is a big downfall compared to what I got which is the other way. Erm, and I think that was a lot to do with.....like it was a much more pressurised institution and I benefitted definitely from XXXXX being quite laid back, so I was pleased with that. One regret I suppose that I have is that I was encouraged to apply for Oxford and Cambridge when I was at.........when I was at college......but I wish there was a bit more help out there. I know there's a lot of financial help out there, but I really don't come from the best financial background, so it wasn't really an option, but I would have liked to....

RE: This is a lot about what this research is about.....It's not about that entirely....but it's part of it.....so you were encouraged, what by?

T: My form tutor especially, erm at college....but I didn't want to go down there and like think it was fantastic and then not be able to go, so I didn't even go and look round so.....

RE: What do you think made you not go round?

T: Because I didn't want to go and like it.....and I just couldn't afford it.....

RE: The cost put you off?

T: Yeah and I knew that this was a good university and I really liked the campus, so I thought well I'll come here.

RE: Interesting.....OK....I'll give you a bit of background to this, I don't know whether you know anything but..................,Tony Blair when he came to power wanted 50% of 18-30 year olds in higher education and obviously now...., universities before were seen as very middle class places, I mean years ago, middle class and male, so they have come a long way, but why do you think there are so many more........(indecipherable) Why do you think many more people are entering now, than they did say 40 years ago? Do you think it's just to do with what Tony Blair said, or do you think there are other things?

T: I think a big influence on a lot of people at the moment, is the social side of university. Obviously you get a lot, I suppose...who want to do really well, want to do further research after they have done just their normal degree, erm, but I know a lot of people who have been encouraged to go to university and haven't particularly got great grades....I mean I know people who have got three 'D's and lower and have gone to university and I don't particularly think that's a good thing....erm and have

just literally gone there for the social side of it, and I don't think that is a particularly good thing at all.

RE: Yes......What about people that have come from BTEC's and Vocational backgrounds, do you think there's.......obviously that's where the opportunities have been built up, It's been built up so that anyone who has the ability to go, can go, whereas before, like you said with Oxford, you felt excluded from there didn't you......

T: Yeah.....

RE: .....everybody, people who did vocational qualifications, people from you know, different social class backgrounds and things like that have felt excluded from university as a whole, but now the idea is that they don't.....

T: ......yeah, it's a lot more relaxed now....i mean I don't feel excluded here and I am glad that it has been opened up to all people because, obviously I wouldn't have been able to come if It hadn't been and like my Grandad he talks to me about how different it was, he's very very clever, but he obviously couldn't afford to go to university, but he's very intelligent and I think that was a shame that he couldn't, so I'm glad that I have had the opportunity....

RE: OK. Right.....do you see there being a difference between an academic route to HE, ie your 4 'A' levels and a vocational route?

T: erm....yeah (cautiously)...

RE: What do you think are the differences?

T: Erm......well I get the impression that 'A' levels are harder and I do think that more work goes into them, erm and I also think they give you a better grasp at different subjects rather than just one route. We've got a friend who did a business BTEC, and he's now out of work and on the dole even though he got the top mark, erm because he's just limited himself completely, and I don't think he had to work as hard as we did, because there's a lot of coursework and there's not as much exam and I think revising for exams is really stressful and is really hard, so yeah.....

RE: And do you think there are any other differences?

T: Erm, mainly the exam/coursework thing really......

RE: Is there anything you think that........for example, I don't know whether you know anybody on your course that came in with those qualifications.....

T: No I'm not sure....

RE: All 'A' levels.....Do you think that there's things that those students bring that maybe you haven't done? Do you think that there are any differences?

T: I'm not sure really.....

RE: You don't know....that's fair enough.....(pause). So what do you think are the main challenges that you face as a student in higher education?

T: Well reading is definitely....erm, the amount of reading is compared to 'A' level is just crazy and also the amount of independence that you have got here compared to what we were taught...., the way we were taught at 'A' level is so different. Finance, obviously as well, erm its been a struggle, yeah and I think it's just a completely different environment to get used to, very very different from college or school......

RE: yes.....well you are left to your own devices aren't you?

T: Yes you are......which isn't a bad thing.....it's just I didn't feel prepared for it when I got here, because college is just......

RE: Really......

T: .....yeah....I didn't feel prepared at all. I mean the first term, I'm not going to lie.....I didn't like it at all. It's taken me a long time to get into the swing of things and I think it's a lot to........(pause).

RE: Is that personally or academically?

T: Academically

RE: Academically....

T: I mean I do find History hard, I mean.....

RE: Even though you did so well?

T: ....Yeah, even though I did well. I think if I'd have done Sociology or English I might have found it easier, because I think the way the course is taught is probably not be that different. But with History, erm, we only have six hours with any contact with people and it's a lot to do with primary sources and things like that, whereas literally at 'A' level we were sat in a classroom and you just sucked up everything that was said to you, and that was it, there was no independent thought really at all.

RE: You've got to go and find it......

T: Yeah......and that's what I have found hard. But I am definitely getting into the stride of things now and I just hope that I do well in my exams.

RE: Do you think it was just the sort of....

T: It was the initial shock.....

RE: Is there anything you've sort of gone through like, on a personal level, emotionally? Has there been anything different? You said for example about your confidence. Has that been a big challenge to you?

T: Erm.....I found the seminars hard at first, because I'd never been in a situation like that, I mean there's only like ten of you in the room and when you first come I do think that that's quite daunting. Erm, but I do think my confidence has improved from it, which is a good thing, so I have benefitted from it definitely.

RE: And those sorts of things will help you when you come to do your PGCE, cause that's like another thing completely.........But erm, Ok...well the next one here...is going back to this vocational/academic thing: Do you feel that there is an assumption, now that can be your assumption, society's assumption, that students in higher education have come from the academic 'A' level background?

T: Yeah I think so.....

RE: What makes you think that?

T: Erm, I'm not sure. For History, I think the majority of students probably did 'A' levels anyway and I think there is maybe a stigma attached to a BTEC, in the fact that maybe if they do come to university, they are going to take a less traditional course because they have taken less traditional qualifications. Erm, so you know something like Media Studies or whatever, less traditional....and I do think that there is a stigma attached to it as well.

RE: That's your view, do you think that that is society's view as well?

T: I think a bit of both. I think it is my view, but I have got that from somewhere, erm....yeah.....

RE: It's almost what probably pushed you away from doing that....

T: Yeah probably......

RE: ......when you were thinking were you going to get your GCSE's, you didn't think oh, I'll go and do that BTEC.......what was sort of instilled in you that I want to go and do 'A' levels

T: Yeah.....

RE: Right...OK. So do you feel that.....you can call it the institution, the department, split it like that, provide you with adequate support to help you with your studies or assist you? I mean you may not use them all the time, but are there support mechanisms, can you go and see your tutor. Are there lots of things available to assist you?

T: Erm, I don't think the support I have got here, has been as good as I got at college, but I think that is partly to do with the independence thing. Erm, they want you to think for yourself and the seminar tutors have been really helpful. Erm, my form tutor I don't really see, I don't know.... I don't really see the point in having a form tutor, I think you should really go to your seminar tutors. I mean I think that's mainly all admin stuff, filling out forms and stuff, I don't know him, so I wouldn't go and say anything. If I had problems I'd rather go to a seminar tutor than him, cause I think they know me better.

RE: Yes.....

T: .....that's it really.

RE: ......What kind of relationships do you have with your.....one, your academic tutors and two, fellow students? So do you get on with them, what sort of relationship do you....I've got as a following question do the relationships make you feel a sense of belonging to your subject and your department? So do you feel wrapped up in it because of your relationships, do they inspire you? Do you get things like that?

T: Erm, I've built up good relationships with the seminar tutors like I said, especially the one, who I have got for two seminars. And erm, I feel like he knows my personality now, which I still don't think a lot of the others do cause there is much less face to face contact than there is at 'A' level. Erm, fellow students not so much, and I think that's got a lot to do with living at home. If I was living in halls, erm then I would have built up relationships obviously to do with the course – i'm just missing people, erm, and if you're with the all the time it's going to make you get on with people better. And I feel slightly excluded living at home really.

RE: OK. Do you feel that sense of belonging to the subject then?

T: Yes, I think the department is good at that. I mean yeah.....I do.

RE: Why do you think that is then?

T: Erm, I think it has helped me being in a place where the people are really enthusiastic about what they do. Erm, at school some of the teachers weren't particularly enthusiastic, and also at 'A' level even I don't think some of them were as enthusiastic as others. Erm, but here obviously, they really understand their subject which they are teaching you and I think that makes them naturally just more enthusiastic and I think the students pick up on that
so....

RE: OK.....

Please note that to preserve the anonymity of this interviewee, names/locations of colleges/universities have been replaced by XXXXX

Appendix Four: Full details of study participants

NAME (PSEUDONYM)	AGE	GENDER	INSTITUTION	ETHNICITY	FAMILY COMMITMENTS	HE/EMPLOYMENT STATUS	OCCUPATION/ FAMILY OCCUPATION	PRE H.E COURSE OR EXPERIENCE	COURSE IN H.E
Sue	Mid 40's	Female	Westside	White	Yes	Full Time Student	HM Forces (Partner)	Access to HE	Bachelors Special Needs & Inclusion Studies with Educational Studies
Julie	Early 40's	Female	Westside	White	Yes	Full Time Student	Student	Access to HE	Bachelors Special Needs & Inclusion Studies with Educational Studies
Lindsay	Mid 30's	Female	Newtown	White	Yes	Full-Time Student	Student	Access to HE	Bachelors P
Paula	Late 20's	Female	Nightown	White	No	Full Time Student	Scientist (Partner)	Access to HE	Bachelors Nursing
Robert	48	Male	Brightown	White	Yes	Employed – Distance Learning Part-Time student	Safety Officer	Professional with various work related qualifications	University Diploma in Food Safety (Degree equiv)
Karl	21	Male	Brightown	White	No	Employed – Distance Learning Part-Time student	Entrepreneur and Management Father and Mother	BTEC National and work related qualifications	University Diploma in Food Safety

NAME (PSEUDONYM)	AGE	GENDER	INSTITUTION	ETHNICITY	FAMILY COMMITMENTS	HE/EMPLOYMENT STATUS	OCCUPATION/ FAMILY OCCUPATION	PRE H.E COURSE OR EXPERIENCE	COURSE IN H.E
Simon	40	Male	Brightown	White	Yes	Employed – Distance Learning Part-Time student	HM Forces	Professional with various work related qualifications	University Dip in Food Safety
Joe	40	Male	Brightown	White	Yes	Employed – Distance Learning Part-Time student	HM Forces	Professional with various work related qualifications	University Diploma in Food Safety
Terry	39	Male	Brightown	White	Yes	Employed – Distance Learning Part-Time student	HM Forces	Professional with various work related qualifications	University Diploma in Food Safety
Katie	Early 20's	Female	Chase	White	No	Full Time pre-HE Student	Student	Currently on Access	Not known
Gill	Late 30's	Female	Chase	White	Yes	Full Time pre-HE Student	Counsellor (Partner)	Currently on Access	Not known
Claire	Early 20's	Female	Newtown	White	No	Full Time Student	Student	Access	Bachelors Social Welfare
Leanne	25	Female	Newtown	White	Yes	Full Time Student	Student	'Access type' research qualification	Bachelors in Psychology and Counselling

NAME (PSEUDONYM)	AGE	GENDER	INSTITUTION	ETHNICITY	FAMILY COMMITMENTS	HE/EMPLOYMENT STATUS	OCCUPATION/ FAMILY OCCUPATION	PRE H.E COURSE OR EXPERIENCE	COURSE IN H.E
William	31	Male	Westside	White	Young family	Full Time Student	Student	Various vocational qualifications including BTEC National	Bachelors Early Childhood Studies
Carly	25	Female	Newtown	White	Yes	Full Time Student	Student	'Access type' research qualification	Bachelors in Psychology and Counselling
Tina	18	Female	Brightown	White	No	Student	Civil Servant	'A' levels	Bachelors History
Sunita	19	Female	Brightown	Asian	No	Student	Factory worker	'A' levels	Bachelors Childhood, Culture & Education
Fraser	21	Male	Brightown	White	No	Student	Health Service Worker	BTEC National Vocational qualification	Bachelors in Applied Golf Management Studies
Joanna	19	Male	Brightown	White	No	Student	IT Consultant	Mixed mode 'A' levels and BTEC National Vocational qualification	Bachelors in Sport, Physical Education and Community Studies

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