AN INVESTIGATION INTO THE PROVISION AND IMPACT OF FOUNDATION DEGREES FOR TEACHING ASSISTANTS

By

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A thesis submitted to
The University of Birmingham
for the degree of
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Department of Education
The University of Birmingham
November 2009

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ABSTRACT

This thesis investigated the provision and impact of Foundation degrees for teaching assistants by examining; teaching assistants on Foundation degrees, Foundation degree providers, Head teachers, and local authorities across four different areas of the Midlands.

Findings confirmed that teaching assistants on Foundation degrees gain many personal and professional benefits from their course. These are determined by internal and external factors but include the support received during their Foundation degree course. In their workplace the teaching assistants are given additional responsibility but often this is not acknowledged through financial recompense or enhanced status, a consequence of which is that teaching assistants are very discouraged about the lack of recognition for their Foundation degree. This is exacerbated by the fact that whilst Foundation degrees are being promoted as having employer engagement, most head teachers lack knowledge and understanding about Foundation degrees for teaching assistants, nor do many teaching assistants feel supported by their employer.

The implication of this thesis is that whilst accepting the many benefits to the individual and their workplace, Foundation degrees are contributing towards the creation of divisions and frustration levels of teaching assistants. In this case, the impact on pupils needs to be explored.

Dedication

My journey has been has been challenging in countless ways, but the voyage has been cushioned by companions and travellers on the way. These include the love of my family and friends and the support of my supervisors Dr. Ian Grosvenor and Dr. Chris Swzed. I would like to take this opportunity to give a special thank you to my anchor; my husband John for his love and endless support and to my work colleagues for their constant encouragement and to all those who agreed to be part of this research. I would also like to express my appreciation to Dr. Ken Kilby for his supportive comments throughout my journey and finally to Dr. Andy Roberts without his encouragement the first steps would not have taken place.

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CHAPTER ONE – INTRODUCTION

In the course of my teaching experience, it seemed evident to me that teaching assistants were pivotal to the development of certain pupils and that of inclusive practice. However, it was considered that many teaching assistants appeared to have concerns particularly about their perceived low status, pay and career path. When my own career path changed to being involved with training teaching assistants these views and concerned were reinforced. This spurred me on to investigate whether these were isolated views or whether the introduction of Foundation degrees for teaching assistants had altered their views.

Since 1997, the number of teaching assistants in the UK has risen dramatically. The Department for Education and Skills (DfES) full-time-equivalent figures show a 97 per cent increase in the number of support staff between 1997 and 2005, from 136,500 to 268,600. DfES figures demonstrate the fastest growing area over this period is teaching assistants (from 61,300 to 148,500).

The increase can be seen as part of the Remodelling the School Workforce Agenda (DfES 2002), whereby the Government has proposed changes in both the number and roles of support staff in the classroom. Kerry (2001) has identified that teaching assistants perform over twenty different roles, both in and out of the classroom, whilst Johnson *et al* (2004) acknowledged almost 30 different support roles that teaching assistants were undertaking, with many individuals carrying out two or more of these roles. These new responsibilities may have contributed to the unrest felt by some

teaching assistants. O'Brien and Garner (2001) explored many different contexts and settings and talked to learning support assistants (LSAs) from a range of educational and experiential backgrounds. They had a 'sense of disquiet' this was in terms of those LSAs, who "…expressed anxieties about their low status and low pay, their lack of training and the complete lack of any identifiable career path or structure" (p.1).

One strategy to support and develop the role of teaching assistants has been the creation of Foundation degrees especially designed for their supporting learning role (DfEE, 2000b).   Foundation degrees are a relatively new intermediate level, vocational higher education qualification. They were created in response to concerns raised during the 1990s with regard to the country`s perceived skills gap, economic decline and disillusions with the existing vocational training structures (Beaney, 2006).   Linked to the perceived skills gap, another driver behind the creation of Foundation degrees is as a strategy to encourage wider access into higher education. Foundation degrees are providing an opportunity for non-traditional learners to enter into higher education which did not exist previously. Teaching assistants most usually come from those very social classes that the Widening Participation Agenda has targeted and tried to include (Archer *et al* 2003).

The impact of this strategy has received relatively little research attention, despite the possible consequences to all those involved. Sandlin (2005: 36) also argues that typically adult education has "failed to acknowledge the lived experiences of learners".   These outcomes and experiences include the teaching assistants themselves, their employers and the pupils, in terms of both impact and the costs involved.

Foundation degrees can be a second chance for learners. Von Prümmer (2000) explains how it is vital to ensure that this second chance provision is not second best. Concerns have already been expressed by the QAA (2003) when examining the experience of non traditional students within the Widening Participation Agenda and considered that more than half of courses needed improvements.

This research explored the provision and impact of Foundation degrees for teaching assistants. As a female practitioner/researcher working primarily with female teaching assistants embarking on Foundation degrees, I believed I was in a relatively exclusive position to clarify the unknown position of those teaching assistants who are taking or have taken a Foundation degree in supporting learning, both in terms of possible personal and professional consequences. This was accomplished by researching four different types of institutions which provide Foundation degrees for teaching assistants. The perceptions of teaching assistants taking Foundation degrees were examined whilst being employed at nursery, infant, junior and secondary schools. Head teachers, Foundation degree programme managers and a representative from the local authority were also investigated in order to explore their views with regard to Foundation degrees for teaching assistants.

It is accepted that research evidence should feed into policy and inform practice. Beaney (2006: vi) who is involved with "supporting, developing and carrying out research with respect to Foundation degrees", highlights six areas of Foundation degrees lacking research evidence. These include:

1. Employers` engagement

2. Partnerships

3. Work based learning

4. Innovation

5. Progression

6. Systematic and comprehensive data.

Beaney`s (2006) six areas (as stated above) were used to focus the following research questions which were explored the this thesis.

1.1 Research Questions

1. Do Head teachers possess knowledge and understanding of Foundation degrees for teaching assistants?

2. What type of support do teaching assistants need during their Foundation degree course?

3. What effect does a Foundation degree course have on the teaching assistant personally?

4. Does a Foundation degree course influence the role of a teaching assistant?

5. What are the views of a local authority school workforce advisor on Foundation degrees for teaching assistants`.

This research was also seen as being vital, not only due to the lack of empirical data into Foundation degrees, but also due to the lack of evidence of the provision and impact of teaching assistants taking Foundation degrees and the possible consequences to the learners they work with. In order to understand this vital issue, the individual, the practice and environment of teaching assistants was also explored. This thesis provided much needed evidence into the impact of teaching assistants taking Foundation degrees and contributes to knowledge which can inform practice (Morris, 2009).

Those parties that may benefit most from this research are found at three entwined levels; macro, meso and micro.

1. At the macro level, social, economic and political processes shape decision making. Government and "policy makers should have available to them the widest and latest information on research and best practice and all decisions should be demonstrably rooted in this knowledge" (Bullock *et al* 2001: 7).

2. At the meso level, Foundation degree providers are faced with a competitive market with neighbouring educational providers delivering similar courses. The outcomes of this research would provide information to tailor their foundation degree to local needs to provide the most constructive and appropriate experience. Head teachers may use the results of the research to aid their decision making in terms of staff deployment, as many appear to be lacking information and understanding of skills gained by teaching assistants on Foundation degree courses (Smith *et al* 2004).

3. At the micro level, this involves how the individuals` internal and external processes can influence perception and decision making. Further information at this level would give both Foundation degree providers and individual teaching assistants increased knowledge in order to deliver appropriate support and make informed decisions. Evidence indicates that the mature student's experience of educational and career choice can often be muddled rather than considered.

People need high quality information about the provision on offer and if they have this, they will be able to make well-informed choices about their education and career pathways (Patton, 2007:1).

When researching into any area an exploration of the background and possible influences may be considered helpful. In this instance, when researching Foundation degrees aimed at teaching assistants, it is important to investigate the pressures, social context and culture in which Foundation degrees operate in order to throw light on its present manifestation (Hill and Kerber, 1967).

The historical overview was included in order to aid understanding of the present educational system and shed light on how pertinent educational practices developed. "The particular value of historical research in the field of education is unquestioned" (Cohen and Manion, 1996: 45) and may help provide a framework in which to appreciate particular pertinent factors in this research.

1.2 Aim and Objectives

The aim of this research was to investigate the provision and impact of Foundation degrees for teaching assistants. This research is vital due to the current lack of research evidence in this area. Foundation degrees are still relatively new and at the present time, there is a lack of data on the impact and creation of an entirely new type of award (Brennan and Gosling, 2004).

To achieve the aim of this research it was considered necessary to examine the particular social processes and social structures with regard to the provision and context of Foundation degrees for teaching assistants. These included the macro-level or socio-structural level (e.g. policies and initiatives such as the widening participation), the meso-level or institutional/organisational level (e.g. Foundation degree providers and Remodelling of the Workforce Agenda) and the micro-level or personal/individual (e.g. perceptions and motivations of teaching assistants).

The specific objectives were to:

1. Investigate the rationale behind Foundation degrees for teaching assistants through a critical appraisal of the literature.

2. Explore the perceptions of a representative from a local authority with regard to Foundation degrees for teaching assistants.

3. Examine head teachers knowledge and understanding of Foundations degrees for teaching assistants. This will be achieved through a postal questionnaire and the interviewing of a sample of head teachers of schools and nurseries.

4. Explore the provision of Foundation degrees for teaching assistants by interviewing programme managers of Foundation degrees for teaching assistants.

5. Investigate teaching assistants' perceptions of the impact and contribution of Foundation degrees for teaching assistants course, both in terms of professional and personal factors through focus groups.

1.3 Outline of the thesis

This thesis aimed to investigate the provision and impact of Foundation degrees for teaching assistants. This was achieved through a range of research methods and techniques in order to examine and develop an understanding of this phenomenon.

The structure of this thesis is as follows:

Chapter 2: offers a pertinent background history to the phenomenon being explored. This is considered vital in order to put in context the social processes and policies which have shaped the development of both Foundation degrees and the role of a teaching assistant.

Chapter 3: contains a discussion of the research philosophy underpinning the thesis. Here, I make the case for the primary research methods undertaken and outline the steps taken in order to promote validity.

Chapter 4: outlines the four Foundation degree providers involved in this research and the location of the institutions under investigation.

Chapter 5: presents the description and initial summary of the fieldwork. Here, the research evidence that emerged is outlined stage by stage.

Chapter 6: here the results are offered, evaluated and assessed in the light of the underpinning theory and literature research.

Chapter 7: this contains a précis and recommendations for future research directions are offered here, along with a discussion of methodological issues.

CHAPTER 2 – LITERATURE REVIEW

> *The success of education is almost impossible since the essential conditions of success are beyond our control. Our efforts may bring us within sight of the goal, but fortune must favour us if we are to reach it.*
> (Jean-Jacques Rousseau 1762 cited in Émile 1911: 6).

This thesis investigates the provision and impact of Foundation degrees for teaching assistants. It accepts that the development of these degrees has been dependent on social, economic and historical factors. Consequently, it begins the discussion at the macro level of analysis which involves investigating the historical context, policies and structures within which Foundation degrees for teaching assistants have been developed and positioned in (Lave and Wenger, 1991). Goldman (2000) agrees with this strategy and believes that the application of the macro level of analysis may reveal to the researcher an appreciation that policies, institutions and processes condition the environment within which people operate and give an awareness of the importance of the links between them.

2.1 Learning Society

As this research examines a specific group of learners, it will be helpful to examine those learners in the context of the society in which they exist. The learners in question are teaching assistants who are participating or have participated in Foundation degree learning, usually part time, whilst working. In a 'learning society', "education is not a segregated activity, conducted for certain hours, in certain places,

at a certain time of life. It was the aim of the society" (Hutchins, 1970: 133). Sheats (1975) described a concept of lifelong education as being able to take place: "Anywhere, anytime and anyhow".

The concept of a learning society may also be integrally and explicitly linked to the idea and demands of a continually successful society. Although Young (1998: 193) highlights that:

> *Its weakness is that so far the criteria for the critique remain very general and therefore, like many terms of contemporary educational discourse such as partnership and collaboration, it can take a variety of contradictory meanings.*

Ranson (1992, 1994, and 1998) has challenged this view. He argued that the notion of a learning society supplies a useful way of making sense of the shifts that are required in our understanding. This consideration is necessary in order to put into context the profound changes which are required to rise to the challenges associated with not only globalisation, but also the social and economic changes which need to take place as they are invariably linked. This is recognised by Young and Guile (1996:1) who have discussed how dialogue in Western countries with regard to encouraging economic prosperity and social development "has become almost obligatory to invoke concepts of a learning society".

It is recognised that society is changing and with it the needs of its individual members. Long gone are the days where one's employment is relatively fixed. Therefore depending upon the individual or agency, the emphasis of a learning society will be determined by differing perspectives. These perspectives include

governments, society, businesses and individuals, all of which can be seen as responding to economic competition forced by globalisation. The individual perspective can be seen from an exploration of the self. Our changing society means that individuals need to be involved in continual personal and professional development. The reality is that over one third of the adult population have not engaged in any learning at all since reaching school-leaving age (Gorard and Rees, 2002). The Fryer Report (1997) found that only one in four adults would describe themselves as 'current learners', with a third of all adults having taken no part in education or training since they left school. It was outlined in the report how this would impede the development of a prosperous future for us all, for the individual and for our nations` economic benefit.

The Fryer Report (ibid) highlighted the need for creating a learning culture whilst recognising some of the problems that needed to be overcome before the recommendations could be implemented. This was in terms of government involvement, partnerships between providers, and a shared responsibility. Fryer's comments provide support in relation to how crucial this research is as it examines; government involvement, providers and individuals. The individual teaching assistants are key players in aiding the development of a learning culture and contributing towards the next generation of lifelong learners. They are playing at least two roles; one as individual (possibly lifelong) learners and one as a force in encouraging the development of other (possibly lifelong) learners.

The concept of adult learners can be explained by andragogy which can be seen as a method, a philosophy, or as "the art and science of helping adults learn" (Knowles,

1982: 351). Andragogy has been criticised for not considering adult education as being political, whilst promoting the view of the adult learner being a white, middle class male (Collins, 1995). With this in mind Hart (1990: 126) argued that educators "must fully understand the social nature and origins of the distortions" that affect both access and opportunity within our education systems. We also need to "acknowledge the distinguishing effects of race, class gender and other `isms" (Sheared, 1996: 4), thus understanding and appreciating the education of adults within the wider social and political context.

Welch (1992) explains how the personal development of adults is not solely for the benefit of the individual, but has to be for the benefit of an organisation. Organisations by their very nature regulate the performance of the individual, as they have to conform to possibly quite rigid requirements. However, if organisations adopted lifelong learning as an integral strategy rather than peripheral activity, they together with the individual would reap the benefits of having a workforce that incorporate fully personal development. Learning for life and learning for work can be seen as inseparable, with many of the abilities needed for success at work being the same as those needed for success in both personal and social life. Whilst this may be accepted, in order for potential constraining factors to be removed and for lifelong learning not to be part of a prescriptive unilateral agenda, there needs a creation of a positive and supportive environment (Welch, 1992).

The supportive environment may need the appreciation and acknowledgement of the value of experience. There are concerns about the formal assessment of experiential learning, such as the nature of evidence which is acceptable and the means of making

judgment about the quality and quantity of the evidence presented (Mulligan and Griffin, 1992).   Tight (1998) argues that in stressing the formal education and training elements of lifelong learning there is a downgrading of the importance of other kinds of learning, the impact of which might have significant consequences for the economy. So in order to achieve economic success it was deemed that the creation and encouragement of a learning society was needed. This was a central feature of a report from the Advisory Council for Adult and Continuing Education, (ACACE) 1982, who argued:

> *If it is to promote adaptability and creativity in the adult population, continuing education cannot be related solely to work.   While economic success depends on the technical knowledge and skills of the working population, the success of specific job training depends on the general educational attainments of those being trained. Adaptability at work is also reflected in the ability to work co-operatively with others and to contribute to the shaping and taking of decisions. These abilities are most readily formed through the cultural and social aspects of general education. Just as good training for employment develops skills beyond the needs of specific jobs, so general education develops skills relevant to all the demands of everyday working life.   Continuing education must therefore be comprehensively planned to include all the forms of education and training available to adults beyond their initial education (p.3).*

Despite these views, government policies with regard to education and learning have been deliberated with the view that much of the interest in adult learning is fuelled by monetary interests. The focus of a learning society has, at times, been heavily biased towards the needs of industry and competitiveness with much of the interest in lifelong learning being fuelled by the prevailing economic and social climate. With the growth

of the global economy and the fluctuations in the employment market, there is the realisation that in order for economies to continue to be competitive, they need a flexible and rapidly deployable work force. *The European White Paper on Growth, Competitiveness and Employment*, published in 1993, discusses the need for investment in education. It states that the quality of education and learning are key elements in competitiveness and concludes by reiterating the view that training and know-how need to be invested in their own right (Ecclestone, 1999).

> *Concerns about non-participation in lifelong learning may indicate an emerging moral authoritarianism arising from pessimism about the future…encourages the idea that lifelong learning should be compulsory (ibid p.332).*

Strategies for promoting economic prosperity have been part of an ongoing debate in Britain on how society can continue to compete with other countries. During the 1990s the Conservative Government put forward proposals to "turn Britain into a 'learning society' by the year 2001" (Ainley, 1998: 559). The definition of a learning society by both the Conservative and the succeeding new Labour governments is similar and summarised by Ainley:

> *A learning society is one which systematically increases the skills and knowledge of all its members to exploit technological innovation and so gain a competitive edge (ibid).*

There appears to exist a common drive to create a highly skilled and educated workforce through a development of a 'skills revolution', in order to achieve a competitive edge in new technological global markets. The success of this strategy

has yet to be established, as previously Ashton and Green (1996) found no causal link between a country`s level of competitiveness and numbers in post-16 education. However the prevailing view contemplated that developed countries, such as Britain, could no longer compete in the market of mass production of heavy industrial goods; the skills of the workforce were believed to be outdated. In order to remain competitive, modern societies need to be able to continually evolve to compete in highly specialised markets.

Britain has been facing increasing competition and concern about falling competitiveness, which has resulted in strategies to try to increase the levels of skills within the workforce. This was deemed necessary in order to tackle the pressures of competitiveness and focused efforts at regaining its position as a nation considered innovative and technologically advanced (Tight, 1998). These goals culminated in three major reports being produced prior to the consultative document, The Learning Age (1998). These were the Kennedy Report, *Learning Works: Widening participation in further education* (1997), the Dearing Report (1997) Higher education in the learning society and the Fryer Report, *Learning for the Twenty-first century* (1997). Each report undoubtedly has its own bias depending upon the sector it represents, but there are clear similarities between them all. All the reports argued for the economic necessity for lifelong learning.

> *Learning is central to economic success and social cohesion (Kennedy, 1997:15)*

> *...the UK must progress further and faster in the creation of a (learning) society to sustain a competitive economy (Dearing, 1997: 9).*

This country needs to develop a new learning culture…it is essential to help the country and all of its people meet the challenges they now face…they feature in the economy and labour market, in the need to meet increased competition (Fryer, 1997: 3).

The above three quotes indicate the prevailing mind-set of lifelong learning on the agenda of the 1997 Government. Governments are interested in securing the conditions of economic competitiveness and need to develop their citizens. The strategy of governments is to create the conditions in which "people, families, communities and organisations are most *likely* to learn for themselves" which would render the need for an education policy, in the traditional sense, obsolete (Griffin, 1999: 440).

In Britain, the creation of this type of learning society has been reflected on by New Labour thinker Tom Bentley (1999) (former special advisor to David Blunkett). Bentley describes *'Labour's learning revolution'* as follows:

It requires a shift in our thinking about the fundamental organisational unit of education, from the school, an institution where learning is organised, defined and contained, to the learner, an intelligent agent with the potential to learn from any and all of her encounters with the world around her (The Economist, October 9, 1999: 42).

As government policies have been identified as a macro driver in the creation of Foundation degrees for teaching assistants, it is vital to explore the specific

government views and initiatives which contributed towards its conception, starting with the policies of New Labour.

2.2 New Labour

Shifts in thinking are experienced in all areas of our society, including educational practices. When examining higher education provision, a discussion of the key decision makers needs to attempt to put into context the societal influence on education system provided, including the rationale and drivers behind it (Morrison, 2007).

Since coming into power in May 1997, the New Labour Government set out to construct a new politico-moral terrain. Signifying a movement beyond the political constructs of the Left and Right, it claimed to offer a 'Third Way' to national renewal. The 'Third Way' discourse was seen as a reconciliation of the objectives of social justice and economic competitiveness (Giddens, 1998). This 'Third Way' ideology has come to be associated with the politics of New Labour.

> *Central to New Labour policy is the creation of 'a dynamic knowledge-based economy founded on individual empowerment and opportunity, where Governments enable, not command, and the power of the market is harnessed to serve the public interest (Bullen et al 2000: 441).*

The harnessing of control within the 'Third Way', was explained by Giddens (2001) to do with facing up to the obvious links between government, the markets and civil society. This 'Third Way' strategy, was not wholly unique. Budge, *et al* (2004) stated

that when Labour came into power, they continued to implement the previous Conservative Government's spending plans. Others agreed and also saw that there was, "a clear lineage between the education policies introduced by the Conservatives and those developed by New Labour" (Ludlam and Smith, 2004: 213).

Despite not being a unique perspective, the Third Way was seen as incorporating the neo-liberalism of the Thatcher era within its own 'old' Labour inheritance, into what has been labelled as the 'Third Way'. This 'Third Way', according to Ludlam and Smith (2004:4), "implied a coherent strategy that would guide new Labour in all its works", rather than just be seen as a middle way between Thatcherism and 'old' Labour.

Driver and Martell (1998: 2) explained that Blair:

> *Rejected most of the policies of the post-war Labour Party such as Keynesian economics, nationalisation and planning, and egalitarian tax and spend policies....the anti-community, selfish, individualistic message of Thatcherism and its neo-liberal economic individualism.*

They further suggest that in education, "the difference (between New Labour and Thatcherism) perhaps is the idea that standards can be raised in the last instance by government rather than by market forces" (ibid: 100). Although, both parties seem to agree that regulation rather than state control was the ideal path to follow and New Labours` concern with regard to improving learning and education resulted in somewhat more interventionist tactics (Budge, *et al* 2004).

The New Labour strategies outlined encompassed three phases, these were:

> *The first phase (1994-97) - `becoming a modern social democratic party fit for government.*

> *The second phase (1997-2001) – putting in the Foundations that would allow change that lasts.*

> *The third phase – driving forward reforms, building lasting change and a better society.*

> (Blair 2002a cited in Ludlam and Smith, 2004: 1).

New Labour's three phase approach was not without criticism. The incorporation of their strategies into the ideology of the 'Third Way', was presented as almost beyond politics and within its underlying position there was the suggestion of an obscuring of the class politics of current educational policies. Some considered that areas of social justice appeared somewhat peripheral. Concerns were raised about equity appearing to be tagged on to the list of Labour's priorities rather than being of the central concern of the 'Third Way' (Ball, 1999).

The Labour Party Manifesto (May 2001, for June 2001 general election) proposed private sector involvement in education and in The Queen's Speech to Parliament immediately after the general election, the Government outlined proposals for letting the private sector into schools (White Paper, Schools: *Achieving Success 2001*), whilst New Labour's Green Paper on education, *Schools: Building on Success* (DfES, 2001), expanded to legitimise the business take-over of schools.

Business take-over of 'failing' schools: external sponsors are to take responsibility for under-performing schools (Introduction: 4).

New Specialist 'Business Schools': In addition to technology, languages, sport and the arts, we will offer schools three new specialist options: engineering; science; and business and enterprise. Business and enterprise schools will be expected to develop strong curriculum-business links and develop teaching strengths in business studies, financial literacy and enterprise-related vocational programmes (Para 4.15: 47).

Extension of the Private Finance Initiative (PFI): Many schools are also benefiting from the Private Finance Initiative. Twenty-one deals have been signed so far, and funding for a further 33 has been agreed in principle, bringing benefits to around 640 schools. The scale of activity is increasing (Para.6.19: 81).

This sort of learning revolution is regarded to be highly individualised and focused at employers and/or consumer interests. Many commentators have emphasised that although there is a need for a highly developed and adaptable workforce that could respond to the ever increasing global economic changes, this may result in little real interest in learning for its own sake. Where collective advancement is prioritised and accentuated, it is more often with respect to gaining economic rather than community advantage (Courtney, 1989; Swailes and Roodhouse, 2003).

In an attempt to address the needs of the global workplace, 'lifetime education', was adopted as a key objective. The New Labour Government in 1997 declared its priority to be 'education, education, education' and not only for those of compulsory age education. In support of this education agenda the Government set up a range of

initiatives. These initiatives included the creation of a Union Learning Fund (ULF) and Individual Learning Accounts, which were announced in the Green Paper, The *Learning Age*. Grants were to be made available for union 'lifelong learning' representatives, in order to have time off work to promote activities by trade unions which support the Government's objective of a learning society, thereby promoting the view that education had come to represent a central part of the future for both the individual and that of the globalised networked society (Ludlam and Smith, 2004).

When examining the benefits of education and training to the individual in terms of economic prosperity to society as a whole, Doyle (2003) outlines 'New Labour's' attempt to offer a 'Third Way' access to widening participation in higher education. Doyle suggests that in terms of education "the discourse of the Third Way attempts a rationale for the reconciliation of apparent opposites, 'social justice' and 'economic dynamism'" (p.9). This reconciliation however, may be no more than an illusion as it is suggested that:

> *There has been a fundamental "clash" between the view of education as an end in itself for living a human life and the view of education as a mere instrument of the economy and people as workers (Frade, 2005: 6).*

This 'clash' of views may be more hype than reality.   Marr and Leach (2005) suggest that in the most part students are looking for a means to differentiate themselves within the labour market. When it comes to the factors which help careers, a 1998 survey conducted by Pirie and Worcester (1998) on behalf of MORI and the Adam Smith Institute '*The Millennial Generation'*, showed that 74 per cent of 16-21year olds

identified educational qualifications as counting towards success rather than privileged background. Dearing (1997) outlined the importance of producing a skilled labour force that can successfully contribute in an increasingly competitive global economic environment. His report recognises the pressure of globalisation which can be categorised into three interconnected functions:

1. The knowledge function,

2. The labour function, and

3. The institutional function.

The first function outlined is concerned with the construction or acquisition of knowledge, such as during a Foundation degree. The labour function can be explained in terms of both the production of a skilled society to meet the needs of globalisation and the ideology of lifelong learning where individuals such as teaching assistants can "re-equip themselves for a succession of jobs over a working lifetime" (*ibid*). The institutional function can be summed up in the phrase:

> *Higher education will become a global international service and tradable commodity… …competitive advantage for advanced economies will lie in the quality, effectiveness and relevance of their provision for education and training (Dearing, 1997).*

Despite the recognition of the necessity to mobilise and equip society in order to remain competitive, some groups are still argued to be under-represented in higher education today. Even with widening participation being "at the heart of New Labour's higher education initiatives since they came to power" (Callender, 2002: 1). Harris (1992: 313)

recognising that "education is not an objective, neutral process. It reflects the cultural, social, political, economic and philosophical imperative of the society". The Widening Participation Agenda, which aims to facilitate under represented groups gaining access to higher education, such as teaching assistants who are central to the focus of this thesis, will be discussed next.

2.3 The Widening Participation Agenda

This research focuses on students, who in the main are unfamiliar to the world of higher education. The Widening Participation Agenda is concerned with ensuring that higher education should be open to:

> *Anyone who has the potential to benefit from it, regardless of background. As although approximately half of the population describe themselves as working in occupations which are classified as skilled (manual), partly skilled or unskilled. Yet, in 2000, just 18 per cent of young people from these backgrounds were benefiting from higher education (DCSF, 2003: 7-9).*

Therefore the Widening Participation Agenda is about making higher education more accessible. In broad terms it aims to increase the number of people from lower socio-economic groups and those from state schools, particularly those in low participation neighbourhoods. The philosophy was one of equal access to and participation in higher education, to attract and include "people from minority ethnic groups, people with special needs, and people from poorer socio-economic backgrounds" (HEFCE, 2005a: 8).

> *Education must be a force for opportunity and social justice, not for the entrenchment of privilege (DfES, 2003b:65).*

This is part of the Government`s agenda aimed at students from social groups or communities that have not traditionally entered higher education. Widening Participation in Higher Education is usually taken to refer to activities and interventions aimed at creating an inclusive higher education system that includes all who can benefit from it – people who might not otherwise view learning as an option, or who may be discouraged by social, cultural, economic or institutional barriers (Allen and Storan, 2005).

> *Widening Participation is about far more than simply recruiting a wider range of school-leavers to existing full-time programmes "on campus", and it involves thinking about older, part-time and work-based students. It is often thought about in terms of the different stages of the student lifecycle. These overlapping stages are: pre-entry, transition, curriculum, student support, and employability (Allen and Storan, 2005: 5).*

The growth of higher education is acknowledged, and aside from "electronics and natural gas, higher education has probably expanded faster than any other major industry in the 1960s" (Layard and King, 1968: 227). Although this statement was written at the end of a rather nostalgic decade, from the 1970s higher education seems to some, to have been under attack and on the retreat (Kogan and Kogan, 1983).

The increase in student numbers in higher education may not be attributed to widening participation. Despite the increase in numbers those students included in the expansion of higher education and who have had the access and opportunities to

participate in higher education in the UK, have traditionally been from significantly higher socio-economical groups. This appears to be still the case, as recent research has demonstrated that:

> *Young people living in the most advantaged 20% of areas are five to six times more likely to enter higher education than those living in the least advantaged 20% of areas… …The participation of young people from social class V is significantly lower than from social classes I and II. Although social class V participation rate has more than doubled since 1991-92, increases in participation by all have left poorer classes filling the same share of the student population (HEFCE, 2005a).*

These findings are supported by Galindo-Rueda *et al* (2004: 76) who found that "more than three quarters of individuals from professional backgrounds study for a degree compared to just 15 per cent of those from unskilled backgrounds." Not only is there evidence of the under representation of certain groups in higher education, but less obvious discrimination appears to be occurring with regard to both type of institution and course. "There is increasing evidence that the under representation of working class students – both young and mature – increases with the degree of prestige of the course or institution" (Bufton, 2006: 88). This indicates that entry is predetermined by economics rather than intellect which supports Naidoo (2004, cited in Kassem, *et al* 2006: 125) when he ... "refers to higher education as being a 'sorting machine' which selects students according to a 'social classification".

Clancy (2001) also found that the more prestigious the university and field of study, the more class inequality there is in participation by social group. The less prestigious universities came about in 1992 as a result of Government legislation in which

polytechnics were able to become universities. Students from a lower socio-economic group are "significantly more likely to gain entry into a post 1992 institution" rather than a 'red brick' institution. (Kassem, 2006: 123).   This is confirmed by figures from The Sutton Trust (founded in 1997 by Sir Peter Lampl to support the academically able) which found that the chance of securing a place at a top university is approximately 25 times greater if you attended an independent school compared to attending a state school and being from a lower social class or live in a deprived area. Figures for the top five universities show an even more exaggerated pattern of admissions in favour of independent schools with 4,600 from independent schools or almost half of the 9,600 total entry and only 980 from less affluent social classes and 450 from poor areas. (www.suttontrust.com/reports/entryToLeadingUnis.pdf - p.3)

Further evidence that access to higher education is linked to attainment in the earlier stages of education has been offered. Galindo-Rueda, *et al* (2004) found that children from poor neighbourhoods are less likely to participate in higher education compared to children from richer neighbourhoods and that decision making with regard to higher education is highly influenced by parental background and education. Forsyth and Furlong (2003) also found that people from lower socioeconomic groups faced cultural barriers at every stage; from deciding to apply, the institution to apply to and the choice of course. Students that have family experience of higher education make use of a wide range of information such as teaching quality assessments and attend open days, whilst other students make use of a limited range of information and other sources which may be unreliable (UCAS, 2002). In an attempt to address this issue, in January 2003, the then Education and Skills Secretary Charles Clarke announced the publication of the White Paper: *The Future of Higher Education*, which set out the

Government's plans for reform and investment of higher education.   The Government argued that:

> *Spending on higher education will rise from a total of around £7.5 billion in 2002-03 to almost £10 billion in 2005-06 - a real terms increase of over 6% each year… …This allocation is the most generous for a decade. It will stabilise the funding of universities, and allow them to make sustained progress in improving research volumes and quality and in tackling the huge backlogs in research and teaching infrastructure (The Future of Higher Education 2003, paras. 1.32 and 1.33).*

Following the White Paper, *The Future of Higher Education*, The Widening Participation Committee was established by the Further Education Funding Council (FEFC) to advise on the nature of under-participation in further education and to make recommendations on how participation might be increased and improved.   Their interim report, *Pathways to Success* (2006), outlined strategies to promote wider access to higher education. Two of the recommendations were:

1. Funding of Strategic partnerships pilots.
2. The introduction of a New Learning Pathway for adults.

A review of the options which English institutions providing higher education should consider to assess the merit of applicants for higher education was also commissioned. A Steering Group headed by Steven Schwartz (vice-chancellor of Brunel University), published a report which recommended changes to admission procedures in order to promote unbiased entry. It championed the setting up of a national centre of expertise with regard to admissions issues and part-time students. This was in recognition of the

particular concerns raised in the report on the methods of assessment which contribute to under-representation of certain backgrounds. "A more transparently fair admissions system is hoped to bring greater diversity and a greater mix of skills into institutions" (Schwartz, 2005: 1).

Whether the admission process is seen to be fair or not may not be the central issue for discussion. Doyle (2003) suggests 'New Labour's' attempt to offer a 'Third Way' access to widening participation in higher education can be seen as putting the blame on those individuals who do not enter higher education. Doyle cites Tight (1998) who states that "all those who are not fulfilling their potential...must be drawn into successful learning" (p.9).

It may seem, therefore, that opening higher education to the wider social and cultural groups does not necessarily create social justice. Class inequalities endure despite the many widening participation initiatives designed to attract working-class students (Wakeford, 1993). Archer and Hutchins (2000) investigated working class participants and non-participants in higher education and examined the many factors and reasons why they are under-represented in higher education. These included gender, ethnicity and the notion of 'risk'. Their respondents viewed that there was a much greater risk in opting for higher education for a working class student. They found working class students face particularly difficult negotiations around the issue of 'identity' in which the potential benefits to be gained in terms of improved opportunities, needed to be balanced against the potential costs of losing one's working class cultural identity.

Primarily, for the middle-class student choosing to go to university is not really a choice at all. It is about staying as they are whilst for the working-classes it is about being different people in different places, about who they might be and what they must give up (Reay, 2005: 9).

In this sense, participation in higher education is not an 'equal choice' in that risks, "like wealth… adhere to a class pattern" (Beck, 1992: 35). Working class students have to evaluate the benefits of investing in an enhanced identity with the cost of losing a sense of self that anchors them to what had gone before; between escape and 'holding on' (Lawler, 2000). Such difficulties are compounded by age and make the transition to higher education particularly difficult for mature students. The proportion of mature students in higher education fell from 22 per cent in 1994 to 18 per cent in 2000 and only recovered its 1994 level in 2003 (Abrams, 2003). It appears to some that there may be an inconsistency between the Government's expressed commitment to widening participation and recent funding changes which have severe exclusionary repercussions for mature and working class students (O`Toole, 2000 and Reay, 2005).

Mature students, and those on Access courses, are more likely to be women. For example, in 1992 68 per cent of Access students were female (Benn and Burton, 1994). Students on part time Foundation degree courses are also typically female, aged 25 and over and are mostly white (QAA, 2003). These older, less qualified women face particular problems in higher education such as: poor child care facilities, transport problems, inflexible timetabling and insufficient academic and personal guidance (Edwards and Lampert, 1993; NIACE, 1993). For instance, Hogarth *et al* (1997) surveyed more than 2000 higher education students and of those over the age of 25, one fifth cited child care as a barrier to access. Additionally, these students often

possess inadequate time management skills as well as having less free time to manage (Morrison and Collins, 1996).

Strategies which have been implemented in order to address inequalities and encourage a broader base of undergraduates may be lacking rigour. Law *et al* (2004) suggests that the University sector has remained surprisingly insulated from policy developments with regard to promoting not only class, but ethnic and cultural diversity. They further highlight that espousal of themes such as widening participation exposes the possible myth of impartiality and neutrality.

> *Higher education institutions themselves also play a central role in the creation and maintenance of uneven patterns of participation. Universities are racialised, gendered and classed spaces (Read et al 2003, cited in Archer, 2006: 50).*

One particular strategy to promote ethnic and cultural diversity in higher education is the national programme Aimhigher. In the beginning Aimhigher was established as the Excellence Challenge in 2001 and subsequently incorporated into the Widening Participation strategy. Aimhigher aims to widen participation in higher education among students from non-traditional backgrounds and minority groups. They offer information about higher education institutions and courses and attempt to raise the aspirations of people from under-represented communities (West *et al* 2003). The many Aimhigher strategies and initiatives include locating and targeting groups of underrepresented students through activities such as road shows. Their 2005-06 tour made over 500 visits to schools and colleges.

It has been suggested by Hatt *et al* (2005: 345) that there is a real challenge for Aimhigher managers and practitioners and they highlight a concern that "scarce resources will be misdirected towards activities for young people from groups that are already well-represented in HE". They further suggest that "narrow criteria can exclude some under-represented groups and can also risk stigmatizing potential beneficiaries who might then disengage from the programme" (ibid: 342). This is supported by Thomas (2001) who found that the Aimhigher targeting techniques were not sufficiently adequate to encourage appropriate inclusion; she went on to argue that they did little to reduce the differences in access to higher education between different groups of students. In response to this, Tony Acland (one of the Directors of Aimhigher), argued that although participation rates indicate a reduction from 43.5 per cent to 42.5 per cent, as most activities focus on younger aged pupils:

> *The effects of Aimhigher should start to be reflected in the participation figures in the 2007 university entry and particularly between 2008-10* (Face to Face, 2005).

To gain further insight into the effectiveness of widening participation, NatCen (which is the UK's largest non-profit making social research institute) evaluated the Higher Education Funding Council (HEFCE) Widening Participation Support Strategy. HEFCE, in line with the Government's policy to increase and widen participation in higher education, established several initiatives in an attempt to encourage increased participation, particularly from those groups traditionally under-represented in higher education.

The study found that although HEFCE's widening participation support strategy has stimulated activity within the sector, it appears to be having a differential effect. Insofar as policy has been aimed at encouraging institutions without a strong tradition of widening participation to become more pro-active and strategic, it appears to have been successful. However, it has not been seen as helpful by institutions with strong existing commitments to widening participation. These institutions believe that HEIs with no record of commitment to widening participation have been rewarded for their poor performance with additional student numbers and aspiration funding (www.natcen.ac.uk/natcen*).*

Where widening participation has been successful, there have been attempts to ease the transition for underrepresented groups entering higher education. With widening participation, there is the necessity to become more attentive of student background. Students with non traditional entry qualifications can vary significantly when developing the learning skills required to work towards higher education qualifications (Evans and Abbott, 1998).

Investigations which have taken place into the particular learning issues in the process of widening participation in higher education have examined 'non traditional' students experiences. This highlights a number of factors that affect their process, namely problems with academic writing, self-esteem and confidence and the 'rules of the academic game' (Layer, 2004; Pascall and Cox, 1993; Moon, 2000). Strategies employed to address these concerns have included the incorporation of study skills modules and extra study support. University teaching is recognised as being demanding and the changes in the student profiles are argued to increase the pressure.

Of the £282 million set aside for widening participation in 2005-06, almost £215millon is allocated to improving retention…poor grammar, unreliable spelling and impaired critical thinking which can escalate from minor irritations into serious barriers (Jobbins, 13 May 2005, Times online).

Comments on the provision of support for students can be identified under three particular themes. Firstly the importance of the need for the assistance to be integral has been acknowledged, secondly if the study support received is considered as remedial, students with low self-esteem may be further discouraged (Harvey and Watt, 1996). Thirdly, commentators suggest that these problems are not specific to current students as part of the widening participation effect; historically students arrive at university with little knowledge of formal grammar. This is nothing new and many argue that they are exactly the same as previous students who started at university 20, 40 or 60 years ago (Peck and Coyle, 2005).

The shift from relatively elite to a mass system of higher education has stimulated a debate about standards, both within and between the different types of higher educational institutions. Remarks like those from Professor Minogue (London School of Economics) in 2007, claiming that university education was being destroyed by widening participation are contrasted with those from Lomas and Tomlinson (2000: 132) who stated that it was "a case of more means different rather than more means worse". Further barriers to success may arise due to a disparity between the requirements of a course (including design and delivery) and students` potential for success (Barlow, 2002). This is supported by Woodrow (2000) who argued that few institutions are prepared to adapt to accommodate the needs of a new population of students. This view is despite accepting that the students themselves, from under-

represented groups, will need to adjust in order to survive in the world of higher education. The recognition of the consequences of widening participation, Marr, (2006) termed a cultural shift, this was principally with regard to acknowledgement of the need of higher education institutions to modify teaching and learning strategies.

> *Increasing numbers of students in classrooms have highlighted issues of retention, progression and attainment… …*the widening participation student... *…is variously thought to be from a lower socio-economic group, probably from a non white ethnic group, may be mature, will have non-standard entry qualifications and will lack the preparedness for undergraduate study that academics have come to expect in both the new and old components of the sector. They are deemed to require additional support for learning, increased pastoral intervention, new ways of teaching and assessing (Marr, 2006: 14).*

Recent widening participation and expansion based on increasing specialisation and vocationalism challenges previous paradigms concerning the university's role. This is supported by Gibbs (2002b: 237) who suggests that the changing role has altered our expectation of the practice and benefit of higher education from one where "the community trusted the university to develop the individual, to one where competencies for employment are the measurement of personal growth". The question of who benefits most from university has been discussed at some length over the years. The idea entrenched in the Robbins Report (1963) is that as "society benefits from the quality of university graduates then society should pay the cost of their education" (Bartlett and Burton, 2001: 250).

As the numbers entering higher education has substantially increased a view is that as graduates, "benefit the most from higher education… …they should bear at least some

of the cost" (Bartlett and Burton, *et al* 2001: 250). This cost can be relatively substantial, especially for those students on low incomes. For example, teaching assistants are on relatively low pay; although there is some disagreement as to the exact pay as there is no national pay scale in place. The pay of teaching assistant is set by each Local Authority and differs from region to region with many only being paid on a term-time only basis, but on average, "the full-time rate for teaching assistants is likely to be between £11,000 and £14,500 a year" (www.learndirect.co.uk). A Local Government Survey (2007) reported a slightly higher figure; in that the median full time equivalent pay rate for a teaching assistant was £15,330. However shortly after this survey, Unison (2007) carried out their own investigation and found that the average wage was more likely to be £11,000. This figure would undoubtedly impact on the ability to pay tuition fees.

For entry into higher education, universities and colleges in England can charge new students up to £3,145 a year for their courses in the 2008 academic year. The tuition fees can be covered by loans, repayable by graduates once their annual income passes £15,000. Specific concerns have been raised which link the tuition fees payable to the perceived decline in mature students. In that:

> *The proportion of students from working class backgrounds had shrunk to insignificant levels in recent years… …such students were discouraged on financial grounds or through 'debt aversion" (Knowles, 2000 cited in Rolfe, 2001: 22).*

In order to support students in financing their higher education courses, universities are required to offer bursaries to encourage students from the poorest backgrounds.

For example, a minimum bursary of £300 is available for a course whose fee is £3,000 (www.direct.gov.uk). This payment provides non-repayable funding to help part-time students. Other funds have been provided through local authorities, for example for the recruitment of extra teaching assistants, but there are regional and institutional variations on support packages that are available.

> *Some institutions break down the costs by module. Students may be eligible for reduced rates and some part time students on a low income may find they can have their tuition fees paid (www.dfes.gov.uk/studentsupport).*

One specific strategy that is seen as having real potential in addressing the financial issues of widening participation opportunities into higher education and to particularly encourage a broader range of people across the socio-economic spectrum, is the development of Foundation level degrees. Foundation degrees can enable students to work full time and at the same time also gain higher education qualifications (Doyle, 2003). They are provided by both higher educational institutions and further education colleges.

One group of students taking advantage of the Widening Participation Agenda in order to access higher education, are the focus of this thesis and they will be explored next.

2.4 Teaching Assistants

A crucial step in most research studies is to define the population of interest in the research investigation. This will be the population that the researcher will generalise

from (Gilbert, 1993). The particular population under investigation for this thesis comprises teaching assistants. As teaching assistants are the focus of this research, it is vital to explain the evolution of their role and discuss previous pertinent background research.

Historically, teaching assistants have had many different labels attached to them. These include; teaching assistant, general assistant, learning support assistant, classroom assistant, integration assistant and auxiliary staff. Commonly, teaching assistants often come under the umbrella term, 'support staff'. The attributed labels seemed to relate to perceptions of their role which were often divided into caring or learning roles. For example, Lord (1964: 931) identified that 'auxiliaries' should carry out non-teaching duties and would be scandalised "if auxiliaries were given teaching to do". Whilst around the same time Lawson (1964: 1137) explained how prohibiting auxiliaries from a supporting teaching role "would deprive children of a teaching aide they desperately need".

The value of teaching assistants was first nationally recognised in the Plowden Report for the Central Advisory Council for Education (1967). The Plowden Report stated that the role of a teaching assistant as providing an extra pair of hands for the class teacher. This included providing support to teachers in terms of both practical help and supervision of children. A few years later, Duthie (1970) also identified that teaching assistants undertaking a range of what was considered to be housekeeping tasks and duties, ones that did not call for the professional skills of a teacher.

The role of teaching assistants has altered significantly over the years on a somewhat improvised and ad hoc basis. Kerry (2001) explains how this has contributed to the lack of mutual understanding both locally and nationally with regard to the duties and responsibilities the role encompasses. One explanation for a vital part of a new area of responsibility which was developing can be linked to the recommendations stated in the Warnock Report (1978). This Report outlined the inclusion of children with special educational needs into mainstream. The integration of children with special education needs requires the provision of appropriately trained support staff in order to enable pupils to access the curriculum and facilitate the independent learning needed to promote effective inclusion.

Tonner (2005) outlined how the support teaching assistants give is tailored to the individual needs of pupils. This supporting role may be with; pupils who have learning difficulties, pupils with a physical disability, pupils with a visual or hearing impairment, pupils with communication problems or pupils experiencing behavioural difficulties. Kelly (2005) argues that the inclusion of children in mainstream classrooms is only possible through the support of teaching assistants.

The transition from a 'helper' to teaching assistant was not readily accepted by all. This was demonstrated by Kennedy and Duthie (1975) in their investigation of Scottish primary schools. Their findings, despite accepting teaching assistants` valuable contribution in the classroom, argued that their role should be restricted to giving encouragement and helping pupils when they have difficulties, rather than contributing to the planning, management and organisation of teaching and learning. Later views were often still negative in terms of extending the role of a teaching

assistant. In 1998 the National Union of Teachers raised concerns with regard to the deployment of teaching assistants. This was despite the Government releasing The Green Paper, *Teachers: meeting the challenge of change* (1998) which suggested that: "teaching and learning can be strengthened by using the full potential of teaching assistants and school support staff" (DfEE, 1998: 55).

Figures from the Training and Development Agency for schools (TDA, 2005) acknowledge the vast increase in numbers of teaching assistants. They stated that the total number of support staff (which includes teaching assistants) in school has doubled from 135,500 in 1997 to 266,100 in 2005. There has also been a huge increase specifically in the numbers of teaching assistants. By 2004 there were reported to be:

> *133,440 full time equivalent teaching assistants working in mainstream and special schools and Pupil Referral Units (PRUs) in England. This represents one full-time equivalent TA for every 3.1 teachers. The ratio in primary school is 2.08 teaching assistants to one teacher (Vincett, et al 2005:3).*

Further evidence of the sizeable increase in numbers during the years between 1998 and 2006 is evidenced in Table 1 below, from the DCSF (2006).

Table 1: Full-time equivalent number (in thousands) of teaching assistants in the local authority maintained sector in England by phase: January 1998 to 2006

Teaching Assistants	1998	2000	2002	2004	2006
Nursery	2.1	2.2	2.5	2.4	2.5
Primary	42.7	51.1	69.3	86.8	96.5
Secondary	9.0	12.5	19.5	25.3	33.5
Special	11.4	12.7	13.2	15.7	18.6
Pupil Referral Units	0.4	0.5	0.9	1.8	2.0
Total	65.5	79.0	105.4	132.1	153.1

(Adapted from: www.dcsf.gov.uk)

Groom and Rose (2005) explain that the huge increase in the number of teaching assistants employed is needed to provide effective support for the rapid expansion of the number of children with statements of special educational needs that occurred during the 1990s, although it must be acknowledged that teaching assistants do not work exclusively with children with special educational needs.

Generally teaching assistants currently work in three main areas:

1. Support of the pupil(s) - Some teaching assistants are employed with specific responsibilities to work with individual pupils with special educational needs. Others are given more general classroom responsibilities and may be attached to whole classes. This may involve working across the curriculum supporting

teaching in subjects such as physical education and information and communications technology (ICT).

2. <u>Support for the teacher</u> - Duties may involve a number of routine teaching assistant duties, such as escorting groups of young pupils to work areas outside the classroom. The teaching assistants may be engaged in assessing pupils` Literacy and Numeracy performance or supporting group work assigned by the class teacher.

3. <u>Support for the school</u> - translating school polices into practice and furthering the ethos of the school

(www.mbro-ta.co.uk/tarole.htm).

Research that has investigated the contribution teaching assistants have on teaching and learning has been generally reported as positive. Most of this research has also highlighted the benefit to both teachers and pupils alike (Lee, 2002). Researchers who raise concerns, whilst welcoming adults supporting in the classroom, have suggested that teachers have felt threatened by the presence of additional personnel in classrooms (as noted in research by Mortimore *et al* 1994; Fox and Halliwell, 2000). Therefore it may follow that not all pupils or teachers will benefit from the provision of additional adult support in the classroom. This has been supported by findings from longitudinal American research comprising of 6300 students, which found no significant differences between classes with teaching assistants (teaching aides) or those without (Gerber *et al* 2001). Similarly, Blatchford *et al* (2002) found no benefits in terms of attainment when they investigated over 11,000 students over three years.

It has been suggested by Cremin *et al* (2005: 414) that "surprisingly little attention had been paid to the ways in which support works in classrooms" and suggests that such support may be more problematic than one might expect. However, it is conceded by Farrell *et al* (1999) that the distinction between the role of the support assistant and the teacher is, in many practical situations, blurred.

The findings from an Evaluation Report in Scotland (2001) found that teaching assistants were thought to enhance learning, with both head teachers and class teachers generally being satisfied with having teaching assistants support. This was both in terms of supporting teachers by working with children with particular learning or behavioural needs and enhanced teacher-pupil ratios enabling pupils access to more attention from adults, both teachers and classroom assistants. This factor may be linked to the marked improvements found in literacy and numeracy skills. Any concerns that were revealed focused on the perception that a few teaching assistants were over-friendly with pupils, this was considered to have a negative consequence for discipline and the status quo. Other concerns were that there were too few teaching assistants and access to their support was often fragmented. Many teachers commented that "they had grown to rely on support from classroom assistants". This reliance may become difficult especially at the times when this support was withdrawn without notice (The Scottish Council for Research in Education, 2001).

Whilst concerns have been outlined by the teachers, the teaching assistants themselves highlight their own concerns about the working relationship with some teachers. Research suggests that the relationship is not always as positive as it could be and the "teaching assistants made it clear that good manners and consideration for their needs

are important to them". It was recognised that the "best practices arise from clear communication and time spent in forward planning together" (Simmonds, 2003: 60). However, time for planning is not always available or provided to teaching assistants, even where it exists, can be ineffective (Ofsted, 2004).

The difficulties in forming effective working relationships between teachers and teaching assistants have been highlighted. Farrell *et al* (1999) found that teachers received little advice or help on working collaboratively with teaching assistants. Their research recommends that classroom teachers are provided with guidance and strategies to facilitate effective working practices. However, discrepancies in the views of teachers have been noted in the findings from nursery, primary and secondary teachers, with secondary school teachers having more reservations about the improvements gained from the extension in the role of teaching assistants and quality of their relationships with them (Thomas, 2002).

Further recognition of the difficulties that are evident was highlighted in a poll by the Times Educational Supplement (TES). This reported that a 'cultural divide leaves assistants shunned', with teaching assistants left to feel like second class citizens. They found that some staffrooms are uncomfortable places for assistants with little interaction between teachers and teaching assistants taking place. This was supported by Alison Johnston, of the Professional Association of Teachers, who also reported that tensions between teachers and assistants were not uncommon and that she heard on a regular basis that teaching assistants did not feel valued in the workplace (TES 26th April, 2002).

The effectiveness of the teacher/teaching assistant relationship is also hindered by the perceived lack of power in the educational environment. Lowe and Pugh (2007) invited teaching assistants who had completed a Foundation degree to attend a conference on educational leadership in order to explore their opinions on power and leadership. As no teaching assistant responded to the invitation they were followed up and asked to complete a questionnaire on the topic. Their results found that the teaching assistants did not attend the conference due to one of the following three main reasons:

1. Not being given permission to attend

2. That they would not get paid if they attended

3. Did not think that their views were important.

The results of the questionnaire revealed that the majority of teaching assistants felt powerless and also assumed that their role, status and level of qualifications were not worthy of holding power. Most of the teaching assistants questioned also believed that their school was a hierarchical 'top down' organisation whereby the head teacher was the most powerful person within it. The research concluded that the "power systems are conspiring against teaching assistants". This was due to their lack of involvement in decision making and their belief was now they have access to degree level qualifications, once gained they would "increase their power and status in the workplace" (Lowe and Pugh, 2007: 30-31).

The difficulties that exist could also be explained by the lack of a job description. The indication is that teaching assistants are, at times, unclear about their roles and

responsibilities. This may be due to the fact that their role and responsibilities has transformed so much over the past few years (Clayton 1993; Balshaw 1998 and Farrell *et al* 2000). In addition, the duties and responsibilities of teaching assistants are not always clearly outlined, defined or specified. Kerry (2001) identified over twenty different functions and tasks carried out by teaching assistants, both in and out of the classroom. The extensive range of duties for support staff has been recognised by a multitude of research evidence. Johnson *et al* (2004) documented at least 28 distinct support tasks which teaching assistants are undertaking, with many individuals undertaking two or more roles.

The increase in duties which teaching assistants are asked to undertake was also noted in a survey by Unison (2004) which found that in almost 85 per cent of schools, teaching assistants were carrying out a wide range of duties and have more responsibility than they used to, such as planning and delivery of the curriculum. The effectiveness of this strategy is debatable, as in planning the curriculum it has been found that there were limited "opportunities for teachers and assistants to plan together" (Ofsted, 2004: 15).

Many of the more recent tasks and duties which are now required of teaching assistants are argued to be the result of a number of features and drivers at the macro and meso levels. These include the school remodelling process, the inclusion agenda, the current climate of teacher shortages and problems with retention of teaching staff. In response to these new responsibilities and duties, it is argued that training for teaching assistants has progressed from a relatively ad hoc school based on the job training to a more formalised programme (Edmund, 2004).

This range of training available to teaching assistants was part of the Government proposals outlined in the Green paper *Excellence for All Children* (DfEE, 1997). This recommended a national framework for the training of teaching assistants. It was recognised that there had been local initiatives developed, but these were argued to be too specific and non-transferable between local authorities (Dew-Hughes *et al* 1998).

The importance of training was also highlighted in a review of primary education some years previously (1994-95), in which Ofsted stated that:

> *Well trained Teaching Assistants are a key resource. However teaching assistants cannot automatically produce good practice. They need guidance and sound training.*

This is supported by the DfES Good Practice Guide in 2000, which found that "research and inspections` findings confirm the tremendous contribution that well trained Teaching assistants can make to driving up standards in School" (Foreword). This is recognised by Busher (2000: 173) who found that "the availability of qualifications of support staff make a considerable difference to the quality of teaching and learning that takes place".

It is noted that there are more than 600 different qualifications available to support staff in England (Johnson, 2006). Within this range of qualifications on offer are Foundation degree awards. The Foundation degree can be seen as providing teaching assistants with a desirable nationally recognised qualification. Within the assortment of Foundation degrees offered, there is a range of programmes developed specifically

for teaching assistants supporting learning within schools, nurseries and support centres.

One of the specific Foundation degrees being examined for teaching assistants is one titled, 'Foundation Degree in Education and ICT'. Ofsted (2002: para.61) stated that "as teaching assistants become better trained in ICT, increasingly they are taking a defined role in managing and supporting the use of ICT". This was supported by the then Secretary of State for Education, Estelle Morris who stated that:

> *Over time we expect schools to become increasingly flexible about the way they use resources, creating effective new combinations of professional teachers, support staff and Information and Communication Technology (ibid p.56).*

Simmonds (2004) found that teaching assistants demonstrated their valuable contributions in "supporting teachers and pupils in the use of ICT" (p.60). Interesting research by Cunningham *et al* (2000) also investigated how new technologies support teaching and learning. This was not aimed at teaching assistants specifically and although the researchers only investigated those schools which had been identified as already using new technologies in innovative ways, results indicated that there are still many challenges facing those who use new technologies to support teaching and learning in schools.

The literature review recognises that, in the main, research findings in the UK have tended to have a positive position towards teaching assistants. The research has also found that teaching assistants are playing increasingly significant and diverse roles in

supporting teaching and learning. It is concluded however that the longer-term impact of teaching assistants has yet to be established (Farrell *et al* 1999). This view is particularly pertinent as many changes have taken place in the educational workplace in recent years; one change to be examined next is the Remodelling of the School Workforce Agenda.

2.5 Remodelling of the Workforce

Almost every aspect of education has changed since 1990, including changes to funding, teaching methods, roles, management regimes, and regular amendments to the National Curriculum. These changes are especially evident in schools and the role of the teaching assistant whereby teaching assistants have been developed in order to take on new roles and responsibilities (www.dfes.gov.uk/publications/5yearstrategy/M 2004).

 In October 2002, the DfES published 'Time for Standards: reforming the school workforce', which outlines the government's plans for remodelling the school workforce by creating additional time for teachers and head teachers. The impetus behind this reform was the problematic recruitment and retention of teaching staff in the UK for at least the last 20 years (Butt and Lance, 2005).

Remodelling of the Workforce is part of a national agreement on raising standards and tackling workload, was signed by most public sector unions, employers and the Government in January 2003. This was in order to tackle teachers` workload and improve the status and conditions of all those who work in schools. These strategies

have not received unanimous support, while some local authorities are viewed as implementing Single Status more sensitively and effectively, some teaching assistants feel that in order to preserve their current pay levels, they are having to work more hours. Philip Parkin the General Secretary of the Professional Association of Teachers commented:

> *So where do we see areas of concern for support staff? ...The Single Status Agreement. We are seeing the best and worst of a national agreement, which PAT was not party to, interpreted locally. Some local schemes have been well thought through and have been introduced with little difficulty (Conference speech extract, August 2006).*

Along with the reform of support staff other key characteristics of the agreement include contractual changes for teachers in order to bring about a reduction in teachers' overall hours, a reduction in paperwork and bureaucratic processes, a national change management programme and reform of support staff roles.

The three phases of change which occurred for teachers were:

September 2003

- Routine delegation of administrative and clerical teaching assistants
- Introduction of work/life balance clauses, and
- Introduction of leadership and management time for those with corresponding responsibilities.

September 2004

- Introduction of new limits on covering for absent colleagues (38 hours per year).

September 2005

- Introduction of guaranteed professional time for planning, preparation and assessment (PPA)
- Introduction of dedicated headship time, and
- Introduction of new invigilation arrangements

(www.remodelling.org/Home/remodelling/nationalagreement/introduction.aspx).

As with single status, the Remodelling Agreement of the school workforce has not been without difficulties. A report by Ofsted stated that:

> *Reduced budgets and staffing levels in some schools with falling rolls have hampered the implementation of the agreement, although schools supported by national initiative grants were well placed to reduce workload and remodel their workforce. Most of the schools visited by Ofsted regard the agreement as an initiative designed to reduce workloads, but are not making the link between this aim and the overarching objective of improving education for children and raising attainment (Ofsted Press release, 2004: 118).*

Later findings recognise the contribution support staff can make in raising standards. However, with regard to covering for teacher absences, "a minority of schools are opposed to the principle of using teaching assistants for this purpose". There is still the refusal of the National Union of Teachers to sign the national agreement which centres on concerns that this practice may undermine the role of qualified teachers. Although, in many primary and special schools supervised cover is currently provided by teaching assistants, generally they are the ones who would normally be working with the particular class (Ofsted Report, 2005: 2596).

As part of its work to remodel the school workforce, the Government has proposed a number of changes in both the number and roles of support staff in the classroom, including the introduction of the Higher Level Teaching Assistant (HLTA) role. Ofsted report examples of good practice in minimising administrative teaching tasks for teachers, but recognise that most teachers and senior managers remain opposed to using teaching assistants to teach whole classes (Ofsted Press release, 118: 2004).

Butt and Lance (2005) discuss the impetus for change in education and suggest that the historical and current structure may have prevented teaching assistants from taking a more leading role and fulfilling their potential. They also recognise the possible effect on the role of teaching assistants on teachers` perceptions of teaching assistants. They highlight research which investigated primary school teacher's attitudes towards teaching assistants and support staff job satisfaction in primary schools. The results of this identified five areas of teachers` concern "bureaucracy and paperwork, planning, government initiatives, unrealistic targets and discipline" (*ibid:* 147). However the main solution proposed is the employment of more support staff. Recognising the problems in implementing the changes (for example, funding, co-operation and training), may have neglected other strategies for reducing teachers work load and that decreasing class sizes might have a more beneficial effect both on teachers' workload and pupil achievement rather than just concentrating on the role of teaching assistants. It is concluded by Wilkinson, (2005: 421) that "the proposals for 'Workforce Remodelling' may not sit well with the way adults are currently working in classrooms".

In addition to the Remodelling of the Workforce, in 2004 The School Workforce Development Board (SWDB) was established. The SWDB is a sector-wide national partnership of government bodies, unions and employers and is concerned with training and developing the wider educational workforce. The SWDB consists of those representatives most closely involved in funding, promoting learning and skills, and providing training for school support staff. The SWDB published a three-year strategy (2006-09) for training and developing school support staff based around three objectives:

1. To support schools as they develop new ways of training and deploying their support staff,

2. To create a framework of standards and qualifications to enable schools to develop the potential of all support staff, and

3. To extend training opportunities to meet the development needs of all support staff.

This strategy "recognises the rapid growth in the number and type of support staff working in schools, and the pivotal role they play in many aspects of workforce reform and raising standards" (www.tda.gov.uk/support/swdb.aspx). To meet the demands of the Remodelling Agreement the DfES has produced induction training programmes for support staff and teaching assistants who work in the classroom or in other roles within a school. These range from NVQs at levels 2 and 3, a training

programme for Higher Level Teaching Assistants and various Foundation degree level qualifications.

2.6 Foundation Degrees

Foundation degrees form a substantial part of this research as the aim of this thesis is to explore the provision and impact of those created for teaching assistants. Foundation degrees are a relatively new intermediate level vocational higher education qualification developed to; widen participation in higher education, encourage lifelong learning and enhance the skills of the workforce (Beaney, 2006). Gallacher *et al* (2006: 3) elucidated how Foundation degrees represent a 'different form of provision' which emerged from the "growing dissatisfaction with the existing provision, and a perceived need to introduce a new qualification which would be more fit for purpose".

The Foundation degree can be seen as synthesising a number of policy objectives, but at the core is the Government`s drive for economic success. Hope (2006) explained that in order to compete effectively in an increasingly global market place, employers will need those employees with the ability to adapt to the demands now and in the future. Foundation degrees can support this goal as they were created to amalgamate academic and work based learning, whilst offering an alternative route into higher education.

> *The Foundation degree is a bold innovation, incorporating many dimensions – anyone on its own would be challenging and taken together they have the potential to stimulate a radical reorientation of higher education provision. The White Paper set the Foundation degree the challenge of `breaking the traditional pattern of demand` (DfES, 2004: 5).*

In order to have their needs met, employers` need to be involved from the start to make sure that their particular Foundation degree meets the needs of their specific industry by combining technical skills, academic knowledge and transferable skills required. This way the Foundation degree can be seen as being distinctive because they place an emphasis on work place learning, which enables students to continue to earn whilst they are learning (Smith and Betts, 2003). During their Foundation degree course, the employee is expected to develop a "combination of academic knowledge and technical transferable skills demanded by employers" (Doyle, 2003: 276).

The decision on the type of skills necessary comes about through a partnership between education institutions, employers, national training organisations and professional bodies. A Higher Education institution (HEI) with degree-awarding powers is needed for validation and quality assurance purposes.

The actual duration of the Foundation degree course depends on the particular mode of study (part or full time) and individual differences within the providers` institution, but typically it takes two years full-time. Part-time study is available for those in employment, as with the case of teaching assistants and where appropriate students may also progress towards professional qualifications or credit their Foundation degree award towards honours degree study (QAA, 2004). The attraction for many students of Foundation degrees is the financial benefit of a two rather than three year programme. Part-time Foundation degrees for teaching assistants are also promoted by some providers as a two or three year course.

The actuality of a two year Foundation degree programme, despite being welcomed by students, has been questioned by The Council of Validating Universities (CVU) which considers that it is unlikely that any two year Foundation degree could provide students with enough underpinning of knowledge, professional practice and intellectual skills in such a relatively short time frame. In reality however, as illustrated in Table 2 below, many students take much longer than the two or three years promoted duration.

Table 2: Course length
(Foundation degree entrants in 2005-06 at HEIs and FECs in England)

Course length (years)	Percentage
1	3
2	24
3	43
4 or more	19
Indefinite	11
TOTAL	100%

(Adapted from Higher Education Statistics Agency, 2007).

Whatever the final course duration, Foundation degrees are designed to:

Widen and increase participation in higher education by delivering knowledge and skills needed for employment by the application of work-based and flexible modes of learning (QAA Benchmark, 2002: 2).

Foundation degrees are mentioned throughout the 2003 White Paper on *The Future of Higher Education*, where they are described as "the main work-focused higher education qualification" (DfES, 2003: 36).   The Secretary of State (DfEE 2000b) put forward specific proposals for the introduction of Foundation degrees and they were officially adopted in 2002. The development is summarised below (See Table 3).

Table 3: Development of Foundation degrees

Stages in the Development of Foundation Degrees	
Gestation	Development occurred during 1990s as a response to the perceived skills gap at intermediate level and to encourage wider access to higher education.
Pilot Phase	February 2000 saw the launch of the Foundation degree initiative.
Roll Out	Institutions were able to deliver Foundation degrees from 2002.
Expansion	Since introduction there has been an increase in the breadth and number of Foundation degrees offered.

 (Adapted from Beaney, 2006: 14-15).

Since their commencement there are now over 2,000 different Foundation degrees with approximately 38,000 students studying for them in England (Wyatt, 2006). Foundation Degree Forward - a UK body that supports the development of Foundation degrees reported that:

As of December 2006, in addition to the 2,152 programmes already running, there are over 700 foundation degree courses under development... ...In 2006/7 there was also a substantial year-on-year growth (43.4%) in part-time foundation degree provision (HEFCE, 2007).

This growth means that numbers are on track to meet the Government targets, "based on current projections for growth, the sector should be on course to meet the 100,000 figure by 2010-11" (HEFCE, 2008). This figure may even be surpassed due to the Government's policy of exempting Foundation degrees from withdrawal of funding for students if they are studying for an equivalent or lower level qualification (ibid).

Foundation degrees are worth 240 credits (120 each at levels 4 and 5) and will be awarded by individual universities. The CVCP (2000), cited in Doyle (2003), summarised the essential features of a Foundation degree as: "employer involvement; development of skills and knowledge; application of skills in the workplace; credit accumulation and transfer and progression within work and/or an honours degree." Foundation degrees are argued to differ somewhat from other more traditional higher level educational programmes, as the impetus behind them is argued to be primarily for meeting the needs of industry by integrating academic and work related learning.

Sir Richard Sykes (who became Rector of Imperial College London in January 2001) raised a note of caution and commented that just because there has been some employer involvement in the creation of Foundation degrees, other employers might need greater persuasion as to the value of Foundation degrees. He commented that he has worries in relation to:

Employers will look at these Foundation degrees and say, 'What is that; we`re used to HNCs, we`re used to HNDs, we know the value of these, but what is the value of a two-year degree, a two-year Foundation?' And I think we just need to get some clarification there, how these will be seen and valued by employers, I think that is going to be critically important (The Future of Higher Education, para. 62).

This value may not be so easy to achieve, as Gibbs (2002a: 239), highlights:

Granting trust to the brand usually requires an understanding and reassurance of the competence of the brand, its performance, and the consistency of that performance plus the existential belief in the veracity of the brand. Trust and consistency is built up over time and requires a drip feed approach to change.

It is apparent that not all employers are clear about Foundation degrees and what holders of the award are able to do. The Sector Skills Councils aim to address some of these concerns through the development of their own Foundation degree sector framework with the direct involvement of employers (www.ssda.org.uk). This partnership appears crucial to the overall success.

It has been an uphill struggle to achieve the specified objective of making Foundation degrees work as they were intended, particularly within the limited timeframe available for development... ...it proved difficult to engage employers and employers' organisations during this period (Brennan and Gosling, 2004: 8).

In Foundation Degree Forward`s (fdf) mission statement (fdf was established by the 2003 Higher Education White Paper and funded by HEFCE), is that Foundation

degrees "work in partnership to provide a national network to support the development and validation of higher quality Foundation Degrees." They:

- *equip learners with the knowledge, understanding and skills relevant to their employment*

- *are delivered by colleges and universities and training providers*

- *are a full time course which will usually take two years to complete*

- *students study whilst they are employed*

- *students do not necessarily need traditional entry qualifications.*

    www.fdf.ac.uk/page48.html

David Blunkett, in 2000, outlined that the impetus behind Foundation degrees was twofold. Firstly, to encourage national prosperity as they help to increase economic competitiveness. This was to be engineered by filling a perceived skills gap at advanced technician level (up to CATS level 2; NCVQ level 4). The second driving force was the need to widen participation into higher education via the addressing of social inclusion strategies.

These two aims may be considered to be entwined, except Ryan (2005) argues that "the motivation for new Labour's wish for continued growth in higher education has been essentially economic" (p.89). This was supported by a speech by Gordon Brown in 2005 in which he outlined the challenges faced by the UK in terms of globalization and world trade. He also raised concerns about the need for an educated workforce and stated that China and India were producing 4 million graduates annually compared

with a mere 250,000 in the UK. These figures may at first seem significant, however given that in 2007 the populations in China reached 1,307,740,000 billion (www.chinaembassy.org.in) and 1,145,174,000 billion in India, when we compare these figures to the population of 60,975,000 in the UK (www.statistics.gov.uk); the differences in the number of graduates and the impact of, may not be noteworthy.

To consider the Government`s concerns, the Leitch Review was commissioned in 2004 to investigate strategies to maximise economic growth and explore the UK's optimal skills mix. When it was published in December 2006, it detailed targets for the UK to increase skill levels by 2020. One target was to have 40 per cent of adults qualified to Level 4 and above, with a commitment to continue progression. In order to achieve these targets, the review makes eight recommendations. One of the recommendations is related to Foundation degrees; the Review would like to see an increase in employer investment in Level 3 and 4 qualifications in the workplace, more engagement between employers and universities and an increase in co-funded workplace degrees (Leitch, 2006). Despite the workplace collaboration within Foundation degrees, difficulties can arise; a third of organisations have indicated that their training funds have declined (Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development, 2006).

It is clear that the evidence supports that more is needed to be done in:

> *Motivating employers and individual employees to see value and engage in higher level skills development. Because of this issue we do not, as yet, know about the demand from employers and the ability of HEIs to meet that demand (HESA, 2006:7).*

The need for a highly skilled qualified work force to meet the demands of economic globalisation has been outlined. Whilst acknowledging this is beneficial to society, Gibbs (2002b) questions the value of Foundation degrees to the individual. It is proposed that those gaining the most benefit will be the employers. This is in the form of creating a surplus value of the workforce. The Foundation Degree Consultation Document, states:

> *It (higher education) must provide the higher level technical skills and knowledge sought by employers; equip students with the generic skills that will serve them throughout their working lives; and support the growth of new and emerging sectors of the economy" (Blunkett, 2000, cited in Gibbs, 2002a).*

Foundation degrees appear central to the Government's view on the economy, employability, skills gap and competition. The Government has indicated that the perceived skills gap within the UK makes the country less competitive. This is based on research by The Institute for Employment Studies, which highlights a 970,000 skills gap at the intermediate, craft and technician levels. Blunkett argued that the core impetus was encouraging more people into higher education and having a skilled and knowledgeable workforce was about democracy; when people are educated they are able to participate in active self-government and able to work towards "the construction of solution to the challenges they face, both locally and globally" (2000: 13).

One benefit of the Foundation degree initiative is in addressing the Widening Participation initiative. Foundation degrees can be seen as helping a number of students from non-traditional and underrepresented groups to play a part in higher

education. This enterprise is part of new Labour's commitment to a target of 50 per cent of 18-30 year olds to experience higher education by 2010. The aim is to attract new participants, especially those less likely to have previously been involved in the arena of higher education (Doyle, 2003).

The goal in attracting non traditional students towards Foundation degree awards may be within reach. In an investigation of health and social care Foundation degrees, Rowley (2005) found that the majority of the student cohort was made up of those that had not previously contemplated higher education as an aspiration before. They were also most likely to come from families where going to university was not an option. In addition most of the Foundation degree students were females that had experienced a relatively negative time during their school years and had subsequently left school at 16 and entered directly into employment. This resulted in the realisation that their career progression opportunities remained comparatively limited compared to those with higher qualifications.

Combined with providing another route in higher education, Foundation degrees can aid students` career progression by enabling them to access a combination of academic knowledge, technical expertise and transferable skills. They are seen as part of the initiative in the *Skills Strategy White Paper* (2003), which aims to tackle the skills gap and bridge a close link between education and employment. It seeks to:

> *Create a coherent policy framework which supports front line delivery....that employers have the right skills to support the success of their businesses and organisations, and that individuals have the skills they need to be both employable and personally fulfilled (DfES, 2003b: 1-2).*

Notwithstanding the personal benefit from widening participation, Foundation degrees appeared central to addressing the need for skilled employees as part of the Government's goal of lifelong learning for the workforce.

> *Realising our nation's potential to have a competitive and productive economy requires ever growing proportion of highly skilled well qualified people…* *…we want to see Foundation Degrees as an opportunity to help fill the skills gap (The Rt. Hon. Alan Johnson MP Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, p.2 Foundation Degrees: Meeting the need for higher level skills, 2003).*

The advantage of a higher education programme which involves some component of workplace learning has been widely recognised. HEFCE have also indicated that "its prime concern lay with workplace learning as part of a higher education programme but also that it was interested in learning at higher level that was integrated with work." (CHERI and KPMG, 2006:43).

Whilst acknowledging that Foundation degrees are aimed at addressing the needs of employers and employees, the White Paper, *The Future of Higher Education* (DfES, 2003) recommended that one should:

> *Recognise that Foundation degrees are ends in their own right, giving them enhanced status as qualifications. Those with Foundation degrees will have the right to use the letters FDA (for Arts-based subjects) or FDSc (for Science-based subjects) after their names (DfES, 2003b: 61).*

One particular group of working adult students who are taking advantage of the opportunity to gain letters after their names whilst combining workplace learning and higher education programmes, are teaching assistants. Within the array of professional development and higher educational degrees on offer to teaching assistants, is the opportunity to take a Foundation degree. The Foundation degree course enables those without higher level qualifications to take the first steps on the ladder into higher education onto a course, which in the case of teaching assistants, is tailored to the specific requirements of their role of supporting teaching and learning in education and training. This can be seen as a combined endeavour, one that may address the concerns with regard to social inclusion in higher education, but also one that may meet the changing needs of the workplace (Beaney, 2006).

> *The demands of the workplace are central to the provision of Foundation degrees. The way students chose to study for a Foundation Degree is split equally between full-time (49.3 per cent) and part-time (50.7 per cent) modes (HESA, 2005).*

Edmund (2004) investigated the prevalence of Foundation degree courses for teaching assistants, and found twenty-one different types. When examining the prospectuses of the particular institutions, it was discovered that that rationale given to the students of the benefit of Foundation degrees was provided in both economic and democratic terms, in relation to possible employment prospects and access into higher education. Edmund defined Foundation degrees as:

> *Equipping the workforce with the skills and knowledge employers want and say they need; widening participation in higher education; enabling progression within higher education (2004: 41).*

Edmund (*ibid*) further argued that the most important factor out of those presented was the one which focuses on addressing the needs of the employers. This is supported by the Benchmark (p.3) statement:

Foundation degrees are vocationally focussed and equip learners with the skills and knowledge relevant to their employment and the needs of employers.

This indicates that the target group identified is teaching assistants who are currently employed. This is reflected in the range of modules on offer which incorporate elements of the range of work-based learning and focuses on the range of teaching assistants within the workplace.

Work-based learning encompasses learning for work, learning at work and learning through work. An assessment of work-based learning in Foundation degrees found that in Foundation degrees which were aimed at teaching assistants, work-based learning was an important means for learning which can open up means of developing higher order cognitive skills. The modules undertaken during their Foundation degree course include discrete tasks which need to be carried out in the students' workplace and require high levels of reflection (Gray, 2001).

The educational value of integrating experience, learning and reflection has been widely recognised (Moon 2000, Kolb 1984 and Dewey 1933). Dewey (1983) claimed that education is the reconstruction of experience, in which there is a recognition of the need for constructing learning experiences upon what the learner already knows, what they need to know and how they come to know it. Education must not only be useful for right here, right now, but also for producing an "individual more capable of

self support and self respecting independence" (Dewey, 1983: 11). This suggests that learning may not exclusively lie in developing future skills, knowledge and experience, but that learning recognises the relevance of past experience. This is highly pertinent to Foundation degrees which attract a large number of female, mature students, as demonstrated by the Table (4), below.

Table 4: Entrant numbers by sex and age at commencement of study
(Home Foundation degree entrants in 2005-06 at HEIs and FECs in England)

Age Group	Full Time	Part Time	Total
Young male	28	6	19
Young female	23	4	16
Mature male	21	28	24
Mature female	28	62	41
TOTAL	**100%**	**100%**	**100**

(**Note:** 'Young' students are under 21 on the date of entry to the programme).

Workplace learning is particularly relevant to Foundation degree students as many are mature students; they are particularly motivated to learn especially if their learning can be rewarded or recognised at the workplace (Forrester *et al* 1993). Dearing (1997) recognised how transferable skills can contribute to the workplace and outlined how accreditation of prior learning (APL) fits in rationally to the more specific area of work-based learning. This can be identified as past, current or future experiential learning. This type of learning is supported by an evaluation of Foundation degrees by York Consulting (2004) which indicated the appeal of Foundation degrees in terms of

appreciating APL for working mature students. This is due to the incidence of their past experience being taken into account and the emphasis on work-based learning especially as the Foundation degrees are designed in collaboration with their employers.

The application accreditation of prior learning (APL) is particularly pertinent with regard to mature females such as teaching assistants embarking on Foundation degrees, as it can facilitate both access and progression of this type of student. Credit can be given for their relevant experience. Previously with regard to APL, Connelly and Clandinin (1998) have claimed that because experiences are embodied in practice, there was little opportunity to reflect such learning in a more formal environment. This is one explanation as to why past learning often remained neglected. Also, as the APL process is not standardised, there can be difficulties in measuring and recognising prior experience and determining if the experience has actually led to pertinent professional development.

Dulewicz (1991: 50) points out that "in the final analysis the critical factor is how much the participant does to develop him or herself".   The importance of this is outlined in the Government`s policy on lifelong learning which encourages the promotion of a lifelong learning culture. Learning is seen as "the key to prosperity - for each of us as individuals as well as for the nation as a whole" (*The Learning Age*, Department for Education and Employment, 1998: 1)**.**

In supporting the development of both a learning culture and workplace learning Britain`s higher education providers have experienced some important restructuring in

the past few years with Foundation degrees being at the core of these changes. Most of these changes have been imposed upon them by external forces which may determine how well they rise to the challenges (and opportunities) they present (Gibbs, 2002a). As this thesis examines Foundation degree provision, Foundation degree providers will be examined next.

2.7 Providers of Foundation degrees

Foundation degrees are part of the degree provision offered by the higher education system. This research will compare the findings from four different types of Foundation degree providers. Recent figures detail "that there are 72,000 students enrolled on Foundation degree programmes in 2007-08" (HEFCE, 2008). The Foundation degree providers include over 100 higher education institutions and further education colleges. Only allowing Foundation degrees to be awarded by institutions which hold degree awarding powers, is suggested to indicate an emphasis on standards and is believed to raise the status of the qualification (Wagner, 2004).

> *While universities and higher education colleges with degree-awarding powers will award Foundation degrees, the successful delivery of these programmes depends on the active involvement of several other partners….It is anticipated that further education colleges will play a large role in delivering this qualification since they have strong links with local employers and easy accessibility to potential learners. However, we recognise that some awarding HEIs may wish to deliver a proportion of, and perhaps all, of the Foundation degrees (HEFCE, 2000).*

Foundation degrees have been identified by the Government as a major factor in meeting the Government targets of increasing the higher education participation rate to 50 per cent by students under the age of 30 by 2010. They have also been part of the promotion of the concept of 'lifelong learning' designed to address concerns that had been raised during the 1990s with regard to the perceived skills gap, economic decline and disillusions with the existing vocational training structures. This expansion in higher education is seen as assisting in encouraging "economic development, wealth generation and social benefits" (Morgan *et al* 2004: 354).

A feature of Foundation degrees is "the consortia which come together to design and deliver them". The essential partners are the employers and Foundation degree providers (Higher and Further Education institutions). "All institutions involved must feel that they are genuine partners" (Wagner, 2004: 4). The success of the partnership may be inhibited due to the specific intention to tailor Foundation degrees to the explicit needs of employers. This has resulted in the inability to standardise the product leaving confusion and ambiguity, which is further compounded by the huge variety of Foundation degrees titles on offer to teaching assistants. The QAA recognised that employers' can lack understanding with regard to the nature and requirements of Foundation degrees, in their 2003 review.

Illustrated in the Table (Table 5) below, (which is adapted from Foundation Degree Forward`s website (www.fdf.ac.uk/courses/Education.php), is a small selection of the wide variety of titles of Foundation degrees on offer to teaching assistants. Along with the particular title of the Foundation degree is the awarding body and the institution that delivers the specific Foundation degree.

Table 5: Examples of Foundation degrees course with their delivering and validating institutions

COURSE TITLE	VALIDATING INSTITUTION	DELIVERING INSTITUTION
Assisting Learning	University of Teesside	Bishop Auckland College
Classroom Assistants	Oxford Brookes University	Solihull College
Classroom Support	Oxford Brookes University	Aylesbury College
Classroom Support	Oxford Brookes University	Abingdon and Witney College
Education and ICT	University of Birmingham	University College Birmingham
Education and Learning Support	Sheffield Hallam University	Chesterfield College
Education Support (Teaching Assistants)	Bournemouth University	University Centre Yeovil
Learner Support	University of Huddersfield	Rotherham College of Arts and Technology
Learning and Teaching (Schools)	University of Northampton	University of Northampton
Learning and Teaching Support	University of Chichester	University of Chichester
Learning Support	University of Worcester	University of Worcester
Pre-16 Learning and Teaching Support	University of Hull	Doncaster University Centre
Professional Studies in Learning	University of Birmingham	University College Birmingham
Supporting Learning (Sport, PE and Health)	University of Leeds	Leeds Trinity and All Saints
Supporting Learning and Teaching	Liverpool Hope University	St Mary's College, Blackburn
Supporting Teaching and Learning (Secondary)	Edge Hill University	North Trafford College
Supporting Teaching and Learning in the Classroom	Institute of Education (University of London)	Institute of Education (University of London)
Teaching and Learning Support (Secondary)	Lancaster University	East Lancashire Institute of Higher Education

The above list demonstrates that many Foundation degrees are often delivered by further and higher education institutions, rather than the validating institution. The delivery of Foundation degrees by further education colleges is seen by Doyle (2003:3) as "an attempt to make higher education learning more accessible". In attracting students under the Widening Participation Agenda, entry has been made more flexible so that "non-traditional students are likely to benefit most from the new courses (QAA Benchmark, 2002: para. 24).

Whittaker (1992: 28) has outlined the difficulties in this practice and has argued that:

> *It would be nice to think that standards could be developed against which CPD activity could be assessed. Unfortunately, this is an impossible dream.*

Jary and Jones (2006), whilst recognising the importance of flexible entry to higher education, emphasise the need for the Widening Participation Agenda to look beyond recruitment in terms of numbers, in order examine course content and course delivery to provide what is needed for non traditional students. This includes a careful consideration of forms of assessment and monitoring as concerns have been raised that in the desire to widen access to higher education, this has created institutions and courses which although particularly attractive to some non-traditional students, may result in differentiation between experience and career opportunity. "The creation and development of Foundation degrees is argued to further increase this tendency" (Jary and Jones, 2006: 14-15).

When examining the experience of non traditional students within the Widening Participation Agenda, a recent QAA confidential inspection of 33 courses expressed concerns about whether students are:

> *Obtaining higher-level, intellectual, analytical and reflective skills; more than half of courses need improvements in the development and assessment of student knowledge; work-based learning arrangements are inadequate on half of the courses seen, and only a few courses have included employers fully in running the programmes (QAA Overview, 2003).*

The QAA (2003) findings may relate to the course design rather than Foundation degrees per se. Despite this it may seem that the challenge of non traditional students to Foundation degree providers and educators may rather be explained in terms of the previous educational experiences and backgrounds of their students. Rowley (2005) details how the challenges are the result of their perceptions formed during their compulsory school years, in that it was found that the majority of Foundation degree students had previously experienced a negative time during their school years, influencing their attitude, behaviour and strategies in adapting to returning to education.

Another explanation of the challenges of the students in Foundation degree provision is with regard to course development and delivery. It is evident that this provision has lacked; standardisation, a national framework and a coherent structure. Courses have tended to be developed locally which inhibits the advancement of professional standards, which not surprisingly allows doubts to be raised with regard to "issues of

variability in equality of provision and appropriateness of programmes" (Graves and Jones, 2008: 311).

In the defence of Foundation degrees, Professor Leslie Wagner the Chair of the Teaching Assistants Task Force, observed that:

> *Foundation Degrees are a bold innovation challenging current activity in many ways. The need for them is clear, and the achievements of the first three years are impressive. There are still many challenges to be met if Foundation Degrees are to become embedded as an integral part of our higher education system. However the first period of any innovation is often the most difficult. The hardest bit has been done (www.uclan.ac.uk/quality/cdg/app/app11.htm).*

Wagner expands to reiterate that, "It is now time to embed Foundation Degrees permanently in the landscape of higher education qualifications, through a sustained and systematic policy environment focused on long-term development" (Wagner, 2004: 10). Part of that change and development is teaching assistants taking Foundation degrees, which will be explored next.

2.8 Teaching assistants taking Foundation degrees

This research examines, in the main, working class mature students who are taking or have taken Foundation degrees on a part time basis.

> *65.7 per cent of first year Foundation Degree students were women, compared to 64.1 per cent in 2002/03. Of these women 81.7 per cent were mature students, that is, aged 21 or over. The same figure in 2002/03 was 80.8 per*

cent. When looking at both genders, 72.8 per cent of first year Foundation Degree students are mature (HESA, 2005).

Foundation degree students are also, generally, less likely to have experience of higher education. They are also likely to be attending part time whilst in employment. Employer support was a factor identified by Schuller and Raffe (1997) in the ability of these students to access higher education. In the case of Foundation degrees, employers have to agree to the student attending the course. The importance of future employment was raised by Kay and Sundaraj (2004), who found that a desire to improve their career prospects or change career paths was the predominant motivation amongst mature students. Some students after finishing the Foundation degree then transfer to a Bachelor of Arts degree in the hope of becoming fully qualified teachers.

It is clear that Foundation degrees are playing a role in helping a number of students from non traditional and underrepresented groups with little experience of the world of higher education to play a part in it. Out of the total number of higher education students, 54 per cent are over the age of 21 years. They also represent over 90 per cent of part-time students (Aldridge and Tuckett, 2003). There has also been some expansion in the numbers from ethnic minorities who are attending colleges and universities, representing around 15 per cent of students. Rates of participation do vary and are higher for certain groups including; Chinese, Indian and African origin, but lower for those of Pakistani, Bangladeshi and Caribbean origin (Jary and Jones, 2006). Kassem *et al* (2006) suggest that being excluded from any of the social economic, political or cultural systems which determine the social integration of a person in

society "will impact upon a person's outlook and perception of themselves as confident and competent individuals (p: 189).

> *Race inequalities are embedded…in the academic disciplines…but how this embedding takes place in particular cases and with what consequences, is far from clear (Young, 2000: 530).*

Widening participation maybe can be considered a success in terms of equality of gender, since the numbers of women students have grown so much that there are now more women than men in higher education (Equal Opportunities Commission, 1996 cited in Peters, 2000). However despite this phenomenon, the construction of the 'normal' student remains and "continues to be based on masculinist conceptions of the individuals, with this learner constructed as male, white, middle class and able bodied (Leathwood and O`Connell, 2003: 599), indicating that the values and structures are laden with masculine values. Although many departments and centres may have attempted particular initiatives it is still likely that women are reduced to a 'type' which presents particular hurdles to women in higher education which are not being addressed by the higher education institutions. This belief may be especially pertinent in this case, as Hancock *et al* (2002: 32) pointed out that most teaching assistants, for example 98.9 per cent in primary schools, are female, which follows that the majority of those teaching assistants taking Foundation degrees in supporting learning would be female. This may be a pertinent factor to be explored in terms of gender differences in Foundation degree provision, experience and career development.

Reay *et al* (2003) examined the learning experiences of women on an Access course and found that the wide-ranging demands of their many roles often resulted in little

quality time being available to devote to their studies. Adult women learners may be caught trying to balance between two worlds, as:

> *The adult who chooses to leave one life world to enter the intellectual world of learning, faces the 'existential anxiety' of inhabiting two discourses at once* (Barnett, 1999 cited in Kassem *et al* 2006: 38).

The anxieties that women learners experience has been related to how women learn. The individual backgrounds of women and their experiences have also highlighted the need for different approaches such as the introduction of reflective practice, a different approach to assessment, just in time workshops and the establishment of an alumni network (Muir and Atkinson, 2006). Research by HECSU (The Higher Education Careers Service Unit, 2004) also indicates that more women than men felt they needed a degree to obtain their job.

Research (Ozga and Sukhnandan, 1998; Cook and Leckey, 1999) indicates that students whether they are male or female with family members who have little experience of higher education, are likely to be unprepared for, and have a naive expectation of, higher education. It is recognised adult returners to higher education:

> *..will have entered higher education without having taken responsibility for their own learning... ...unrealistic expectations and lack of preparation mean that many prospective students will find the transition... ...difficult (Cook and Leckey, 1999, cited in Burke et al 2005: 170) .*

Yorke and Thomas (2003) argued that universities who are encouraging "students whose backgrounds may not have given them an appreciation of what is expected of

them" need to be more proactive in supporting them (p: 69). This is backed by Davies (2003) who outlined how the level of support widening access students need is sometimes different to those more academically qualified.

A study by Thomas (2002) signifies that the extent to which a student is academically prepared will influence not only their academic performance but retention rates as well. Retention rates can be one way of measuring the success of widening participation in higher education particularly in relation to non-traditional students. The dropout rate in the UK for higher education courses is 17 per cent, although this compares very favourably to the figure of 30 per cent, in other members of The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries (UUK, 2005).

Quinn (2003) draws attention to the view that higher education institutions are not addressing the needs of women students from different cultural and lower socio-economic backgrounds. Universities, who are encouraging "students whose backgrounds may not have given them an appreciation of what is expected of them", need to be more proactive in supporting them (York and Thomas, 2003: 69). This suggests that widening access is only one aspect that needs to be considered. Universities need to adapt to the (widening participant) mature students` needs as they are likely to be outcome and result-oriented and are both critical and demanding learners. The type of support that non-traditional students may need is not just academic and study skills, but holistic guidance, therefore "adult students represent a serious challenge to Universities" (Davies, 2003: 2).

The challenge from non-traditional students may be due to the fact that they are unprepared for the experience of higher education and all it involves (Ozga and Sukhnandan, 1998; Cook and Leckey, 1999). In addition, students, particularly those from underrepresented groups, are not able to shape and change the student experience to meet their own needs. Instead, policy and practice tends to be based on the assumptions of those in greater power (Thomas, 2001). Within those hierarchies and processes:

> *Bias cannot be discussed as if it were in some way only concerned with the social characteristics of those who apply to higher education…it is also a question of the form of higher education itself, its ethos, organisation and pedagogy and social function (Williamson, 1981: 18).*

Within any organisation there is a complex pattern of behaviour that can create barriers and confusion for those who enter. This includes the power and influence of institutional cultures which can extend across the entire process of participation, meaning that although widening participation enables more non-traditional students to enter higher education institutions, the experience can "alienate working class students and make them feel isolated, uncomfortable and unsure" (Archer, 2006: 51).

The barriers which highlight the social diversity that may distinguish non-traditional students include both subtle and less subtle differences. Accent has been raised as a potential obstacle for non-traditional students, even in those institutions in which working class students are well represented. Those less obvious barriers include the class based distinctions with regard to use and style of language.

Many had difficulty identifying the precise constituents of language use that gave middle-class students an advantage… …a consensus, then, among the working-class interviewees that undergraduate study required language skills they did not possess. In addition, however, there was a suggestion that the difficulties they were experiencing went much deeper than this (Bufton, 2006: 96-97).

A deeper theme expressed by Trowler (2002) is the 'micro politics' of power and authority. Lea and Street (1998) argue that although there are different areas to consider when evaluating students' writing, such as the individual student, interaction between staff, student and the institution, all three are subject to relations of power and authority, rather than being issues of the skills and competencies required of students. Mann (2001, 2002) also believes that the interaction between the individual and power should be examined, as the influence which power can have over individuals can be different for differing individuals; this has implications for their learning experiences. The issue of power has an impact on why it is necessary to understand the importance of recognising differences such as social class. Grenfell and James (1998) calls for "independent autonomous discourses that would not disadvantage one group over another" (p105). Working class adults who are new to studying may be feeling inferior to those students who have studied at that level in the past. Their attempts to adjust to university are influenced by the competing factors in their individual lives (Kember, 2001).

This adjustment for adult widening participation students may be aided by the institutions adapting more fully to the students rather than the students adapting to the higher educational institution, as demonstrated by the following quote:

An andragogically-based adult education is clearly not sufficient to meet the needs of a diverse and critically aware field any longer. A continuing challenge for adult educators is to find ways to practice actively alternative adult educations and not just to pay `lip service` to these alternative views" (Sandlin 2005: 38).

A report from the Rowntree Foundation, on 'Re-thinking working-class drop-out from higher education' (2005: 36-37), examines the view in the media that "the working-class lack the will and ability to succeed". The report also comments that "the negative implications of early withdrawal for students, institutions and the local area are not intrinsic, but are created by higher education policy and cultural norms". For working class students, widening participation has also perpetuated inequalities, with the middle classes still maintaining a greater proportion of participation.

Working class students are facing 'bad value' from the system. They face disproportionately high risks and costs of participation and can expect proportionately lesser benefits (Archer, 2006: 54).

The risks experienced by the working class student are contextually bound. When they return to higher education, they enter an environment in which their difference is disregarded. It is an environment in which the rules and rewards are based around distinct boundaries and norms. It is one which can ignore their experience, power relations, practices and construction of reality. The educational institutions which represent the dominate culture, need to incorporate and accept that there are alternative realities. Until this is achieved the working class student will likely remain marginalised in the higher education environment (Preece, 1995).

Dominant values marginalise the values and experiences of different social groups. This marginalisation is reflected in the way education is offered through, for example, its curriculum and teaching styles (Preece, 2000:15).

The views outlined above are supported by research conducted by the Sutton Trust education charity. This found that only 7 per cent of children attend private school, but found that they are more likely to land the top jobs. Their report shows that 76 per cent of judges and 68 per cent of barristers had a paid-for education. Sir Peter Lampl, who chairs the Sutton Trust, commented that:

My fear is that in another 20 years the chances of those from non-affluent homes to reach the very highest strata of society - will have declined still further... ...It is also clear that the opportunities for bright children from non-privileged homes have declined in recent decades (Daily Mail, 15th June 2006).

Even though there is such a wide difference in chances of achieving the top position, research has found that there is no significant difference in comparable level degrees achieved between students from lower socio-economic groups (with fewer entrance qualifications) and their peers from higher socio-economic group (Bunting, 2003).

Considering the draw backs and costs involved to adult students, such as teaching assistants deciding to return to education, the reasoning behind this decision needs to be explored. Much of the current literature points to the motives of adult students being complex and varied. Houle (1988: 66) identified three general but discrete areas of motivation:

1. *Goal orientated - to gain a specific object.*
2. *Activity orientated – for the sake of the activity itself.*
3. *Learning orientated - learning for its own sake.*

Houle`s classification is wide and the points raised are general areas. It does not explore how the three areas may overlap. Morstain and Smart (1974) provide a focussed guide to the reasons for mature students returning to higher education. They suggest some of the motives that mature students may typically display in answering social surveys enquiring into their reasons for returning to education.

- *Social relationships.*
- *External expectations.*
- *Social welfare.*
- *Professional advancement.*
- *Escape/stimulation.*
- *Cognitive interests*   *(p.86).*

The above areas will be explored as a basis for examining the reasons behind teaching assistants starting a Foundation degree course. The factors that contribute to successfully completing the course and the impact of working towards/completing a Foundation Degree course, both in terms of professional and personal factors, will also be examined. This will aid the exploration of the contribution of Foundations Degrees specifically aimed at teaching assistants to the particular individuals and their workplace.

The rationale and justification for my research methodology will be scrutinised next in Chapter three.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

> *All truths are easy to understand once they are discovered; the point is to discover them ([Galileo Galilei,](#) 1564 – 1642, cited in MacHale 2002).*

This chapter outlines the choice of research method and methodologies used in this study. The type of research needed is one in which to explore answers to the questions raised so far in terms of the provision and impact of Foundation degrees for teaching assistants. This thesis needs to incorporate a methodology which allows access to the participants` own voice, rather than one imposed by the researcher. A central question to consider from the accounts gained from this research is, "whose reality gets presented?" (Lincoln and Guba, 2003: 233).

This chapter also discusses the motivation for the research and engages with the pertinent social structural positions and social processes that underpin this research. The definition of paradigm and the problems associated with epistemology are then discussed. It considers the advantages and disadvantages of various research methods and engages with the research literature. It is important to understand the rationale and the methodological basis for what is to follow in subsequent chapters in order that the true value of the data can be judged as being both valid and reliable.

> *Researchers have to be able to justify and argue a methodological case for their reasons for choosing a particular approach and specific procedures (Opie and Sikes, 2004:17).*

As well as justifying the methodology, as a sole researcher, I was involved at every stage of the research as "participation precedes learning" (Bateson, 1994: 41). So, by undertaking this research, the researcher has learnt through the experience of taking part. It is considered to be an interesting time to be doing educational research not only in light of the array of changes, but due to the increasing number of people asking important questions (Block, 2002; Clarke, 2003; Watson-Gegeo, 2004). Previously in order to try and solicit answers, many researchers have been completing case studies over a longer period of time (a semester or year), using narratives and finding out how students invest in themselves (Cook, 1999; Norton, 2000, 2001).

The motivation for this research can be found in two of Murray's (1938) categories: *'cognisance: the need to explore, ask questions, satisfy curiosity'*, and *'exposition: the need to point and demonstrate; give information, explain and interpret'*. The research is seen as being vital not only due to the lack of research evidence into Foundation degrees; it is also imperative due to the deficiency of evidence of the impact of teaching assistants taking Foundation degrees and the consequences to the learners they work with (e.g. personal, professional, financial and emotional) (Morris, 2009). It was recognised by this researcher that the data collection processes, whether for this research or for use in a school based situation, remain the same, the need for objectivity and validity remain constant and overriding. With combining recognition of, and working towards, the minimisation of bias, it is recognised that the process of triangulation was of prime importance throughout this work.

All that is written is, in my subjective view, a true and honest account of the situations and conditions found at the time of writing. This section employs the use of the first

person 'I' in the narrative, although this is a controversial area in academic research. Traditionally, theses are written in the third person. To place 'I' in theoretical context, Whitehead (1996: 3) used Polanyi (1958) as his standpoint, who said:

> *Polanyi explained the basis of personal knowledge in terms of a decision to understand the world from one's own point of view as an individual claiming originality and exercising judgement, responsibly.*

He goes on to argue that the inclusion of 'I' in the methodology is vitally important because it is a 'living contradiction', (Whitehead, 1998:12). He further argues that:

> *It establishes a dialectical base rather than a propositional base to the educational knowledge being created. The idea of existing as a living contradiction, within one's practical and theoretical knowledge has been found useful by many teachers as they identify a tension in their practice when they hold together the experience of holding certain values and the experience of their denial in practice.*

In order to discover the information needed, one of the initial phases of the research process involved conducting a comprehensive literature review to examine and consider research methodologies. Punch (2000) cites the view put forward by Locke *et al* (1993: 71-2) which suggests that the researcher should "place the research question(s) – or hypotheses – in context of previous work in such a way to explain and justify the decisions made for the proposed study" (p.44). This aided this researcher in the framing of research questions and critically analysing existing methods to help the process of decision making with regard to the suitability of research methodologies for that particular study. This will begin here by an exploration of the research setting.

The research environments in this study are both educational establishments and workplaces. In order to assist understanding of these particular settings, the social structural positions (e.g. social class and gender), and social processes (e.g. sense-making and positioning) fundamental to the perspectives of staff and students need to be outlined (Burrell and Morgan, 1979: 2). Martin and Sommerville (2005) suggest that three relevant forms of structure which are central to the social structure of the workplace are:

(1) **Temporal and sequential structure:** how processes and practices unfold and the sequence of interactions over time.

(2) **Spatial structure:** related to the relationships between objects, persons and actions.

(3) **Conceptual structure:** (sometimes also termed *ontological*) what a set of objects, entities, people, actions are, how they can be individuated and how they relate to one another conceptually.

Suchman (1987) and Wittgenstein (1958) explain that although these structures do not follow rules, plans and procedures to the letter but have a variable relationship which sometimes has a constraining influence on what actions may be taken in practice, other times they offer great flexibility. This depends on the rules and the social practices surrounding their use.

For this reason it is believed that reality is constructed socially as a product of communication… …Our meanings and understandings arise from our communication with others… …How we understand objects and how we behave towards them depend in large measure on the social reality in force (Littlejohn, 1992: 190-1).

As a consequence, this study identified and moved between three inter-dependent levels of analysis and experience.

1. The macro-level (socio-structural)

2. The meso-level (institutional/organisational)

3. The micro-level (personal/individual).

To clarify these entwined processes in relation to this research, I sought to represent this complex situation in a diagrammatical model. The weakness of a simplistic diagram has been recognised, in that it does not fully convey the importance and role of the particular positions. It is however considered to be a reasonable abstract representation which recognises the inter-relationships between the macro, meso and micro levels of analysis and experience, and between social processes and structures/institutions. The model further explains why this research needs a multi layered approach, for example recognising the impact and influences of widening participation at the macro level, the provision of Foundation degrees at the meso level and the motivation and information that teaching assistants have when embarking on a Foundation degrees at the micro level (see Diagram A below).

Diagram A: Macro, Meso and Micro factors
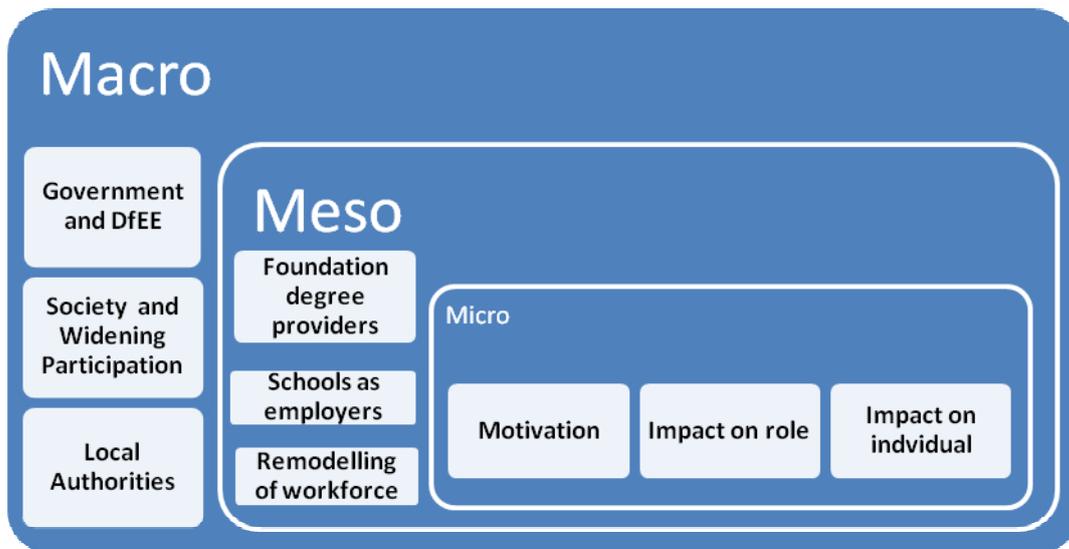
Before considering this model further, the definition of these different levels and the use of them within the model for this research is examined. The macro-level of analysis is defined as "…*the study of large time-space extensions of actors, social conditions…including large social systems and networks*" (Sibeon, 2004: 54). In relation to this research, the macro-level encompasses national-level government discourses and local polices relating to higher education, such as Foundation degrees and the Widening Participation Agenda. The final stage, characterised by the internal forces and processes which impact on individuals, is defined as the micro level. This is the final and possibly most relevant element in this research in terms of gaining perceptions and understanding perceptions of what is equitable or not in education (Schmidt 2001). The micro-level of analysis includes "…investigation of meanings, positions/roles, and actor-actor relations in small-scale settings of face-to-face interaction (situations of co-presence)" (Sibeon, 2004: 54). Micro-level is interpreted in regard to perceptions and motivations of respondents (e.g. teaching assistants and head teachers) and the patterns and influences of their responses**.**

Sibeon (2004) suggests that the micro—macro divide is deemed to be one of the most fundamental problems in social theory. It was deliberated "that the two levels of analysis do not, in themselves adequately encompass the range of objects of study" (Morrison, 2007: 42). To address this hurdle in this particular research the meso-level was introduced in order to connect the micro-level and the macro-level. Schmidt (2001) calls the meso level of consisting of organisations, which in this case included the Foundation degree providers and schools. This level is affected by educational policies and the level of autonomy at this stage is subject to the top down influence of macro level decisions and policies which can vary across regions. The meso-level also refers to:

> *Intermediate' time-space configurations of actors, social relations and practices, materials and structures—including social systems/social networks—that are larger than micro-spatial temporal contexts…but smaller than macro expanses of actors, materials and structure (Sibeon, 2004: 176).*

Within this model, the meso-level term is employed to refer to the providers of Foundation degrees, schools as employers and the Remodelling of the Workforce Agenda in schools. Thus this level incorporates higher education institutions, schools and classrooms, in which managers and teachers will be interpreting and implementing the particular policies and initiatives in their workplace.

> *Individually and collectively they must make sense of reform, and at organisation and classroom level develop interpretations and practices which engage seriously with the changes and their consequences for working relationships and for teaching and learning (Ball, 1994: 12).*

In the model, the political order of society, the economic changes at the macro-level and the notable shifts within the global economy are seen to have contributed to structural changes in the UK higher education policies. These policies are the result of compromises in reference to the macro level. "At all levels, therefore, there are structures and processes in operation" (Morrison, 2007: 43). Without recognising and incorporating these levels of analysis into this research, any interpretation and conclusions to this thesis may be tenuous and lacking validity (Gorard and Smith, 2006).

The methodological implications of this approach are that macro-level phenomena cannot be explained outside the variety of relationships at the micro-level. In sum, individuals are ultimately the sustaining force of macro-phenomena and so we must attempt an "*ascending* analysis of power, starting...from its infinitesimal mechanisms" (Foucault, 1983: 308).

This three way model assisted because it provides boundaries which prevent the whole process from becoming too unmanageable. Such a framework should be intended as a starting point for reflection about the research and its context. The framework is a research tool intended to assist a researcher to develop awareness and understanding of the situation under scrutiny and to communicate this. As with all investigations in the social world, the framework itself forms part of the agenda for negotiation to be scrutinised and tested, reviewed and reformed as a result of investigation (Guba and Lincoln, 1989).

A theoretical framework to further the knowledge of teaching assistants gaining Foundation degrees is Bourdieu`s theory of social practice (1977). Bourdieu explains that individuals tend to operate within what he called 'dynamic fields of forces', where collective symbolic struggles occur for positions based on an individual's strategies for delegating or imposing decisions on others (Harker *et al* 1990). Within these fields, individuals manoeuvre for position and power according to their dispositions (habitus), cultural capital (education), symbolic capital (prestige) and social capital (networks).

Four different modes have been identified in which cultural capital can work to exclude individuals such as teaching assistants from higher education.

1. Self-elimination: whereby students think they will not fit in and so do not even get as far as applying (Read, Archer and Leathwood, 2003).

2. Over-selection: whereby students initially try to participate in higher education, but either fail with their application or drop out early (Longden, 2004).

3. Relegation: whereby students misinterpret or fail to access relevant information in order to secure success or to not appreciate the benefits of participation in the first place (Brooks, 2003).

4. Direct selection: where overt bias takes place by academics responsible for reviewing applications and offering places on higher education courses (Lamont and Lareau, 1988).

Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital can be applied to teaching assistants and their transition from 'classroom helpers' to professionals, for he proposes a way of thinking to describe and analyse individuals holistically as social actors by examining the 'genesis of the person and of social structures and groups' (ibid: 3) and by taking into account 'the interplay between personal economic practice and the "external" world of class history and social practice' (ibid: 3). Furthermore, Bourdieu advocates that social relations link individuals to dynamic collectives of persons which are bound together in socio-structural relationships reflecting both micro and macro structures within everyday worlds. Within those social structures there are individuals who share similar conditions of existence, in which we may identify a class habitus and thus common class social practices.

Whilst knowledge of the social structural positions, the macro-micro divide and Bourdieu`s theory is helpful in interpreting the information under investigation, when choosing a specific theoretical or conceptual framework for this research it was kept in mind that:

> *Frameworks are simply the current version of the researcher's map of the territory being investigated. Without such a map, the search is slipshod… … fruitless empirical anarchy can result (Miles and Huberman, 1984: 33).*

When clearly articulated, a conceptual framework has potential usefulness as a tool to support the research process and to assist a researcher to make meaning of, and to interpret, subsequent findings. The choice of framework will be explored next.

3.1 Interpretation of research

During the process of formulating the research questions and undertaking the literature research it became clear that, along with other investigations, the context of the research rests on certain assumptions. Burrell and Morgan (1979) explained that these assumptions are essentially theories of organisation based upon a philosophy and theory of society, which may be understood by examining certain assumptions which include their epistemology and ontology. These are assumptions about the nature of knowledge and the kinds of entities that exist and are embodied in the practices of scientific inquiry.

Briefly, ontological assumptions concern the very nature of the social phenomena being studied; that is, `Ontology is the study of being`. In this instance the phenomena being studied are teaching assistants and Foundation degrees. Dourish (2001: 129) states that questions of ontology "…address (es) the question of how we can individuate the world, or distinguish between one entity and another; how we can understand the relationships between different entities or classes of entity; and so forth." . It is concerned with 'what is', with the nature of existence, "with the structure of reality as such…each research perspective embodies a way of understanding what it meant to know (epistemology)" Crotty (1998:7). Epistemological assumptions concern the very basis of knowledge, its nature, how it may be acquired and how it may be communicated to others. Therefore epistemology deals with "the nature of knowledge, its possibilities, scope and general basis" (Hamlyn, 1995: 242).

When investigating epistemological and ontological assumptions, Crotty (1998: 8) warns of the risk of merging these two terms into one and extending the meanings "well and truly beyond its boundaries". When relating this view to this particular study and research environment, this may suggest that separating the nature of the realities within the context of the research in order to communicate the personal and subjective perspective experienced within it, may be difficult. In order to help clarify this Burrell and Morgan (1979: 37) state:

> *We can identify perspectives in the social science which entail a view of human beings responding in a mechanistic fashion to the situations encountered in their external world. The view tends to be one in which human beings and their experiences are regarded as products of the environment. This extreme perspective may be contrasted with one which attributes to human beings a much more creative role; with a perspective where `free will` occupies the centre of the stage; where man (sic) is regarded as the creator of his environment, the controller as opposed to the controlled.*

The above passage highlights the difficulties in separating experience from context. In order to aid the research process, an appropriate methodological perspective was needed. Tribe (2001) explains one such perspective (positivism) whereby investigators try to determine "how things really are" and "how things really work". They assume research participants` to be independent entitles which they can study without influencing or being influenced by. "Their role becomes one of a specialist conduit giving access to facts" (p: 443). This is opposed to more interpretive researches, which see knowledge as being more subjective.

This researcher has taken an interpretive constructivist approach which emphasises that there is no objective 'truth' in the data, and that data can be interpreted from a range of perspectives (Bryman, 2001). Accepting this belief, this thesis has attempted to convey the ways in which the external structures and processes and the participant's internal influences and motivations are taken into account for the construction of the social action (Corcuff, 1995).

It follows therefore the constructivist interpretative paradigm may facilitate the study of social phenomena requiring an understanding of the social world in which people inhabit, in this case, educational institutions and schools. The central belief is that people are continually interpreting their world, their social situations and their environment. This inference is within their social context to help make sense of ambiguous situations and behaviour, thereby aiding construct of knowledge. This research attempted to make sense of Foundation degrees for teaching assistants employing a social constructivist and interpretive position. In short, recognising that the social world is already interpreted before the researcher arrives. Yin (2003) outlines that this can enhance the validity of the findings of a research investigation as the situation will not be manufactured in any way.

Burrell and Morgan (1979: 37) state that humans are social, creative beings and to examine them we need:

> *A much more creative role; with a perspective where `free will` occupies the centre of the stage; where man (sic) is regarded as the creator of his environment, the controller as opposed to the controlled.*

In creating and interpreting the environment, interpretivists are concerned with understanding subjectively construed meanings of the world it is" (Boshier, 1997:1). Interpretivists are "subjectivists" in that "reality" is what it is construed to be. Effort is devoted to adopting the frame of reference of the participants, in this case teaching assistants, their head teachers, Foundation degree managers and stakeholders.

This research examined their social reality in order to extract a network of assumptions and shared meanings. This was considered appropriate as an interpretivist needs an empathic understanding of human behaviour and this researcher is part of their reality, being a programme manager of a Foundation degree for teaching assistants. In an interpretivist paradigm, the researcher is always part of the reality they are attempting to understand. There is a view that all research is interpretive, that research is guided by the researcher's set of beliefs and feelings about the world and how it should be understood and studied (Hagyard and Keenan, 2006). "The subjectivist ontological assumptions shared by interpretivists stem from the notion that human affairs are ordered, cohesive and integrated" (Boshier, 1997: 1).

Bulmer (1969) emphasises the appropriateness of the interpretivist perspective by suggesting that in traditional research approaches:

> *Meaning is either taken for granted and thus pushed aside as unimportant or it is regarded as a mere neutral link between the factors responsible for human behaviour and this behaviour as the product of such factors (p. 2).*

It is also recognised that our perception is influenced by the external social constraints that we are exposed to, which help us make sense of the world. Our roles and the

functions we carry out are imposed and "produced through cultural and interpretive practices that people collaboratively use to make sense of the world and render it mutually comprehensible" (Maclure, 2003: 188).

This interpretation is not without its critics and other perspectives were considered when undertaking this research. Other interpretivist researchers have employed the use of Grounded theory, due to their ability to provide context-based explanations (Myers, 1997; Urquhart, 2001). Grounded theory sets out to find what theory accounts for the research situation as it is. It attempts to discover the concepts grounded in the data and uses those concepts in order to build and provide theory. It has been asserted that the Grounded Theory method and procedures can form a useful framework, through a structuring process that is essentially an interpretive practice (Urquhart, 2001).

In spite of the rationale for the use of Grounded Theory in interpretive case studies, there have been difficulties recorded "between the interpretive perspective and the Grounded theory procedures" (Hughes and Jones, 2002: 6).

> *Grounded Theory is by definition a rigorous approach – it demands time, it demands a chain of analysis and the relating of findings to other theories. As it is an inductive, emergent method that is located mainly in post positivism, this means that researchers need to carefully consider their own philosophical position (Urquhart, 2001: 27).*

These demanding procedures were particularly focused around the coding, comparing, and categorising of data which result in somewhat "positivist feel to them. Indeed

sometimes it felt quite mechanistic" (ibid).   Combined with this there are tensions arising from Yin's version of the case study paradigm and the use of Grounded Theory methodology. Yin (1994: 13) suggested that the case study "benefits from the prior development of theoretical propositions to guide data collection and analysis"; whereas Glaser and Strauss (1967) insisted that a grounded theory approach should have no pre-conceived ideas or hypothesis. These concerns, assumptions and beliefs made the selection of Grounded Theory for this thesis untenable.

Whilst the use of Grounded theory has been discarded in this research, concerns have been raised with regard to the interpretivist ontological assumptions of the very nature of the social phenomena being investigated. Where is the social reality coming from? Is it from external or individual influences and if so, does it matter from which? To clarify understanding, the realist ontology, "contents that objects have an independent existence and are not dependent for it on the knower" (Cohen and Manion, 1996: 6) and those objects exists independently, outside of the mind. An idealist ontological position, within the interpretive paradigm, argues that phenomena exist only in the sense that they are perceived.

This perspective can also be explained by 'positioning' theory. Positioning theory is the name given to particular efforts to understand and interpret the dynamics of human relationships within a social constructivist paradigm. The theory suggests that we often explicitly position ourselves in relation to a stated position, but this stated position can be abandoned or maintained, depending upon the outcomes they may generate. Positioning theory is a development of Vygotsky's social constructivist theory of the cultural interaction of thought and language (Howie and Peters, 1996).

The value of positioning theory lies in both the concept of identity being dynamic and relational but also one which is also based in the constraints and benefits of an individual's structural positions (race, class, gender). The appeal to this researcher to the study of positioning theory is that it was used as a tool to aid the description and examination of the interactions of the respondents, which acknowledges the influence of the factors involved in the position expressed (Harré and Slocum, 2003).

Harré and van Langenhove (1999) support the view that positioning theory is based on social constructionist thinking which assumes that human behaviour is goal-directed and constrained by group norms, and that human subjectivity is a product of the history of each individual's interactions with other people. During conversational interactions, respondent may use "storylines" to make their words meaningful. The storylines "can be taken from a cultural repertoire or can be invented" (ibid, 1999: 30).

It is recognised that the conclusions made in this way are not necessarily fixed and may change depending on the storylines through which the various participants make meaning of the interaction and who is interpreting the meanings. Gathering the respondents` stories in this research was a central component in order to access their experience and reality. Stories "define who we are, where we are coming from and where we are" (Somers, 1994: 618). By telling their stories, the respondents in this research were in a position to "explain to outsiders what practices, places or symbols means to the people who hold them" (Young, 1997: 72). These experiences are acknowledged with an awareness of the researcher's contribution and effect on the construction of meanings by the respondents throughout the research process. It was accepted that it was necessary that the interpretation process involved the researcher

being a reflexive researcher, one that does not simply report stories and interpretations but questions how those interpretations came about (Hertz, 1995). Reflexivity requires us:

> *To explore the ways in which a researcher's involvement with a particular study influences, acts upon and informs such research (Nightingale and Cromby, 1999: 228).*

This researcher recognises that she operated as an intermediary through which the narrative story unfolded. Atkinson (1990) demonstrates how the moderation of the research report is not just an agreement of the data. In this case it will be shaped through the use of narrative strategies and procedures that will depict their findings. As Richardson (1992: 131) stated "No matter how we stage the text, we - the authors - are doing the staging". When interpreting meaning in this research, it was also essential to accept that many factors shaped the process and conclusions including that of the researcher. On this basis, it was considered that this narrative research which is shaped within the interpretative qualitative realm was judged to be the most suitable. This is due to the recognition that the narrative method is a collaboration in the production and representation of the data which can only be taken as valid if the concept of reflexivity is fully embraced and inextricably linked.

> *Reflexivity in research is built on an acknowledgement... ...the constraining conditions is the key to the empowerment `capacities' of research and the fulfilment of its agenda. ... As we see it, the process of reflexivity is an attempt to identify, do something about, and acknowledge the limitations of the research: its location, its subjects, its process, its theoretical context, its data, its analysis, and how accounts recognise that the construction of knowledge takes place in the world and not apart from it (Ruby, 1980: 154).*

I have explained the rationale for the epistemological and ontological assumptions in which this research is framed. This is to facilitate an understanding of how the various factors within the research are related to each other. In relation to epistemology, all positions seek understanding and reflexivity as the means of obtaining an accurate reflexion of reality. Reflexivity is:

> *The process, a methodology, ontology and epistemology: as a realisation or acknowledgement of the very facet that exists reflexivity, which can be used to discover other truths about reality (Lisle, 2000: 120).*

I have explored how I employed the use of the macro-micro levels of analysis along with Bourdieu`s (1977) theory of social practice. This is due to the belief that all data collection involves subjectivity – in the sense that what one perceives is dependent upon one`s beliefs, knowledge and interests. As a teacher-researcher, this research does not make knowledge claims based on the results gathered, in the form of generalisations from which predictions can be made with regard to the experience and contribution of teaching assistants taking Foundation degrees.

3.2 Teacher-researcher movement

As previously outlined, past research has lacked the particular focus this thesis has. Conducting this research was both a daunting and a developing process. The teacher–researcher movement has been given support by BERA and SERA, (the British and the Scottish Educational Research Associations) and academics such as Schön and Lomax agree that the teacher-researcher movement plays a significant role in improving practice and in reconstituting educational knowledge and theory. To

understand the research processes involved in this, Berlin and Vivion (1993) promote the teacher-as-researcher movement as a desirable model for the teaching profession. They cite Henry Giroux, Paulo Freire, and other theorists who saw teachers as active transformers of society and indicate in their study how these theorists support the goals of the teacher-researcher movement to re-empower teachers. They argue this has declined through the increased dependency on standardised tests. This research understanding benefited from the guidance of a teacher-researcher, as in these types of environments the importance of experiential knowledge (an insider point of view), has often been accepted as providing useful and exclusive insight (e.g., Beyer, 1996; Schulz, 1997).

The insight gained from being a teacher-researcher whilst considered to be valuable to this research, accepted the risk and impact of accepting a level of impartiality within this type of research. This hazard was minimised thorough recognising and naming the uncertainties which is an important step towards not only establishing rigor in the research process but in addressing the issue of bias (Mulling 1999).

Hillocks (1995) argued what teachers do and what researchers do are similar anyway. Researchers observe, describe their observation, reflect and hypothesise. The teacher hypothesises that an activity will aid students` learning, observes and manages the process, then evaluates the results. It can be concluded that the process of research is a professional activity for educators, both as a mode of working and also part of continuing professional development, whether to inform policy-making or in terms of a reflective process (Nisbet, 2005). This observation is supported by Elton (2001: 53), who states that:

It has become increasingly clear over the past decade that the question of a positive link between research and teaching has no simple or general answer… …a positive link can be due primarily to the processes, rather than the outcomes.

In relation to this, Whitty (2005) has commented that educational research in the UK can often lack rigour, contain theoretical confusion, ideological bias and can be irrelevant. This view is supported by Furlong and Oancea (2005:4) who state that:

A perception of poor quality [in educational research] remains prevalent in government circles…. …one of the consequences of these criticisms has been a growing number of attempts to define what good quality is.

This research aimed to help towards addressing the balance by putting forward an example of quality research.

Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1999) discuss other areas of concern with regard to the teacher-researcher movement. They examine if the dual role of teacher-researcher may encourage a lack of objectivity, with the teacher and researcher creating a distinction between scientific knowledge and practical acquired knowledge. The view is that scholars, whilst divorced from the classroom, have influence as the disseminators of formal knowledge and general theories which are based on research based findings constituting the "knowledge base" (ibid 1999: 273). Doubts also may exist whether the dual practitioner's role may innocently seek out answers to support their own perspective. To counteract possible subjectivity in analysing the raw data, an independent rater was employed to check for bias in extracting themes elicited from

the data.   There is also the added dilemma if the findings from their research reveal or imply any criticism for their institution/workplace as this may be problematic. To offset this, the majority of institutions employed were previously unknown to this researcher.

In understanding that individuals may have their own agenda and/or create their own understandings of social reality, particular research methodology and techniques needed to enable elicitation and examination of such understandings have needed to be employed.   The case study method was considered the most appropriate for this research as it allowed the creation of a "*rich and vivid description of events within the case*" (Hitchcock and Hughes 1995: 17). This decision is supported by Stake (1995) and Yin (1994).

The next section discusses the rationale for the decisions taken during the empirical methodology stage of this research.

3.3 Research Methods

As well as the philosophical perspectives which guided the research process, in order to address my research questions, I devised a strategy or, as Bryman explains, "a general orientation to the conduct of research" (Bryman 2001: 20).   Decisions were made on the choice of research methods, which moves us from the underlying philosophical assumptions to research design and data collection.

Methods in research are the approach taken in the process of collecting data and the way that tools are used in a particular activity (Cantrell, 1993). In this research, this involved listening to people with experience of Foundation degrees and teaching assistants, examining documents such as Higher Level Teaching Assistant job descriptions and exploring what teaching assistants do. A methodology "is a broad array of ideas, frameworks, concepts and theories which surround the use of various methods or techniques employed to generate data" (Hitchcock and Hughes, 1989: 20). Kaplan (1964) recognised that methodology could be a description or a justification of the processes, but not of the methods of data collection themselves. The process of actually collecting data using such tools as interviews, observation or questionnaires resides within a specific methodology. The choice of research method can influence the way in which the researcher collects the data within their research (Myers, 1997).

This research explored four different settings in an attempt to uncover the perceptions of different groups of individuals with regard to Foundation degrees. This study investigated the views of:

- Teaching assistants working towards a Foundation degree in supporting learning
- Programme managers of Foundation degrees for teaching assistants
- Head teachers
- A local authority representative

When preparing to undertake this study certain decisions were carefully undertaken. Initially these were in regard to the research method to be applied which can be broadly viewed in terms of quantitative versus qualitative research.

3.4 Quantitative and qualitative data

Qualitative research has been defined by Strauss and Corbin (1990: 17) as "any kind of research that produces findings not arrived at by means of statistical procedures or other means of quantification". Whereas quantitative researchers seek causal determination, prediction, and generalisation of findings, qualitative researchers seek instead understanding and extrapolation to similar situations (*ibid*).

As mentioned, the settings under investigation in this study are educational establishments. Burgess elucidated that methods of undertaking educational research have varied over the last thirty years and makes the following observation:

> *The last decade has witnessed several changes in the scale, substance, style and strategy of social and educational research. In a field that was at one time dominated by talk of indicators, variables and measurements, by the use of surveys and quantitative techniques, some space has been cleared for qualitative research* (ibid, 1985: 1).

Burgess (1985: 6) further explained that the term qualitative refers to:

> *...a range of research and writing. Some writers have used other terms to refer to some aspects of qualitative methods. Among the most common terms used to refer to particular strategies are fieldwork, field research, ethnography, case study and interpretative procedures. Each of these terms covers an element of qualitative method and indeed there is some overlap involved.*

Strauss and Corbin (1990) suggest qualitative methods enable the researcher to gain more in-depth information that may be difficult to convey quantitatively, in this case attitudes and experiences. Thus, qualitative methods are appropriate in situations

where the researcher has determined that quantitative measures cannot adequately describe or interpret a situation, suggesting that qualitative methods may be used to better understand any phenomenon about which little is yet known and support discovery of new information. This view is highly relevant, as this research is in an area with limited previous research (Morris, 2009).

The capability of qualitative data to more fully describe a phenomenon is an important consideration, not only from the researcher's perspective, but from the reader's perspective as well: "If you want people to understand better than they otherwise might, provide them information in the form in which they usually experience it" (Guba and Lincoln, 1989: 120). The credibility of a qualitative research report may rely heavily on the confidence readers have in the researcher's ability to be sensitive to the data and to make appropriate decisions in the field (Eisner, 1991; Paton, 1990). As a practitioner-researcher this may give a degree of credibility and insight not always readily available.

Burrell and Morgan (1979) suggest that the researcher asks whether it is possible to identify and communicate the nature of knowledge as hard, real and capable of being transmitted in a tangible form, or whether knowledge is of a softer more subjective kind, based upon experience and insight of a unique and personal nature. As qualitative research reports, by their very nature tend to be rich with detail and detail insights into participants' experiences of the world, this method may also "be epistemologically in harmony with the reader's experience" (Stake, 1978: 5) and thus more meaningful.

Qualitative research was also considered to be more appropriate due to the focus of the research area. The results will be disseminated to interested parties in the field of education including colleagues and researchers working with non-traditional students and/or teaching assistants as there is relatively limited research in Foundation degrees and even less into the area of teaching assistants in relation to Foundation degrees (Morris, 2009).

The quality of qualitative research does not fit easily into a formula, in that its worth may lie in the use of the language to express the findings (Buchanan, 1992). Marshall and Rossman (1989: 10) outline six different types of qualitative research traditions which "each assumes that systematic enquiry must occur in a natural setting rather than an artificially constrained one". This type of method reinforces that qualitative research supports the nature of this research wanting to be carried out. Blaxter *et al* (1996: 5) highlight the existence of a multitude of the different types of research, but views that these share basic common ground in terms of each research containing "planned, cautious, systematic and reliable ways of finding out or deepening understanding".

An advantage of the quantitative method is that it can facilitate comparison and statistical analysis of the data which may then give a broad, generalisable set of findings. Qualitative research on the other hand implies an emphasis on processes and meanings that may be thoroughly examined, but not measured in terms of quantity or frequency. Qualitative methods typically produce detailed data and description of situations and events about a much smaller number of cases (Strauss and Corbin, 1999; Paton, 1990).

Quantitative research can be seen as being objective, whereas qualitative research is more likely to be seen as subjective; qualitative research is considered descriptive in that the researcher is interested in meaning and in-depth description. Quantitative research also measures what it considers to be a relative fixed reality in the hope of developing explanatory laws. Qualitative research is argued to be more of an exploration of what is assumed to be a dynamic reality. It cannot claim that what is discovered in the process is valuable, universal and therefore replicable (Descombe, 2000; Creswell, 1994). The worth of qualitative research may be determined by the ability to employ "language to display a picture of the world in which we discover something" (Buchanan, 1992 cited in Silverman, 1997:17).

> *The difference between qualitative and quantitative approaches to research is often said to be grounded in two distinct paradigms, each with its own, mutually contradictory, philosophical presuppositions. Quantitative research, the argument goes, presupposes objective truths and a singular, unequivocal reality; qualitative research presupposes a world which is inherently subjective, with no unequivocal reality... ...qualitative methods and quantitative methods are simply tools, fit for a range of scientific purposes. In common with other tools, whether maps or cutlery, they are useful in different types of situations; (Paley, 2000: 143).*

Strauss and Corbin (1990) may support the choice of qualitative methods for this particular study, as they claim that qualitative methods can be used to better understand any phenomenon about which little is yet known and to gain more in-depth information that may be difficult to convey quantitatively. Thus, qualitative methods may be more appropriate in situations where one needs to first identify the variables that might later be tested quantitatively, or where the researcher has determined that quantitative measures cannot adequately describe or interpret a situation. It is put

forward that research problems tend to be framed as open-ended questions that will support discovery of new information. Greene's (1994) study of women in the trades, for example, asked:

> *What personal characteristics do tradeswomen have in common? In what way, if any, did role models contribute to women's choices to work in the trades? (ibid: 524a).*

Qualitative research methods are not without critics, one specific area of criticism it is argued, relates to its relative lack of rigour. It is suggested that this has transpired because of the attempts to judge the rigour of qualitative studies have employed measures which have been developed to judge the rigour of quantitative studies. It is suggested that rigour needs to be defined differently for qualitative research since the desired outcome is different (Burns, 1989; Dzurec, 1989). In quantitative research rigour could be reflected in its restriction and objectivity which can lead to rigid adherence to research designs and precise statistical analysis. Rigour in qualitative research is associated with openness, scrupulous adherence to a philosophical perspective, thoroughness in collecting data, and consideration of all the data in the development of a theory (*ibid*). Qualitative research methods have been criticised for lack of rigour. Cronbach (1975) claims that employing statistical quantitative research in social settings will not be able to take full account of the many social interactions that take place. He gives examples of several empirical 'laws' that do not hold true in actual settings. Cronbach further explains how if statistical tests are not statistically significant, pertinent effects can be ignored. "The time has come to exorcise the null hypothesis" (p.124). Qualitative inquiry may be more able to acknowledge the complex quality of the social world.

It is recognised that due to the evolving nature of qualitative research design and because this researcher was seeking to interpret meanings in context, it was neither possible nor appropriate to finalise all aspects of the research strategies before data collection has begun. It was accepted that a degree of flexibility was needed whilst facilitating the research process (Paton, 1990).

Miller and Dingwall (1997: 20) stated that:

> *When presenting results qualitative data analysts will suggest that certain patterns occur that perhaps a particular sequence of events can be observed and that the patterns and events have the meanings ascribed to them.*

Bogdan and Biklen (1982: 145) define qualitative data analysis as "working with data, organising it, breaking it into management units, synthesising it, searching for patterns, discovering what is important and what is to be learned and deciding what you will tell others". Qualitative researchers tend to use inductive analysis of data, meaning that the critical themes emerge out of the data (Paton, 1990). It was acknowledged that the themes drawn out are subject to the influence of the researcher`s own views and experience and thus may lack an element of objectivity.

This influence also involved the choice of research to employ. It was accepted that before educational research is undertaken, consideration must be given to the intended outcome which then links the rationale to the suitability of quantitative versus qualitative approaches. Burgess (1985:3) outlined that:

Zelditch (1982) indicated that researchers need to ask themselves what kinds of methods are relevant for the particular topic under investigation? What kinds of information are relevant? How can the methods used be evaluated? Zelditch suggests that these questions can be addressed by considering the 'efficiency' and informational adequacy of the particular methods in gathering data.

With regard to the efficiency of the research methods questions have been raised whether there is really much difference between quantitative and qualitative research:

Bad work of either kind is equally to be deplored; and good work of either kind is still - at best - only tentative. But the good work in both cases will be objective, in the sense that it has been opened up to criticism, and the reasons and evidence offered in both cases will have withstood serious scrutiny. The works will have faced potential refutation, and insofar as they have survived, they will be regarded as worthy of further investigation (Phillips, 1990: 35).

This research rather than just considering either qualitative or quantitative, accepted that there are areas where both can be effectively combined. Amaratunga *et al* (1992) suggested that quantitative and qualitative, are complementary and should therefore be mixed in research. He refers to Das (1983: 311) who stated that:

Quantitative and qualitative ...methodologies are not antithetic or divergent; rather they focus on the different dimensions of the same phenomenon. Sometimes, these dimensions may appear to be confluent: but even in these instances, where they apparently diverge, the underlying unity may become visible on deeper penetration ... The situational contingencies and objectives of the researcher would seem to play a decisive role in the design and execution of the study.

This study exploited them in a complementary 'mixed method approach' in order to take the most advantage of each method. Utilising the '*multiple methodologies*' concept (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994) is an acceptable way of bringing together a synthesis of all the different forms of data and varieties of narrative employed. I therefore utilised several methods under the umbrella of qualitative methodology.

With regard to the recent increase in the popularity of mixed methods research, Bryman (2006: 4) stated:

> *A number of UK and international seminars and workshops have been held in the past year devoted to the discussion of mixed methods research. A journal of mixed methods research is planned by Sage.*

Mixed methods research is now recognised as a major research approach or research paradigm, along with qualitative research and quantitative research (Johnson *et al,* 2007). By definition, mixed methods is a procedure for collecting, analysing, and 'mixing' or integrating both quantitative and qualitative data during the research process for the purpose of gaining a better understanding of the research problem (Tashakkori and Teddlie, 2003). Fielding and Fielding (1986) argue the decision for combining methods may have a good theoretical case. This is in order to study both different levels of enquiry and different aspects of the same problem, which may add breadth and depth to the analysis. Sandelowski (2000), for example, remarks that mixed methods can enhance the flexibility of research designs, while Johnstone (2004) suggests that using mixed methods can complement or expand the contribution of a single approach. When used in combination, as in this research, quantitative and

qualitative methods complement each other and allow for a more robust analysis, taking advantage of the strengths of each (Miles and Huberman, 1994; Tashakkori and Teddlie, 1998). In essence, this is why a mixed methods approach was selected for this study.

Using mixed methods approaches enable possible obstacles to be overcome which may arise in the choice of methods, but to assist in the efficiency and to cut across the qualitative-quantitative divide in this study, triangulation was employed (Holborn, 2004). In distinguishing between the two terms (mixed methods and triangulation), Denzin (1994) attempts to clarify the position; he considers the use of mixed methods can be identified as 'standard triangulation', in that different methods can provide triangulation in establishing whether the findings are consistent with those derived from other methods.

3.5 Triangulation

Triangulation has been defined as "…*more than one method of data collection within a single* study" (Hitchcock and Hughes, 1995: 180). Using contrasting methods offers the possibility of different perspectives on a topic, which in turn can enhance the validity of the data (Denscombe, 2003: 133).

Denzin (1984) identified four different types of triangulation:

1. *Data source triangulation*, when the data remains the same in different contexts,

2. *Investigator triangulation,* when investigators examine the same phenomenon,

3. *Theory triangulation*, when investigators with different viewpoints interpret the same results; and finally,

4. *Methodological triangulation*, when one approach is followed by another.

Triangulation was a tool accessed to address concerns with regard to qualitative and quantitative research and to increase the level of validity of the researchers' investigation. Employing multiple methods such as focus groups, interviews and questionnaires was considered to lead to more valid realities. It is generally considered that the use of:

> *Triangulation strengthens a study by combining methods. This can mean using several kinds of methods or data, including using both quantitative and quantitative approaches (Paton, 2001: 247).*

This is supported by Mathison (1988) who views triangulation as an approach in establishing validity. However these views have been challenged by many that suggest that "there is no absolute guarantee that a number of data sources that purport to provide evidence concerning the same construct in fact do so" (McCormick and James, 1983: 10). Barbour and Kitzinger (1999) have warned against mixing methods within the qualitative paradigm as each may have its own individual suppositions and there is a need to define triangulation in qualitative research from each of the individual researcher's perception.

Knafl and Breitmayer (1989) stated that "multiple data collection techniques contribute to the completeness function of triangulation by providing explanatory

insights about data from varying sources" (pp.234-5). In that, through the triangulation process, common descriptive themes which emerge can provide a greater insight into areas under investigation than statistical data alone. These joint themes indicates that qualitative researchers can be just as confident in their results as the most exact quantitative researchers (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Despite these views, argument still exists as to whether triangulation does give qualitative researchers more confidence in their results. Richie and Lewis (2003: 44) suggest that "the security that triangulation provides is through giving a fuller picture of phenomena, not necessarily a more certain one".

Even so, triangulation may allow for the limitations which occur in all research methodologies to be complemented by the strengths of other methodologies (Brewer and Hunter, 1989). Scandura and Williams (2000: 1250) assured that:

> *Triangulation should improve the ability of researchers to draw conclusions from their studies. The use of a variety of methods to examine a topic might result in a more robust and generalisable set of findings (higher external validity).*

They also noted that as all research methodologies have imperfections, it is critical to obtain corroborating evidence using a variety of methods. Supporting this view, Yin (1994: 92) comments that with triangulation, "…multiple sources of evidence essentially provide multiple measures of the same phenomenon".

Triangulation has been critiqued by Janesick (2000), proposing that rather than triangulating we should crystallize. This encourages the recognition and state of mind

that that our world is "far more than three sides" (Richardson, 2000: 934). This view requires a paradigm shift in the way we approach our research, from a rigid two-dimensional approach towards a concept of examining a crystal, which allows for an appreciation of the infinite variety of shape, substance and form. "Whilst this is an inspiring image, there remains some concern with crystallization as a workable technique" (Tobin and Begley, 2003: 393). This suggests that whilst this approach may acknowledge the variety of angles to be examined, access to this information may be more complex and difficult to achieve.

Access to the area under attention, Foundation degrees for teaching assistants, was investigated by use of a case study, incorporating triangulation methods such as interviews, focus groups and questionnaires.

> *Cases must be chosen; what and who is to be studied and the boundaries of each case… ...within each case, decisions must be made about which issues to raise and what to observe; if these are not taken consciously, perceptions and bias will inevitably govern them (Watson, 2001: 214).*

The rationale for the employment of a case study for this thesis will be appraised next.

3.6 Case Study

Case studies have been defined (Nisbett and Watt, 1984: 72) as "the study of an instance in action". Hitchcock and Hughes (1995: 319) identified that case studies:

- *Have temporal characteristics which help define their nature*
- *Have geographical parameters and boundaries allowing for their depth*

- *May be defined by an individual or group in a particular context, at a point in time*
- *May be shaped by organisational or institutional arrangements.*

The instance is the impact and experience of Foundation degrees on teaching assistants. Whilst it appears that there is some variation on the definition of a qualitative case study, a common definition is that a case study is a unit with an established identity. The identity of the unit in this instance was teaching assistants taking, or who have gained, a Foundation degree. The focus for a particular case study could be an individual, organisation, culture, community or country (Grbich, 1999). This research utilised four different organisations and employed a multiple case study.

The philosophy behind the decision to employ case study technique was due the ability to offer a detailed picture which can help expand knowledge of teaching assistants and Foundation degrees. Case studies investigate situations that are argued to be unique and dynamic and strive to portray 'what a situation is like', in order to record the reality and unfolding events of the participants` experience and feelings within the given situation (Cohen *et al* 2000).

Three types of case studies have been identified by Stake (1994). Firstly, intrinsic case studies which are undertaken in order to aid understanding, secondly, they are instrumental or provide insight or refinement of theory and thirdly, a collective case study in which researchers study a number of cases. Employing this definition, this research employed the use of the collective case study method, as the research involves studying four different institutions.

When investigating more than one institution, it may be wise to keep in mind Dale's (1992) advice (when examining different institutions) that "only rarely are we offered a comparative analysis that has the virtue of demonstrating that things…could be otherwise" (Cited in Halpin and Troyna, 1994: 203). Keeping Dales` (1992) comments in mind, Robson (1993) cited Rose and Grosvenor (2001: 71) who outlined certain components that the researcher needs to address which may facilitate the whole case study process:

- *A conceptual framework*
- *A set of research questions*
- *A sampling strategy*
- *Clear methods and instruments for data collection*

In attempting to begin addressing Robson`s components within this study's particular case study methodology, my procedure for gaining access to the information available was organised. "Case studies are distinguished less by their methodologies that they employ rather than by the subjects and objects of their inquiry" (ibid: 316).

A review of the research methodology literature revealed some challenges to the overall success of the case study method.   The intrusion in the lives of others may distort the reality of their world and restrict practices which are actually always changing. The alteration is mainly due to uniqueness of case studies and problems with consistency and generalisability (Gillham, 2000). Others have raised challenges to its legitimacy. Smith (2000: 375) suggests that:

The case study method is the logically weakest method of knowing. The study of individual careers, communities, nations and so on has become essential passé.

Even with its critics, the consensus is that case study research is an excellent method in enabling an understanding of this particular current issue (Gillian 2000, Bassey 1999, Golby 1999 and Yin 1984), which as mentioned, relatively little is known about. For many years researchers have used the case study research method to investigate contemporary real-life situations. The case study research method has been defined as:

An empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context; when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident; and in which multiple sources of evidence are used (Yin, 1984: 23).

The composition of this case study relied on multiple sources of information and methods in order to provide as complete a picture as possible and was beneficial to this research as relevant information was not considered to be held in one particular discrete source. There is no single way to accomplish a case study and a combination of methods was employed for example, questionnaires, focus groups, semi-structured interviews. Collecting different types of data allowed the triangulation of the different types of evidence collected at each institution and enabled the creation of 'snapshots' of the current situation within those institutions.

As outlined, throughout this thesis, the researcher sought to understand individual and groups located in their own contexts within the interpretive paradigm. Justification for the choice a case study as a strategy was due to the consideration that it provided an

approach which enabled the researcher to adopt an appropriate evaluative stance (Stake, 1995). The phenomenon investigated in this case involved four separate institutions, hence a multiple case study approach was considered to be useful. This allowed the researcher to examine similarities and also take into account the individual differences which existed between the particular Foundation degree institutions, teaching assistants, programme managers, Head teachers and locations.

In accessing the information necessary in order to achieve the aims of this research, decisions were taken with regard to accessing the participants needed. The strategies employed in the selection of participants for study are examined next, starting with a consideration of sampling techniques.

3.7 Sample

Sampling is a process of "selecting individuals, groups, or texts for inclusion in a research project" (Grbich, 1999: 68). The samples accessed for this research included:

1. One institution for piloting.

2. Four institutions – which provided Foundation degrees for teaching assistants.

3. Focus Group participants at each institution (the students/teaching assistants).

4. One programme manager at each institution to be interviewed.

5. The names and locations of head teachers for the questionnaire sample.

6. Head teachers for individual follow-up interviews of from the sample who responded to the questionnaire.

7. A stakeholders/Local Authority representative to be interviewed.

Miles and Huberman (1994) outlined sampling strategies, two of which (although not always distinguished as two separate strategies) were particularly deliberated for this research; opportunistic and convenience sampling. Opportunistic sampling is a flexible strategy that follows new leads and takes advantage of the unexpected. Opportunistic sampling is particularly useful for qualitative researchers working in a context where they have knowledge about the research topic (Amaratunga *et al* 2002). Convenience sampling on the other hand is used where the aim is to "locate a group of people as quickly as possible in order to maximise convenience and minimise cost" (Grbich, 1999: 70).

The convenience sampling strategy, involved employing institutions that the researcher has personal contact with. It is accepted that this could create difficulties with regard to generalisation, but in this research, it was considered appropriate and a "convenient sample may be the sampling strategy selected for a case study or a series of case studies" (Cohen *et al* 2000: 103). This technique generally yields information-poor cases and is regarded as the weakest form of sampling. It saves time and money but this could be at the expense of information and credibility. Despite the weaknesses highlighted, convenience sampling was utilised but efforts were made to ensure that the sample employed for the pilot study was an accurate representation of the larger population as possible. This was completed by checking that the institution ran a Foundation degree course for teaching assistants.

Hitchcock and Hughes (1995: 108) explain the issue of representativeness:

...surrounds the extent to which the situation, individuals or groups investigated are typical or representative of the situation, individuals, or group as a whole.

The pilot case chosen to represent the research area will be explored next.

3.7i: Pilot Study

The term *pilot study* has been used in different ways in social science research. It can refer to feasibility studies which can be seen as a "small scale version[s], or trial run[s], done in preparation for the major study" (Polit and Hungler, 2001: 467). However, a pilot study can also be the pre-testing or the trying out of a particular research instrument (Baker, 1994).

Completing the pilot study successfully was not a guarantee of a successful outcome in the research process as problems may not become obvious until the larger scale study is conducted. One of the advantages of conducting the pilot study is it enabled insight into whether the proposed methods or instruments are appropriate or too complicated. In the words of De Vaus (1993: 54) "Do not take the risk. Pilot test". In this case, the instruments to be piloted include the interview questions, focus group questions and the questionnaire itself.

The pilot focus group took place at a local further education college.   Despite, as Krueger (1994) recommended, being carefully planned, this revealed difficulties in this research method which needed to be addressed before conducting the main research.   Changes that needed to be made to the research procedure involved the

need to be more prescriptive to the hosts with regard to the requirements of the research and the organisation of the schedule of timings. Harré and van Langenhove (1999) would agree with this decision as he suggested that the scheduling of the focus groups was an important factor in research.

The pilot took place toward the end of the students' teaching session one winter`s evening at college. It was found that the focus group took longer than anticipated due to the respondents having a great many issues to discuss, many of which were negative and not directly linked to the research area. Difficulties also arose due to the room allocated being changed a quarter of the way through the focus group and the replacement being unsuitable due to it being a computer room, which made the seating awkward and inhibited adequate face to face discussion.

The pilot study revealed that I needed to give clearer direction to the respondents and employ effective management and moderation of the topic and questions needed to be covered for the research. This was to ensure that the research has uniformity in terms of the areas covered in each focus group in order for the research questions to be answered. Thus the pilot study identified strategies which needed to be incorporated and helped reveal information in a way which would allow the researcher to find out why an issue is relevant, as well as what is significant about it (Morgan, 1993).

After the pilot study, steps were implemented in order to accomplish an effective focus group session. Outlined next (Table 6) are Billson Mancini (ibid) nine steps, along with strategies that were undertaken in order to achieve them.

Table 6: Focus group strategies

	Step	Strategy
1	*Conceptualisation of the key research question*	Researcher gave clear information as to the area of study, key research questions to be answered and an explanation of how the data will be used.
2	*Design of the research approach*	Create the appropriate research design to answer the question set by evaluating method.
3	*Development of the moderator's guide*	Lone researcher gave clear standardised instructions.
4	*Recruitment of participants*	Suitable participants were recruited by ensuring that they fit specified criteria (teaching assistants completing Foundation degrees).
5	*Group Moderation*	Moderator did not allow minority to dominate focus group by asking same questions to those with the least input to the discussion.
6	*Debriefing with observers/researchers*	At the end of the focus group the main themes to emerge were outlined for agreement within the group.
7	*Data analysis*	Use of appropriate techniques to analyse data as soon as possible after focus group to ensure quality of recordings (all were analysed within 72 hours).
8	*Presentation of findings*	Report was written in recommend format.
9	*Follow up*	Impact of findings was explored.

(Adapted from Billson Mancini, 2004: 7-8)

Billson Mancini (2004) Focus Group Research model reiterates the importance of conducting a pilot study as it is proposed that many research projects falter because of lack of a well considered plan brought about by thorough discussion, direction and consensus.

The steps involved locating the research participants for this study; the sampling techniques for which are examined next.

3.7ii: Foundation degree institutions/Programme managers

Four institutions which offer Foundation degrees for teaching assistants were investigated for this research. Participants from the researcher`s own institution comprised one of the focus groups and in order to gain access to the other three relevant institutions, course listings were located on the following Foundation degree web site: www.findfoundationdegree.co.uk. The programme managers at all institutions listed offering Foundation degrees for teaching assistants in the Midlands area, apart from my own local authority, were then emailed. The email included all the details with regard to the aim and objectives of this research. The email also included a request for permission to visit their institution to personally invite them and their students to take part in this research. The first three programme managers to respond positively to the email, from three different boroughs across the Midlands, were emailed back and arrangements and were made to visit and conduct the required research.

The sampling method employed for this aspect of this research was a self selected sampling (or volunteer sampling) technique. This sampling method consists of participants becoming part of a study because they volunteer when asked. It is recognised that this sampling method may have been open to bias as the sample that volunteered may be different to those that decided not to take part. Goyder (1987) believed that the motivation to self select is the desire to have a voice. However the programme managers themselves are not the only focus of the research, rather their students, so it was considered to be an acceptable sampling technique in this instance for this particular research.

When recording the details of the four Foundation degree institutions in this research (see Table 7 below); the final sample was considered ideal as each represented a different type of establishment offering Foundation degrees; a traditional university, a university college, a collegiate and further education college (see Chapter 4, for an outline of each establishment).

Table 7: Institutions that responded to email

Institution	Example of Foundation Degree offered	Length
1	Foundation Degree in Educational Studies	3 Years
2	Foundation Degree in Classroom Support	2 Years
3	Foundation Degree for Teaching Assistants	3 Years

The fourth institution to be involved in this research was the researchers own, which is a university college.

4	Foundation Degree Professional Studies in Learning	2 Years

(Note for ease of reference, the same number was kept for identification of the institution, it`s local authority and focus group conducted there).

The table above demonstrates that two of the institutions ran their Foundation degrees over three years, whilst the other two offered theirs over two years. This reflects a 50/50 split in provision offered by the Foundation degree providers investigated.

Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) 2007, figures state that 51 per cent of part time Foundation degree students gain their qualification within three years. This sample closely reflects the population of interest and was considered an appropriate sample for this research.

At the Foundation degree institutions the research required access to teaching assistants taking Foundation degrees in order to conduct focus group research. The respondents of which will be examined next.

3.7iii: Teaching assistants on Foundation degrees

The focus group participants were accessed through their Foundation degree programme manager. As access was gained via a gatekeeper, I did not presume that all the teaching assistants on Foundation degree students within the organisation had volunteered, as their consent was by proxy. All individual participants were asked for their informed consent to take part in this research and this was obtained. Before the focus group questions were put to the volunteer sample of teaching assistants, the respondents were asked to identify their job role/title and specific cohort of learners they were supporting (nurseries, infant, primary, junior or secondary school age children). The details were recorded along with their own age range, social class and ethnicity. This was considered to be useful in order to contribute towards the analysis of results and enable comparisons between groups and their individual characteristics to be made. The pertinent variables are detailed in the table below:

Table 8: Focus Group Respondents

Focus Group 1	Job Role/Title	Age	Gender	Social Class	Ethnicity
AW	Teaching Assistant (Sec.)	Over 25	Female	Middle	White
VH	Teaching Assistant (I & J)	Over 25	Female	Working class	White
PG	Teaching Assistant (Nursery)	Under 25	Female	Working class	White
NE	Teaching Assistant (I & J)	Over 25	Female	Middle	White
JG	Teaching Assistant (I & J)	Over 25	Female	Working class	White
Focus Group 2					
AA	Teaching Assistant (Junior)	Under 25	Female	Working class	White
AB	Teaching Assistant (SEN)	Under 25	Female	Working class	AABP
AC	Teaching Assistant (Nursery)	Over 25	Female	Working class	White
AD	Learning Support assistant (I & J)	Over 25	Female	Working class	White
AE	Teaching Assistant (I & J)	Over 25	Female	Working class	BBC
Focus Group 3					
RL	Teaching Assistant (Sec.)	Over 25	Male	Working class	White
NA	Integration Assistant (Junior)	Under 25	Female	Working class	AABP
HM	Teaching Assistant (Nursery)	Over 25	Female	Working class	White
AV	Learning Support Assistant (Sec.)	Over 25	Female	Working class	AABI
SZ	Teaching Assistant (Sec.)	Over 25	Female	Working class	White
Focus Group 4					
JS	Teaching Assistant (Sec.)	Under 25	Male	Working class	White
NK	Teaching Assistant (I & J)	Under 25	Female	Working class	AABP
AC	Teaching Assistant (Nursery)	Over 25	Female	Working class	BBC
AK	Teaching Assistant (Infant)	Over 25	Female	Working class	AABP
AA	Home school liaison officer (Sec.)	Over 25	Female	Working class	BBC
AM	Learning mentor (Sec.)	Over 25	Female	Working class	BBC
TR	Integration Assistant (Junior)	Under 25	Female	Working class	AABI
JH	Teaching Assistant (Nursery)	Over 25	Female	Working class	White
MD	Teaching Assistant (I & J)	Over 25	Female	Working class	White
BS	Teaching Assistant (SEN/Deaf)	Over 25	Female	Working class	AABI

Explanation of Terms

I & J: *Infant & Junior school*   **SEC***: Secondary School*
W: *White*   **BBC**: *Black or Black British Caribbean*
AABI: *Asian or Asian British Indian*   **AABP**: *Asian or Asian British Pakistani*

As well as a selection of institutions offering Foundation degrees for teaching assistants and teaching assistants on Foundation degrees, needing to be researched; it was important that all educational environments (nurseries, infant, primary, junior and

secondary schools) were included and represented in the final sample. Stratified sampling may have enabled a representative sample of the target population on the basis of those identified characteristics which needed to be investigated. Despite accepting that, the selection of institutions and participants were left out of this researcher particular control, as ultimately the respondents were, as previously outlined, self selecting. The sample size must be considered as it needs to reflect the size and particular characteristics of the particular population (Cohen and Manion, 1996). Due to the relatively large number of respondents it was considered that most would be included in the final sample. To check if this was so, all the pertinent variables including the type of workplace (e.g. nursery, primary or secondary) was checked to determine if all types of institutions were represented in this research. Results indicated that all relevant variables (e.g. type of school) were included therefore the next stage of this research, a questionnaire for Head teachers was initiated.

3.7iv: Head teacher questionnaire

Following analysis of the focus group data, a questionnaire was to be forwarded to sample of Head teachers. The questionnaire was piloted on a pair of volunteers, who were as similar as possible to the target population; they were two ex head teachers. This strategy was recommended by van Teijlingen and Hundley (2001) as a useful and pertinent approach in order to identify potential practical problems in the research tool. As Head teachers at four types of educational institutions, nurseries, infant and primary and secondary schools needed to be included in the final sample investigated, two sampling methods were employed. Firstly, a stratified sampling method which

enabled a representative sample of the target population to be included on the basis of those identified characteristics needed (type of educational institution). Secondly, a systematic sampling technique was employed in which every fourth name on an alphabetical list of schools on the four individual local authority website was sent a questionnaire. This allowed an acceptable ratio of the sample frame from the target population.

The questionnaire also permitted access to the next population that needed to be interviewed for this research.

3.7v: Head Teachers for interview

Four individual interviews were conducted in May 2008 (see appendix: C) with Head teachers. The table below (Table 9), below indicates the local authority and school type of each interviewee. This sample was also self selected through the questionnaire, in terms indicating on the questionnaire that they were happy to be followed up to take part in an interview and as such included and returned their contact details to me with their questionnaire.

The table (Table 9) below contains relevant details including of local authority and school type.

Table 9: Individual Head Teacher interview/ school type

Name	Date	LA	School Type
SJ	01.05.08	4	Secondary
SS	07.05.08	3	Infant and Nursery
DP	08.05.08	2	Primary
JA	15.05.08	1	Secondary

The methods employed to obtain the samples in this research taken have been examined, together with the sample frame. Whatever the methods employed, it was accepted in this thesis that the quality of the research must be paramount. A good study can help us speculate to aid our understanding and uncover information as a sort of road map or guide. "Guides call our attention to aspects of the situation or place we might otherwise miss" (Eisner, 1991: 59).

The first research tool to be employed within the case study was a focus group carried out at each of the Foundation degree institutions. These focus groups comprised of teaching assistants taking Foundation degrees.

3.8 Focus Groups

Focus groups were used in order to examine the teaching assistants' perceptions of the contribution of their Foundation degree in terms of their personal experience during

their course, their professional development and the contribution they make to the workplace. Employment of this technique for educational research appears to be growing in popularity amongst researchers as a cost efficient and relatively practical way of developing discussion and generating a wide range of responses (Cohen and Manion, 1996).

The term 'focus group' originates from the idea that groups are 'focused' on a collective activity occurring in a social context (Kitzinger, 1994). The researcher is present to take notes and guide the discussion with prepared open ended questions. Krueger (1994: 6) defines a focus group as "a carefully planned discussion designed to obtain perceptions on a defined area of interest in a permissive, non-threatening environment." He expands on this definition to state that a focus group generally comprises of between six and ten people with shared characteristics. Fong Chiu (2003) suggests that the term focus groups may be too general in that establishing universal guidance for this type of research is undependable due to the individual nature of this type of methodology.

Aside from definitional and construction debates, the focus group methodology is said to have many advantages and disadvantages as a research method. These were considered before the final decision before incorporating into this research. Some of these are summarised by Sherraden (1995) next:

Table 10: Focus group appraisal

Advantages	Disadvantages
Efficient - interviewing a number of people at the same time means results can often be obtained in a reasonably short time span.	Groups can be difficult to assemble and vary considerably.
Flexible - the researcher can probe for clarification or greater detail.	Less control than in an individual interview.
People often express views that they might not express in other settings, or if interviewed as individuals.	The setting and conditions must be conducive to discussion - individuals must feel secure and confident within the group.
Unanticipated lines of discussion can be pursued.	Data can be difficult to summarise and analyse – a lot of specific information, some not relevant to the topic.

Advocates argue that focus groups have several advantages over other research methods, which in comparison are suggested to be somewhat rather more artificial techniques. For example, it has been argued that the conversation may actually mirror the natural day to day conversation that takes place (Hollander, 2004). Other authors challenge this view and have raised concerns about both the appropriateness and credibility of focus groups (Carey, 1995).   Focus groups can be time efficient as they can produce a large quantity of data in a short period of time compared to the corresponding number of individual interviews (Morgan, 1993). For this researcher the main advantage of focus groups is that they are a socially oriented method which can encourage people to discuss and interact with others in order to form and express opinions (Krueger 1994).

Whilst accepting the environment in which focus groups takes place can be an 'unnatural setting', by focussing on a particular issue they may offer insights which may not be forthcoming in a conventional interview. In that the focus group allows the process of reflective dialogue to be encouraged whereby respondents have the opportunity to develop points during their discussions (Litosseliti, 2003).

The focus groups conducted comprised of teaching assistants currently on Foundation degree courses and took place between November 2006 and January 2007. A total of four focus groups were conducted during this time period. The decision to conduct four focus groups is supported by Morgan (1997) who suggests that one rule of thumb is to hold between three to five focus groups. Morgan acknowledges that this figure will of course be influenced by the specific research aims and individual factors. In this instance, one focus group was carried out at each of the four Foundation degree providers to be investigated.

Each focus group took place in one of four different educational establishments, in the students` usual classroom with the participants seated around a table in clear view of both the researcher and each other. Focus Group 4, was held in the researcher`s own institution with the respondents being known to the researcher, in the capacity of their programme manager and lecturer. I considered that a good relationship existed between both parties and that respondents would be able to discuss openly their genuine views without restraint. Most were female respondents, as a female research, Oakley (1981) asserts that women interviewing other women enjoy a greater rapport, as a result of their shared experiences, process.

In effect, because the wider social structure classifies the researcher and informants in a similar or identical fashion, this creates greater confidence between the parties ... One of the results of this trust and exposure to the most intimate of details is that the insider researcher is able to appreciate the full complexity of the social world at hand (Hockey, 1993: 204-205).

The researcher's knowledge of the group also enabled the focus group to be conducted with twice as many respondents, as they were familiar to the researcher and it was easier to ensure that all those involved had an opportunity to voice their views.

Leininger (1994) proposed that is it important to establish rapport and develop trust within a research group, so time was taken to introduce myself to the groups in order to try and make the groups feel at ease. Careful effort was especially evident at those focus groups taking place at institutions previously unknown to the researcher. During the introduction (in line with the ethical guidelines, see page 153) the purpose of the session was explained along with the background, aims and objectives of the research. Participants were also assured of full anonymity and the right to withdraw at any time. Prior to the commencement of each focus group, the groups were addressed in order to ask for one volunteer to agree to stay behind afterwards to take part in a one to one interview in order to obtain an individual life history at each institution. This was considered to be useful in positioning the individual within their own educational, social and cultural context because:

Life history research at its best always brings a focus on historical change, moving between the changing biographical history of the person and the social history of his or her lifespan (Plummer, 2001: 39–40).

Krueger (1994) whilst accepting the potential of the focus group for useful dialogue between members as their principal strength, recognises their limitations. The discourse can be unequal with the few making the majority of contributions.

> *One-tenth of the participants produce over one-third of the output. Increasing the number of participants merely reduces the average output* (Augustine, 1986).

This was recognised, in that some participants did try and dominate the discussion at times. However steps were taken to counteract individual respondents dominating the discussion during the focus groups; moderation strategies were employed, such as directing the same question at those that had not had an opportunity to respond. These techniques were developed through the pilot study, in order to regulate input to ensure that all respondents had opportunity to contribute to the research. Respondents can also feel pressured by group dynamics into offering opinions they do not really have due to the influence of the group. The focus groups carried out included groups of teaching assistants who are on a long course together (two or three years). Conformity research highlights that remarks made are dependent upon the processes of social influence and this process can both reduce the motivation of individual members to participate and reduce chances that comments made will actually reflect their true views (Latane *et al* 1979). As the respondents will be familiar with each other, it was considered that they may be less likely to be influenced by factors which increase levels of conformity.

Another limitation of focus groups is that the data can be more difficult to analyse than in an individual interview, since:

Group interaction provides a social environment, and comments must be interpreted within that context. Care is needed to avoid lifting comments out of context and out of sequence or coming to premature conclusions. Occasionally participants will modify or even reverse their positions after interacting with others (Krueger, 1994: 36).

This last point is an important one. It highlights the fact that a focus group is essentially a social encounter and that a transcript of the event, however detailed, may not adequately convey this. This underlines the need for the researcher to regularly return to the original recording to get a stronger sense of the nature of the social interaction that took place (Kvale, 1996). It was accepted that the analysis of the transcript of the focus group needed to be examined carefully and repeatedly. The data analysis involved making summaries of the intercourse and then drawing out themes from the raw data which was broken down further into discrete topics and sub-topics. When examining the original data from the focus groups, it is suggested by Billson Mancini (2004) that the following procedure will aid the process:

Table 11: Analysis of Focus Groups

Procedure
Develop a system for analysing the data and stick with it
Make copies of the original transcripts and work from the copies. Keep copies of the originals in a separate directory to avoid loss.
Save your work every few minutes on the computer - changes or conceptualisations once made are often quickly forgotten.
Analyse the data from one group at a time, and then begin to make comparisons across groups.

(Billson Mancini, 2004: 22).

The above guidelines (Table: 11) were followed in this study. The scheduling of the focus groups was also an important factor in the research. They were employed first, before the questionnaire and analysis and before the individual interviews. This was in order to elicit and develop any significant experiences and perspectives that might arise from the discussions and need to be further investigated (Harré and van Langenhove, 1999). This was due to the recognition that the focus group had the ability to access the "knowledge, ideas, story-telling, self-presentation, and linguistic exchanges within a given cultural context" (Barbour and Kitzinger, 1999: 5), results of which were used to inform the next stages of this research.

Following the realisation of the focus groups, a questionnaire was developed and employed to ascertain information from Head teachers with regard to Foundation degrees for teaching assistants. The use of questionnaires in this study will be examined next.

3.9 Questionnaires

Questionnaires were considered a useful tool in this research as they were used to offer an objective means of collecting information about people's knowledge, beliefs, attitudes, and behaviour (Oppenheim, 1992). Questionnaires are also familiar to most people as nearly everyone has had some experience completing questionnaires (Berdie, 1989). Generally questionnaires are designed to gather the data for research and the list of written questions, eliciting a written response, ensures for consistency and standardisation efficiency in collating the answers (Denscombe, 2003).

Steps were taken to ensure that the questionnaire was uniform and utilised standardised question presentation and wording, as there is less likely to be interview bias. It is recognised however that standardisation of presentations and wording may not necessarily result in, or entail, standardisation in interpretation of meaning. But unlike personal interviewing, there are no verbal clues to sway a respondent to answer in a particular way. The influence of the interviewer has previously been documented in terms of how interviewer voice, intonation and body language can affect responses (Barath and Cannell, 1976; Collins, 1970). The drawback to this is the lack of an interviewer which limits the opportunity to probe responses. The researcher can partially overcome this disadvantage by allowing spaces for respondents to add their own comments at the end of the questionnaire, therefore this was a strategy incorporated in to the design of the questionnaire.

The physical appearance of the questionnaire in this research as well as the content was given careful attention. Determining the appropriate length and layout of a questionnaire can be a difficult task for researchers. To avoid respondents failing to complete questionnaires, brief construction rather than lengthy was considered preferable. Czaja and Blair (1996: 90) suggest the following strategies:

> • Limit, no more than six to eight pages.
>
> • Precode response categories by assigning a number to each possible answer for the respondent to circle.
>
> • Space the categories so that it is easy to circle one response without touching an adjoining one.

• Provide simple instructions of no more than two sentences describing how to answer questions.

• Use a different typeface for questions, response categories, and transitions or section headings.

• Whenever possible, use arrows to indicate "skip" instructions.

These guidelines aided this researcher's decision to eliminate the unnecessary elements of the questionnaires in order to encourage responses, as the questionnaire was given to head teachers or senior managers in schools whose time is precious.

Combined with the above strategies, other measures were undertaken to try and ensure a valuable outcome.

For example:

• The size of the questionnaire was adapted and limited after the pilot study was undertaken and it was condensed in order to fit on to one page.

• The categories were spaced and enclosed in boxes so that it is easy to tick one response without touching an adjoining one.

• Simple instructions and details were provided of no more than two sentences, defining terminology and describing how to answer questions.

• Typeface for questions was adapted into bold typeface.

Czaja and Blair (*ibid*) further suggest that the researcher needs to examine each item on the questionnaire; they need to be meaningful and relevant to the respondent. If a researcher cannot show that a question measures a variable in the problem, question or related variable, it should be deleted. If the item survives these tests, then researchers should ask if the respondents will understand the question, have information required to answer it and would be willing to answer it. If the item fails any of these tests, then the item should be deleted. This was also a technique employed in the construction of the questionnaire.

Further disadvantages of using questionnaires include the choice of responses available which may channel respondents away from their actual perceptions. The researcher may have problems in terms of checking for the truthfulness of the responses. Steps were taken such as triangulation, to minimise this effect as much as possible. It was recognised that the results of the questionnaire may be dependent on the frustration level and attitude of the respondents at that time (Denscombe, 2000).

One vital goal of this questionnaire was to try and ensure that it held the respondents` interest in order to encourage the respondent to fill out the questionnaire and return it. As a common criticism of postal questionnaires is that they often have low response rates which can threaten the validity of studies (Puffer *et al* 2004). One of the most powerful tools for increasing response is to use follow-ups or reminders. "Traditionally, between 5 and 65 per cent of those sent questionnaires respond without follow-up reminders. These rates are too low to yield confident results" (*ibid,* 1989: 58). It is important therefore to recognise that there may be barriers to uncovering the truth and that data collected within the group may be simply a variety of socially

desirable responses. It was also acknowledged that there is also the possibility of the researchers own bias through the selection and interpretation of the field data to fit in with own preconceptions (Silverman, 2001).

> *Methods are selected because they will provide the data you require to produce a complete piece of research. Decisions have to be made about which methods are best for particular purposes and then data collecting instruments must be designed to do the job (Bell, 1999: 101).*

After the piloting and subsequent editing of the questionnaire (see appendix B), it was distributed by Royal Mail post to 234 head teachers across four local authorities in the Midlands area.   Several strategies were employed in order to encourage a higher response rate.   The sample identified was sent their questionnaire with an accompanying letter outlining all the details of this research along with a self addressed stamped envelope (SAE).   McCrohan and Lowe (1981) suggested that including a SAE would encourage a higher response rate. So this technique was employed despite the higher cost involved with regard to those who do not return their questionnaire.

Salisbury *et al* (2005) suggested that no significant difference in the overall response rates would be obtained from employing either a short or long version of questionnaires or between different versions of the short questionnaire. However, Edwards *et al* (2002) suggested that a higher response was more likely when short questionnaires were employed.   The target group, being head teachers, were considered to presumably receive a significant amount of mail. In recognition of the demands of their position and in order to encourage a higher response rate the Head

Teachers questionnaire was limited to one page. To make the questionnaire stand out it was also printed on brightly coloured yellow paper. As Berdie (1989) suggested that this may make the questionnaire more appealing to the target group. The questionnaire itself contained seven main questions, although one question incorporated five aspects using the Likert scale rating, and another question combined of eight statements to either agree or disagree with. Space was made available at the end of the questionnaire so that those respondents who wished to make their own further comments outside of the fixed questions could do so. By using this technique, it gave the opportunity to, not only gain valuable information which had not been captured by the questionnaire items, but may have also encouraged a higher response rate (ibid).

Unfortunately despite strategies in order to encourage a high response rate there was a relatively poor response rate of 23 per cent, as only 54 questionnaires were returned. This means that 77 per cent of head teachers did not respond, it was recognised that this should not be ignored therefore steps were taken to counteract this, in terms of conducting a non-response survey.

3.10 Non-response survey

It was considered that a low response rate to the postal questionnaires could threaten the validity of any study by reducing the effective sample size and possibly introducing bias (Puffer *et al* 2004). In the methodology chapter the importance of a representative sample was emphasised. Methods were undertaken to try and ensure that the response data would represent the research population on a range of

demographic variables such as type and location of school. When the questionnaires were collated, it was found that all variables such as school type and location were included in the final responses, as well as an appropriate ratio between number of local educational authorities and institutional replies. Despite this, it is still possible that the final response group is different from the research population on one or more of the research variables; if head teachers with a particularly different characteristic or viewpoint were found to be underrepresented. Contesting this Barton (1980) outlined that pertinent demographic variables such as age and gender were likely to be the same for respondents and non respondents.

When examining the effects of low or non responses, Durier (2005) contends it has two main consequences. Firstly, it can reduce the accuracy of the results due to somewhat diminished sample size and secondly, it may reduce the accuracy of the results themselves. This is by introducing bias in terms of the exclusion of a particular variable of the individual non respondents. The non response variable which could be a factor within this research is interest level of the individual head teachers regarding Foundation degrees for teaching assistants.

A low response rate does not necessarily mean that the results are biased, as long as the non-respondents` responses to the questionnaire would not have been significantly different to those who did respond. The difficulty is demonstrating that the non-respondents would not be any different, because there is no concrete evidence as to how they would have responded to the questions. Templeton (1997: 91) argued that "a low response rate need not affect the validity of the data collected, but it is still necessary to test for non-response effects and make corrections to the original data in

order to maximise validity". In this situation a non-response survey was considered to be of value, as it could assist in the understanding of possible non-response bias, "if it is designed with the same protocol as the main survey, the supplementary data could simply be added; if it uses a different mode of collecting, it could help to better know the mechanisms of non-response" (ibid 2005: 1).

Telephone calls were made to four head teachers, by way of a convenience sample method, to head teachers who were not included in the original sample. They were asked the same questions, in the same order, as those in the postal questionnaire, in order to see if their views would be similar to those already collected.

Table 12: Individual Head Teacher telephone interview by LA and school type

Date	LA	School Type
06.05.08	4	Secondary
06.05.08	4	Primary
06.05.08	4	Nursery
06.05.08	1	Nursery

All the responses were collated in a similar way from the questionnaire analysis to aid standardisation and to maximise objectivity. Results indicated that the majority of replies from the telephone non response survey were very similar to the findings from the questionnaire (See Data Findings and Analysis Chapter 5: Page 228.

This is part of the triangulation technique which is endorsed by many, including Davies (2001) and Lilleker (2003). O'Donoghue and Punch (2003), argue that triangulation is a "method of cross-checking data from multiple sources to search for regularities in the research data" (p.78). As well as the benefit of triangulation, individual face to face interviews were conducted in order to explore further the issues and points raised in the postal questionnaire and focus groups. With this view in mind, the next source of evidence comes from interviews conducted with the programme managers of Foundation degrees and Head teachers.

3.11 Interviews

One method commonly used within case studies is the interview. During the 1980s, there was a considerable growth in the employment of the interview technique as a method for educational research and now it is generally agreed that interviewing is a key method of data collection (Seidman, 1998; Powney and Watts, 1987). Bell (1987) commented that:

> *A skilful interviewer can follow up ideas, probe responses and investigate motives and feelings…The way in which a response is made (the tone of voice, facial expression, hesitation etc.) can provide information that a written response would conceal. Questionnaire responses have to be taken at face value, but a response in an interview can be developed and clarified (p. 70).*

Having decided that within this case study, an appropriate method for gathering data would be conducting an interview, a decision was made with regard to which type of interview. This was necessary as this affects the type of data to be collected and

analysed. There are many different kinds of interviews. Hitchcock and Hughes (1989: 79) lists nine different variations: structured interview, survey interview, counselling interview, diary interview, life history interview, ethnographic interview, informal/unstructured interview and conversations. Cohen and Manion (1996: 273), group interviews into four kinds, including "the structured interview, the unstructured interview, the non-directive interview, and the focused interview".

Interviews which have open questions are deemed to have the advantage of keeping the interactions between interviewer and interviewee focussed, whilst still allowing individual perspectives and experiences to emerge (Paton, 1990). The interview approach is explained as follows:

> *A list of questions or issues that are to be explored in the course of an interview…the interviewer remains free to build a conversation within a particular subject area, to word questions spontaneously, and to establish a conversational style – but with the focus on a particular subject that had been predetermined (Paton, 1990: 283).*

A highly structured closed interview format was not believed to be appropriate for this study as more than 'yes/no' answers were needed, in that respondents` attitudes towards teaching assistants with Foundation degrees are required. Time constraints would have also made the unstructured interview difficult. The participants in this research undoubtedly have little spare time and I was relying on their goodwill to grant me time to interview them and I felt that I would be more successful if the interview was shorter rather than longer. It was considered that the time needed for an unstructured interview was in the region of 2-3 hours per interview and many

more hours transcribing in order to organise the data to be analysed. The choice was therefore narrowed down to the semi-structured form of interview, which is one of the most readily favoured by educational researchers as it allows respondents to express themselves at some length, but offers enough structure in order to inhibit aimless rambling (Wragg, 1978). This was aided by the application of a research interview protocol, (as detailed on page 154).

Subsequent arrangements were made to interview the programme managers of the courses under investigation. Two of the interviews took place at the programme managers` own institution and two took place via email communication. Employing email as a method was not initially considered for this research. Foster (1995) had pointed out that interviewing by email had the benefit of not being constrained by geographical location, but as all institutions were well within 50 miles of the researcher`s home city, face to face interviews were planned. This technique was employed at the last minute only at the request and convenience of the respondents. There are recognised benefits to e-mail interviewing as it may reduce the problem of interviewer effect. Nevertheless, it is accepted that e-mail interaction may not be equivalent to verbal interaction in many ways (Boshier, 1990). It can be seen as a less than perfect reflection of a respondent's thoughts than verbal data, as "the 'mute evidence' of written data can offer the (sometimes necessary) convenience of both spatial and temporal distance between subject and researcher" (Selwyn and Robson, 1998). As two interviews were conducted face-to-face and two by email, any differences between the two interview methods which may influence the results were considered to cancel each other out.

The interview technique involved a semi structured interview comprising of nine pre-established questions. Although they were asked in the same predetermined order (as outlined in the research interview protocol page 153), a degree of flexibility was employed to accommodate the responses given in order to achieve clarity and pertinent responses.

The individual interviews with head teachers were conducted in order to explore further some of the issues raised from the questionnaire. This was an important part of the research focus as Foundation degrees are promoted as a qualification which is "designed with employers that combine academic study with workplace learning" (www.fdf.ac.uk). Teaching assistants are appointed by head teachers and they decide whether they will support (or otherwise) teaching assistants on Foundation degrees. This is crucial as Foundation degree providers insist on employer support as one of the entry requirements. By creating the research conditions that permitted an opening to the employers (head teachers`) positioning, this part of the research allowed access to an in depth examination of their views to reveal how much head teachers actually know about Foundation degrees. Therefore the individual interviews with the head teachers had two related and specific aims:

- To follow up on and develop any relevant issues that arose from the questionnaires;
- To gain detailed information on head teachers knowledge and views on Foundation degrees for teaching assistants.

In order to ensure consistency during these interviews the research interview protocol was followed, (as detailed on page 154). On completion, respondents were reminded of their right to withdraw and right of edit over the notes taken; none of the respondents requested these options (Yin, 2003).

Some researchers question whether interviews are reliable (Nisbett and Wilson, 1977; Wilson and Nisbett, 1978). There appears to be two general concerns. First, they doubt that respondents are aware enough about a given subject to reply in any useful way. It is viewed that at times people may not know how they feel about topics. Though there have been responses to such attacks (e.g., White, 1998), there is little doubt that it is not sensible to ask people questions that they cannot answer. This researcher has tried to deal with these concerns by ensuring the sample of respondents have had extensive experience of working with teaching assistants with and without Foundations degrees.

Orne (1970) recommended that accuracy of respondent reports should be checked by the use of "sacrifice groups." These groups are interrupted during the interview or questionnaire process to see if they really understand what is meant by specific questions. Since these respondents have been distracted somewhat, they are "sacrificed" and their responses are used only to validate the survey question content. The use of such a method was not necessary when conducting this research, particularly as a pilot focus group took place, although all decisions were ultimately determined by addressing pertinent ethical considerations.

3.12 Ethical considerations/Interview protocol

A prime feature of this research is that at all times it conformed to the codes of research conduct as laid down by the British Sociological Society's (1996) **'**Statement of Ethical Principles and their Application to Sociological Practice**'**.   A pertinent ethical consideration recognised in this research is the fact that I am both an insider and an outsider during the process. This dual position has been considered by Thomas, Blacksmith and Reno (2000), who recognised that combining the role of tutor, assessor and research could be problematic. The individuals were self selecting or volunteers; this is a recognised technique to employ in order to minimise ethical problems and could be a situation which would benefit from the pre existing relationships that may exist between researcher and respondents (Litosseliti, 2003).

To further support ethical considerations on all occasions, I strived to establish and reiterate with the individuals concerned, the aims of the research and respect their wishes in terms of their involvement. I also gave respondents the opportunity to reject the use of the voice-recorder as this is used to collect data during interviews and focus groups. The 'real' names of institutions and respondents were not recorded in this thesis. This aids elimination from censure of the narrative accounts from respondents which may have criticism attached to them. The four local authorities employed in this research are referred to by number (LA 1 – 4) and respondents by code (e.g. AC). It may be argued under the purpose of academic freedom, that using 'real' names in an educational research thesis can be legitimised. Although I followed the 'rule of thumb' according to Barnes (1979:39) "that data should be presented in such a way that respondents should be able to recognise themselves, while the reader should not be

able to identify them". With the introduction of the Data Protection Act (1998), which came into effect on 1st March, 2000, the consideration of anonymity and privacy can no longer simply be deemed as just a matter of ethics; it also has legal implications. The Act protects the rights of individuals in respect of personal data held including that held by academic researchers.

With regard to ethical considerations and in order to aid reliability, a standardised approach is required (Devitt *et al* 1997). It was recognised that I needed to be methodical and maintain a standardised approach and manner during the interview process. To achieve this, prior to each interview, full informed consent was obtained by outlining the aim of the research. Before any questions are asked a statement was given as a way of ensuring confidentiality and permission was asked to record relevant details such as their role, age and ethnicity. Consent was also gained from the respondents to record the interview. The same main questions were asked in the same order to each of the respondents, with an open question to end with in order to ensure that all pertinent points were covered clearly within the interview. On conclusion, appreciation was expressed to the interviewees for their cooperation and participation and they were reminded of their right to withdraw and their right of edit over the notes taken (Yin, 2003).

The ethical steps taken contributes towards the validity of this research, in that researchers need to make their ethical principles clear as confidence in results depends upon a faithful representation of all the research procedures undertaken (Ryten, 1983).

3.13 Validity

When carrying out research it is critical to investigate how accurately the methodology and data collection represents the social phenomenon that is being recorded. This directly links to the issue of validity in terms of measuring what you think you are measuring in research.

Validity has been defined as *"the state of quality of being sound, just and well-founded"* (Random House Webster's Unabridged Dictionary, 1999 Cited in Whitehorse *et al* 2001). Researchers can take this to mean the extent which a measurement actually measures or detects what it is supposed to measure, which is crucial in the researcher's investigation. With regard to the type of research, "the issue of validity is appropriate whatever theoretical orientation or use of quantitative or qualitative data" (Silverman, 1994: 156). However, this view does not have blanket acceptance amongst all researchers. Some qualitative researchers have suggested that the term validity is not wholly appropriate to qualitative research. It is acknowledged that some kind of qualifying safeguard is needed, but the concept of validity may need to be "redefined in order to reflect the multiple ways of establishing truth" (Golafshani, 2003: 604).

When discussing how this relates to this research and this individual researcher, it was helpful to discuss differences in types of validity. Firstly we have the actual criteria which are principles and techniques which are the actual methods employed to minimise threats to validity, which may be a more realistic view, rather than trying to eradicate it totally. Indeed, many believe that however well founded empirically or

theoretically, all knowledge gained is uncertain (Whittemore *et al* 2001). It is further suggested that standards of validity must be sustained and that rather than being a single set of definitive criteria, there is an amalgamation of key criteria proposed by various researchers that enables a coherent dialogue in establishing benchmarks for researchers to examine validity in their own qualitative research (ibid).

Table 13: Validity Criteria Development

Author	Validity Criteria
Altheide and Johnson (1994)	Plausibility, relevance, credibility, importance of topic
Eisenhart and Howe (1992)	Completeness, appropriateness, comprehensiveness, significance
Leininger (1994)	Credibility, conformability, meaning in context, recurrent patterning, transferability
Lincoln (1995) Lincoln and Guba (1985)	Positionality, community as arbiter, voice, critical subjectivity, reciprocity, sacredness
Marshall (1990)	Goodness, canons of evidence
Sandelowski (1986, 1993)	Credibility, fittingness, audit ability, conformability and artfulness
Smith (1990)	Moral and ethical component
Thorne (1997)	Methodological integrity, representative creditability, interpretive authority

(Adapted from Whittemore *et al* 2001: 529).

These concepts of validity as stated above is explored under the headings of internal, external and construct validity. Internal validity is the conduct of the researcher with regard to the extent of the actual procedures and techniques and implementation which may compromise results.   This challenged the researcher to recognise the appropriateness of the range of techniques to choose from; this required consideration of the purpose of the research and honest perception of credentials of the investigator (Wolcott, 1994).   Whereas construct validity is the initial idea that determined which data was gathered and how it was gathered. For example, questions were asked with regard to the data in terms of examining if it is free from the effects of the artificial environment or researcher` bias. This is to encourage the procedures taken at every stage of this research which employed repetitive checks of interpretation.

When collecting and analysing the qualitative data, this involved gathering two types of subjectivity: the subjectivity of the individual respondent's contributions and the subjectivity of the researcher trying to make sense of those contributions. Billson Mancini (2004) suggest that if the researcher systematically codes the data, it can become objective. The risk is that researchers may draw conclusions after the first couple of groups.

> These early impressions can be very misleading because the most recently heard comments have more cognitive and emotional impact than comments made in previous groups. For example, if you are taking a "quick picture" in the middle of a project and you do not systematically analyse the data, you risk amplifying the subjective aspects (Billson Mancini, 2004: 34).

Lincoln and Denzin (1994) were also concerned with the influence of the researcher and critically discussed how effective the individual researcher can be in reliably speaking for the experience of others. Others suggest that these concerns can be addressed by having more than one researcher independently interpret results obtained. As Kidd and Parshall (2000) suggest one way to aid confidence in results is inter-rater reliability. If the focus groups are recorded or that no fewer than two members of the research team attend taking detailed notes, then cross referencing of responses can take place. However, they recognised that to access the validity of focus groups there are many methods but they are generally progressive and down to the skill of the researcher in guiding the session to make sure the discussion covers the range of experiences relevant to the focal situation (*ibid*).

Nevertheless, this researcher felt that depending upon the type of research emphasis, the suitability of methods needed to be evaluated in relation to the individual research focus and perspective of the researcher. Supporting this it is suggested that one way of assessing validity is from a social constructivist perspective, based on:

> *The belief that research findings are already partial and situated; they actively construct the social world which is itself an interpretation and in need of interpretation* *(Aguinaldo, 2004: 128).*

However the concept of validity is not a single fixed concept, but grounded in the processes and intentions of the research. To differentiate trustworthy valid research from that lacking validity in order to encourage a greater level of confidence in the results, then testing and increasing the validity will be important in any research paradigm (Golafshani, 2003).

Some authors suggest that focus groups may be high in external validity, in that there is the ability to generalise the results to the wider population. Although the discussion cannot be identical to conversations participants might have in their daily lives, as commented by Hollander (2004), nevertheless they are in the expected range for conversations that might have ordinarily taken place. It is also suggested that this type of tool may reduce experimental demand characteristics as the researcher may be able to fade into the background and let the participants control the discussion undertaken (Hollander, 2004). This is supported by Morgan (2001) who has written:

> *It is certainly true that the same people might say different things in individual interviews than they would in a group discussion, but that does not mean that one set of statements is distorted and the other is not (p.51).*

As previously implied the focus group is a social situation in which participants interact with each other in a social context and the extent of influence of the individual participant may be dependent on many factors, for example, composition of the group, gender mix, social class, age, environment and the particular topic under discussion. Denscombe (2003) suggests that if the topic under discussion is not a particularly sensitive issue then it can be considered as a valuable tool especially with participants who may be somewhat hesitant to comment and put their view forward on a one-to-one basis. However, Denscombe also warns of the relevant issue of personal involvement. Many of the participants were known to the researcher in her professional role as a course manager and it is suggested that "the researcher needs to be confident and committed to make it work" (p.118). This raised questions which needed to be addressed in terms of:

- Will the participants be influenced by social desirability and put forward responses that they feel the researcher wishes to hear?

- Will the researcher have the objectivity and skills to aid reliability?

How effectively these issues were dealt with depended upon many variables and perceptions, but needed to be acknowledged with regard to validity in interpreting the results gained. Kidd and Parshall (2000) warn focus group research may be driven by those with agendas, prior assumptions. This was addressed by acknowledging this researchers philosophical approach and understanding this from a social constructionist standpoint. As previously mentioned this is based upon the view that research conclusions are always already incomplete and are themselves an interpretation within the particular social context. Aguinaldo (2004) further suggests that validity "is a process that actively promotes critical reading and re-reading of any research representation" (Aguinaldo, 2004: 128).

It has been suggested that the concept of validity is not a single or fixed concept, but grounded in the processes and intentions of the research in terms of its trustworthiness. Then to establish a level of integrity and trustworthiness in research, testing and increasingly the level of validity of the investigation will be important in any research paradigm in order to establish credibility. However, it must be recognised that credibility may not be guaranteed but be dependent upon the ability, perspective and effort put in by the individual researcher (Golafshani, 2003).

Examining the credibility of this particular practitioner researcher, it was recognised that the researcher`s experience is relatively limited, but it was also recognised that the notion of credibility is a highly subjective one. Working towards ensuring credibility creates its own difficulties as Polit and Hunglar (2001) point out, it is both context-specific and variable over time:

> *Every honest researcher I know admits he's just a professional amateur. He's doing whatever he's doing for the first time. That makes him an amateur. He has sense enough to know that he's going to have a lot of trouble, so that makes him a professional (Kettering,* 1876-1958, *www.britannica.com).*

Being both a professional amateur and a practitioner-researcher, one strategy employed to tackle credibility is ensuring that the findings reflected the reality of the experience. Participants in this study were all provided with the opportunity to review the researcher's interpretation of the data. This involved summarising the main points raised after the focus group and asking participants if they represented a reasonable account of their contributions (Parahoo, 1997). A similar procedure was taken after conducting the interviews, except respondents were emailed a transcript to ensure that they agreed with the content and were still happy for the contents to be used in the research.

Being a practitioner researcher, access to part of the data was not considered to be problematic in this study as the researcher examined her own institution for part of this study. Robson (1993: 447) stated that "the practitioner researcher is someone who holds down a job in some particular area and at the same time carries out systematic enquiry which is of relevance to the job". As well as the advantages of

researching one`s own workplace, it is accepted that difficulties could arise. Bell's (1987) highlights concerns on 'inside' research and describes the pros and cons faced by a researcher working within his own research environment:

There were definite advantages in being an 'inside' researcher. For example, he had an intimate knowledge of the context of the research and of the micropolitics of the institution, travel was not a problem and subjects were easily reached…On the other hand…the close contact with the institution and colleagues made objectivity difficult to attain (ibid: 44-5).

These concerns are reiterated by Robson (1993) who points out the advantages and disadvantages of such involvement in research activity.

Table 14: Review of the Insider researcher

Advantages	Disadvantages
Insider opportunities – an existing knowledge and experience base about the situation and the people involved.	Insider problems – The insider may have time constraints and pre-conceptions about issues and solutions.
Practitioner opportunities – There is likely to be a substantial reduction of implementation problems.	Lack of expertise – not knowing what it is that you don't know.
Practitioner insights and role help in the design, carrying out and analysis of useful and appropriate studies.	Lack of confidence – A lack of experience in carrying out studies leads to a lack of confidence.

Robson's concerns challenge researchers to consider their effect on their particular research situation. Time will always be of concern for practitioner researchers.

Expertise and confidence was not considered a major issue as the researcher has previously been involved in undergraduate, postgraduate and Best Practice Research Scholarship (BPRS) and has developed research techniques through those and other relevant experiences. The researcher also had access to the supportive and co-operative framework of staff and lecturers in this area. Insider insight is a consideration here; it could be legitimately argued that the researcher is too close to the situation to be able to take an objective view. Therefore the outsider validation process was employed when analysing the data to minimise this factor. This involved asking a colleague to extract themes from a sample in order to check reliability. Results of this procedure concurred with those already extracted.

It is recognised that some bias is an inevitable part of any investigation. Decisions on what was included or discarded as relevant, the choice of interviewee, and the framing of the questions for the interview are all subject to the possibility of bias. Hammersley and Atkinson (1995) do not consider that being the participant researcher is necessarily detrimental to the process and results obtained. Instead they consider that the participant observer within the situation is able to appreciate more fully the reality within that situation giving a better understanding of the phenomena and data collected.

3.14 Analysis

It was accepted that the interviews and focus groups conducted in this study generated many hours of transcripts, interviewer notes and observations which needed need analysis. Spiggle (1994) suggested that usually this raw data can lack

an obvious and identifiable structure, particularly in this case whereby early data and respondents` replies will shape subsequent decisions as to what further data are gathered and from whom.

The process of examining the content of the interviews and focus groups can come under the heading of content analysis. Content analysis has been defined as a systematic, replicable technique for compressing many words of text into fewer content categories based on explicit rules of coding (Berelson, 1952; Krippendorff, 1980; and Weber, 1990). A broad definition of content analysis is, "any technique for making inferences by objectively and systematically identifying specified characteristics of messages" (Holsti, 1969: 14). The extent to which the researcher can remain objective is not certain and as mentioned may be even more problematic when researching one's own institution. Although as this researcher employed an interpretative stance which recognises and appreciates the collaboration in the production and representation of the data.

One technique to be evaluated, for analysing the view formed by individual respondents, is Kelly's (1955) Personal Construct Theory. This theory places emphasis on each person's individual construction of their world. As this researcher has a psychological research background, when commencing the analysis of the interviews, the researcher considered employing Kelly's theory which encompasses a repertory grid technique and further investigated its possible use as an aid in the analysis of the data collected. Kelly (*ibid*) argued that people function almost as scientists, in that they want to be able to predict and explain the world they live in. Within this theory, Kelly believed that people interpret the world around them by the

use of what he called personal constructs. Understanding an individual`s personal constructs and finding out how they make sense of the world, is often in terms of how they relate and/or understand other people and also the behaviour they display. Kelly's theory may be thought useful in analysing the data gathered in this individual research. One aspect of this particular research aimed to find out the opinions and perceptions of respondents within the context of interviews. Kelly put forward that events can only derive their meaning from the way they are interpreted by individuals.

> *Man looks at his world through transparent templates which he creates and then attempts to fit over the realities of which the world is composed. The fit is not always very good. Yet without such patterns the world would appear to be such an undifferentiated homogeneity that man is unable to make sense of it (ibid: pp.8-9).*

The above quote suggests that our personal constructs may not match with the reality of 'what it is really like', as all the researcher has is the respondents` interpretation as expressed within the interview process. This interpretation is not necessarily fixed, as viewed if they are being a scientist, the respondent may be constantly engaged in checking and modifying their unique set of constructs (Gross, 1999).

Kelly's (1955) constructs are bipolar in nature, meaning our evaluations tend to fall within ranges such as 'good' through to 'bad', 'hard working' through to 'lazy', which can be plotted in a grid, which he called The Repertory Grid analysis. Kelly's original repertory grid technique has not remained static but has incorporated various refinements since its first conception (Harri-Augstein and Thomas, 1991). By examining this grid through inspection of rows and columns it allows the researcher to

see clusters of similar ranges. To aid this process, there are now computer programmes that facilitate this somewhat time consuming process of analysing the data (Fransella and Bannister, 1977).

> *The process of analyzing qualitative data today is a deep chasm that can be crossed only by the highly manual process of working one's way down one side of the chasm and then trudging up the other side. Computerized analysis can create a bridge across this chasm, making the travel time shorter and the entire process less onerous (Mayernik, 2003).*

It was evaluated that the interview transcripts would have been be more appropriately analysed using other tools when attempting to elicit further relevant meaning. This is supported by Cohen and Manion, (2000) who reported a fundamental criticism of the repertory grid technique, suggesting that it may not be appropriate for scrutinising interview transcripts for accessing perception and attitude. They further pointed out an inherent contradiction which can arise when using repertory grid techniques:

> *Similar to scales of measurement in the physical sciences, elements are assigned to positions on a fixed scale of meaning as though the researcher were dealing with length or weight (ibid: 310).*

Cohen and Manion, (1996: 310), argued that meaning is naturally located "in the shifting sands of semantics", and that to accurately represent all nuances of meaning would require a grid of vast proportions, suggested to be problematic even in terms of computer analysis. Kelly's (1955) repertory grid analysis may still provide a powerful tool for the researcher, which this researcher may seek to employ in future research. In this instance, reservations remained to the appropriateness of this data

analysis method, due to the limitations and the perceived 'user-unfriendliness' of repertory grid, needing consideration of other possible data analysis methods.

To aid investigation of the approaches used in the data analysis, Seidel (1998) put forward a model to help clarify qualitative data analysis. Seidel put forward an interlinked model consists of 3 parts: Noticing, Collecting, and Thinking about interesting things (see B: below). The idea is that when thinking about things, this in turn highlights related things which you may need to gather or collect. The researcher then assigns 'codes' to them, based on particular topics or themes.

Diagram B: (Adaptation of the Data Analysis Process Seidel, 1998)
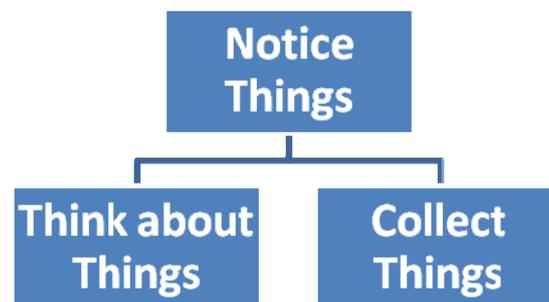
The importance of pre-testing and revising codes has been raised as the initial coding is often unreliable. Also a single definition of the term 'coding' is not agreed on by all qualitative researchers and it is even suggested that some prefer not to employ it at all (Dey, 1995; Richards and Richards, 1994). When analysing an interview transcript the researcher employed this strategy to review the conversations and convert the ideas communicated to a set of written notes. This basic coding system used to interpret the data can vary widely from person to person (Mayernik, 2003).

To ensure consistency of interpretation and analysis, it is considered that two independent coders should be employed. Some researchers have found that the use of more than one coder improves the consistency or reliability of data analyses. However, the usefulness of inter-rater reliability in qualitative research has been contested (Armstrong, 1997). In this research, there was merit in involving more than one analyst, as it is in situations whereby the researcher is both teacher/researcher in their own institution, where researcher bias may be especially likely to be perceived as a problem. During this research it is believed that this dual rater procedure was needed to be employed as it is a recommended method for lone researchers (Miles and Huberman, 1994). In this case a colleague was employed to check themes extracted from the research data.

A way around the problem of a lone researcher may have been the employment of computer software methods to code data. Among the most widely used computer data analyst programmes are QSR NUD*IST (Richards and Richards, 1994) and ATLAS.ti. (Muhr, 1997). This software allows basic "code and retrieval" of data, annotation of the text, or the creation and amalgamation of codes (Kelly, 1995). Coding, as employed in the context of CAQDAS (computer aided qualitative data analysis programmes), involved tagging pieces of text with a label that describes what the particular text refers to. Codes can be seen as being comparable to an index in a book, which gives a location for the data on a particular topic or theme in the overall body of data (Richards and Richards, 1994).

Problems may arise within the coding method of tagging text for many qualitative researchers. Those researchers who emphasise the importance of non-verbal data in

qualitative research may feel that this method is inappropriate (Pike and Thompson, 1995). It is considered that body language and tone is as important as the verbal utterances:

> *Researchers need to consider what will count as data in a project. Data can be words (an interview transcript), symbols or pictures (a photograph), behaviour (gestures), the manner in which something is said (emphases, pauses) or whatever the researcher considers relevant. All of these data can be coded (Catterall and Maclaran, 1998 - www.warc.com/ArticleCenter).*

A useful addition for data analysis is that many computer programmes now allow the researcher to add particular points to pieces of text or transcripts. This can take the form of notes to remind the researcher of important non-verbal aspects of the interview and to record the researcher's thoughts and developing ideas about the data. Memos can then be retrieved and scrutinized in a similar manner to coded text gathered and can enable complex organisation and retrieval of data (Richards and Richards, 1994).

Using software to help the researcher with the more laborious side of analysis has many potential benefits, but concerns have been highlighted as using a computer package may not actually make the analysis less time consuming. This is especially pertinent if the researcher is not particular ICT competent and would impact on the efficiency of the method, even though it may show that the data analysis process is systematic (Lee, 1991). It is judged that this researcher may have adequate skills, but questions remain as to the overall value of this tool and was therefore discounted as being particularly beneficial in this research.

Gordon and Langmaid (1988: 138) supports the decision taken and argued that 'no computer software has yet, or ever will, replace the brain of a skilled qualitative practitioner'. With regard to this statement there appears to be no agreement between those research analysts who use computer programmes and those who do not. It is argued that even the most sophisticated programmes are incapable of doing the decision making analysis for the researcher. Their strength is considered by Gordon and Langmaid to be in their objectivity in terms of removing human bias. They can also aid the researcher with basic but important tasks such as, storing and organising large volumes of data. They also allow the researcher to quickly undertake searches and retrieve text. It is recognised that this may be a very valuable tool but the time taken to learn the mechanics of the programme was not considered to be feasible (ibid). Ultimately, the potential advantages may be dependent on operator management in regard to how the software is employed.

A technique employed in part, to interpret and display the data gathered was the application of descriptive statistics (also known as univariate statistics). "Descriptive statistics may always be used (unless the data are too sparse), in order to make generalizations about a larger study target population" (Desbiens, 2007: 1). Descriptive statistics will also aid the analysis of the findings in this research as it enables large amounts of data to be displayed in a concise way. They are used to describe the distribution found within samples (Coolican, 2004).

These decisions may be linked to internal validity and the conduct of the researcher with regard to the extent of the actual procedures and techniques and implementation, as these may compromise results. When carrying out research it is critical to

investigate how accurately the methodology, data collection and analysis represents the social phenomenon that is being recorded. The extent to which a measurement actually measures or detects what it is supposed to measure, will be crucial in the researcher`s investigation. As "the issue of validity is appropriate whatever theoretical orientation or use of quantitative or qualitative data" (Silverman, 1994: 156).

In terms of this thesis, case study research is recommended in terms of aiding validity due to the use of multiple sources of evidence and the researcher intends to employ many methods such as focus groups and questionnaires. It is believed that this type of research is popular in educational research and can "often provide a fascinating picture due to the richness of the data" (Bartlett and Burton, 2001: 55).

This chapter has critically explored the rationale with regard to the choice of research method and methodologies employed in this research. This has enabled a template to be made to facilitate the research process and data collection process. By following the above steps, a standardised procedure was initiated and followed to support the collection of reliable and useful data in order to achieve the aim and objectives of this research.

CHAPTER FOUR – OVERVIEW OF INSTITUTIONS

Four Foundation degree providers were investigated as part of this research. Each institution represented a different type of higher education institute; a university college, a further and higher institution, a collegiate college and a traditional university. Therefore an overview of each Foundation degree provider investigated is presented next.

5.1 Foundation degree providers

1.   University College

The university college offer three types of Foundation degrees for teaching assistants;

i)   Foundation degree in Early Years

ii)   Foundation degree in Professional Studies in Learning

iii)   Foundation degree in Education and ICT

The origins of this university college can be traced back to 1916 when it provided cookery and domestic science courses. It has since developed to offer a range of vocational, higher and post graduate courses at two city centre sites to well over 8,000 students. Recently it gained its own taught degree awarding powers.

The university college provides Foundation degrees for teaching assistants who are employed in roles which support learning. They offer three different Foundation

degrees; for infant and primary, secondary and one for those who wish to specialise in supporting ICT in the classroom. Their Foundation degrees are run over two years and are offered to those with a Level three or equivalent National Vocational Qualification. Course fees are usually waived for those employed by the local authority. Progression is available onto a full honours degree.

2. Further Education and Higher Education College

This FE/HE college offers one Foundation degree for teaching assistants in conjunction with a university.

i)   Foundation degree in Classroom Support

The college was founded in the early 1950s and provides Higher Education courses in one of the largest general FE colleges in the West Midlands. It provides further and higher education for approximately 35,000 students across two main campuses, several satellite centres and work based programmes.

It offers a Foundation degree for experienced classroom assistants and learning support assistants in infant, junior, secondary or further education settings. Their Foundation degrees are run over two years or five years (typically three years) and a minimum of 2 years` work experience is required. Course/tuition fees are charged to students. Progression is available onto a full honours degree.

3.   Collegiate (College partnership)

This partnership institution offers two Foundation degrees for teaching assistants.

i)   Foundation degree in Early Years

ii)   Foundation degree for Teaching Assistants

This institution is a branch of a partnership of all the education providers in the area, including the local secondary schools. This means that if a subject is not offered to students at one particular centre, they will be able to take that course at another local institution.

The collegiate offers two Foundation degrees for teaching assistants which are delivered over three years. The courses are designed for experienced classroom assistants and learning support assistants. One for early years (up to key stage one) and the other for children and young people in junior, secondary and beyond. Course/tuition fees are charged to students. Progression is available onto a full honours degree.

4.   University

This traditional university offers one Foundation degree for teaching assistants.

i)   Foundation degree for Teaching Assistants in Educational Studies

This university was founded in 1921 and is one of the older UK universities. Almost three-quarters of its departments are ranked in their subject top ten. The University was shortlisted in 2005 and 2006 for the award of Higher Education Institution of the Year by the Times Higher Education Supplement (Times Higher Education Supplement 2006).

This Foundation degree has been designed for teaching assistants in Primary education. Course/tuition fees are charged to students. Progression is available onto a full honours degree.

4.2 Local Authorities

Each of the above Foundation degree providers is located in the Midlands area. The East Midlands region includes the counties of; Derbyshire, Leicestershire, Lincolnshire, Northamptonshire, Nottinghamshire, which incorporate Derby, Leicester, Nottingham, Rutland. The West Midlands region includes; Staffordshire, Warwickshire, Worcestershire, incorporating Birmingham, Coventry, Dudley, Sandwell, Solihull, Walsall, Wolverhampton. The combined population of the East and West Midlands Region is 9,538,900 of which 50.85 per cent is female (Census 2001, ONS).

Each local authority has a web site which details all their nursery and school provision. This enabled samples for this research to be obtained. Full details are contained in the methodology (see Chapter 3, page 119).

CHAPTER 5 – DATA FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

In this chapter, the researcher outlines and illustrates the primary data gathered via the research methodology, as described in chapter 3. The presentation of the results are combined with explanations of the evolving decision making process during both the collection and analysis of the data. These steps are vital in order to shed light on "the collection and analysis of information on the world of education so as to understand and explain it better" (Opie and Sikes, 2004:3). The chapter will begin with outlining the data obtained from the focus groups carried out with teaching assistants currently on their Foundation degrees. It will then move on to summarising the data from questionnaires responded to by a selection of head teachers. Next it will condense the interviews conducted with four head teachers, four Foundation degree course managers and a local authority educational advisor.

5.1 Focus groups

Focus groups comprised the initial research tool in this research, as they were conducted prior to the head teachers questionnaire and before the individual interviews. By conducting the focus groups first, this enabled a wealth of experience and perspectives to be revealed. This was recognised not only as important evidence and useful in its own case, but as a vital key in providing a contextual basis to aid the construction of the next stages; the questionnaire and interview questions. A full detailed rationale, for employing focus groups, sampling and protocol procedure, is outlined in the methodology (Chapter 3, page 85).

Outlined below are the particular variables of the focus group:

Table 15: Focus Group Interviews

Focus Group	Type of Provision	LA	Date	Number of Participants	Gender
1	University College	1	12.11.06	10	9 Female, 1 Male
2	FE and HE College	2	03.12.06	5	All Female
3	Collegiate	3	15.01.07	5	All Female
4	University	4	21.01.07	5	4 Female, 1 Male

As the focus groups were both audio recorded and observations noted down, a combination of data analysis methods was employed. As additional notes were made during the focus groups, this allowed the data to be analysed by the annotating-the-scripts approach. This involved reading the transcripts and listening to the audio tapes and writing interpretive thoughts about the data in the margins. This method permitted the focus group to be re-experienced, taking into account comments on the body language and tone of the discussion. As "annotating data is a way of opening up the data, preparing the ground for a more systematic and thorough analysis" (Dey, 1995: 93). Examples of how this was recorded are detailed below (TM denotes the moderator/researcher).

Focus Group 1

L.66: *TM - Do you think that being on this Foundation degree course changed you personally in any way*?

(Lots of nods, smiles and murmurs of agreements).

<u>Focus Group 2</u>

L.79: *TM - Do you think that being on this Foundation degree course changed you personally in any way?*

(Lots of shakes of heads and frowns).

Noting down this non verbal behaviour allowed further investigation into occurrences that might have been missed if the researcher had been just relying on the verbal transcripts as they would not reveal this stark contrast between the two groups. This confirms that during focus group research, when relying completely on audio recordings, pertinent non-verbal behaviour can be overlooked. "When we speak (or listen), our attention is focused on words rather than body language. But our judgement includes both" (Givens, 2000: 4). Breakwell (1990) also maintains the importance of making notes especially where non-verbal communication was particularly evident. This can help to distinguish whether the respondents` comments correlate with what they are feeling. Each audio recording was transcribed in full, although some editing did occur. This was in order to aid the readability of the transcript, such as editing out of incoherent utterances and when hesitations took place (See appendix: A). It is understood that hesitations could provide clues to respondents thoughts and this was kept in mind when transcribing. Also when more than one person did occasionally speak at the same time, hand written notes supported the audio transcript, which aided accurate records.   It is however accepted that "there cannot be a perfect transcript of a tape-recording. Everything depends upon what you are trying to do in the analysis" (Silverman, 1994: 124).

Examination of the focus group notes and transcripts allowed other useful information to be revealed in terms of highlighting possible dominance by individual members of the group. Krueger (1994) whilst recognising the capability of focus group for interaction between members as their principal strength, concedes this limitation. Participants can feel pressured by group dynamics into offering opinions they do not really have. In a group setting, "when an individual's opinion differs significantly from that of others in his group, he feels extensive pressure to align his opinions to conform to that of the others" (Robbins, 1983: 215). In this case there were no 'obvious' signs of conversational dominance or undue influence by one or more of the participants. The fact that those involved in the focus group were mature students could account for this finding. This is supported by Chen-Yu and Seock's study (2002) which revealed that although people need to be accepted in social situations, the older people get, the less likely they are to be influenced by their peers and conform to group pressure.

When conducting this part of the research, in adherence to the focus group interview protocol and in order to aid the standardisation process, the same questions were asked, in the same order, to each of the four focus groups. These questions were in relation to gaining:-

Information on:

i)   Prior employment
ii)   Length of service
ii)   Future goals
iv)   Graduates in family
v)   Funding

Experiences of:

i)   Being on a Foundation degree course for teaching assistants

ii)   Support from workplace

iii)   Support from institution

Perceptions of:

i)   Status in workplace

ii)   Value of course

5.2 Focus group analysis

One of the aims of this research was to give teaching assistants a voice by examining their perceptions, feelings and experiences of being on a Foundations degree course, both personally and professionally. However, just listening to their comments is not enough, careful and meticulous procedures were followed after the focus groups were conducted. As Robinson and Taylor (2007: 14) stresses "it is what happens with the information, what is done with it, that is also of great importance".

After completion of the focus group, all the audio tapes were transcribed as soon as possible and all within 72 hours. This was an attempt to keep the experience fresh and provide the most accurate representation as possible. As mentioned a true verbatim transcription, which included every incoherent utterance or 'um' and 'er' was not considered necessary, as hand written notes were also taken during the focus groups. So an intelligent verbatim transcript was employed, whereby most of the 'ems' and 'ers', and repetitive utterances were left out.

The next task performed after transcribing the audio recordings from the focus groups, which took place prior to analysis of the focus group transcripts, was to reduce the data recorded into a format suitable for analysis. This is known as data reduction (Cohen *et al*, 2000). Whichever method of data reduction is employed there are two basic parts to the analysis:

> *Segregating and organizing the data into logical and meaningful segments...*
> *...The second part in the analysis is interpretive and involves developing*
> *criteria for organising the data into useful groups (themes) (OMH, 2002: 42).*

The data reduction was achieved by examining the findings using an inductive analysis technique. This technique allowed the extraction of recurrent themes by organising the data in order to identify categories as they emerge from the data. This is a common technique for interpretive qualitative research whereby critical themes emerge out of the data rather than being decided beforehand (Paton, 1990).

The use of a computer package was discounted because it was considered that performing a manual analysis would enable access to a deeper and quicker understanding of the data. A manual compilation of a 'master list' of repeating points from the text was employed. These points identified were then organised into groups that expressed a common theme. Auerbach and Silverstein (2003: 62) describe a theme as "...*an implicit idea or topic that a group of repeating ideas have in common*". This process allows the researcher to learn more about the research participants and their subjective experiences of the world (ibid). To demonstrate this approach, an example is included below:

An Example of a Worked Piece of Qualitative Data

The following is an extract from the second focus group session that took place at the FE/HE college (Group 2). The group was composed of mature female teaching assistants in the second year of their Foundation degree. 'TM' denotes the interviewer; all other initials refer to the interviewees.

L.117.   TM   *In what ways does your college/institution support your progress?*

L.118.   AE   *I have to say no, from my personal point of view.*

L.119.   TM   *Why do you say no?*

L.120.   AE   *I do not feel supported, maybe it is a personal thing, but I feel that*
L.121.   *don't get any helpful feedback or input about my work.*

L.122.   AD   *I have stopped asking the tutor because it's not helping. Then you*
L.123.   *get the assignments back and you have not done things right. As*
L.124.   *well as that, the lecturers are always contradicting each other.*

L.125.   AA   *Yes, you do one thing one way which suits one and they make such*
L.126.   *and such a comment, but then the other does not like it that way.*

L.127.   AC   *We get individual tutorials, but you have to wait around a lot to*
L.128.   *get them. They are not convenient at all.*

L.129.   AE   *I feel that certain people get preferential treatment.*

L.130.   AC   *I get bored of waiting around.*

L.131.   TM   *What about you AB, what are your views on support you receive?*

L.132.   AB   *I just get on with it, but agree with the others.*

From the data included within the above extract I was able to identify a number of repeating points that were subsequently grouped together to form a particular theme, in this case 'support from delivering institution'. For example 'AE' (line 120) was

concerned about level of academic support offered and, 'AD' (Line 122) revealed that she has stopped asking the tutor for academic help and support.

Gordon and Langmaid (1988) also identified an approach to the analysis of focus group data, which was found to be useful. This is equivalent to a manual cut and paste which involved devolving the transcripts into text segments and allocating these segments themes. When assigning these themes, the outcome needed to be a true reflection of the situation. In order to achieve this, methodical and rigorous procedures were needed, so a systematic data analysis technique was employed across all four focus groups. Hurdles in achieving rigour in analysis have been noted as "much of the work in which investigators engage in this phase of the research process is as much implicit as explicit" (Bryman and Burgess, 1994:12).

It is recognised that in deciding which themes to follow, decisions are influenced by the researcher`s own conceptual framework, but this also has potential usefulness as a tool to assist the researcher in making and in interpreting the ensuing findings. Bearing in mind that the findings need to reflect the views of all the respondents and not just those that fit in with the researcher`s own predetermined agenda (Bloor *et al* 2001). The transcripts were read and re-read in order to classify the essential features into pertinent categories.

> *Categories must have two aspects, an internal aspect – they must be meaningful in relation to the data – and an external aspect – they must be meaningful in relation to the other categories (Bloor et al 2001: 96-97).*

When analysing the data from the focus groups, each question was addressed in turn. The summary of findings from the focus groups was examined individually and then compared to consider the results across all the four focus groups. The first question analysed was the first question put to the four focus groups: 'Why did they want to complete a Foundation degree'? As the Foundation degree course is voluntary for teaching assistants rather than required by their employers, the respondents` motivation was considered a crucial aspect to be investigated in terms of assessing whether they considered the course would meet their expectations. There presumably has to be an appealing vision for the teaching assistant in order to enrol in the first place which responds to their perception of their needs and goals.

Knowles (1982: 12) believed that "as a person matures the motivation to learn is internal". The mature learners, in this instance, are taking courses related to their work and it is considered that there would also be pertinent external influences to be explored.

The motives outlined by teaching assistants for wanting to complete a Foundation degree will be explored next. It was revealed through this research that the reasons given by the focus group respondents, although often varied they appeared to be related to issues regarding to their self esteem. This is an issue that may need to be tackled in order for the other factors to be addressed. In line with Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, the respondents in this research are unlikely to achieve their potential before other more basic needs are met (Maslow, 1943), such as their self esteem.

The reasons have been categorised under six themes, which are outlined in the Diagram (C) below.

Diagram C: Reasons put forward for wanting to complete a Foundation degree
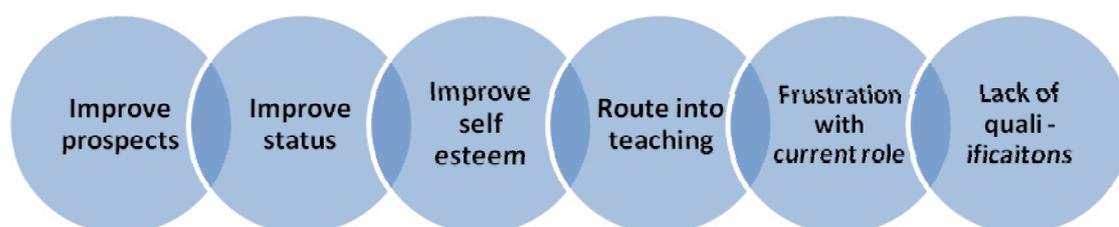
The first reason to be explored is the view put forward by respondents that they embarked onto their Foundation degree course with the expectation that it would improve not only their own individual prospects, but that it would also contribute towards enhancing the longer term outlook for their families.

Improving prospects for self and family

Many responses were characterised by the recognition that despite higher education being a challenging process for the respondents, one which also involved pressures on their family life, there was a desire to succeed in higher education due to the wish to make a better life for their families. "Their present jobs can be poorly paid and low status" and some teaching assistants "see the course as a way of enhancing their opportunities for better paid occupations" (Edmund, 2004: 5). Some respondents also felt that by participating in higher education they would provide a valuable role model

for their children so that they all may eventually benefit in terms of improved job prospects and personal achievement. This view is illustrated by the following quotes.

Focus Group 2

AD: Actually, there is another reason why I am pleased I am doing it. It will be a help, for knowing what my children need to be able to have to do when they go to university. What support they will need. It will be beneficial to them and encourage them.

Focus Group 3

NE: Yes, it's what you said, it's being a really good role model for the children. Also it helps you to get another job, it shows how much effort and determination and commitment that you have.

Focus Group 1

SZ: My husband has had to learn to cook. Well he knows, but now he has to do it. It sets a good example for the children, because we all sit down and do our homework together.

The results from the focus group research demonstrated that for some respondents the motivation for embarking on their Foundation degree course was not just in terms of them as individuals, but in terms of the perceived desirable impact of their family lives and situation. This was in relation to being a role model and providing a source of particular encouragement for their own children.   The view that parental experience may expand their children's expectations is supported by the research of Galindo-Rueda *et al* (2004) which found that access to higher education is highly influenced by

factors such as parental education. The vast majority of focus group respondents were female and mothers, but they did not account for the total picture; one out of the two male teaching assistants` was also a father. Regardless of gender, many studies have demonstrated that children who grow up in a home environment which has a great emphasis on learning opportunities do better academically, regardless of socio-economic background (van Steensel, 2006).

Whilst future benefits may be an important consideration, many respondents commented on how they enrolled onto their Foundation degree in the hope that it may positively impact in the here and now, on their current role and status in the workplace.

To improve status in workplace

Teaching assistants have "expressed anxieties about their low status" (O'Brien and Garner, 2001: 1). Although the Remodelling of the Workforce and Single Status Agreement signed in 2003 aimed to improve the status and conditions of all those who work in schools, concerns are still currently being voiced by teaching assistants about their status and position. Milliband (2003) argued that support staff can be held back by outdated demarcations and working practices and whilst Foundation degrees may contribute to the professional development of teaching assistants, what is less clear is how that contribution is recognised in the workplace.

Many respondents commented that they had concerns about their lack of status in the workplace and that they hoped that by embarking on the Foundation degree, this situation would improve. This is supported by the following comments.

Focus Group 4

AC: Has it changed the role, no. But like you are given a tad more respect, now that you are doing a qualification as such. They see you in a slightly different, more positive light.

SB: With me it's also with work colleagues, you feel more of a team.

Focus Group 2

AD: I am doing a Foundation degree to raise my profile as a teaching assistant. We are seen as that we are thick and odd-job people.

AE: Absolutely, yes, which, is probably how we were seen originally, but now our role has expanded since but perception hasn't.

Focus Group 1

RL: At my school the non-teaching staff have to sign in. But I am to all intent and purposes a teacher, taking the class, parents evening, playground duty. I tried not signing in, but I was told that I would get a warning over it. My manager says that I am treated as a teacher when it suits them, like when the head of department was on secondment when I ran the department, but a teaching assistant at other times.

However, despite respondents being hopeful that their Foundation degree will have a positive impact on their status in the workplace, some were recognising less favourable consequences of being on a Foundation degree course. They explained that

they can either feel put upon or even have their new understanding and skills ignored. Some have also identified that it can contribute towards discord between other teaching assistants, as illustrated by the following responses.

Focus Group 1

> *SZ: The other TAs look at you very suspiciously, what are you doing, who do you think you are. They are a bit funny about it.*

Focus Group 3

> *AV: I think there is a bit of jealously from the other teaching assistants.*
>
> **TM: Why?**
>
> *AV: Because you are doing something to raise...to improve yourself which they are not.*

Focus Group 2

> *AE: My teachers don't know or care that I am on a degree.*

The responses demonstrate that the effect of being on their Foundation degree course has lead to frustrations being voiced by the respondents. Many of these frustrations were to do with the impact of being on their Foundation degree course with regard to their role and responsibilities in the workplace, which will be explored next.

Frustrations with current role and responsibilities

The range of recent demands placed upon the role of the teaching assistant can be seen as being due to the remodelling agreement. Under this agreement the Government put

forward changes to the roles of support staff in the classroom and established The School Workforce Development Board (SWDB). The SWDB is concerned with the training and development of school support staff in order to raise standards (www.tda.gov.uk/support/swdb.aspx).

It is recognised that the educational workplace can present challenges to students on Foundation degrees. Edmond *et al* (2005: 1) highlights that:

> *A common tension expressed by students is that between their role as employee and their role as student is felt particularly acutely in the workplace.*

Focus Group 3

> *VH: I have found that the further I have gone in the course, the more – they call it responsibility - I call it that I have been put on to be honest.*

As well as the frustrations being voiced by the respondents, one respondent explained that she felt that her workplace was more frustrated with her, than she was with them. This is due to her perceived lack of co-operation, that she no longer felt able or willing to put in the previously extra unpaid hours. This was both at school after hours and at home making additional resources for activities in the classroom, as demonstrated by the following quote.

Focus Group 4

> *JJ: The negative way though, I think that the school has noticed that it's about my time, the time that I am prepared to put in. Before starting this course, I would have stayed and put in extra work - which I was not paid for. Now I wouldn't as I haven't got the time.*

This supports the work of Eyers *et al* (2004) which concluded that workforce remodelling may not be beneficial for all adults currently working in the classroom. The move towards teaching assistants gaining higher level qualifications has shown to have an impact both in terms of the pressures from themselves as individuals and those directly from their school/workplace. Additionally, some respondents stated that they lacked confidence and raised concerns about their ability to engage in learning, particular those that did not possess previous positive educational outcomes. The lack of confidence and low self esteem will be explored next.

Low self esteem

With regard to adult learners Gallacher *et al* (2000) advises that developing a positive attitude and positive self esteem may require several years of study. However, the following responses indicate that even early on in their Foundation degree course, the self esteem of students can be enhanced.

Focus Group 1

> *RL: It (the Foundation degree) has raised my self esteem, I don't feel such a fraud anymore.*

Focus Group 4

> *AM: Yes, also, when people are talking about how they have been to university and got degrees, you feel good, because you are actually doing a degree you are almost on an equal level.*

> *TR: Other people respect you more, because you are supposedly seen as working more towards their level.*

NK: It has given me confidence.

Respondent 'AM' (Focus Group 4 - above), is from both a working class and ethnic minority background. She expressed many reasons for embarking on a Foundation degree, but they all appeared to be around self-esteem issues. For instance, she mentioned that her much younger niece had recently gained a place at university and commented that having a degree would make you feel good because you would be "*almost on an equal level*" (Focus Group 4, L.83).

The comments identified around self esteem issues all came from teaching assistants from working class backgrounds. Most had also left school with few, if any, formal qualifications. Sargeant (2000) found that social class can influence attitudes to learning, with the vast majority of adult learners more likely to be from upper and middle socio-economic groups, rather than working class. "Of those who left school at 16, only a quarter are current or recent learners, compared with half of those who stayed on after 16" (p.1).

Whilst low self esteem was a recurring issue, some of the respondents from Focus Group 3, appeared much more confident.

Focus Group 3

JG: Our jobs are changing and we are finding that we are teaching a lot more anyway, but are not getting any of the benefits that teachers get.

VH: We get nothing – just our normal salary. I have found that the further I have gone in the course, the more – they call it responsibility I call it that I have been put on to be honest. You are doing the teacher`s job, but you are not getting the teacher`s wages.

NE: My Head sees it as - that we are getting the experience. I love that!

AW: Yes, that's what you get when you don't get what you want. Yes, my Head says that we are offering you all these valid experiences. That you would not be able to teach Y6 in any other school. All these different opportunities that we offer you is great.

JG: So we make it work for ourselves, we are never going to get paid for what we do we have accepted that anyway.

The above respondents from Focus Group 3, can be seen as being different from many of the respondents from the other focus groups. Their responses suggest that they may have an increased level of self-confidence compared to many of other respondents in the other focus groups. This may be due to several reasons; James (2002) found that adult learners` self esteem is affected by factors which include their previous experience of learning and social economic status.  The majority from Focus Group 3, had experienced previous higher level employment and most had decided to become teaching assistants, initially at their own children`s school, as they felt this suited their personal family situation. Two had also decided to enrol onto the Foundation degree course even though they had already achieved Higher Level Teaching Assistant status (HLTA).

HLTA status can be awarded to those teaching assistants who meet national HLTA standards. If appointed, salaries are higher than regular teaching assistants, but differ on a regional basis and some HLTAs are paid term-time only (www.routesintoteaching.org.uk). The HLTAs tend to work closely with the class teacher but they can take whole classes in order to contribute independently to pupils' learning and achievement. Despite this, Wilson *et al* (2007) identified only 31 per cent were very pleased with the way in which their role had developed since achieving HLTA status. "Additionally, 16 per cent noted some positive changes, but not as many as they would have liked" (p.4). This may explain why the HLTA students embarked on their Foundation degree. Lack of respondents` qualifications will be explored next as a motivation in wanting to complete a Foundation degree.

Lack of qualifications

Several respondents identified that their reasons for embarking on their Foundation degree came from a lack of previous qualifications. They commented that they wanted to achieve a higher level qualification as they wanted to raise their qualification profile and level in the workplace.

Focus Group 4

AM: I did because, realistically, I have worked in schools for so many years, but have no NNEB or any particular formal qualifications to work in school. So I thought I have been there for so long and I should do something and get some qualifications.

AD: I am doing this for me, but also to get some professional qualifications to raise my profile as a TA, hopefully to get better wages and increments.

The above examples of respondents` rationale, is supported by Sargeant (2000). Sergeant's research found that the workplace often supplies the motive, resources and opportunities for gaining qualifications, as demonstrated by the above responses. Whilst many of the teaching assistants from the focus groups did not possess any formal qualifications, a few did and for them their rationale for embarking into a Foundation degree was as a possible access route into teaching.

As a route into teaching

The final theme identified as a motivation for wanting to complete a Foundation degree was as a route into teaching. This was one clear and repeating theme highlighted by the respondents; they were using the Foundation degree as a route into teaching. Some respondents commented that they had teaching as a goal right from the start of their course. These respondents tended to have stayed on at school or had parents that had attended university.   Most others explained that they had only just considered teaching as an option, as they felt that they had gradually gained confidence during their course and realised that this could really be a career which is open to them. This is demonstrated from the following extracts:

Focus group 1

NK: After being on this course, I now want to teach – it's an option now. My school has said they will support me on the Registered Teacher Training route, which means I can still work.

Focus Group 2

AA: You need a degree to get into teaching and I needed to work at the same time.

Focus Group 3

JG: I want to teach and I need a degree and it was a way of doing it whilst I was working, yes.

Focus Group 1

SZ: Same sort of thing, to get into teaching. I did not get to go to University when I was younger when I could have done. I have now found myself teaching and basically being used really, to cover classes but can't be considered as a teacher without a degree.

The overall results across all four focus groups found that the primary motivation for embarking on a Foundation degree for the majority of respondents (64 per cent) was as an access route into gaining qualified teacher status. This option allows the respondents to combine work with study. This suggests that the majority of the respondents see the Foundation degree as not just being a means of enhancing the professional development of their role, but as a stepping stone to a new career. The reality of which has yet to be empirically established due to the length of progression times from Foundation degree to fully qualified teacher (QAA, 2005). However, there

were clear differences found in responses from the different institutions/local authorities.

Graph (i) Comparison of focus group responses stating that they were using their Foundation degree was as a route into teaching
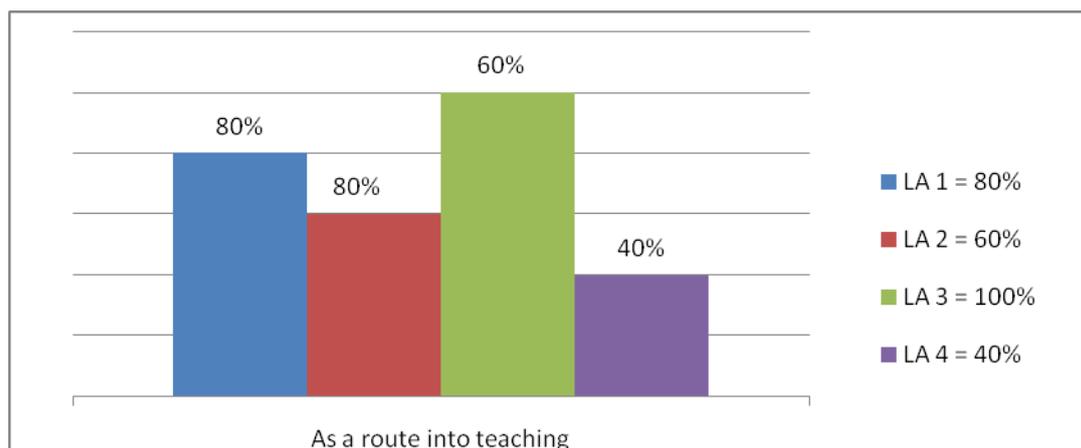
When examining the differences between the four local authorities, it was found that the focus group with the fewest number of respondents wanting to enter teaching (with only 40 per cent) was Local Authority 4. When examining possible explanations for this, it was found that compared to the respondents across the four other groups, this Local Authority group had a higher ratio of ethnic minorities, see Table (16) next.

Table 16: – Ethnic makeup of Focus Group Respondents

Focus Group Population	Ethnic Group				Total	Percentage of ethnic minority students
	W	BBC	AABI	AABP		
Local Authority 1	3	1	0	1	5	60%
Local Authority 2	5	0	0	0	5	Nil
Local Authority 3	3	0	1	1	5	60%
Local Authority 4	3	3	2	2	10	70%

The fact that there is a higher percentage of ethnic minority students at the institution located in local authority 4, is a factor that may not be significant influence in this research but one that needs addressing (Modood and Shiner, 1994), especially as the students in this research are adult mature learners. The literature which explores non-participation in education (Woodley *et al* 1987; McGivney, 1990) cites people from minority ethnic groups as being among those least likely to engage in education later in life. Given the somewhat dated publication of this literature (1987 and 1990), the position may have altered, especially as a more recent view challenges this point of view.

> *Contrary to popular belief, many adults from working class and minority ethnic backgrounds do not lack educational aspirations. They may well harbour long-felt desires to embrace education, both for its own sake and for the prospect of a better life for themselves and their children (Bowl, 2005:9).*

It is considered that many more of the respondents from local authority 4, may have aspirations to teach, but may not voice this until after successful completion of their Foundation degree course, possibly due to feelings of low self-esteem and/or feelings of alienation (Jones, 1997).   As I am employed at this institution, I am in the useful position to know that all but one member of this group went on to progress on to the honours degree programme.   The one student that did not progress cited family circumstances and lack of support rather than lack of motivation.   This high progression rate is well above the figure cited by Dunne *et al* (2007: 55) of 49 per cent which was revealed from their research into the career trajectories of teaching assistants on Foundation degrees at one institution in the North West of England.

As well as a route into teaching, an interesting and different motivation was revealed by respondents for enrolling onto their Foundation degree. This explanation may be found when examining responses to the next question.

Question: 'How many have family members who have attended university?'

The vast majority of respondents indicated that they were the first in their family to attend a higher education course. Findings indicated that apart from a few exceptions from Focus Group, 2 and 3, most of the respondents were the first to go to university in their family.   The three respondents from Local Authority 3, which mentioned that they were not the first in their family to attend university were both white females, as was the respondent from Local Authority 2. This supports figures collected by UCAS (2000) which indicate that if you come from an ethnic minority background you are less likely to attend university.   The respondent from Local Authority 2, stated that

whilst she was not the first, the other family member was her sister who had only recently gained a place at university as a mature student. Taylor (1992) claimed that there has been a proportionately greater participation in higher education among the lower socio-economic classes of ethnic minorities (classes IV and V). Nearly all of the respondents in this research considered themselves to be 'working class' except one white respondent from focus group 1 (NE) whose parents both had degrees, who considered themselves middle class.

In order to clearly illustrate the different responses between the four focus groups, a bar chart (see graph ii below) was created. This bar chart allows direct comparison and indicates the percentage of those that had families that had attended university and those that had not.

Graph (ii)   Respondents with family member's previous experience of HE
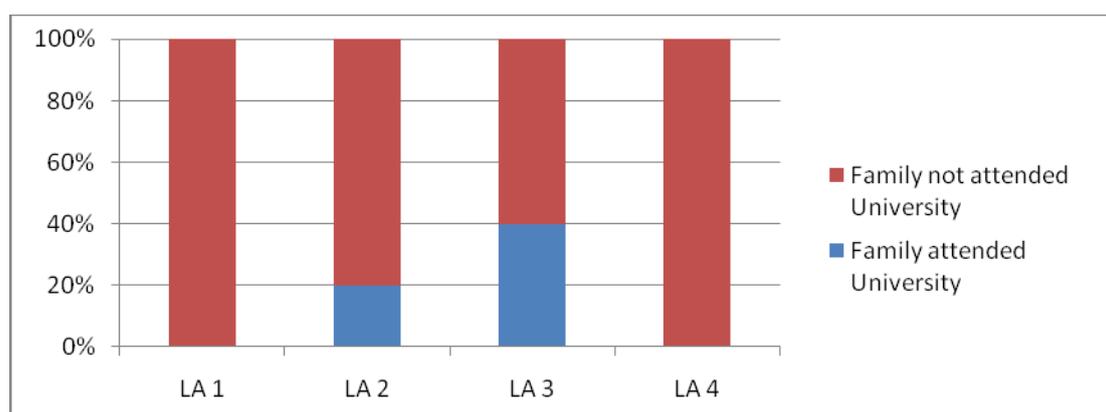
The above graph (ii) indicates that the introduction of the Foundation degree course appears to have successfully met one of its briefs, as it has extended access to and participation in, higher education.   This research established that only three

respondents had family members that had previously attended university. The other brief of the Foundation degree, in terms of developing work place skills and supporting staff in their current role and career progression, is tackled in the next question, which examines the respondents` view of the impact of their Foundation degree course on their current role.

<u>Question: Has being on the Foundation degree course changed or affected your role at work in anyway?</u>

This question explored the respondent`s view on if or how their Foundation degree affects their role in the workplace. This was to explore Foundation Degree Forward (fdf) belief that foundation degrees "equip learners with the knowledge, understanding and skills relevant to their employment" *(www.fdf.ac.uk)*.

The responses to the above questions can be sorted into three categories:

1. positive,
2. negative and
3. no appreciable difference.

Diagram D: The impact of a Foundation degree on a teaching assistant's role
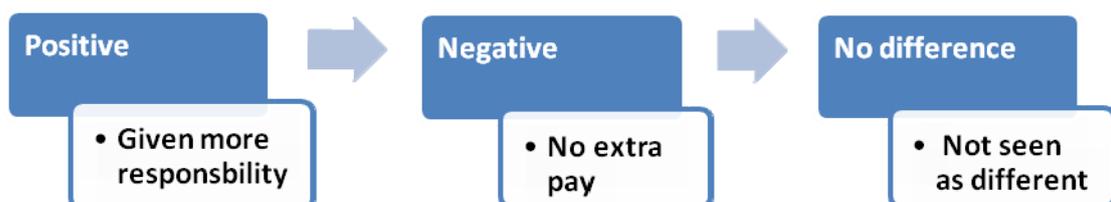
Occasionally respondents voiced that they considered that their Foundation degree had not impacted on their role. Sometimes this was due to their workplace being unaware that they were on a Foundation degree as the students were self funding and taking the course in their own time. Another respondent believed that in her workplace the Foundation degree was not seen as being particularly different or distinguishable to any other course available for teaching assistants, as demonstrated by the following quote:

Focus Group 2

> *AB: Because my school is a special needs and most people are on a course, it`s nothing major. People are always on courses!*

Whilst some respondents did think that their Foundation degree had little or no impact, many others did recognise the benefit to their role and responsibilities.

Positive impact

Some other respondents did judge that their Foundation degree had impacted on their role, in a positive way. Respondents stated that they were given more responsibility in their workplace, due to their Foundation degree course. Respondents commented that the contribution to their role was in terms of enhancing their own knowledge and understanding, which in turn contributed to their professional practice. This is reflected in the following quote:

Focus Group 3

AW: The most beneficial thing is knowing and understanding why teachers are teaching, you can now say I know why you are doing what you are doing. The children are not, for example, just playing a fishing game, but are learning.

VH: Not all the teachers know I am doing one, but my class teacher does ask sometimes about what I am doing. But basically they just give you more responsibility than the other teaching assistants, without extra pay.

<u>Negative Impact</u>

Some respondents did consider that their Foundation degree had impacted on the role in a negative way. They perceived they have seen their role and responsibilities develop and have acquired more responsibility, but have not acquired the same benefits and support as a teacher has. This has resulted in them withdrawing their good will and tasks that they would have previously undertaken. Gibbs (2002b) previously identified that that those gaining the most benefit will be the employers. Less favourable treatment and consideration identified by respondents is also demonstrated by the following quote.

Focus Group 1

SZ: I do cover classes, but when I cover the class I am still expected also to do the teaching assistant duties as well as covering the class.

The above quote highlights an interesting discovery from this research with regard to teaching assistants being asked to cover classes; respondents revealed that when they are asked to cover classes in which they are normally the appointed teaching assistant, they are not given another teaching assistant to cover their normal supporting learning duties. Cremin *et al* (2005) identified that cover and support in the classroom may not be straight forward. The introduction of Foundation degrees may have not made this situation any clearer.

Summary of impact of a Foundation degree on a teaching assistant's role

With regard to the contribution of a Foundation degree to a teaching assistant`s role, the results demonstrate that many of the respondents in the focus groups consider that the course has enhanced their understanding of teaching and learning and believe that this development is often reflected in their work and the way they carry out their responsibilities. These findings are supported by the Benchmark (p.3) statement:

> *Foundation degrees are vocationally focussed and equip learners with the skills and knowledge relevant to their employment and the needs of employers.*

Regardless of the contribution to employers, this research has established a drawback for many respondents in their role as teaching assistants. In many cases they declared their frustration as they feel that their new skills, knowledge and understanding are not reflected in any enhanced status or pay and they can become discouraged by the situation. This, combined with the extra demands placed on the teaching assistants

involved in Foundation degrees means that their previous good will, in terms of freely giving their own time above and beyond paid hours, is likely to be withdrawn.

Edmund (2004) observed that the most important factor of the Foundation degree is that it focuses on addressing the needs of the employers rather than employees. That aside, some respondents remarked that their professional development is supported to some degree in their current workplace. This is an area which is explored next in question.

<u>Question: 'Do you receive any type of support from your employers for your course?'</u>

Overall the results indicated that only 16 per cent of respondents felt fully supported by their employer during their Foundation degree, whilst 37 per cent did not feel supported. Although a total of 44 per cent respondents felt either fully or partially supported, it is clear that the majority of the teaching assistants feel that whilst pursuing their Foundation degree, support from their employer is not always available and often compared themselves to others and the support they may be receiving at their place of employment. An example of this is demonstrated by the quote below:

<u>Focus Group 4</u>

> *AM: Comparing it to like other people who went into further education. Its well we can't pay for you, I have had to take this time to attend this course without pay. The first year they paid me, they don't this year, so feel that I am not supported, I take the day off now in my own time. So I don't feel supported at work.*

The expectations of respondents with regard to the amount and type of support they receive is different across the focus groups. To clarify the range of responses given to this question, they were collated under five different headings and are displayed in the pie chart next (Graph iii).

Graph (iii): View on employer support
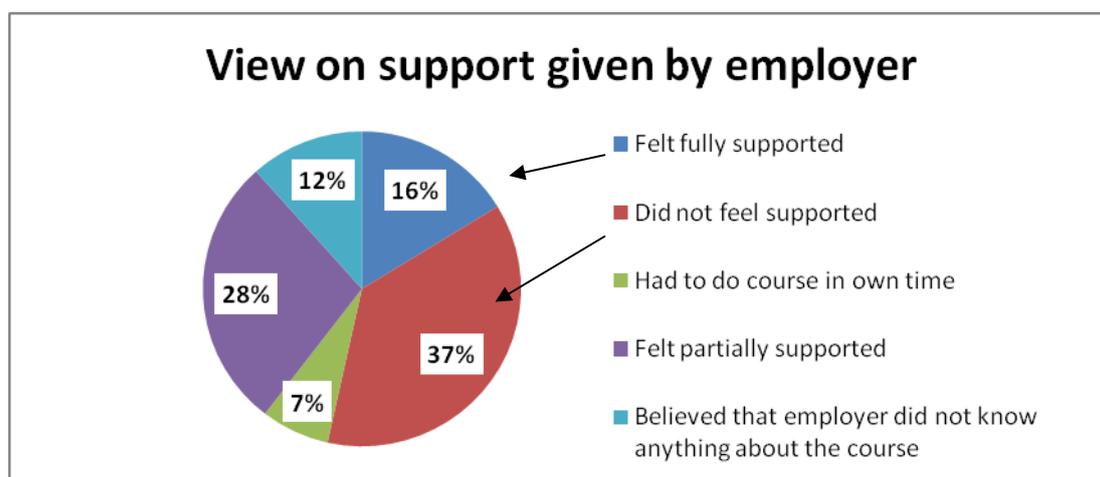
Results revealed that there is no standardised amount or type of support for teaching assistants undertaking Foundation degrees. It was however clear from responses given to this question (outlined below), that many respondents were perturbed by their perceived lack of support from their employers towards their Foundation degree study.

Focus Group 2

> *AB: No, help, only from students loans, I have to pay for the course myself.*

> *AE: No I don't get funding or anytime off to study. They (their workplace) reap the benefits though.*

Focus Group 3

NE: My Head says she cultivates an ethos of learning and support for her teaching assistants. She talks the talk and does send us on a lot of training, but pays us as little money as she can get away with. She does give us a huge amount of responsibility, she sees how valuable teaching assistants can be and she says will help me become a teacher. But she won't pay for this course.

JG: I don't think mine knows, my class teacher has helped me especially at the beginning of the year, but my head won`t know. The Foundation degree was something that I have done of my own accord. So they have not asked me about it. But I am from a big school.

Focus Group 1

AV: No, I even have to pay for photocopying that I need to do for the course, they said they would support me but not financially support me at all.

SZ: I don't even think they know about the course. My school is a SCITT school and those students are my best support, talking to them about the tasks. I don't think the teachers understand or realise what we do, they don't have a clue about what`s involved.

AV: The Head has never once asked me how I am getting on, or what it is about. No one in the school has ever done the course before. I don't get study time or fees paid.

Boud and Symes (2000) suggests that the lack of support is because work based learning is still in its infancy. However, some respondents appear particularly annoyed about the situation and felt that lack of work based support hampers their development and growth. Linked to this Edmond *et al* (2005:6) viewed that although:

> *Most students are able to demonstrate their learning in practice. Some become frustrated if their setting cannot accommodate changes they would like to make.*

Results also reveal that some respondents seem to accept that although they are pursuing courses related to their current role without full employer support, they are looking at the longer term prospects and are hoping it will eventually benefit them personally by opening up new career opportunities (e.g. teaching).

Focus Group 1

> *RL: They sign the letter for the course. They also pay for the course and for a taxi to get me here. But I am damn good, they are getting cheap labour as I teach whole classes every day. But I am not daft over it, but they say they will support me in becoming a teacher.*

Whilst many respondents outlined their lack of employer support, a few pointed out examples of positive employer support, as demonstrated from the following quotes:

Focus Group 2

> *AA: Mine allows me to leave early and does not dock my pay*

Focus Group 3

> *VH: I have a good relationship with my head, but the deputy has stepped into my head`s shoes and has become my mentor. The head will occasionally ask about my progress, but the class teacher gives me the most support.*

Focus Group 1

> *RL: Really my school is very good; my line manager proof reads my work.*
> *They even get someone to type up my work for me when I need it.*

However, success on the course is not exclusively due to the level of support afforded by the particular teaching assistant`s employer.   The support provided by the Foundation degree providers at the institutional (meso) level may also be pivotal to their success. This area is tackled in the next question, below.

Question: 'In what ways does your institution support your progress?'

As there were many different types of remarks in response to this question, the responses were put into a category of either positive or negative. By categorising comments into either positive or negative differences in perceptions of level of support given by different providers were uncovered.   Some focus groups results were overwhelmingly positive, whilst others responses vocalised a much more negative level of support received.

Graph (iv) Perceptions of level of support
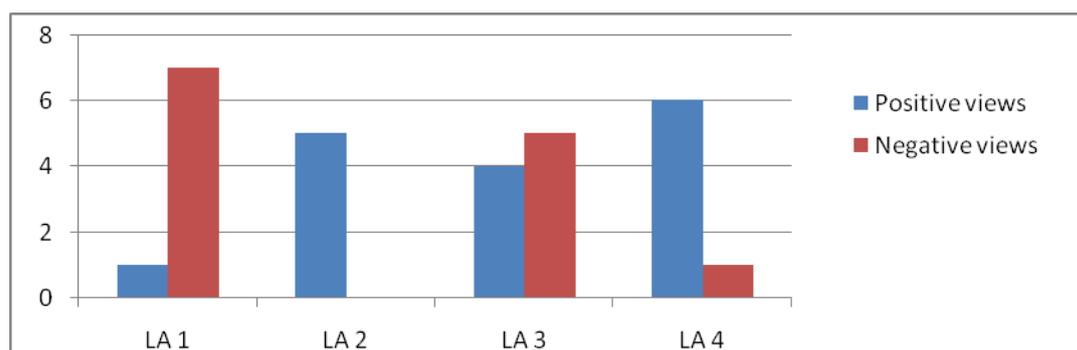
The above results support the findings from Forrester *et al* (1993), which identified that mature learners can represent a real challenge to some universities as they are likely to be critical and demanding learners.

When synthesising the data with regard to the positive and negative views of the respondents towards their Foundation degree provider, a number of different and interesting issues were found. The negative responses included strongly worded complaints about inadequate level of academic support and guidance, through to their perceived lack of response to their concerns about course content. Other focus groups respondents revealed feelings of very positive support and guidance, both emotional and academic from their Foundation degree providers.

Focus Group 4

>   *AA: They need to inform our school of what is involved and the work load. But the lecturers are really approachable and helpful.*

>   *TR: With our first assignment we did not have a clue, that was really hard, but the lecturers were all really approachable and helpful and you always feel you can ask them anything.*

Focus Group 2

>   *AE: I do not feel supported, maybe it is a personal thing, but I feel that I do not get any constructive feedback or input at all. They are not interested.*

Focus Group 3

>   *NE: I did not feel as though I needed any more support than I have been given. I have not felt as though I needed anything extra.*

Results from across the four focus groups suggest that students are experiencing different levels of support and guidance. At two out of the four institutions the perceptions are either all generally positive or negative, at the third they are totally positive, but at the fourth institution the perceptions of their experiences are more balanced with a mixture of positive and negative. With these results in mind, it is therefore interesting to compare the results of the question with regard to their experiences on the course, to the question, 'how would you summarise the value of the course to you?'.

Question: 'How would you summarise the value of the course to you?'

The majority of the respondents in all the four focus groups were generally positive in their perceptions of the value of the course to them. The value was recognised as impacting on many distinct and different areas of their lives. The graph below highlights these areas along with two less favourable considerations which emerged from this question.

Graph (v): Perception of value of course
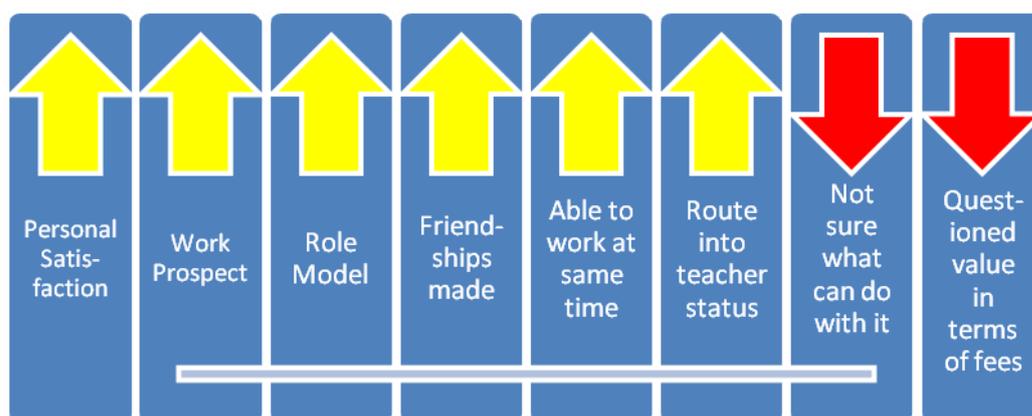
Despite many respondents identifying drawbacks with their Foundation degree, overwhelmingly they identified that they recognised the value of the course to them; as individuals, parents, in terms of their role as teaching assistants and for future professional development. However, many teaching assistants commented on the difficulties and guilt experienced when trying to access study time which detracted from their family time. They also commented that the workload and pressure to succeed meant that they had to rely on support from friends and family members and many acknowledged that without them they would not have been able to attend, cope with, or successfully complete the course.

Log Hook

All the questions responded to from the focus groups were addressed and analysed. To ensure that all pertinent and recurrent themes had been identified, a 'log hook' was created from all the four focus groups conducted. It is important to keep the tally of the individual responses separate for each focus group, in order that a comparison can be made. If five respondents express an opinion or make a particular statement in only one of the four focus group sessions held, then this may be less significant than if five individual people say the same thing in the four different focus groups. It is useful to know how many times an issue was discussed across all the focus groups as well as how many times in total a response was given (Dawson *et al* 1991).

The log enabled a pictorial tally to be created which made it easier to visually compare the main responses of each group with the other. The result of the log hook is displayed below in the Table (17) below:

Table 17: Log Hook

Topic	Focus Group Sessions/Number of respondents			
	F1: 5	F2: 5	F3: 5	F4: 10
Reasons for enrolling				
a. want to teach	1111	111	11111	1111
b. wanted a challenge	1			1
c. wanted a higher level qualification	1	11		1111
d. improve skills				1
Who has family with degrees/working towards?		11	11	
Views of the student teaching assistants since being on the course – in terms of value/cost.				
a. More responsibility – without pay		1		111
b. More responsibility – with pay				
c. Feels more positive: seen in a better light	1111	1	111	1111
d. Negative: Creates a divide	1	1	111	1
e. Aids understanding of role		11	11111	11
f. Gained confidence/personal satisfaction		1	1111	111111
g. Developed skills	1		1	11
h. Stressful	1	11		11
i. Increased employment prospects	1		1	11
Attitude with regard to support from employers				
a. Felt fully supported	1	1	1	1
b. Did not feel supported	11	1	111	1111
c. Had to do course in own time	1			1
d. Felt partially supported	1	111	1	11
e. They do not know anything about course			1	11
Views on course and experience of Foundation degree provider				
a. Mainly positive		11111	1	1111
b. Positive emotional support			1	111
c. Positive academic support	1		1	1
d. Mainly Negative	1111			
e. Not enough handouts	1		11	
f. Not enough one to one support			11	
g. Would like more involvement with employer		1		11
h. Greater level of guidance needed	1		1	1
i. Good resources	1		1	
j. Course not specialised enough e.g. SEN	1 1			

(Log hook adapted from Dawson et al. 1991)

The log allowed the researcher to start with reference to the group context "..and recognising the operation of individual 'voices' within it" (Barbour and Kitzinger 1999:16). The analysis of the issues identified by the log enabled a summary of the main core themes to be extracted from the four focus groups. This also ensured that no themes were omitted from the analyses (see Table 18 below). The results of this procedure also fed into the development of the head teachers` questionnaire.

Table 18: Themes from the Four Focus Groups

Findings	Theme	Level
Majority want to carry on to full degree in order to gain teaching qualification but most are self funding and need to keep working.	Route into teaching.	Macro
Majority are first in family to attend university.	Widening participation /skilled workforce.	
Support provided during course appears vital to teaching assistants experience and success	Level /kind of support provided.	Meso
Most feel that their Heads do not understand what a Foundation degree is or are particularly supportive of them.	Role of Heads/schools.	
Most teaching assistants feel that the Foundation degree increases confidence/self–esteem. Many feel they have more responsibility e.g. covering lessons, but not gaining in status or extra pay.	Importance of paper qualifications to teaching assistants. Workplace benefits and drawback of completing a Foundation degree.	Micro
Professionalised workforce. Teaching assistants taking on more responsibility. Outcome for TAs (WP and CPD).	Who's benefiting from TAs taking Foundation degrees?	Macro, Meso and Micro.

The above Table (Table: 18) also enabled three different levels of analysis to be exposed; micro, meso and macro. In relation to this research, the macro-level encompasses polices relating to higher education, Foundation degrees and the Widening Participation Agenda. The meso level can be seen as acting as the intermediary between the two other levels (macro and micro) as it focuses on Foundation degree providers and the 'Remodelling of the Workforce Agenda', whilst the micro-level focuses on the individuals concerned in this research, the teaching assistants themselves. "At all levels... ...there are structures and processes in operation" (Morrison 2007:43). These will be examined next in the overall summary of the four focus groups conducted.

5.3 SUMMARY OF FINDINGS FROM FOCUS GROUPS

The results reveal that across all four focus groups, the respondents` motivations in entering higher education and embarking on a Foundation degree were frequently varied and often prompted by factors including, personal life, previous education, work experience and goals. Foundation degrees are particularly seen as part of the Widening Participation Agenda, which will be explored next.

Widening Participation

Participation in higher education has been clearly differentiated in terms of socio-economic groups (Bynner, 1992; National Audit Office, 2002). Under the Widening Participation Agenda, the Government has promoted higher education for groups that

have not traditionally entered higher education before (The Future of Higher Education, 2003).

This research identifies that Foundation degrees are playing a role enabling a number of students from non-traditional and underrepresented groups, with little experience of the world of higher education, to participate in higher education. The focus groups revealed that 84 per cent of respondents had no prior experience of higher education prior to their Foundation degree. This indicates that widening participation works for those individuals who see the point of it. In this instance widening participation is about the professional development of teaching assistants which they can use, not only in their current occupation, but in accessing a new career, for example, teaching.

As a route into teaching

The predicament is that the Foundation degree may be seen as a first step into teaching, rather than a discrete professional qualification in its own right. Results found that the majority (64 per cent) of all respondents stated that gaining qualified teacher status was their primary motivation in enrolling for their Foundation degree course. They stated that this option allows them to continue working whilst gaining applicable qualifications. The QAA (2005) have recognised that a Foundation degree for teaching assistants can "provide the base for an alternative route into teaching". Although, as the Foundation degree has only been available since 2002 and the path to qualified teacher status is relatively lengthy for teaching assistants starting at this level, as yet there are few actual cases of evidence to support the credibility and usefulness of this route. Most part time Foundation degrees take approximately three

years. There is then the progression to honours degree which can be another two or three years.   And then there is then a Qualified Teacher Status (QTS) course to complete, which is a minimum of one year full time. In total the time taken could be at least seven years. Thus the success or otherwise of the Foundation degree being a route into teaching has yet to be empirically established. This is due to this time involved in achieving QTS with the Foundation degree as the starting point (in 2002).

Accepting Greenbank`s (2007) view that the experience of students making the transition from Foundation degree to honours degrees is under-researched, it can be assumed that the transition from teaching assistant on Foundation degrees, to qualified teacher status, is even more under researched.   However, one relatively recent investigation involving a sample size of 73, investigated the career trajectories of teaching assistants achieving a Foundation degree at one particular institution in the northwest of England found that 33 per cent went onto a QTS programme (Dunne *et al* 2007).

Support for goal of teaching

Results found that some of the respondents did feel supported by their workplace in their goal of QTS. There are various options available to those teaching assistants who have support from their employers in becoming qualified teachers.   These include, firstly completing a Foundation degree and then a Registered Teacher Programme (RTP). This normally takes around three years to five years, three years for the Foundation degree and two years for the RTP. Another option is to complete their Foundation degree, then top up to the full degree and then take the Graduate

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Teaching Programme (GTP) which is a "programme of on-the-job training allowing graduates to qualify as a teacher while they work", all of which would take around seven years (TDA, 2007). Some of the focus group participants comment that they are already sure of which route they will be taking as they feel they have support from their head teacher. Their decision may need to be revised as there are many barriers to progression; key areas can present problems, such as "age; personal and family life; and lack of recognition for the Foundation degree" (Dunne *et al* 2007:55).

Some teaching assistants felt that their head teachers did appear to have knowledge of the Foundation degree and how it could be used as a stepping stone to full honours degree and/or QTS status. Other head teachers appeared to use it as the 'proverbial carrot', as one teaching assistant was already taking a full teaching timetable and others were being used as cover supervisors, without receiving any financial contribution for these extra responsibilities and duties, but with the promise of support to QTS through the GTR or RTP routes. The successful transition from teaching assistant to teacher will need a supportive employer in most instances, starting with their Foundation degree.

Work place support for Foundation degrees

To access a Foundation degree in the first place, the teaching assistant needs support from their head teacher, as they are attending part time whilst in employment. Employer support was a factor identified by Schuller and Raffe (1997) with regard to accessing higher education. Results found that although there were some very good examples of support for teaching assistants during their Foundation degree course,

with some giving financial, academic and study time support, most teaching assistants were not so fortunate. Many respondents commented that they felt they were funding the course themselves and doing it in their own time. Several also commented that they felt their head teacher had no knowledge of either what they were doing, how it could support their role, or even what a Foundation degree is. This supports the view that not all employers are clear about Foundation degrees or what holders of the award are able to do (www.ssda.org.uk).

A factor which has become apparent from this research is that if many head teachers support their teaching assistants in using the Foundation degree as a stepping stone to a new career, rather than for professional development, it may impact on the time that they are employed at the school or even in the role of a teaching assistant. Townsend *et al* (2005), advises that high staff turnover is commonly cited as a reason to deny investment and support for training some employees.   The length of service of an employee is uncertain, the employee could move before the training investment has been recovered.   Studies which have explored the connection between training and mobility have found that the likelihood of employees leaving employment after training is usually more significant for women than for men: that females are likely to try and find more favourable employment (Royalty, 1996; Shields, 1998). This may explain why some head teachers did not appear to be supporting teaching assistants on Foundation degrees, due to the concern that many of the teaching assistants will leave their employment after their Foundation degree course in order to support their professional development and improve their longer term prospects.

Improving prospects

Results recognised that there was a clear desire from respondents to succeed in their Foundation degree course. Reasons for this included a desire to improve their employment prospects and thus increase earning potential in order to make a better life for their families. Apart from two males, all other respondents in this research were female and many of those indicated they were mothers. Department of Work and Pensions (2001) figures indicate that more and more mothers will be employed by 2010 and 25 per cent of all families will be headed by a single parent. This family status factor may be reflected in the desire by some of the respondents to be a role model and provide a source of encouragement for their own children.

Impact of course

The impact on the students during the course has also been at times, challenging to their personal and family life. Bearing in mind the particular student cohort, it is common for their study to be affected by both minor and major life events, including difficulties with childcare, relationships and family bereavement (Edmond *et al* 2005). During this research it was revealed that family, partners and their particular social issues are particularly linked to their experience on the course. Some respondents mentioned the pressures from partners. Other respondents outlined the guilt they experienced due to the time involved and the pressures of the course taking them away from family time and responsibilities. They explained that they experienced contradictions in that they were giving advice to parents which they found difficult to meet with their own children (e.g. level of homework support).

Simcox (1998) recognised other factors, such as work balance, family support and dynamics may determine the overall experience of teaching assistants on their Foundation degree. As the vast majority of respondents are mature students in full time employment with many complex family responsibilities, this leaves very little time to adjust to the additional and challenging demands of higher education study. This was borne out in the focus groups with many respondents commenting that they found the academic and study demands of the course extremely difficult to cope with at times. This has impacted on many of the respondents both at work and at home.

With regard to the respondents` work, and their feelings that they are not getting the benefits they deserve for extra duties and responsibilities. Further to this, this research has identified that teaching assistants are being asked to cover classes without the support of teaching assistants, which the class teacher would normally have. Although Cremin *et al* (2005) have acknowledged that there is a need for more collaboration and team working between teachers and teaching assistants.   Whether the teaching assistants get the support they need during their Foundation degree from the teacher or the school needs to be further investigated.

Those respondents that commented much more favourably on their experience with their Foundation degree declared that they had support from family and friends. The value of access to a social support network during their Foundation degree course can be appreciated through Bourdieu`s (1977) concept of social capital.   Smith (2007) outlines that 'social networks are a valuable asset' in which people commit themselves to building communities which can bring about great benefits. This advocates the importance in developing communities for overcoming social exclusion. "It is used to

signify the extent to which people have access to networks" (Thomas and Jones, 2000: 16). The respondents revealed that the more support networks they have access to, the less problematic they find the demands of their Foundation degree course to be.

Financial constraints

Other factors that were considered to compound their level of difficulty included the financial constraints which many were subjected to, for example with regard to paying for childcare, study resources and for many, course fees. When Foundation degrees were introduced, higher education became likened to that of a marketplace, with a new role for students as paying customers. "With the prospect of tens of thousands of pounds of debt on graduation, it's only rational that students demand value for money" (Teather, 2006). The pay of teaching assistants is relatively low and having to pay fees from that is a huge financial commitment. A student who completes 120 credits in an academic year would pay £1,100 in tuition fees or £275 per 30 credits www.gre.ac.uk/foundation degree.

The teaching assistants at three out of the four focus group institutions had fees to pay for their Foundation degree. It was considered by this researcher that this may be a factor in the teaching assistants` perceptions of their course. The teaching assistants at Focus Group 4, had their fees paid for them by their Local Authority and the majority of their views are positive. This factor may have a bearing on their views. However the respondents at focus group 3, have to pay their own fees and all their comments (100 per cent) were favourable. This indicates there may be other factors, apart from financial issues involved in determining the perception of their course.

To explore perceptions around the teaching assistants` experiences, several questions were asked with regard to the teaching assistants` perceived needs during their Foundation degree course. The vast majority of respondents across all four focus groups commented on the difficulties of balancing all the required reading and study with work and personal/family responsibilities. The timing, structuring of the course and cost involved all impacted on the teaching assistants` experience and satisfaction with their Foundation degree. Access to books, computer facilities and competing family and employment commitments, often lead to anxieties over the amount of study time needed, with many commenting that they study either late into the night or very early in the morning.

Results highlighted that students may be experiencing different levels of support and guidance from their Foundation degree providers, with teaching assistants commenting at the different institutions that their experiences were either generally positive or generally negative. This may be explained in terms of the individual institutions containing different expectations of 'non-traditional' students compared to traditional higher education students.

Students that have limited experiences of higher education may need different kinds of support compared to traditional higher education students. Research (Ozga and Sukhnandan, 1998; Cook and Leckey, 1999) indicates that students, whether they are male or female, with family members who have little experience of higher education, are likely to be unprepared for its demands, which means that many widening

participation students will find the transition demanding. This view was supported by the findings from the focus groups with one respondent commenting "I do not feel supported... ...I feel that I do not get any constructive feedback or input". Forrester *et al* (1993) argued that mature learners are likely to focus on the outcome and be result-oriented. This can represent a real challenge to some universities in providing the appropriate type of support needed. Those respondents that identified that they had good relationships with other students and staff on the course were much more positive in their whole attitude with regard to the course and their future. They were much more likely to comment as one respondent did - "the lecturers were all really approachable and helpful and you always feel you can ask them anything, it's great". Tinto (1997) found that the more students interact and have good relationships with their peers and staff, the more likely they are to stay and have a successful outcome to their course. This is supported by a study by Simcox (1998) which revealed:

> *That those aspects which most significantly contributed to a non traditional learner include ... ...faculty/staff support, peer support (p. 61).*

Difficulties that may arise could be explained by Bourdieu (1977) who would contend that a traditional institutional habitus would tend to reinforce social inequalities.

> *The language of instruction, the assumed knowledge and the prioritising of style over contents favour students from a dominant background, rather than those for whom HE is not the norm (Harker, 1990: 88–89).*

A further determining factor highlighted throughout the focus groups appears to be the quality of relationships between:

(i)   the Foundation degree lecturing team and the students and

(ii)   the students on the course.

Those that felt they had a good relationship with staff and other students had a much more positive perception about their Foundation degree in terms of meeting their needs, support given and the experiences they had during the course. These results indicate that the type of support that non-traditional students may need is not just academic and study skills, but emotional, practical support and mentoring.   It appears that the attitudes of teaching staff are fundamental to the respondents` experiences and ability to cope with the academic requirements of their Foundation degree course. This position is supported by Grenfell and James (1998), who discusses how the student experience has to be understood in relation to the larger picture, in terms of the practices of teaching and support. It is recognised that educational institutions ought to identify what support the widening participation students see as being necessary to them if they are to achieve their goals. These students have:

> *Greater external demands and pressures in comparison to the traditional age*
> *students. Support and the sources of support, therefore, take on greater*
> *meaning for adult learners participating in higher education (p. 10).*

Despite the misgivings identified about the difficulties faced and perception of the level of support received by some of the respondents, the common sentiment stated by most of the respondents was positive and upbeat. This is particularly in regard to their

contribution to the teaching assistants` personal development in terms of self-esteem, image, personal development and professional skills. None of the respondents said that they regretted their decision to undertake the course and many had mentioned that they had developed strategies to face the difficulties that arose during the course. Many respondents commented that several of their peers on the Foundation degree had dropped out during their course. It could be hypothesised that those students that perhaps were unable to develop adequate coping skills, left the course. This fact needs to be acknowledged in terms of the possible bias within the sample of the focus group participants, in that their views may be different from those that withdrew from their Foundation degree course.

The next step in this research is to examine the replies from the questionnaire sent out to head teachers across four local authorities in the Midlands which employ teaching assistants. This is in order to examine their understanding and perceptions of the contribution of Foundations degrees for teaching assistants.

5.4 Head Teachers Questionnaire

Despite the measures taken in the construction of the questionnaire, the response rate was disappointing with only 54 out of the 234 being returned, consequences of which were addressed with a non response survey, (see page 146). The results of the non response survey indicated that I could be confident in the reliability of the results as the results were very similar to the findings from the questionnaire, which are examined next.

5.5 Questionnaire Analysis

The first step in order to analyse all the data from the 54 returned questionnaires, is the task of data reduction. This involved the production of a basic frequency table of all the questions in the questionnaire. After this data reduction process had been completed, there remained the relatively straight forward task of inputting the data into Excel in order to have clear and detailed data to hand in order to analyse.

To give an overview of the questionnaires returned, it was first considered useful to breakdown the number of questionnaires returned from each local authority and also documents the type of educational institution. This would allow easier reference and allow the comparison of results from the different local authorities and institution type.

Table 19: Questionnaires returned

Local Authority	School Type	Total Number of questionnaires returned
1	First School	2
	Primary	3
	Secondary	2
2	Infant and Nursery	1
	Primary	10
	Secondary	4
3	Infant and Nursery	3
	Primary	4
	Secondary	2
4	Infant and Nursery	8
	Primary	9
	Secondary	6
TOTAL		**54**

The above table (19) also illustrates the breakdown in the numbers involved in this part of the research, including the local authority and type of educational establishment. This data was gained from the first three questions asked on the questionnaire which required information with regard to the type of establishment and number of teaching assistants employed there. Information was also asked with regard to the number of teaching assistants with Foundation degree or who are working towards their Foundation degree. The results are displayed below (Table 20), along with the percentage to aid a more direct comparison between local educational authorities to illustrate how many teaching assistants either have, or are working towards, a Foundation degree.

<u>Numbers of teaching assistants employed and number of teaching assistants on Foundation degrees</u>

The table below illustrates the differences of teaching assistants employed across the four local authorities. It also illustrates the number of teaching assistants involved in Foundation degrees. These figures were also converted into percentages to aid comparison due to unequal numbers at the individual local educational authorities. Results of which demonstrated that the local educational authority with the highest number of teaching assistants on Foundation degrees is Local Authority 3, with 16 per cent on Foundation degrees and the local educational authority with the least number is Local Authority 1, with just 4.65 per cent.

Table 20: Numbers of teaching assistants employed and number of teaching assistants on Foundation degrees

Local Authority	Number of teaching assistants employed	Number of teaching assistants on Foundation degrees	Percentage of teaching assistants on Foundation degrees
1	86	4	4.65%
2	71	9	12.67%
3	175	28	16%
4	183	27	14.75%

Bearing in mind the differences between the local educational authorities, it was considered to be useful to explore the differences between types of educational institution, see below (Graph vi):

Graph (vi): Break down in percentage of type of institution and number of teaching assistants on Foundation degrees
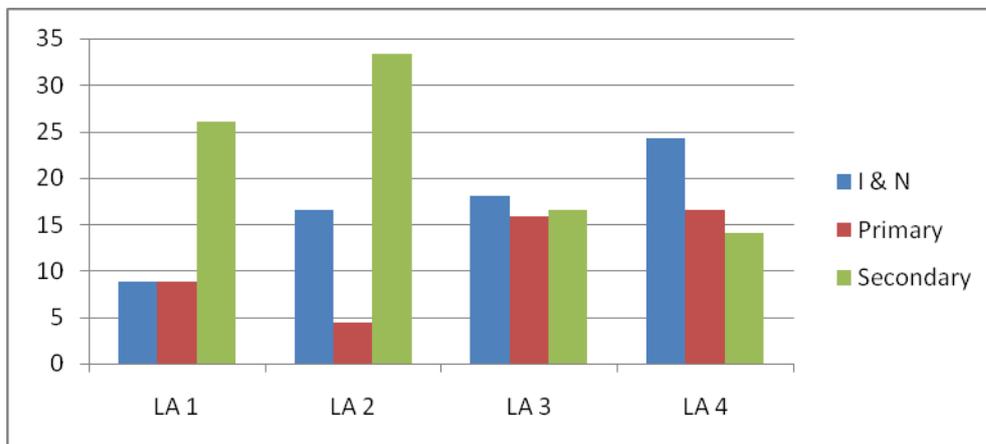

From the Graph above (vi), we can clearly see the differences between types of institutions of teaching assistants involved in Foundation degrees. Local Authority 3, has recorded relatively similar percentage figures across the three education

establishments (infant and nursery, primary and secondary), but Local Authority 1 and Local Authority 2, display a significant increase in the number of their teaching assistants on Foundation degrees from secondary schools, compared to infant and nursery and primary schools. This factor needs to be recognised in terms of the possible influence when examining the results of this thesis.

The analysis of the next question on the questionnaire, (Q4) was broken down as it involved five statements. The first statements to be analysed looked at the responses from all four local authorities in order to give a total picture of the views of head teachers with regard to three pertinent areas of a teaching assistants role; level of effectiveness, impact on pupil learning and their ICT skills.

Question 4: (Combining statements 1, 3, and 5) How do you think that gaining or working towards a Foundation degree affects a teaching assistant's level of effectiveness in post, impact on pupil learning and ICT skills.

Graph (vii)
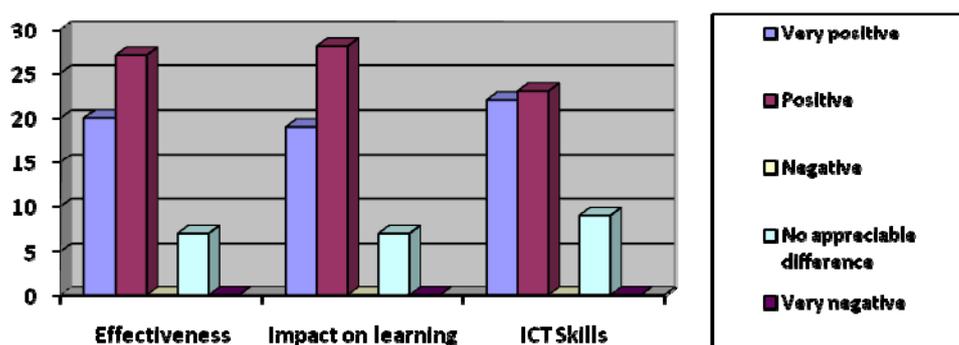
In Question 4, the head teachers had five categories to choose from, ranging from very positive to very negative. Despite this, no responses included negative responses with regard to teaching assistants with Foundation degrees professional ability. The vast

majority of responses considered their teaching assistants involved in Foundation degrees to contribute either positively or very positively in terms of effectiveness in role, impact on learning and ICT skills. This supports findings from an Evaluation Report in Scotland which found that teaching assistants were thought to enhance learning. OFSTED (2002) also said that teaching assistants became better trained in ICT and used these skills to support learning. The above results were based on the total of all the head teachers' responses from across the four local educational authorities. Considering in mind the data displayed in the Graph (vii) above and remembering the difference between Local Authority 3, with the highest number of teaching assistants on Foundation degrees (16 per cent) and Local Authority 1, with the least number (4.65 per cent), it was considered worthwhile to directly compare these two local educational authorities with regard to the same statements as above.

Question 4: (Combining statements 1, 3, and 5). How do you think that gaining or working towards a Foundation degree affects a teaching assistant's level of effectiveness in post, impact on pupil learning and ICT skills.

Graph (viii): Local Authority 3, Head Teachers view
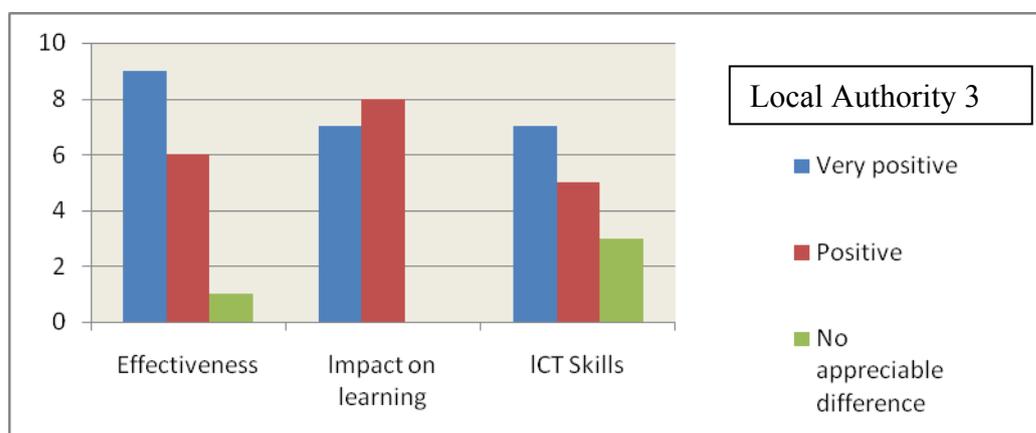
Graph (ix) Local Authority 1, Head Teachers views
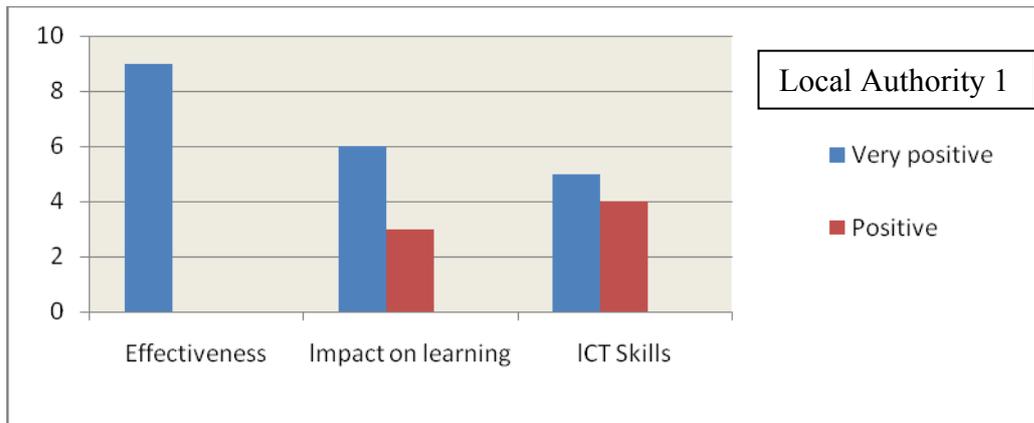
The above two graphs (viii and ix), illustrate a clear difference in results between these two local authorities, with Local Authority 1, head teachers responses all either being positive or very positive. Local Authority 3, head teachers on the other hand, included a number of `no appreciable difference` responses with regard to level of effectiveness in post and ICT skills. In order to help clarify the data from the above two graphs further, and in order to make a direct comparison, the information was converted into percentages and displayed together (see graph x below).

Graph (x): comparison of Local Authority 3 and 1, responses
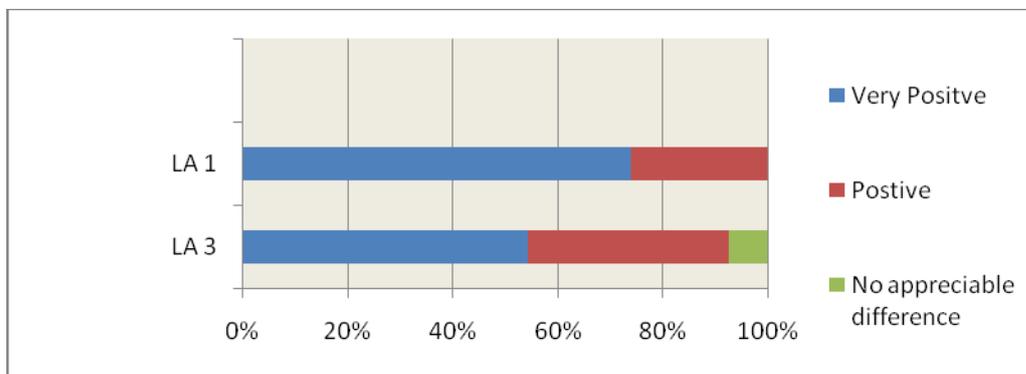
As there were large differences between Local Authority 3 and Local Authority 1, responses, the above graph (x), was created in order to aid clarity and visually display the percentage differences, side by side, in the results between responses collected between their head teachers. Even though Local Authority 1, has the least number of teaching assistants involved in Foundation degrees, the head Teachers responses were all either very positive or positive. The vast majority of responses (over 71 per cent) were very positive with regard to the contribution they think Foundation degrees make to their teaching assistants` professional practice. In order to reveal another possible way in which head teachers may consider that Foundation degrees for teaching assistant support teaching and learning, the views and responses concerning a teaching assistants level of professionalism will be examined next.

Question 4: (Statement 2) How do you think that gaining or working towards a Foundation degree affects a teaching assistant's level of professionalism.

Graph (xi): Head teacher's views on effect on professionalism
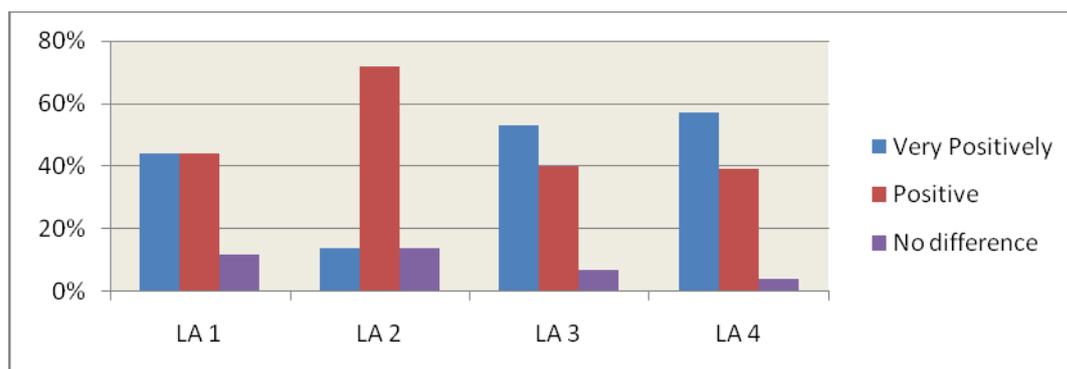
The responses detailed above (graph xi), were converted into percentages, again to aid easier comparison due to unequal numbers at the individual local educational authorities. In response to these statements the head teachers had five options to

choose from, ranging from very positively to very negatively. Despite this, no responses included a negative response with regard to a teaching assistant's level of professionalism with reference to their involvement in Foundation degrees. However, all head teachers responses across all four local authorities contained a 'no appreciable difference' in a teaching assistants level of professionalism between those involved or not involved in Foundation degrees. They considered that all their teaching assistants were professional, whether or not they were accessing Foundation degree courses. With these results in mind, the next question asks head teachers to comment on the three main advantages of having their teaching assistants involved with Foundation degrees.

Question 5: The three main advantages of having a teaching assistant with a Foundation degree

The Head teacher's responses in terms of the advantages of teaching assistants with Foundation degree could be classified into five reoccurring themes, which are categorised below:

Diagram E: Advantages

The Diagram (E) above, highlights five areas in which head teachers recognise the contribution that a Foundation degree can have to a teaching assistant`s role and professional development (improved knowledge and understanding, commitment, confidence and enhanced skills). The head teachers commented that they noticed that not only do teaching assistants appear to have an increased level of knowledge, understanding and skills, they also appear to be more confident in their own ability and have a higher level of self esteem. This is supported by research conducted by Tierney and Slack (2005) into 'learning journeys' of Foundation degree students. They found that although individuals might have initially enrolled onto a Foundation degree for professional development reasons, the outcomes often included an increase in self-confidence and additional life skills. This may be particularly useful as now teaching assistants are generally carrying out more teaching and learning tasks under the Remodelling Agenda (Unison, 2004). The Foundation degree course may contribute to producing the good practice required by providing an appropriate professional development course and support network.

The importance of training teaching assistants was also highlighted in a review of primary education some years previously (1994-95), in which OFSTED stated that, "...well trained Teaching Assistants are a key resource. However Teaching Assistants cannot automatically produce good practice. They need guidance and sound training." The view that teaching assistants need training and professional development in order to make a positive impact on teaching and learning is supported by the DfES Good Practice Guide in 2000. This stated that:

Research and inspections`findings confirm the tremendous contribution that a well trained teaching assistant can make to driving up standards in School (Foreword).

One way in which teaching assistants can access the professional training and development considered necessary is through embarking upon Foundation degrees. Sykes (2003) explains that a key issue for Foundation degrees is the way in which employers regard them. Just because there has been some employer involvement others might need greater persuasion as to the usefulness and meaning of Foundation degrees. If head teachers, as suggested by the questionnaire, recognise the many possible advantages to the role of a teaching assistant with a Foundation degree, it is important to find out if they actually know what a Foundation degree entails.

Question 6 has six statements and head teachers are asked to either agree or disagree with them, one of which includes a statement with regard to the head teacher's knowledge of Foundation degree courses for teaching assistants.

Question 6: Statements to either agree or disagree with

Statement 1: You have an understanding of the content of Foundation degrees for teaching assistants

Graph (xii) – Q6 (Statement 1)
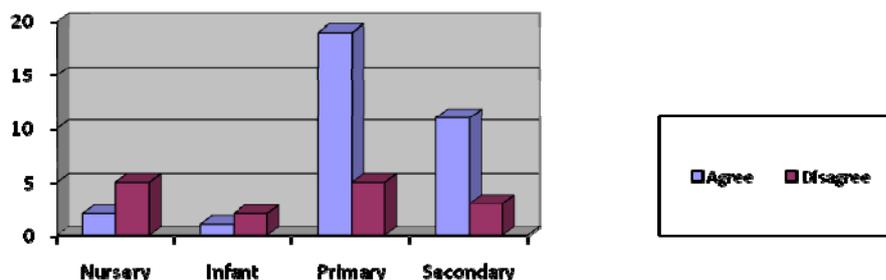
Many head teachers considered that they had some understanding of the content of Foundation degrees for teaching assistants.   Employer involvement and workplace learning is a critical part of the Foundation degree rationale with guidelines provided by the QAA outlining that:

> *Authentic and innovative work-based learning is an integral part of Foundation Degrees and their design. It enables learners to take on appropriate role(s) within the workplace, giving them the opportunity to learn and apply the skills and knowledge they have acquired as an integrated element of the programme (Para 23, QAA, 2004).*

It is clear that not all employers have a full involvement in the process or practice of Foundation degrees. When comparing the different types of institutions under investigation (graph xii), we can clearly see that nursery and infant school head teachers appear to have relatively limited knowledge of the content of a Foundation degree course for teaching assistants, compared to primary and secondary head teachers. This is despite those institutions having signficantly more of their teaching assistants on Foundation degrees.   They also lack knowledge with regard to the content of Foundation degrees and what holders of the Foundation degree award are able to do. This is despite the Sector Skills Councils striving to address some of these concerns through the development of their own Foundation degree sector framework with the direct involvement of employers (www.ssda.org.uk). Whilst recognising that:

> *Work-based learning is still an idea in search of a practice, a pedagogy that is undergoing development as it accommodates itself to the exigencies of the workplace and the university (Boud and Symes, 2000, p3).*

Those head teachers and institutions which appear to have some knowledge and understanding of Foundation degrees would presumably consider that it is a good use of resources to allow teaching assistants time off to attend their course.

The next statement (statement 4) investigates this area, as it asks for head teachers` responses to giving teaching assistants time off to attend their Foundation degree course.

Statement 4: Is giving teaching assistants time off to attend their course a good use of your resources?

The results revealed a positive attitude towards giving teaching assistants time off to attend their Foundation degree course. This is supported by Statement 8, which asked if head teachers think that a Foundation degree for teaching assistants is a useful qualification, as with the exception of just one head teacher at one secondary school in Local Authority 4, all head teachers thought that the Foundation degree for teaching assistants is a useful qualification for their role. These results are supported by a report commissioned by the QAA (2005: 4), which found that employers considered that there was a need for highly skilled learning support personnel and that "employers are committed to the Foundation degree as a route for professional development". However, although they may consider that they are committed to the Foundation degree as being a useful tool in the professional development of teaching assistants and a good idea to give them the time off to attend, the reality is somewhat at odds with their positive views. When the focus group responses were examined it was found that the majority of head teachers did not give their teaching assistants paid time off to attend their courses.

If employers really are supportive of the Foundation degree programme for teaching assistants, the final question which explores the confidence levels of head teachers with teaching assistants with Foundation degrees may confirm this position. Head teachers were given three options to chose from; more confidence, less confidence and no difference in confidence levels in teaching assistants with or without a Foundation degree.

Graph (xiii): Q7: All things being equal, would you have more, less, or no difference in confidence levels in a teaching assistants ability when appointing a teaching assistant with a Foundation degree over a teaching assistant without a Foundation degree in supporting learning.

29.6%

No difference in confidence levels (16 outof 54)

70.4%

More confidence in TAs with FDs (38 out of 54)
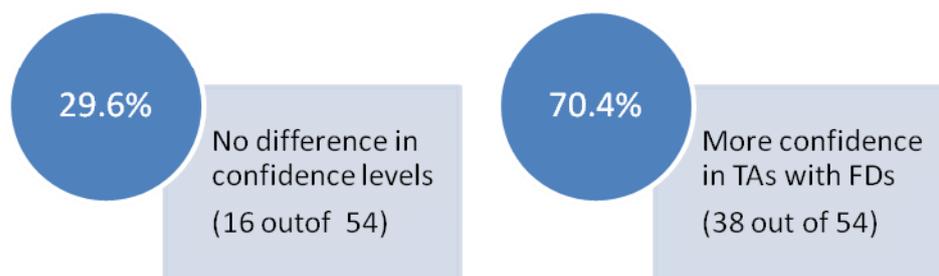
None of the head teachers indicated that they would have less confidence in a teaching assistant with a Foundation degree, but just under 30 per cent reported that they had no difference in their levels of confidence. The vast majority of head teachers, over 70 per cent, stated that they would have more confidence in a teaching assistant with a Foundation degree. This would appear convincing in support of the positive attitude held by head teachers of teaching assistants with Foundation degrees, until we break it down further and look at the results from each type of institutions.

Graph (xiv) Confidence levels across workplaces
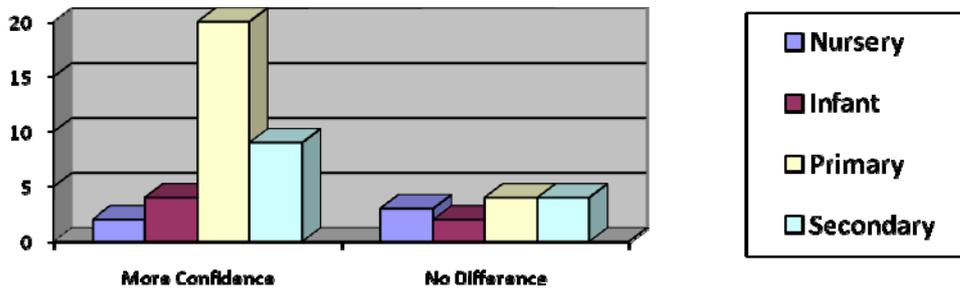
As illustrated by the graph (xiv) above, nursery school head teachers do not have more confidence in their teaching assistants with a Foundation degree. More of their head teachers stated that they had no difference in confidence levels between their teaching assistants with or without Foundation degrees. However, primary school head teachers demonstrated the most confidence in teaching assistants with Foundation degrees, with secondary school head teachers having the next highest levels of confidence in their teaching assistants with Foundation degrees. One reason for nursery head teachers not expressing more confidence in those teaching assistants with Foundations degrees may be due to the fact that nurseries would have traditionally employed staff who have a Nursery Nursing Examination Board qualification (NNEB). The nursery nurses will have experience of working with children from birth to eight years old.   Johnston and Pritchard (1999) have explained that nursery nurses would deliver a comprehensive range of duties and have responsibilities for delivering the depth of quality required.

The above results demonstrate differences in the responses between the different institutions towards Foundation degrees for teaching assistants.   These will now be summarised.

5.6 SUMMMARY OF HEAD TEACHERS QUESTIONNAIRE

A total of 54 questionnaires from head teachers were returned from across four local educational authorities, the results of which were then collated and analysed. Differences have been noted in the uptake of Foundation degrees between some institutions and local authorities. Across the four local authorities a discrepancy of 11.35 per cent in the number of teaching assistants involved in Foundation degrees was identified. The lowest (Local Authority 1) has 4.65 per cent and the highest (Local Authority 3) has 16 per cent of their teaching assistants involved in Foundation degree courses. Differences between types of institutions involved in Foundation degrees for teaching assistants were also found with Local Authority 1 and Local Authority 2. This disparity was identified in the significant larger numbers of their teaching assistants on Foundation degrees from secondary schools, compared to their infant and nursery and primary schools on Foundation degrees.

Knowledge of Foundation degree qualification

The findings from the all the head teachers` questionnaires suggest that many do not know what the Foundation degree qualification means or are clear about what is involved in Foundation degrees. Accepting that there is the distinction between teaching and supporting (and as such), two different classes of professionals have been created (teachers and teaching assistants) to fulfil both roles. These differences will continue to exist and kept detached. Teaching assistants will not be able to apply their developing skills and knowledge if head teachers do not know what is involved in the content of a Foundation degree, or what teaching assistants can learn during them.

Keep (2003: 3) argued that "...the crucial yet persistently absent ingredient is how to persuade the vast majority of employers to get engaged in the process" of Foundation degrees.   To address these concerns the Sector Skills Council has developed their own Foundation degree sector framework (www.ssda.org.uk). It appears that the effect of this has yet to be filtered through to the majority of head teachers.   The Government's Skills Strategy Progress Report in July 2004, acknowledged that:

> *We are still only at the start of the journey to improve the skills of the workforce, and note that engaging employers was one of the five major challenges (DfES, 2004: para 42).*

It was previously hypothesised by this researcher that those institutions which had more teaching assistants involved in Foundation degrees (nursery and infant schools) would most likely have a greater level of knowledge of them. However results found that significantly more primary and secondary head teachers considered that they had more understanding of Foundation degrees` content, despite having less teaching assistants involved with Foundation degrees.

Dunning *et al* (2007) has commented on the difference between perceptions and understanding and suggests that differences may not be unexpected, as it is accepted that it is difficult to accurately evaluate one`s own knowledge.  This also relates to La Piere's (1934) classic study which investigated the relationship between attitudes and behaviour, highlighting the discrepancy between doing one thing and saying another. However, Le Piere`s research used restrictive closed questions in his questionnaire, whereas this research employed some use of the Likert scale, which is designed to circumvent the problem of obtaining meaningful quantitative replies to closed

questions. It is also considered that the "reliability of Likert scales tends to be good" (Oppenhein, 1992: 200).

Head teachers` view of Foundation degrees

The issue of reliability in terms of agreement of views recorded can be seen in the consistency of responses. The results from the questionnaires revealed that the majority of head teachers considered Foundation degrees to enhance a teaching assistant`s understanding of teaching and learning. So not surprisingly, most head teachers were generally supportive of Foundation degrees and in favour of their teaching assistants completing a Foundation degree course. Edmund (2004) viewed Foundation degrees as being driven by a need to have a 'skilled' workforce and the evidence from this research finds that Foundation degrees appear to be addressing the needs of the employers by providing their teaching assistants with a relevant professional development qualification. This implies that the Foundation degree course, which is focused around work based learning may be an important route, one which can encourage the development of a range of cognitive, practical and professional skills pertinent to the diversifying role of a teaching assistant.

Impact on the teaching assistant's role

Accepting the head teachers` perception and interpretation of the significance of the Foundation degree course to the role of a teaching assistant and that teaching assistants are playing an increasingly diverse and flexible role in supporting teaching and learning, supports the DfES (2000) view that this adaptability is a source of strength.

The teaching assistant can be deployed where they can provide the most benefit. This may give some insight behind the head teachers` higher level of confidence and positive belief in their contribution, which was revealed by the head teachers` responses to Question 5. This found that head teachers considered that teaching assistants with Foundation degrees are demonstrating a greater level of commitment to their schools and are perceived to have comparably enhanced skills. This research has established that the consequences of head teachers holding these views, is that they are giving teaching assistants with Foundation degrees more responsibility.

Level of confidence in Foundation degrees

Whilst the majority of head teachers (over 70 per cent) considered they indeed had more confidence in teaching assistants with Foundation degrees, these figures did vary between the different types of institutions. Primary school head teachers had the most confidence and nursery and infant head teachers had the least, despite having more teaching assistants involved in Foundation degrees. The differences in the responses between the each educational institution towards Foundation degrees for teaching assistants, supports the view of the TDA (2007). The TDA highlighted that access to professional development for teaching assistants is a key aspect for leaders in education, one which still appears to present a challenge to be overcome. It could also be due to the view that higher responsibility does not in this instance often come with better pay, which as the focus group results demonstrate, leave teaching assistants feeling very frustrated about their lack of financial recognition for their Foundation degree in their work place.

Contribution to a teaching assistants` role

Results from the questionnaire sent to head teachers have highlighted similar themes and common ground in terms of the head teachers` responses. Many recognise the contribution that the Foundation degree can have to a teaching assistant`s role and professional development (identified as; improved knowledge and understanding, commitment, teaching assistants` confidence and enhanced skills). Differences were also revealed, not only between the different types of educational institutions, but between the four different local authorities. These differences include; knowledge of Foundation degrees and views on how a Foundation degree effects a teaching assistant`s role and ability. However, these results need to be considered in light of the relatively poor response rate of 23 per cent, as only 54 questionnaires were returned. This means that 77 per cent of head teachers did not respond, it was recognised that this should not be disregarded therefore steps were taken to counteract this, in terms of a non-response survey.

5.7 Non-response survey

The methodology chapter emphasised the importance of a representative sample and methods were undertaken to try and ensure that the response data would represent the research population on a range of demographic variables such as type and location of school.

All the responses were collated in a similar way from the questionnaire analysis to aid standardisation and to maximise objectivity. Results indicated (see graph xv below)

that most of the replies from the telephone non response survey were very similar to the findings from the questionnaire.

Graph (xv): Non Response Survey Findings

Question 4
- Positive about teaching assistants effectiveness and impact on pupil learning.
- Very positive about how Foundation degrees effects teaching assistants professionlism

Question 5
- Greater knoweldge
- Increased confidence in teaching assistants
- Teaching assistants more confident in themselves
- Ability to take on new tasks and responsibilities

Question 6: statement 11
- All responded that they have an understanding of Foundation degrees

Question 6: Statement 4
- Three out of four responded that they agreed that giving teaching assistants time off to attend Foundation degree course is a good use of their resources

One area which was not directly raised from the questionnaire was the issue of funding. This is significant in regard to pressure on resources and increased levels of pay that may be needed to retain teaching assistants, once they have achieved their Foundation degrees. It was considered that although Foundation degrees were very beneficial to the teaching assistants both personally and professionally, it was recognised that the consequence of this initiative was one of raised expectations, which ultimately meant that the staff were likely to seek alternative employment, one more in line with newly acquired level of qualification.

The findings summarised above from the non-response survey, held very similar views from those head teachers who had responded to the postal questionnaire, which was outlined in the previous section. These findings support the work of Kessler *et al* (2000) which involved conducting two parallel surveys. Their results found that the non response bias was small and inconsistent and that "very few significant differences were found" (p.125). They also claim that their findings are consistent with a number of other studies in finding minimal bias and further point out that the focus should be on presenting high quality data rather than on achieving a particular response rate. Even so, it was viewed to be of vital importance to have conducted the non response survey in order to feel confident in the results obtained by cross-referencing the data from both studies.

5.8 Interview analysis

The first question focused on finding out how much head teachers actually knew about Foundation degrees for their teaching assistants.

Question: Could you tell me what you know or have heard about Foundation degrees aimed at teaching assistants?

> *JA -   Not a great deal at all really, know virtually nothing, not had any experience of them really.*

> *SS -   Little, if anything, really.*

SJ -   *No, nothing really, I have put TAs through HLTA training, but have no experience of Foundation degrees.*

Results found that the majority (three out of four) of the head teachers interviewed knew relatively little about Foundation degrees. This is confirmed by Smith *et al* (2004) who argued that employers had limited knowledge of what a Foundation degree is or how such could contribute to practice in the workplace. One head teacher from a Local Authority 4 primary school, despite not being able to give me any real details about the foundation degree course, did comment about them very favourably and revealed that she promoted them, but only to those particular teaching assistants that she considered to show particular promise in the workplace. This finding supports the view that the head teachers are the gatekeepers in terms of access onto the Foundation degree course. Hirsch (2003) also noted that senior managers are often the gatekeepers to training, and their assumptions can limit access to training.

As Foundation degrees have limited take up at the Foundation degree providers institutions under investigation in this research, it was hypothesised that the financial concern may be a factor, both in terms of fees and cover for staff attending their Foundation degree course. This is supported by investigations by the QAA (2005) which stated that although "employers are committed to the Foundation degree as a route for professional development ... they foresee potential problems with funding" (p.5). Therefore the next pertinent question needed to be with regard to funding.

Question: Who should fund Foundation degrees for teaching assistants?   Both in terms of fees and/or time off.

None of the head teachers thought that the school or the head teachers should pay the Foundation degree fees. Three out of the four head teachers felt that their local authority should fund Foundation degrees for teaching assistants, with the fourth (SS) who had previously mentioned her lack of knowledge with regard to Foundation degree, admitted that "well I am not sure as I don't know enough about them". Kingston (2007) remarked that the overwhelming majority of Foundation degree students get no financial support from employers with regard to either their fees or other expenses. HEFCE (2007: 8) concurs and suggests that:

> *The recent government proposal for employers to contribute significantly more money than the fee, would entail a dramatic change in employers' attitudes to their employees on Foundation degree courses.*

It needs to be acknowledged by this thesis that when examining the data on employers support for Foundation degrees, HEFCE (ibid) compared the information provided by the Destination of Leavers from Higher Education (DLHE) survey and HESA student records which "find a poor level of agreement. We cannot be sure which source, if any, is right and therefore there is uncertainty about what the true figure is" (ibid: 55).

As the focus groups had already established that the majority of teaching assistants fund their own Foundation degree, it was noted that one of the head teachers appeared to know less about Foundation degree than he may have realised, especially in terms of its impact of a teaching assistant's salary. This became clear when examining the replies for Q4 (see JA comment below), where one head teacher believed that teaching

assistants would get a pay increase. This perception, in fact, is not the case as the Foundation degree award is not usually reflected in the pay scales of teaching assistants. This is despite the then Secretary of State (Alan Johnson) promising a national pay deal for school support staff in May 2007 (cited in Barker and Milne 2007).

If pay increase is not a motivating factor, the next area to be explored is examining the head teachers` perception of who benefits from Foundation degrees for teaching assistants.

**_Question: Who do you think benefits from Foundation degrees for teaching assistants and why?_**

> *SJ* **-** *The individual should benefit from increasing their knowledge and skills. The school should also benefit because the children would have someone working with them who had a better understanding of the learning that was taking place.*

> *DP - They develop a different perspective, they grow and become more confident, more analytical, have more ability on every area. They are also particularly more effective in dealing with parents. It's the growth in confidence that benefits both us and them. But sometimes – very rarely – the teaching assistants feel that they are better than the other teaching assistants that do not have Foundation degrees and do not want to do certain duties that they feel are beneath them.*

> *JA* **-** *Gives a great spread of ability – they get their salaries increased. I certainly feel there is a case for the role of a TAs with a Foundation degree. We need to professionalise them. Here we assign teaching assistants to study areas – rather than linked to certain individuals.*

Many issues with regard to the head teachers` views on the benefits of Foundation degrees for teaching assistants were identified. All pertinent positive themes have been extracted from the transcripts from the interviews and were converted into the Diagram (F) below:

__Diagram F: Question: What do you think are the benefits of Foundation degrees for teaching assistants and why?__
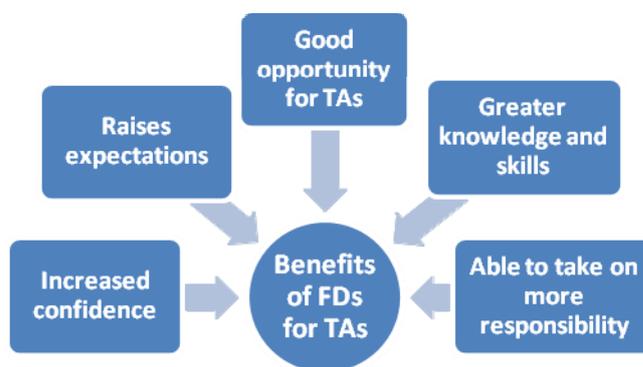
The head teachers stated that they considered that there were many benefits to all those involved, including the teaching assistants both personally in terms of confidence, and professionally with regard to their role in the schools. However, some more negative comments arose in terms of the drawbacks in relation to teaching assistants studying for a Foundation degree. One head teacher indicated that a previous level of goodwill that existed, in terms of the tasks teaching assistants were previously willing to undertake, was now lacking. The head teachers viewed that some teaching assistants now felt that their level of study precluded them from certain odd, mundane or unpaid tasks. The same head teachers also considered that relationships between those teaching assistants on Foundation degrees and those not involved in foundation degrees were at times, strained. This consequence may also be an inhibiting factor for head teachers when considering supporting potential applications.

When examining the responses from the Question: 'Have any teaching assistants approached you about wanting to do a Foundation degree? If so, what was your response and why?' Responses only focused around benefit to the school, for example "I would be happy for her to take time off - if there was benefit for the school", other comments included; "I would only encourage those that I considered it could benefit". The main point here is that although they comment that they are in favour of teaching assistants, these comments may relate to the old saying, 'actions speak louder than word', with relation to supporting teaching assistants on Foundation degrees; the head teachers may `talk the talk` but their action appears to be somewhat at odds with their actions at times. This is in terms of the head teachers fulfilling their own agenda rather than the teaching assistants. This may be understandable in terms of recognising from a 'Teacher Workload Study' that head teachers work more than the average professional (PricewaterhouseCoopers, 2001).

5.9 SUMMARY OF HEAD TEACHERS` INTERVIEWS

> *Foundation Degrees are intended to provide the knowledge and skills that are necessary to enable employees to be versatile and adaptable in progressing to and within work. Employability is a key aspect in Foundation Degree programmes and its inclusion should equip and assist learners to enhance their employment opportunities, and/or allow them to prepare for a career change* (QAA 2004 para. 33).

Foundation degrees were developed in conjunction with employers, however it has been revealed from this research that employers have limited knowledge of what a Foundation degree actually is and what it involves. This gives support for Sykes

(2003) supposition that employers needed greater clarification and more understanding before they could value Foundation degrees. Despite this lack of knowledge (or perhaps because of it) the head teachers have raised concerns about Foundation degrees for teaching assistants with regard to two particular areas.

1. The negative relationship between the teaching assistants with and without Foundation degrees.

2. How teaching assistants interpret the outcomes of their Foundation degree upon their responsibilities, duties and role.

Findings of head teacher perceptions of the relationship between those teaching assistants with/without a Foundation degree will be examined first.

Relationships between teaching assistants

The head teachers identified that they recognised that an element of discontent was apparent in the teaching assistants with regard to the staffing demarcation and the duties previously undertaken. One particular head teacher felt that some of their teaching assistants on Foundation degrees now considered certain duties to be outside of the remit of their perceived understanding of their job role. The same head teacher also commented that the relationships between those teaching assistants on Foundation degrees and those not, were at times particularly strained, in that it was considered that the Foundation degree created negative divisions and tensions between teaching assistants. The resentment between those teaching assistants with or without a

Foundation degree, appears to be creating divisions, a class within a class, the ones who have and the ones who have not, the consequences of which have been identified in this research as to the damaging teaching assistants` morale.

Perception of Foundation degrees

Despite the rather negative points raised by the head teachers, it was clear that the majority of head teachers` comments were very positive and encouraging about Foundation degrees for teaching assistants. All of the four head teachers` responses (despite one not being clear about what a Foundation degree is), were generally very positive and supportive in terms of the usefulness of Foundation degrees for a teaching assistant`s role and professional development. These findings are supported by a QAA (2005) review of Foundation degrees and also by the DfES in their review (2000), which found that head teachers "attached great importance to the training needs of teaching assistants and encouraged them to take up opportunities for self-development". Edmond *et al* (2005) explains that although Foundation degrees are a response to the need to develop and remodel the workforce, their motive is to support the development of a skilled and trained workforce rather than to cultivate professional development.

Head teachers support for Foundation degrees

An issue to be revealed in connection with supporting teaching assistants on Foundation degrees is that although head teachers may 'talk the talk', their action

appears to be rather limited. The head teachers are the ones in the position of power, in terms of granting access onto the Foundation degree course. Consent is needed from their head teachers by the teaching assistants as all the Foundation degree providers under investigation employ this as one of their entry requirements. This is explained by Foucault, (1977: 205) in terms of the power being both internally contradictory as it can both oppress and enable by "acting directly on individuals".

One of the most commonly cited reasons for not supporting the teaching assistants request to enrol on a Foundation degree is the risk of increasing the staff turnover, in that staff may be more likely to leave once they have gained their Foundation degree. Townsend *et al* (2005) points out why invest if your employee is going to leave. The attitude of senior management as a barrier is also recognised by Watkinson (2003) who considered that teaching assistants could only achieve their potential if there was a supportive management in their schools.

> *In some cases the employer has identified employees who would benefit from undertaking a Foundation degree, but the employer will not pay for the cost of the course...they are reluctant to acknowledge that investment in training brings long term benefits (Buxton et al 2005:16).*

Achieving support for Foundation degrees may be complex. It was recognised that gaining support could take some time. Soon after their launch Gibbs (2002a: 239) stated that "trust and consistency is built up over time and requires a drip feed approach to change". The relatively newness of Foundation degrees for teaching assistants together with the lack of a standardised designation may illustrate one reason why the value of Foundation degrees has been questioned and left some

employers puzzled about what a Foundation degree actually is and could do for their workplace. When creating a new award an investment of time is needed by all parties involved. This was recognised by Thurgate *et al* (2007) who commented that when it comes to developing successful relationships in Foundation degrees "partnership is a key to maintaining commitment in any new venture of this type" (p.218).

When further considering Foundation degrees, it is important to also investigate all those involved in the partnership, including the Foundation degree providers to ascertain their view on Foundation degrees on offer to teaching assistants.

5.10 Foundation degree providers

There are over 100 higher education institutions and further education colleges which provide Foundation degrees. They chiefly attract working class, mature students taking Foundation degrees on a part time basis (HESA 2005).

One initial explanation as to why the interviewing of programme managers of Foundation degrees needed to take place, was due to the concerns that have been raised with regard to the quality of Foundation degree provision (Layer, 2004; Moon, 2005; Pascall and Cox, 1993). A further incentive was revealed from the primary data analysed so far (focus groups with teaching assistants and questionnaires/interviews with head teachers) and the disquiet revealed from some respondents. This course of action will also provide a further "method of cross-checking data from multiple sources to search for regularities in the research data" (O'Donoghue and Punch,

2003:78). The detailed rationale for this method is contained in the methodology section.

5.11 Interview of Foundation degree programme managers

The first interview question explored the programme managers` knowledge and perception of the students on their course.

Q1: Is there a 'typical' Foundation degree student?

It was clear from the feedback from three out of the four programme managers interviewed, that they considered that the teaching assistants on their Foundation degree were of a general 'type'. The Foundation degree students were found most likely to be working class underachieving females in their late 20s to 50s. All programme managers reported that since the onset of their courses, they had attracted and enrolled increasingly younger students, but there remained the large age spread. Despite concurring on features such as age, gender and class, one programme manager also disagreed in terms of behaviour and attributes and stated that:

> **DB:** *I wouldn't say there is a 'typical' Foundation degree student although they all seem to come with no real knowledge of how to write assignments, formulate arguments, develop critical analysis etc., and many struggle to acquire these skills.*

As well as programme managers recognising a general 'type' of student on Foundation degrees, the programme managers also recognised that common motivations existed in

their students when applying for, and during, their course. These motivations were further explored in the next question (2).

Q2: What do they say is their motivation in enrolling onto the course?

All programme managers cited that their students frequently revealed that they perceived their Foundation degree as a natural progression in their return to education, for example, moving on from their Level 3 qualifications. Others mentioned that their students enrolled on to their course to improve or gain higher education qualifications in the hope of gaining promotion or enhancing their status and role at work.   It was considered that the teaching assistants wanted to be seen as 'professionals' for the work that they are already doing.

> **CL:** *The students come from diverse backgrounds and experiences. Most of them will tell of their previous educational experiences relating to under achievement or being 'written off' at school. Some are returning to study after having children and some see it as an opportunity to gain recognition for the level of work they are already doing in their settings.*

> **MW**: *All want to update and up skill, be seen as a professional. Many see it as a part time route into teaching.*

All programme managers commented that some of their students enrolled onto their course with the goal of achieving qualified teacher status. These findings support the research conducted by Kay and Sundaraj (2004), which found that for mature students a prime motivation was to improve their career prospects or change career paths. As well as a route into teaching, two of the programme managers pointed out (Local

Authority 1 and 4) that there was now a growing awareness amongst their students of other career routes of professional development options. For example, both of these programme managers had students who, since enrolling on to their Foundation degree had gained the position of head of year in their schools. It was commented that alternatives to teaching were often popular with the older students on their courses. This is perhaps not that surprising given that the total time taken to achieve qualified teacher status starting from Foundation degree level could be at least seven years (QAA, 2005).

As well as being asked to outline the motivations of their students, the programme managers were asked to comment on the type of support that they consider their institution gives to the teaching assistants during their Foundation degree course. The next question explored their comments on the support they consider they provide for their students whilst enrolled on their course.

Q3: In what ways does your institution support their progress?

Foundation degree students are far less likely to have experience of what higher education entails compared to honours degree students. All the programme managers interviewed appreciated that the majority of their students have difficulties in initially making the transition to the requirements of higher education. It is accepted that many do not make the transition, which is reflected in the high dropout rates. Their views are supported by Reay *et al* (2003) and Quinn *et al* (2005) who agree that many will have difficulties in meeting the challenges presented. Reay (ibid) examined the learning experiences of women on an Access course and found that mature female

learners experiences are likely to be exacerbated by the challenges of trying to balance and move between two worlds (work and family commitments). To tackle these concerns Forrester (1993) recognised that higher education providers need to adjust to the demands of non-traditional students and the type of support required is not just academic and study skills. They need a different approach which recognises and addresses their particular individual needs, backgrounds and experiences (Muir and Atkinson, 2006).

This view that Foundation degree part time students require a more holistic type of support appears to be taken on board by the institutions in this research. When exploring the ways in which providers of Foundation degrees for teaching assistants support students, the programme managers outlined many different types of support they provide. The strategies implemented by programme managers have been outlined in the Diagram (G) below and grouped into four categories; academic support, emotional support, professional development and workplace involvement.

Diagram G - Q3: What ways does your institution support their progress?

ACADEMIC SUPPORT
Extended induction
Assignment/study skills
Learning suppor/Group tutorials

EMOTIONAL SUPPORT
Individual tutorials
Emotional/personal support
Access to tutors via email/telephone

Support provided

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT
Careers Advice
Online support/VLEs

WORKPLACE INVOLVEMENT
Workplace visits
Encouraging workplace mentors
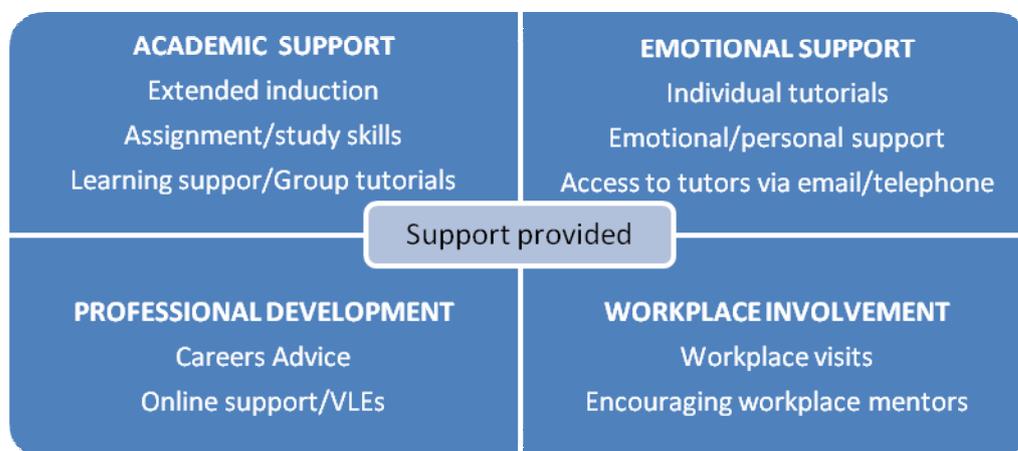
It has been revealed through this research that programme managers of Foundation degrees believe they positively support their students by employing many different tailored strategies. Given the broad range of support, the next question examined if they considered there was a particular type of support that the students appeared to need the most during their course.

Q.4: What particular type of support does a typical student appear to need the most?

Results found that the programme managers indicated that there was not just one particular type of support necessary for the students, but rather a range of strategies was considered essential. All recognised that the most common time to withdraw from their course is around the first assignment hand in date and it was therefore considered that although the emotional support was vital, academic and study skills support was initially a top priority in order to support initial progress. The programme managers have implemented strategies in order to tackle this which is demonstrated from the three quotes below.

> **CL**: *The induction process was amended this year to create a more phased return to study. This occurred over three weeks and involved a short diagnostic piece of writing to identify any potential barriers to success. The areas identified were then addressed in tutorials so that the students were aware of the aspects of their work that could be a potential strength and those that may cause concern.*

> **CS***: Since taking over as programme manager I give the students a huge amount of study, academic and personal support. I work hard to build up group cohesion, the students cannot access academic support if they do not feel they are in a supportive environment. It takes time to build up*

relationships, they (the students) will not ask for help in the early days they need time to build up relationships with the tutor and with each other. I also explore their learning needs, this year many of the students were assessed for specific learning needs and 4 out of 16 were then statemented for dyslexia.

DB*: They need support with academic writing skills, particularly with writing assignments, formulating arguments and developing critical analysis. Also referencing skills is the 'bane of everyone's life'*!

Programme managers mentioned that they had introduced their strategies primarily in response to high levels of students withdrawing themselves from their course, in order to improve retention rate of students. Figures and details of dropout rates were disclosed for the next question (Question 5) which investigated the rates students withdraw from their Foundation degree course.

Q5: What is your student dropout rate?

The dropout rate for students nationally in the UK for HE courses is 17 per cent (UUK 2005). This is much lower than the programme manager's figures which recorded a dropout rate of between 20 and 40 per cent.

CL: *On my programme, I lose about a fifth within the first semester mainly due to the level of commitment being too challenging for them. Out of a cohort of 21 in 2007-8 only 14 now remain. They do not appreciate that time in college is the tip of the iceberg and that they will have to invest more of their home time in aspects of research and study and this is difficult for them. They are also not prepared to the change in the level they are expected to work at.*

It would be useful to make comparisons with other Foundation degree courses. However due to the relatively short time Foundation degree courses have been offered, "there is comparatively little research directly exploring recruitment and retention in Foundation degree students" (Mackenzie, 2006: 1). This is exacerbated by the fact that the relevant dropout figures are not centrally held (www.publications. parliament.uk).

Withdrawal figures for Foundation degrees, that are available, are from a review of 34 Foundation degree courses by the QAA (2005). This examination revealed that a high proportion of students on some Foundation degree programmes withdraw before completing their programmes. They identified that between 45 and 90 per cent of the students on the Foundation degrees reviewed, completed and achieved the award. On average, they found that their withdrawal rate figure for part-time students was approximately 29 per cent, the reality of which is that a high proportion of students on some Foundation degree programmes withdraw prematurely and may not go back and complete their studies.

Q6: Do many of them progress on to the full honours degree?

The programme manager at the collegiate provider in Local Authority 2, stated that "*just under half usually progress on to do the BA honours top up*". The other three programme managers stated that with regard to their students, out of those that do actually complete their Foundation degree course, the vast majority go on to progress to the full honours degree.

Two out of these three programme managers stated that two of their students (at two different institutions), cited lack of family support rather than lack of motivation, for their non progression to the honours degree programmes.   From examining the programme managers` perception of the changes in their students over the duration of the course, identified from the next question (Q7), explanations for the relatively high progression rate from all institutions are highlighted.

Q7: What do you consider to be the main changes in the students over the course duration?

Rather than going through all the changes, perhaps this could be best condensed into three words, confidence, confidence and more confidence! All programme managers emphasised strongly that the Foundation degree course had a huge contribution in increasing their students' self-esteem and level of confidence. Despite this benefit there were some, albeit smaller drawbacks, which are summarised below, along with the benefits:

Diagram H: Programme Managers perception of the main changes in the students over the duration of the course?

Greatly increased level of confidence and self esteem	Increased level of skills, abilities and responsibilities	Frustrated by lack of opportunies and extension role	Frustrated by lack of recognition of FD course by employers
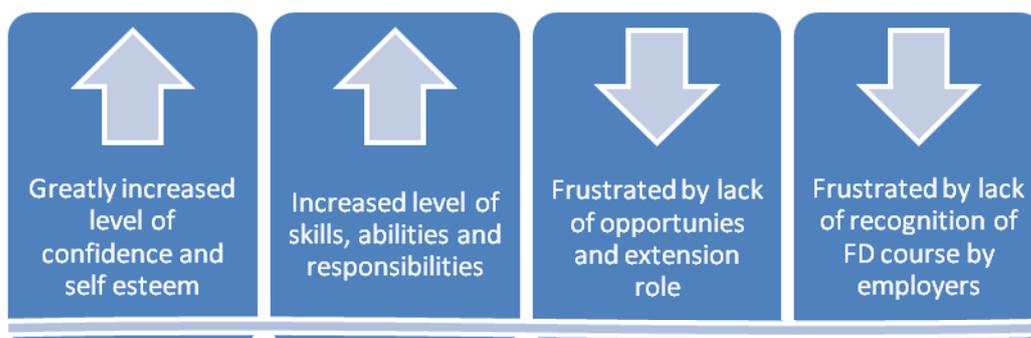
During the exploration of the above question (Q:7), it was revealed that the programme managers recognised that the students often felt frustrated by the lack, or perceived lack, of support from their employers. It was considered by the programme managers that the teaching assistants thought that employers not only thwarted their opportunity to access promotion in order to apply their new skills and knowledge, but also they did not recognise their course in terms of how it may contribute to an improved position in their workplace. Buxton *et al* (2005) believes that employers are less than knowledgeable about Foundation degrees and there is a need for "a more effective approach to raising awareness of Foundation degrees amongst employers" (p.13). Therefore it was considered important to discover if, or how, the programme managers in this research, involve employers in their Foundation degree course.

Q8: How are employers involved in your Foundation degree?

Employers are compelled to be involved with Foundation degrees in order to meet the needs of their particular industry (QAA, 2004). This research has found evidence to support Sykes` (2003) premise that some employers appear to be less involved than others.   When the programme managers were asked if and how they involve employers, two out of the four stated that they required little participation from employers.

> *CL: We have minimal employer involvement – if they are employed rather than voluntary – we require a letter from their Head to support their application*

and ask students if they can ask someone in their workplace to agree to be their mentor, but this is an informal request and not followed up.

CS: Not at all – except for a letter of support and most agree to provide mentors for students.

All of the institutions require a letter of support from the head teachers of those teaching assistants that are in their paid employment. Teaching assistants that were working on a voluntary basis, but wanted to complete the Foundation degree course, do not always require this letter of support. All programme managers acknowledged that they had at least one student on their course working in a school on a voluntary/unpaid basis. Two programme managers (Local Authorities 2 and 3) declared that their institution did have considerable involvement with employers. They not only required a letter of support, but they invited employers to a meeting prior to the start of their Foundation degree course and expected workplaces to provide mentors for the students. One programme manager also visited her students at their school in order to have the opportunity to observe the teaching assistant in the workplace and stated that:

DB: Mentors in the work place are seen once a year during the observation of the student. Employers are given details of the course leader who they can contact with any concerns.

5.12 SUMMARY OF PROGRAMME MANAGERS` INTERVIEWS

Foundation degrees were created in order to integrate academic and vocational work based learning, whilst offering an alternative route into higher education. In order to access this route it is recognised that employer support is a crucial factor (Schuller and Raffe, 1997). The QAA (2004) also acknowledge employer involvement in Foundation degrees is an essential ingredient, not only in order to meet the needs of their particular industry (in this case education), but also in meeting the needs of their employees. This is not as separate entities but one based on interdependence; a symbiotic relationship in which there is a mutual benefit, but one which takes effort from both parties if it is to be successful.

> *In order to make these programmes successful, staff in further and higher education institutions, and the employers they have worked with, and the students they have recruited, have had to work long and hard to find creative and innovative solutions to the problems they have encountered" (Brennan and Gosling, 2004: 9-10).*

Widening participation

In meeting the needs of the students, from the analysis of the programme managers` interviews, it was concluded that the Foundation degree for teaching assistants does indeed provide access into higher education for non-traditional students. These non-traditional Foundation degree students on courses for teaching assistants tended to have common characteristics. Research by Taylor *et al* (2006) into foundation degrees for early years workers (which include primary teaching assistants) also found that the students tended to have common features. They are likely to include being mature females, with family commitments in low paid jobs, possibly teaching assistant or nursery nurses with level 2 qualifications. This vision of the typical student is

supported by the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) in 2005, which found that the majority of Foundation degree students were mature women, attending part time whilst in employment.

<u>Support provided for students</u>

The importance of a flexible entry into higher education has been identified by Jary and Jones (2006), but they stressed that providers need to deliver courses which tailor to the needs of widening participation students. This is in order to prevent differentiation between experience and career opportunity of non-traditional higher education students. Through the focus group studies, it was uncovered that many of the students were discontented and frustrated by their perceived lack of support during their course from their Foundation degree providers. When this was explored through the programme managers' interviews, they recognised that their students often felt anxious and apprehensive when joining their course and often had great difficulty in coping and meeting the challenges it demands. The concerns expressed indicated that students often feel discontent and frustration with their progress and ability to complete the course and confirm this by withdrawing. Dissatisfaction has been acknowledged as a contributory factor in increasing student withdrawal rate (National Audit Office, 2002; Bennett, 2003; Mackie, 2003).

Rather than the students dissatisfaction being externally imposed, the programme managers revealed how although they accepted that the students needed different types of support; their role was to develop and encourage independent learning skills. It is considered by the Government, that neither they or educational providers can take full

responsibility for the lifelong learning of an individual and the individual is the only one that can take the responsibility for organising themselves (DfES, 2003).

In supporting the successful outcome for their students, all of the four programme managers appreciated that their Foundation degree students required them to modify the level, frequency and type of support they provide. The various strategies implemented were in order to impact and improve on many overlapping areas which include increasing student satisfaction, retention and success rates. Despite providing tailored intervention, three out of the four institutions had a higher than average dropout rate (the further education college, collegiate and university college). One possible explanation for this may be due to the higher entry requirements required at the other institution (traditional university). At the university for example, they are required to pass an interview for the course as well as mostly needing to possess at least a level three qualification, or considerable experience.   The course manager stated that it is unusual for her students not to have GCSE English. She also "has to be satisfied that they demonstrate the ability to write".

Student motivation

As the Foundation degree courses have a relatively high dropout rate, the programme managers` view of their students` motivation in joining their courses was explored. Previous research on adult learners` motivation suggested that the reasons were complex and varied. For example, Hutchinson and Hutchinson (1978) explained that the great majority of women students that enrolled onto courses were looking for intellectual stimulation, whilst Johnson and Bailey (1984) highlighted self

development as the motivation of female mature students. Although these could be a by product of being involved in Foundation degrees, the preliminary findings of this research challenge the view that the teaching assistants` motivation in enrolling on their Foundation degree is particularly complex or varied. The overriding motive according to all the programme managers interviewed, for the vast majority of students of their students, was the opportunity to attain a degree in order to improve their economic status and family life.

Value of Foundation degrees for teaching assistants

The opportunity for the teaching assistants on Foundation degrees to improve their current position was advocated by the programme managers in some depth during their interview. This was particularly in terms of recognising the impact of the course on their students in many different ways. They all recognised the value added aspect of the course to the holistic development of the individual and all agreed that the course can have a positive impact not only on their career development, but in terms of the students` confidence and self esteem. However, it has been revealed that many teaching assistants feel frustrated by the workplace by the lack of recognition of their Foundation degree course.

Lack of workplace recognition

The frustration felt due to the lack of recognition of Foundation degrees in the education workplace may be considered an enigma when looking at comparable

sectors. For example, the National Health Service announced in 2004 that their Foundation degree was to be linked to their pay scale, under their Agenda for Change (DoH, 1999). In order to explore the rationale for this not happening in the educational sector, as well as why head teachers appear to lack knowledge and understanding of Foundation degree, the next element to be investigated will be the views of a stakeholder/representative from a local authority.

5.13 Interview with School Workforce Advisor (Local Authority 4)

The Government have made their views on developing teaching assistants clear. In 1998, the then Secretary of State for Education, Estelle Morris commented that, the contribution of training for teaching assistants "will make possible effective new combinations of staff and technology to raise standards and extend learning opportunities" (DfES, 1998: 12). Whether this view was disseminated down to local authorities needs to be investigated. Consequently, a local authority school workforce advisor from Local Authority 4, was interviewed in order to ascertain her view on the impact and recognition of Foundation degrees on offer to teaching assistants.

The semi structured interview took place at the respondent`s own workplace. (In line with the interview protocol outlined in Chapter three, page 154).

> *Interviewing them [respondents] on their own territory... ...is the best strategy. It allows them to relax much more than they would in less familiar surroundings (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995: 150).*

Whilst accepting this as a particular strength, Scheurich (1997) drew attention to the potential mismatch that can occur throughout the interview process. "What a question or answer means to the researcher can easily mean something different to the interviewer" (p.62). This was recognised but as both the respondent and researcher/interviewer work in a similar field this risk was considered to be relatively minimal.

To aid clarity and coherence the interviewee will be referred to as the SWA (school work advisor) throughout the following section.

The first question put to the SWA was asked in order to clarify her role and involvement with Foundation degrees. The SWA described herself as a:

> *A school workforce advisor with responsibility for all support staff with regard to their continuing professional development. Part of that responsibility involved developing Foundation degrees in participation with a local university college.*

The outline given by the SWA corresponds to the job description, detailed below:

School Workforce Advisers Job Description

> *School workforce advisers provide information, support and guidance on all aspects of training and development for the whole school workforce. Each local authority employs an adviser, partly funded by the TDA, whose role includes working with schools and the authority to raise the quality and impact of training and development, and to identify and share effective practice.*

School workforce advisers also feed local ideas about skills gaps and training and development priorities back to the TDA to help us develop appropriate support (www.tda.gov.uk 2009c).

The next question, examined the SWA`s perception of the role of the local authority with regard to Foundation degrees.  The respondent explained that it has many intertwined roles.  In brief, the SWA considered it was to facilitate the Governments` plan for an integrated children's workforce and to meet the requirements of the Every Child Matters Agenda (2003) legislation**.** This involved supporting the formation and delivery of the training and development of the whole school workforce, including HLTA provision which could allow the CAT points to be recognised.   The SWA also stated that they "particularly wanted to devise a programme with CATs points"

(Credit Accumulation Transfer points are awarded on the successful completion of the Unit requirements and can be accumulated to achieve specific awards. 20 CAT points equates to 200 hours of 'student effort').

It is implied by the quote below, from the SWA, that she viewed the role of the local authority as encouraging the involvement of Foundation degrees to be a three way relationship; themselves, schools and providers.

SWA: It's a partnership – at the end of the day there has to be some continuing professional development as part of the national strategy and to promote pupil development. The schools and teaching assistants have to take into account their particular needs. There is no mandatory training and development for teaching assistants - I can only speak for my local authority, but it has to be a partnership, but an effective partnership. My local authority has a good partnership with schools and Foundation degree providers.

The entwined relation is illustrated by the following Diagram (I).

Diagram I: How do you see the role of the LA in this area?

As the role of the local authority involves developing and maintaining partnerships it was important to explore the SWA`s perceptions of the links between the local authority, head teachers and course providers. The SWA considered that in her Local Authority there are good links between the stakeholders. The SWA stated that head teachers were 'on board' and were part of the development of Foundation degrees in her Local Authority. She pointed out that many are particularly involved and attend meetings, but acknowledged that they need to be 'on board' if they are all to meet the demands of the educational agenda. I challenged the view that all are fully involved in my next question, as my research has already revealed that few very head teachers in this research actually know about Foundation degrees for teaching assistants.

Question: In the course of my primary research I have found that very few head
teachers know about Foundation degrees for teaching assistants, why do you think
this is?

The SWA remarked, "Why should they know?" She felt that there were just too many

qualifications for head teachers to keep up with and that the head teachers are

concerned with pupil development. The SWA pointed out that in schools there would

be a named person responsible for continuing professional development and the

person responsible for this would not necessarily be the head teacher. The TDA

(2009) concur with this and state that:

> *Although one member of the senior leadership team (SLT) may have overall*
> *responsibility for continuing professional development (CPD) leadership is*
> *most successful when responsibility is shared (TDA, 2009a).*

The SWA believed that a clear agenda is needed for those involved in Foundation

degrees but explained that the real issue is, "what you are recruiting teaching assistants

to do". In the last few years the role and responsibilities of the teaching assistant has

been transformed (Clayton, 1993; and Balshaw, 1998). Both Kerry (2001) and

Johnson *et al* (2004) have also identified over twenty different functions performed by

teaching assistants, with many of those individuals undertaking multiple roles. This

diversity of role may contribute to the reality of the career development framework for

teaching assistants being relatively complex. This is due to the:

Different job titles and grading structures used across local authorities and schools, the framework does not link training and qualifications to specific job titles or grades. Training programmes and qualifications are not accredited to the National Qualifications Framework (TDA, 2009).

This lack of a standardised career structure and qualifications is linked to the next question as it explores the SWA`s view on the role that Foundation degrees may have in the professional development of teaching assistants.

Question: What role do you think the Foundation degree has, if any, in the professional development of teaching assistants?

The SWA was very positive about the contribution and role of Foundation degrees for teaching assistants. She fully endorsed the view that Foundation degrees have a useful role in the professional development of teaching assistants   The SWA outlined the contribution of Foundation degrees in promoting learning, by supporting the changing nature of the role and the school workforce. In particular she also recognised how useful Foundation degrees were in contributing towards the Widening Participation Agenda, by giving teaching assistants an opportunity, previously lacking, to access higher education.

> **SWA:**   *The Foundation degree is giving all teaching assistants a chance, especially those from minority groups that may have not had the opportunity previously to access a course at this level.*

Whilst this thesis appreciates the role Foundation degrees can play both in enabling teaching assistants to access higher education and also in the professional development of teaching assistants, this research has documented the frustrations of many teaching

assistants about the Foundation degrees` lack of recognition in the workplace and link to the teaching assistants pay structure. This was acknowledged by the SWA and she accepted that teaching assistants can get very frustrated about the lack of recognition of their Foundation degree. The next question therefore asked if she thought that Foundation degrees for teaching assistants should be linked to their pay structure.

> **SWA**: *I recognise that teaching assistants may be frustrated because their Foundation degree is not attached to pay scales. Teachers are funded nationally, but not teaching assistants. But where is the money coming from? No money is ear-marked or given from the Government. But the school workforce is changing and through their Foundation degree they may then have the opportunity to tackle other roles in school.*

It was considered by the SWA that Foundation degrees will help local authorities to respond to the many challenges presented. Not only those challenges presented by the National Agenda and the development of the children's workforce, but also the new 14-19 curriculum.

> SWA: *There may be huge gaps in the workforce experience – some, - very experienced teaching assistants could fill these gaps not as teachers but filling a useful role within those agendas.*

Some of the many diverse roles in schools are listed next (Table 21):

Table 21: Job roles in schools

Job roles	Examples of job titles
Exam officer	▪ Examinations office
Finance	▪ Bursar
Librarian	▪ Information manager/assistant
Science/design and Technology	▪ Art and craft technician ▪ Design and technology technician ▪ Food technology technician ▪ Science technician
Cover supervision	▪ Cover supervisor ▪ Cover manager
Early years	▪ Foundation stage assistant
Special needs	▪ Teaching assistant special needs
Teaching assistant/ bilingual support	▪ Bilingual support assistant ▪ Higher level teaching assistant
Behaviour/guidance/support	▪ Behaviour mentor ▪ Year Manager ▪ Learning mentor

Adapted from www.tda.gov.uk/support **(2009)**

Despite the many roles and opportunities available, the preferred goal for many teaching assistants taking Foundation degrees is that of qualified teacher status. This phenomenon may be pleasing for the Government, as there has been evidence in the early part of this millennium of teacher shortages in schools. In 2001, just prior to the roll out of Foundation degrees, the Schools Chief Inspector, confirmed that there was "a shortage of teachers with the necessary expertise and qualifications to teach" (Ofsted, 2001). Pressure also came from Shadow School Minister, Nick Gibb, who voiced his alarm at the significant rise in vacancies (Smithers, 2002).

The table below (Table 22) shows there has been a drop in the number of teacher vacancies. These vacancies have decreased at about the rate of 0.1 per cent per year.

Table 22: Teacher vacancy rates

Establishment	2002	2008
Nursery	1.0	0.5
Primary	1.0	1.0
Secondary	1.4	0.8
Special	2.3	1.4
Overall	**1.2**	**0.7**

Adapted from DCSF: (figures 2002 and 2008).

One explanation for this may be due to the teaching assistants being able to fulfil posts as many are taking the registered teacher programme and graduate teaching programme. The TDA (2009) support and promote this option by stating that if the teaching assistants school support them and **"can place you in a teaching post instead, you may be able to train through the GTP. Otherwise, you could follow a part time course at university or college while continuing with your original job"**. Whether the drop in teacher vacancies is due to teaching assistants needs to be explored. It is recognised that the reduction in school vacancies may not be entirely due to teaching assistants applying for teacher training but could be explained by factors such as fluctuating birth rates resulting in a reduction in the number of pupils in the education system. Combined with this, between 1998 and 2007, the number of pupils in state schools fell by 1.3 per cent from 8.26 million to 8.15 million. However, these figures discount the rise in the number of pupils at independent schools, which rose from 556,228 (6.73 per cent of all pupils) to 577,667 (7.08 per cent) and also the number at Pupil Referral Units, which nearly doubled from 7,740 to 15,160 (DSC, 2008: 1).

If the consequence of Foundation degree provision for teaching assistants is more about providing a wider field of applicants for teaching, rather than contributing to the professional development of teaching assistants, then the view of the local authority is considered vital, due to the possible impact on the workforce.

Question: The goal for the vast majority of teaching assistants taking Foundation degrees appears to be, to gain qualified teacher status. What is your view on this?

The SWA accepted that many teaching assistants took advantage of the Foundation degree as a route into teaching, but supported any teaching assistant wanting to do a

Foundation degree. She insisted that although they were not about promoting the Foundation degree as a route into teaching, if the teaching assistants wanted to take advantage of that opportunity, then that was considered fine and she was "happy for them to take this option if that`s what they wanted". This is supported by the DfES who **"**expect that those Teaching Assistants with Foundation degrees will be able to pursue Qualified Teacher Status" (DfES, 2003a).

When examining the results collated from focus groups and evidence from programme managers about the motivations of teaching assistants taking Foundation degrees, it was found that the focus group conducted in Local Authority 4 had the fewest number of respondents wanting to enter teaching. It was considered by this researcher that the funding of Foundation Degrees courses for teaching assistants might explain the variation in results. One of the differences between the respondents from the focus group conducted with Local Authority 4 teaching assistants is that their local authority funds their teaching assistants Foundation degree. All of the other students were self funded. The question of funding Foundation degrees was raised next.

Question: (a) Not all LAs fund the fees for Foundation degrees for teaching assistants. Should they be funded? (b) If so by whom?

It was clear from the responses from the SWA that she agreed with and actively supported her Local Authority`s policy of funding Foundation degrees for teaching assistants. Whilst she accepted that every local authority is different, she claimed that "they could access funds if they wished to", in order to support teaching assistants on their Foundation degrees. The SWA believed that in, the local her Local Authority knew what schools wanted and they should try to fund to support this. It was also

viewed by the SWA that funding could also be made available by Foundation degree providers in that they could access funding for this programme. In order to achieve this objective, then Foundation degree providers need to prioritise foundation degrees for teaching assistants. The SWA put forward her explanation for this perceived lack of willingness to fund Foundation degrees for teaching assistants.

> ***SWA:*** *I think they (the other local authorities) don't fund Foundation degrees as they (teaching assistants) are not seen as academic or with a particular prestigious status. We (her Local Authority) value support staff, but money is the key. It (funding) is a can of worms.*

5.14 SUMMARY OF INTERVIEW WITH THE LOCAL AUTHORITY 4 REPRESENTATIVE SCHOOL WORKFORCE ADVISOR

This SWA represents Local Authority 4 and is one of the largest local authorities in the country with 471 schools. The role of the school workforce advisor is to support schools in the strategic planning for the training and development of the whole school workforce. They contribute to training and development practices and communicate directly with TDA on local training and developmental priorities (TDA, 2008). During the interview the feedback from the Local Authority 4 Schools Workforce Advisor included many pertinent points and issues with regard to Foundation degrees for teaching assistants. These are summarised below.

Perception of the role of the local authority with regard to Foundation degrees

The role of local authorities in relation to Foundation degrees is with regard to the appointment of a School Workforce Advisor. Part of the responsibility of that role is the school workforce development by the promotion of a partnership with relevant parties (schools, staff and providers). The SWA explained how she envisaged the Foundation degree playing a role in supporting the many initiatives (Remodelling the Workforce, Every Child Matters, and Inclusion policy) all of which required new roles and responsibilities to be undertaken by teaching assistants.

Head teachers` knowledge

The replies to questions with regard to head teachers` knowledge of Foundation degrees were conflicting. On the one hand, the SWA promoted how strong partnerships were formed and head teachers were intrinsically involved in the meetings and discussions around Foundation degree provision for teaching assistants. However, when challenged with the results of my research which indicated that some head teachers seem to know or understand very little about Foundation degrees, the SWA quickly responded with the comment that they could not be expected to know all about Foundation degrees, as they were too busy running their schools. This indicates that, although select head teachers may be involved in Foundation degrees for teaching assistants, it is recognised by the results of this primary research that for some head teachers this may be just one area too many for them to be fully engaged and involved in. It is accepted that this research involved a relatively small sample of head teachers, however "small sample size may be more useful in examining a situation in depth from various perspectives, whereas a large sample would be inconsequential" (Myers 1997: 2).

Role of Foundation degrees

The SWA supported the role of Foundation degrees in the professional development of teaching assistants. She particularly highlighted the contribution Foundation degrees could play in supporting the changing nature of the teaching assistant role and the school workforce in supporting initiatives such as 14-19 Agenda and Every Child Matters. Significantly she also recognised how useful Foundation degrees were in contributing towards the Widening Participation Agenda.

Goal of qualified teacher status

Whilst recognising that many teaching assistants enrolled on to their Foundation degree in order to become a teacher, the SWA emphasised that the local authority was not about directing teaching assistants specifically down this route. The SWA acknowledged that if teaching assistants undertake training by way of the Graduate Teaching Programme (GTP) route they would be paid a salary by the school in which they would be employed as an unqualified teacher (TDA, 2007). This enables them to access teacher training whilst they are earning and provides the local authorities with a field of experienced school practitioners to fill teacher vacancies.

Funding

The SWA interviewed was from Local Authority 4. This is the only local authority to fund Foundation degrees for teaching assistants out of the four investigated for this research. The SWA fully supported her local authority`s policy of funding Foundation degrees for teaching assistants and particularly highlighted her support for these students which she considered would be representative of those targeted under the Widening Participation Agenda. When she discussed those local authorities that have decided not to provide similar funding, she perceived their decision making to be based on their lack of priority for a cohort that may be considered lacking in status and prestige (working class women). These findings support the view that barriers to participation in higher education of under-represented groups exist which stem from middle-class bias (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1979; Reay, 2002).

In the next Chapter, (chapter six), all the findings outlined above will be explored and explained with regard to the interplay of the particular relevant factors at three different and entwined levels of analysis; macro, meso and micro. These levels supply this research with a framework in which these results and conclusions will be underpinned within the interpretive perspective. Concurring with Guba and Lincoln (1994), this research recognises the importance of this perspective in accepting that the findings have been, to all intents and purposes, created by the researcher/ researched relationship. It is also recognised that that the macro, meso and micro distinction has been socially constructed, and that these features are in some way both a connected and subjective experience, which has been investigated by this research (Layde, 1993 and Brennen, 1992).

CHAPTER SIX – SUMMARY OF RESULTS

We must have patience, and little by little, we shall find things, which at first were obscure, becoming clearer (Vincent De Paul, Cited by Koch 1999).

This chapter presents the conclusions of research carried out to investigate the provision and impact of Foundation degrees for teaching assistants across four providers and four local authorities. This thesis documents the voices and real life experiences of teaching assistants undertaking their Foundation degree, head teachers who employ them and the Foundation degree course managers who deliver their course. These are supported by the findings from a school workforce advisor from a local authority. The summary is examined in light of the theoretical framework, research objectives and at the three different levels of analysis; macro, meso and micro.

Theoretical Framework

Prior to outlining the conclusions of this thesis, it is important to again emphasise that it carried out the research through the employment of the theoretical assumption within the interpretative paradigm. This accepts that the social reality explored through the various primary qualitative research methods employed has been created through the subjective experience of the respondents involved in this research (Morgan, 1997). This research has achieved its interpretivist aim to "disclose subjectivity" through the portrayal of the experience being researched (Munhall, 2001: 73). The experience examined here, through the interaction between myself as the

researcher and research participants, is the provision and experience of Foundation degrees for teaching assistants.

After gathering and analysing the data for this research study, it has been established that the macro, meso and micro model (as outlined in Chapter 3), aids the clarification and interpretation of the results obtained. This rationale is in terms of assisting in the explanation of the effect of the overarching policies, social processes, structures and institutions that have been revealed relating to and impacting on Foundation degrees for teaching assistants.

The specific aim of this research, which has been addressed, was to investigate the provision and impact of Foundation degrees for teaching assistants. The results gained will now be explained in relation to the specific objectives and interpreted acknowledging the influence and interaction between three different levels; macro, meso and micro, as outlined below:

Macro level: Government policies, social processes, the Widening Participation Agenda and local authority initiatives.

Meso level: Institutional and organisational objectives of Foundation degree providers, schools as employers of teaching assistants and the Remodelling of the Workforce Agenda in their workplace.

Micro level: The impact of the Foundation degree course on teaching assistants both personally and professionally including support and motivation for undertaking a Foundation degree.

It is accepted here that if this thesis had attempted to draw conclusions without incorporating the impact at the different levels, as outlined above, it would be incomplete and lacking validity. The entwined levels (illustrated on page 87: Diagram A) allow recognition and appreciation of the pertinent influences, both external and internal. Luke (2004: 7) puts forward the view that the simplest argument for researchers in employing multi level techniques is because:

> *So much of what we study is multi level in nature, we should use theories and analytic techniques that are also multi level.*

Despite this endorsement, exploration of the interdependence of different levels of analysis is relatively scarce (Reagans *et al* 2005). This view is supported by Klein and Kozlowski (2000: 232), who recognise that "researchers have routinely neglected the effects of the organisational context within which individual behaviour occurs". This indicates that the results of this multi level research will contribute to knowledge and understanding of the influence of the factors at each of the different levels involved in Foundation degrees for teaching assistants. It is recognised that changes at the macro-level filter down and impact on to the other levels, namely the meso and micro levels. The summary of the findings at the macro level will be explored first, employing a descending level of analysis of the findings (macro to micro).

6.1: Macro level of analysis

The macro level of analysis involves investigating the ideological context within which Foundation degrees for teaching assistants have been developed and positioned in. The relevant players at this level include "*large social systems and networks*" (Sibeon, 2004: 54). As the overwhelming majority of teaching assistants are working class females, the pertinent social systems include the influence of the social hierarchies of gender and class in society located at the macro level. McNally (2002) points out that when class differentiation is found in a society, it will also be a society which is reflecting inequality in terms of gender; in this case a male dominated society resulting in inequality of opportunity, experience and remuneration. This inequality is reflected in the following Foundation degree statistics, which although take into account all Foundation degrees, do demonstrate the gender divide:

Table 23: Foundation degree statistics

Statistics (2005)	Female	Male
On part time courses	66%	44%
Average part time salary	£16,000	£18,000

(Adapted from: HEFCE (2007) and HEFCE (2008).

From the above statistics it can be observed that the majority group of students taking part time Foundation degrees are females, earning significantly less than their male counterparts, but still higher than that of teaching assistants. The pay of teaching assistants is in dispute, in that a Local Government Survey (2007) has identified that the median full time equivalent pay rate for a teaching assistant was £15,330 in 2007. Unison (2007) who carried out their own survey shortly after found that the average wage was more likely to be £11,000.   This is combined with many workers being paid term time only.

The results from this research should not be interpreted without acknowledging the societal factors which influence both the provision and access to Foundation degrees for teaching assistants, which include social class and gender. Rowley (2005) found that the majority of the student cohort were the first in their families to attend a higher education course and left school at 16 to enter directly into employment. Whilst the employment of women has increased from 59 per cent to 70 per cent since 1980, women still earn substantially less than men, and wages are generally lower in occupations that employ more women, such as teaching assistants (Workplace Employment Relations Survey, 2004).   This is despite government initiatives such as The Equal Pay Act 1970 (Amendment) Regulations 2003.

The above discussion has enabled societal factors at the macro level to be acknowledged in order to explain the wider context of the results before moving on to examining the findings. This will begin by examining the results in relation to the first objective in this research.

Objective one: The rationale behind Foundation degrees for teaching assistants

The rationale for the introduction of Foundation degrees will be explained firstly in terms of filling the perceived skills gap in the workforce.

Skills gap

The literature review has already identified that the introduction of the Foundation degree award was part of a range of government initiatives put forward to meet the challenges associated not only with globalisation, but with the emerging social, employment and economic changes. These changes were argued to be necessary in order to develop a more flexible workforce which would address the perceived skills gaps (QAA, 2004).   It is accepted that long gone are the days where one's employment was relatively fixed for life; the Foundation degree was put forward as a means to support the workforce in this transformation and the concomitant need for adaptation. Teaching assistants are just one workforce which has seen their role and duties expand and diversify.   This research has obtained evidence to support the view that the Government drivers at the macro level have directed the conditions whereby individuals, such as teaching assistants, can "re-equip themselves for a succession of jobs over a working lifetime" (Dearing, 1997).

The results support Foskett`s (2003) observation which also considered that Foundation degrees could equip students with the transferable skills and academic knowledge that employers are increasingly demanding.   The research data demonstrates that Foundation degrees for teaching assistants are providing the

underpinning knowledge for the development of skills for the changing and expanding role of the teaching assistant. However, even though the Foundation degree students may have enhanced their understanding and abilities, it was revealed through this research that they often felt frustrated by the lack of opportunity to utilise their developing skills in their workplace. Many of the teaching assistants believed that their head teachers did not understand or recognise how their Foundation degree course could be applied to their role in the workplace and thus contribute towards quality provision.

This thesis supports the work of Buxton *et al* (2005) which argues that employers are not particularly knowledgeable about Foundation degrees. Despite this view, head teachers themselves believed that they have some knowledge, but their perception and the reality seem somewhat at odds and did not concur with their actions. This is not a new phenomenon as LaPiere (1934), Wicker (1969), and other researchers have reported similar findings in that attitudes did not predict subsequent behaviour. These results explain how the similarities and differences in understanding between the head teachers and teaching assistants are constructed from the participants' perspectives. This demonstrates the commitment of this interpretivist research in attempting to understand 'meanings and the way people understand things' in cultural contexts (Denscombe, 2003: 267).

The SWA investigated did not consider that lack of knowledge by head teachers was an issue, in that their role is to delegate responsibility in many instances so as to manage the multiple pressures on their position. However, as head teachers are often the main gate keepers for teaching assistants in accessing their Foundation degree, the

reality is that their head teachers are making decisions based on incomplete information.

The head teachers did appreciate how being on a Foundation degree course can increase the teaching assistants` level of confidence. This level of confidence, in turn, was recognised as being useful in equipping teaching assistants in making an effective contribution in their workplace supporting the diversity needed in the Government goal of up skilling the workforce and supporting the array of initiatives and roles in teaching and learning. Many of the teaching assistants questioned explained how they had taken on new roles and responsibilities. Some of these tasks were linked clearly to the teaching assistant's traditional role by taking on responsibility for initiatives such as literacy and numeracy strategies. Other teaching assistants were taking more responsible positions which included, for example, being cover supervisors, heads of years and ICT co-ordinators. This ability of teaching assistants on Foundation degrees to deliver this level and type of role is supported by the interview results with a local authority representative.

The local authority representative interviewed (SWA) agreed that the Foundation degree played an effective role in the professional development of teaching assistants. She particularly highlighted the contribution foundation degrees could play in supporting the changing nature and diversity of the teaching assistant role. The SWA particularly considered that the Foundation degree for teaching assistants could and does provide support for the many new initiatives such as the School Improvement Framework, the Every Child Matters Agenda, the Inclusion policy and the new 14-19 Curriculum.

If the Government initiative of wanting to provide a workforce to meet the educational challenges presented is to be addressed, then it requires a more effective partnership and understanding of how Foundation degree students can contribute successfully in the workplace. As in the case of Foundation degrees for teaching assistants this knowledge appears to be lacking. Many teaching assistants responded that they felt that their head teacher had no knowledge of what they were doing on their Foundation degree, how it could support their role, or even what a Foundation degree is. It is considered that an explanation for this is partly to do with the fact that according to the Teachers Development Agency (TDA, 2004), distinction between teaching and supporting is such that two different classes of professionals have been created and entrenched in the system it supports. The system whilst distinguishing between those with and without degrees, is expecting teaching assistants to have 'one foot in each camp', with the Foundation degree course providing the 'footpath and bridge'. This may be more pertinent to women returners, such as teaching assistants embarking on Foundation degrees as this research has discovered that the initial prompt behind embarking on their Foundation degree, is their employment status. This is supported by Green and Webb (1997) who agreed that they are more likely to be triggered by work related factors which support the point that Foundation degrees are instrumental in meeting mature women`s higher education learning needs and contributing towards widening participation.

Widening participation

Linked to the perceived skills gap, another pertinent macro level driver behind the creation of Foundation degrees is as a strategy to encourage wider access into higher

education. This research has identified that that the teaching assistants most usually come from those very social classes that the Widening Participation Agenda has targeted and tried to include. The Foundation degree as a Widening Participation initiative, may be seen as being successful in this instance, as 84 per cent of respondents had no previous experience of higher education and were the first in their family to attend university. The real success of this initiative may need to include those that carry on to 'top up' their Foundation degree to full honours. This criterion needs to be the benchmark rather than the stand alone Foundation degree, if the effectiveness of the widening participation strategy is to be assessed as a strategy. Whilst accepting this factor, it is clear that Foundation degrees for teaching assistants are attracting individuals into higher education from a broader range of backgrounds. The only two students that had previous family experience of higher education attended the only traditional university in the sample. This supports the work of Osborne and Gallacher (2007), which pointed out that those individuals from the lowest socio-economic backgrounds are unlikely to attend the more prestigious, higher education establishments.

Regardless of which higher educational institution is attended, and which level of degree, the Widening Participation Strategy has been promoted as democratic rather than economic in terms of parity of access and inclusion into fields which were traditionally harder to access.   This research identifies that widening participation is more likely to be successful when people see the point of it, in this case of the strategy of Foundation degrees is being linked to the professional development that students can apply in their workplace.   However, the Widening Participation Agenda often

appears to be less about the professional development of teaching assistants and more about being an access route for a new career, for example teaching.

The fact that teaching assistants are using their Foundation degree in a way that suits them best is not surprising and given that they are likely to be among the lowest paid in schools, and so would appear to be most in need of financial support. It has been highlighted that fees are often still a barrier to higher education by many prospective students. Dearing's (1997) previous warnings have gone unheard in recommending an end to the discrimination in funding and remembering that the rationale was to widen and not just to increase, participation in higher education.

This research has discovered that many teaching assistants are taking Foundation degrees because they wish to become a qualified teacher. They see the course as a stepping stone, rather than as part of a professional development strategy for their current role. Some teaching assistants have identified this goal, at times supported by some of their head teachers, but many appear to be using it as the 'proverbial carrot'. For example, one teaching assistant who was teaching French on a full timetable without receiving any extra financial supplement, had the promise of support to qualified teacher status (QTS) after completing the Foundation degree from his head teacher. He was not alone in this belief of being supported in his future goal; other respondents outlined how they are also taking the longer term strategy. They accept that they are not at the moment receiving any financial incentive or enhanced status, but believe that their head teachers will support them in the registered or graduate teaching training route, but this support was discretionary and was not part of any formal written agreement. The registered or graduate teaching training route is where

the teaching assistant works towards gaining qualified teacher status in their workplace. A few head teachers responded that they had identified particular 'strong' teaching assistants who they felt would contribute positively to the school and therefore supported them down this route.

Combined with the schools benefiting from having, what are effectively, non qualified teachers taking their class as a much reduced cost, they also profit from being involved in the Graduate Teacher Programme (GTP). Schools do pay the student a salary during their training, but most of this is funded by a grant from the Teacher Development Agency (www.idea 2007). It is clear that employer support for the route to a teaching career can offset what is otherwise an expensive process. The financial benefit for Foundation degree students is that it is promoted as a two year qualification on the grounds of cost effectiveness in encouraging wider access. The reality of that is challenged by this research, as 50 per cent of the Foundation degrees under investigation ran their Foundation degree over three rather than two years. The programme managers of the two providers that did offer their Foundation degree over two years, commented that some of their students did take longer than the two years and that this was an option open to all the students. This was either through choice, or due to having to re-sit failed or omitted work through extenuating or mitigating circumstances, often brought about through family and work pressures.

The consequence of so many teaching assistants taking Foundation degrees and then moving on to access other professions needs to be explored further. The course has been developed in order to enhance the role of a teaching assistant but it`s effectiveness need to be explored further in terms of how the course contributes to the

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role of a teaching assistant.   It could be that the role of a teaching assistant, like many other jobs that are closely related to care, are perceived as 'easier', female and less professional, the outcome of which is they may be considered less prestigious.   It is clear that the teaching assistants feel very frustrated about their lack of recognition for their Foundation degree in their work place, especially with regards to pay and conditions.   If all their hard work and commitment is not recognised it is understandable when teaching assistants appear not to be enrolling onto their Foundation degree with the goal of developing their current roles. This would explain why some head teachers would be reluctant in promoting and supporting their teaching assistants accessing the Foundation degree course, due to the likelihood of leaving their employment after gaining their award.   The Foundation degree award for teaching assistants is in danger of becoming an access course, rather than a course contributing to the expanding duties under such initiatives such as the Remodelling of the Workforce Agenda.

Objective one explored the rationale behind Foundation degrees for teaching assistants. Results of this research found that the motivation could be divided into either workplace or personal considerations. Despite the weaknesses highlighted in terms of the level of influence in the workplace and effect on the individual, both have been demonstrated to be important factors in terms of evaluating of the impact of Foundation degrees for teaching assistants.

Objective Two: Explore the perceptions of a representative from the local authority with regard to Foundation degrees for teaching assistants

Most local authorities (also at the macro level), despite supporting Foundation degrees as part of the School Workforce Development initiative, do not provide a standardised level of support for teaching assistants wanting to take advantage of this course. Results indicate that teaching assistants wanting to participate in Foundation degrees are the least likely students to be funded. Research by Hillier and Rawnsley, (2008) cited that only 28 per cent of Foundation degree students were self funding. This contrasts markedly with the findings from this research which found that most teaching assistants are self funding as only one out of the four local authorities investigated had a policy of financing Foundation degrees for teaching assistants. The one local authority which did provide funding viewed that the policy of not funding Foundation degrees for teaching assistants was due to the teaching assistants` lack of status. These findings support a bias existing in terms of the societal influence at the macro level, in terms of lack of parity in equality of opportunity.

The dilemma of trying to encourage widening participation whilst trying to balance their budgets is a common occurrence facing educational policy-makers and institutional managers and with the current economic climate this position can presumably deteriorate. A third of organisations notified a decline in their training funds (Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development, 2006).

When head teachers were questioned about funding for Foundation degrees for their teaching assistants most supported the view that the local authority should provide funding. Head teachers, whilst recognising the value of Foundation degrees for

teaching assistants in supporting quality provision, did not want the burden of extra financial commitments on their budgets. The focus group responses revealed that the vast majority of students, despite approaching their employers, did not receive any additional funding for their course. This predicament has been summarised as follows:

> *We want more, and more diverse, people to have access, we want to maintain the quality of what is provided, and we want to do this with shrinking public funds. The equation does not add up (McNair, 1997: 111).*

The representative (SWA) from the local authority in Local Authority 4 was from the only authority that funded Foundation degrees for teaching assistants and she clearly supported her local authority`s decision to do this. The SWA was very positive about how the Foundation degree could support the new initiatives being implemented now and in the future.

When questioned about the number of teaching assistants indicating the desire to enter teaching, she was positive about this consequence especially as she recognised that most were from backgrounds which are targeted under the Widening Participation Agenda and was more than happy for them to achieve their potential.   In terms of filling teacher vacancies, having head teachers developing potential teachers through the Foundation degree route, was considered to be beneficial to all parties.

From examining the content of the interview with the SWA, she presumably would support this researcher's difficulty in trying to think of another example of an industry which would require their own staff to fund the professional development they feel

they need in order to consider themselves more confident and effective in their role; and one which has been greatly modified by their employer.

The next level to be explored is the meso level in relation to objective three.

6.2: Meso level analysis

Objective Three: Examine the knowledge, perceptions of head teachers of Foundation degrees for teaching assistants.

Despite the QAA (2003) emphasising that employer involvement is an essential criterion in the development and success of Foundation degrees, this research has revealed that few head teachers had any real knowledge about Foundation degrees for teaching assistants. The findings support the outcome of a DfES review (2004) which found that although stakeholders have been involved in the design and development of Foundation degrees, employer involvement can be relatively hit and miss. The results indicate that more is needed to be done in motivating employers especially as only 16 per cent of respondents felt fully supported by their employer, their head teacher, during their Foundation degree.

When examining head teachers` perceptions many contradictory points were uncovered. Combined with an appropriate Level 3 qualification, in order for a teaching assistant to gain a place on their Foundation degree course, they need a letter of support from their head teacher. By giving support it was considered that this would indicate that head teachers would have some knowledge about the course that they were supporting. However, the results indicated that most head teachers were

unclear about what a Foundation degree is or how it impacts on the teaching assistant's skills and abilities. So not surprisingly it was revealed, despite giving their written consent, that many head teachers were less than supportive in their subsequent actions. Very few head teachers gave their teaching assistants release time off to attend courses or contributed financially in any way. Head teachers also considered that as the Foundation degree course was not linked to pay scales in terms of enhancing pay, it was likely that the teaching assistants would leave their employment soon after completion of the course. This may explains head teachers` lack of practical support to teaching assistants undertaking Foundation degrees.

When comparing the knowledge of head teachers across the sample of educational institutions (nursery, infant, junior and secondary schools) differences were identified. Nursery and infant school head teachers were found to possess relatively limited knowledge of the content and application of a Foundation degree course for teaching assistants, compared to primary and secondary head teachers. This is despite the nursery and infant schools having signficantly more teaching assistants on Foundation degrees within their staff.   It is viewed that this could be due to the staffing traditionally in nurseries being comprised of nursery nurses. They customarily play a major role in the provision of support in nursery and infant sectors, thus explaining the differences in knowledge revealed by head teachers.

Objective Four: Explore the provision of Foundation degrees for teaching assistants

Several factors determined the reality and perception of the provision of Foundation degrees for teaching assistants and concerns had previously been raised with regard to

the quality of this type of provision (Layer, 2004; Moon, 2005). Despite this Foundation degree courses remain relatively popular, but all providers have seen a drop in numbers of teaching assistants since inception in 2002. Initially, it was considered that a financial reward would be given to teaching assistants with Foundation degrees. As this is not happening, this may explain the drop in numbers that the providers are experiencing.

The level and type of support is a strong theme to emerge from this thesis. It was recognised by the programme managers interviewed that their students often felt overwhelmed at times by their Foundation degree course and this can be negatively expressed; in terms of being more demanding of support or by withdrawing from their course. These findings support many other researchers, such as Bennett and Marsh (2003) and (Mackie) 2003, both of whom acknowledge that dissatisfaction is a factor in increasing student withdrawal rate. To support their students and to try and counteract negative experiences of their students, the programme managers explained that they adapted their approach and support in accordance with identified needs. Despite these steps, three out of the four institutions had a higher than the national average dropout rate for Foundation degree courses (the FE/HE college, collegiate and university college).

Due to the high level of student dropout rate, it could be argued that the appropriateness of the support provided by Foundation degree providers in attempting to address the barriers to successful completion is inadequate. This is despite all programme managers attempting to address their students' needs. A potential problem is that this support, as identified by von Prümmer (2000), is to ensure that this

provision is not inferior. It was clear that many of the students in this research were discontented and frustrated by a perceived lack of support from Foundation degree providers. All of the providers interviewed accepted that students needed holistic support; incorporating academic and interpersonal aspects. They also recognise that their Foundation degree is their 'second chance' at education and appear keen to support their students' progress, but recognise that they are not the only factors in the effectiveness of provision provided to Foundation degree students.

Aside from the effectiveness, or otherwise, of Foundation degree provision, another reason for the teaching assistants` perceptions towards their course is supported by the work of Baxter and Britton (2001). They explain that if the students past educational experience were mostly negative, this can cause critical views to be expressed for their current course. All the Foundation degree providers acknowledged that many of their students required careful and sensitive managing. Most also identified that some of their students had informed them of their previous negative experiences at school, which they considered had contributed towards students lack of confidence and difficulties on the course. The combination of their past educational experience, their current job role as a teaching assistant, may compound their attitude and experience of their Foundation degree course. If they are employed to support learning and find they are struggling on an academic course themselves, this not only leads to self doubt in their ability to complete their Foundation degree, but also presumably their perception of their ability to do their job effectively.

This thesis has revealed mixed levels of support given by head teachers to teaching assistants when embarking on their Foundation degree courses. Employers support

when embarking on training courses has also been investigated by Gibbs (2002a) who went on to question an employer's ability to act in the best interest of their employees. This research has revealed that despite inadequate support, the teaching assistants` intrinsic level of motivation can overcome this obstacle.

The overriding motive according to all the programme managers for the vast majority of students was the opportunity to attain a degree in order to improve their economic status and family life. The programme managers recognised that, at times, the students felt like that they were `jumping through hoops`. They could not always see the link from the lecture room to their practice, but felt that those teaching assistants that persevered with the course, despite the difficulties and hurdles, were the ones that were able to keep the future goal in the forefront of their minds.

Combined with the ability to keep their future goal in mind, the results revealed that the extent to which the pressures of the Foundation degree course were managed, or just became too much, often depended on the type of relationship the students perceived they had with their Foundation degree providers. In this research, the teaching assistant`s perceptions at the different Foundation degree delivering institutions were either all generally positive or all generally negative. The determining factor in their positive or negative perceptions of the course appears to be the view that the teaching assistants had of the attitude of lecturing staff towards them, and the quality of the relationship they felt they had developed. This was recognised by the Foundation degree providers and those that directed more of their time to emotional support with individual tutorials had the most satisfied students. This is supported by Hawksley and Owen (2002) who identified how the tutor almost takes on

the role of a surrogate parent by not only facilitating learning, but by providing emotional guidance and support. This thesis recognises that Foundation providers are attempting to provide support for the needs of teaching assistants` on their Foundation degrees, but the results clearly indicate the need to adapt further to meet their students needs.

Foundation degree providers have been encouraged by the TDA (2008: para 15.2) to consider adapting their modes of delivery to include a more blended approach in areas such as:

- Workplace delivery
- E-learning
- Weekend and holiday attendance.

The above strategies would ease the difficulties and demands the students face during their course, which have been recognised by all the programme managers during this research. They outlined how the current modes of attendance, which most likely involves attending straight after a full day's work, increases the level of stress and difficulty for most of their students.

Whilst recognising all the difficulties faced by students, the programme managers appreciated the benefits the students gained from their Foundation degree course. This is supported by the fact that none of the teaching assistants in this research, despite the difficulties, outlined regretted their decision to undertake the course. However it is recognised that this sample could have been considered bias, in terms of not including the views of those students that had withdrawn from their course. It is acknowledged

that selection of participants can be critical to the validity of the information that represents the populations that are being studied (Shaughnessy *et al* 2006). This thesis examined the provision and impact of Foundation degrees for teaching assistants and such as the sample employed was representative of the research population.

The programme managers investigated explained how the successful students were able to develop strategies and/or had access to a network of support in order to help them face the difficulties that arose during the course. Those that did not, or could not, faced withdrawing from the course. To counteract the high dropout rate, one Foundation degree provider (the university), had a strategy of demanding not only the standard entry requirements, but required more assurance that the student would be able to cope with the academic demands of the course. The provider often asked for evidence of writing skills. Whilst this approach is understandable, all students appeared to need more tailored support across all four providers prior to the start of their course. This is in terms of academic writing, referencing and note taking. These needs, however, are not specific to Foundation degree students and research by Layer (2004) and Moon (2005) has identified many factors which specifically challenge students accessing the 'rules of the academic game'. Programme managers also acknowledged that many of their students have difficulties with low self-esteem and so any intervention needs to be carefully implemented. This is supported Harvey and Watt (1996) who also recognised that students could be further discouraged if the support was not sensitively offered. This again seems to indicate how pivotal the relationship formed between staff and students on Foundation degrees is to a successful outcome. This will be explored further at the micro level of analysis.

6.3: Micro level analysis

The micro level of analysis enables the social practice investigated to be interpreted as something people actively produce and make sense of themselves.

Objective Five: Investigate teaching assistants` perception of the impact and contribution of their Foundation degree.

Results of the focus group reflected both the positive and negative perceptions and views of teaching assistants on the impact of working towards their Foundation degree.   It is accepted by this researcher that Foundation degrees differ from traditional degrees in their structure, mode of delivery and students. It is also expected that the Foundation degree student is able to undertake a large proportion of the learning in their own work place (QAA, 2004). This learning is often on top of challenging work and family commitments, all of which impact on their perception of the impact and contribution of their Foundation degree course.

Impact of course – personally

The impact of Foundation degree courses for teaching assistants has positive and personal benefits to the students`.   One encouraging influence identified by programme managers, Head teachers and teaching assistants` has been the contribution in raising the students` level of self-confidence.   The consequences of which can be recognised in their growing awareness of their potential and desire to utilise their new competence.

Many students were identified in this research as having accessed their Foundation degree course in order to enhance economic prospects and improve their and their family's life chances. All but two of the respondents in this research were female and most of those indicated they were mothers. One of the two males also indicated he was a father. These figures could explain their desire to be a positive role model for their children and enhance the future economic stability for all of their family.

Those respondents that commented much more favourably on their experience with their Foundation degree declared that they had support from family and friends. The value of access to a social support network during their Foundation degree course can be appreciated through Bourdieu`s (1977) concept of social capital, in the building up of social connections of support. Smith (2007) outlines how social networks can be a useful asset by which people can surround themselves with those that can offer support and benefit. The respondents whom revealed that they had social support networks found the demands of the course easier to cope with. This is also supported by Kember (1999) who was interested in why some adult students seem able to cope with the demands of their course where others cannot. It is clear that a determining factor in a student's ability to cope with the course is the employment of 'mechanisms' of support received by family and friends.

Simcox (1998) recognised other factors such as work balance may determine the overall experience of teaching assistants on their Foundation degree. The vast majority of respondents are mature students in full time employment with many family responsibilities; this leaves very little time for getting to grips with the additional and challenging demands of higher education study. Time management was highlighted as

a valuable commodity by Bennett and Marsh (2003) in response to understanding adult learners' success. It was recognised as one of the most important coping strategies in dealing with multiple demands on their time (work, study and family). This was borne out in the focus groups with many respondents commenting that they found the academic and study demands of the course extremely difficult to cope with at times, but had developed strategies and techniques in order to reduce the stress involved. This has impacted on many of the respondents both at home, in terms of accessing more support with chores, and at work not working after paid hours and identifying future goals.

Impact of course – professionally

One impact of the course on teaching assistants in the workplace is that it may have raised unfulfilled expectations, resulting in feelings of dissatisfaction. Explanations for their frustrations may be rooted in the role of the teaching assistant and how their position is related to their perceived or actual deficient power status within the organisation. The view that teaching assistants identify their lack of power with a lack of qualifications has been expanded on by Lowe and Pugh (2007: 30), in that they claim that teaching assistants are "identifying the interrelationship between qualifications, position and power within the structure". By gaining a higher educational level qualification the teaching assistants are hopeful that it may contribute to raising their status and position, which this research has revealed is not always the case.

It has been revealed that head teachers are typically not utilising teaching assistants with Foundation degrees to their full potential, the consequence of which is that some teaching assistants are experiencing frustration and withdrawing their previous good will. For example, previously they would have worked after hours without pay, this included undertaking duties such attending meetings or taking resources home to prepare or complete.   Many of the teaching assistants explained that they are not receiving additional pay or even enhanced status. They feel that they are being treated unjustly, in that their efforts on their Foundation degree are only acknowledged in terms of additional responsibilities rather than additional pay.   Resentment is intensifying and one way of counteracting this by some teaching assistants, is by working only to their contractual hours, and not undertaking additional hours or additional tasks outside of work hours.

With regard to their work, many teaching assistants on Foundation degrees explained how they are also being asked to cover classes without the support of a teaching assistant (which the teacher would normally have).   One would presume that they would need just as much support as a teacher would need. Also, if the teaching assistant is viewed as a relatively 'second-class' member of staff, the children may behave accordingly, making their job even more difficult. Schools are presumably saving money by not employing supply teachers as they have their teaching assistants covering class. One way around this, suggested by one teaching assistant, was to put these savings into a 'budget' in order to fund their Foundation degrees, as this was an area that impacted on their ability to access their course.

Financial Constraints

Financial constraints suffered by teaching assistants on Foundation degrees were considered to compound their level of difficulty both in accessing their course and in supporting their progress. The financial constraints that many were subjected to included having to pay for childcare, travel costs, accessing study resources and of course, for many, course fees. The pay of teaching assistants is relatively low and having to pay fees from that is likely to be financially challenging.

Teaching assistants taking Foundation degrees are not the only students to experience financial constraints during their higher education course. The drivers for teaching assistants taking Foundation degrees may been recognised as external and imposed by their employer in terms of the School Workforce remodelling Agenda. The TTA (2003) pointed out that this initiative has required many teaching assistants to extend their skills and understanding with regard to the demands of their teaching and learning supporting roles.

The teaching assistants at three out of the four institutions investigated had fees to pay for their Foundation degree. It was considered that this may be a factor in their perceptions of their course. The teaching assistants at focus group 1, did not have to pay fees (they had their fees paid for them by their local educational authority) and the vast majority of their views were positive. This factor may have a bearing on their views, however, the respondents at Focus Group 3 had to pay their own fees and all their comments were also favourable. This indicates there may be other factors, apart from financial ones, involved in determining the perception of their Foundation degree

course. One factor may be the potential to gain a longer term goal as many of the respondents were mothers and wanted the option of arranging their long term career goals, such as teaching, around their children.

As a route into teaching

Results found that the majority (64 per cent) of all respondents stated that gaining qualified teacher status was their primary motivation in enrolling for their Foundation degree course. They discussed how this option allows them to continue working for as long as possible in paid employment whilst gaining applicable qualifications. It has been recognised that the Foundation degree for teaching assistants can provide a route into teaching (QAA, 2005). Due to the time involved from Foundation degree to qualified teacher status, the success or otherwise of the Foundation degree being a route into teaching has yet to be empirically established. However, this thesis provides evidence to suggest that head teachers have identified that they will be supporting certain teaching assistants in their goal of becoming qualified teachers.

The predicament is twofold; firstly the Foundation degree may be seen as a first step into teaching, rather than as a proper professional qualification in supporting the diversifying role of the teaching assistant in its own right. Secondly, the majority of teaching assistants taking Foundation degrees want to become teachers may indicate that being a teaching assistant is not universally accepted as a profession in itself.

This chapter has summarised the research findings of the impact and contribution of Foundation degrees to teaching assistants, this review will now be condensed in the following chapter (chapter seven).

CHAPTER SEVEN - PRÉCIS

The place which may seem like the end may also be the beginning (Ivy Baker Priest 1905-1975, cited in Bakken and Farrington 2003).

Carrying out this research has enabled the collection of the voices of the subjective, real life experiences of adults involved in Foundation degrees for teaching assistants, through focus groups, questionnaires and interviews.   It is recognised that the details contained in this thesis is a reflection of the voices collected through a construction of the respondents` stories, the underlying principle of which was to record and analyse their subjective experiences.

The first hand experience of carrying out this thesis and the findings suggests that this intuitive approach towards methodological triangulation has worked. When investigating Foundation degrees for teaching assistants, focus groups were first conducted with the students in order to access pertinent information to inform the next stages of this research. The findings of the focus groups pointed in the same direction as the results from both the questionnaire and interview data. Thus, the assumptions derived from one method has validated those from the other and support Mangan *et al* (2004) in that methodological triangulation can provide multidimensional insights into research investigations.

Kvale (1996: 233) further tells that:

By specifying the supporting evidence and making the arguments explicit, the researcher can allow readers to judge the soundness of the generalisation claim.

The insight evidenced in this thesis has described how, despite the shortcomings, a Foundation degree for teaching assistants can benefit students both personally and professionally. Across all research methods, a recurring theme highlighted was an increase in the level of confidence of teaching assistants involved in Foundation degrees. Whilst many teaching assistants have found the challenges of higher education too demanding and withdrawn, many thrive with the support of the providers of Foundation degrees. It is recognised that despite this, many teaching assistants remain on the course, but feel that this support could be more effective. Even though the teaching assistants are working in a supporting learning environment, they are often unprepared, both academically and emotionally, to meet the demands of the course.

With regard to the teaching assistants position in the workplace their lack of status and power may be one explanation in their decision making process for embarking on their Foundation degree. Lowe and Pugh (2007) explained how teaching assistants are identifying a relationship between their position and their lack of qualifications. By gaining a higher educational level qualification they are hopeful that it may contribute to raising their status and position. However, their situation also encompasses their social class and gender. The vast majority of teaching assistants are revealed as working class women employed in an occupation that has a 'domestic ideology' which has been influenced by both historical and social processes. This has resulted in the perceived reality, which has previously been proposed by O`Connor (1998), that the more feminised any occupation, such as the role of the teaching assistant, the more likely it is to be poorly paid.

Teaching assistants consider that their involvement in Foundation degrees may improve not just their own, but their whole families` future prospects. They are most likely to be from backgrounds with no previous experience of higher education. Accessing higher education in this instance is in direct relation to their role in the workplace. Whilst accepting that the teaching assistant's workplace has enabled access to higher education via their Foundation degree in the first place, many of the drawbacks have been in relation to their place of work. These disadvantages are with regard to academic study and work place conflicting rather than harmonising; which would be expected in terms of a course developed in order to meet employers` needs by equipping learners with skills relevant to their work place.

In the workplace, it is acknowledged that teaching assistants accept that their head teachers are the most powerful person in their organisation (Lowe and Pugh, 2007). This power determines not only admission onto their Foundation degree, but impinges on their role and responsibilities; this in turn impacts on the teaching assistant`s levels of motivation and opportunity to apply their new skills and understanding in the workplace. When recognition in the workplace occurs it often results in being given extra responsibilities and duties, but this is not usually reflected in enhanced pay or conditions. Consequently the potential outcomes of gaining a Foundation degree can ultimately leave many teaching assistants frustrated by the lack of prospects and recognition.

One potential successful outcome is in access to other roles and careers, rather than the supporting role the Foundation degree for teaching assistants was developed for. Whilst the Foundation degree can be seen as enhancing the teaching assistants, many

teaching assistants are moving on to new positions such as cover supervisors and pastoral heads of year. These roles utilise skills which are not usually part of the traditional supporting learning role that is a teaching assistant.

The dilemma is that the Foundation degree is creating a three tier outcome and one which does not appear to aid the professional status of the teaching assistant or the pupils they are supporting:

Table 24: Summary of consequence to teaching assistants on Foundations degrees

Tier	Duties and role	Benefit?	Outcome
First	No difference in role or responsibilities	No difference in remuneration	Lack of motivation
Second	More responsibility	No extra remuneration	Frustration
Third	Completely new role	Possible additional remuneration	Lack of teaching assistants with Foundation degrees

This thesis has summarised and explored pertinent factors with regard to investigating the provision and impact of Foundation degrees for teaching assistants. In recalling the rationale behind the development of Foundation degrees, it has been outlined that they were established in order to:

- Encourage economic competitiveness
- Respond to the country`s perceived skills gap

- Counter disillusions with the existing vocational training structures

- Contribute to widening participation (Beaney, 2006).

In relation to specific Foundation degrees for teaching assistants, they were designed to:

- Assist in the development of skills in order to support changes to their supporting learning role (DfEE, 2000b).

The 'drivers' in the creation of the specific Foundation degrees for teaching assistants have been demonstrated to be external and imposed by the inclusion policy and the Remodelling of the Workforce Agenda. Undoubtedly the implementation of Foundation degrees has been an enormous investment by the government, local authorities, Foundation degree providers and individual teaching assistants. This research has revealed that despite some local authorities being willing to support the funding of Foundation degree courses for teaching assistants such inconsistency identifies the lack a coherent national framework of support. Despite this, there is enthusiasm on behalf of teaching assistants to take on board the challenges of a Foundation degree, but they feel let down in terms of creating expectations for teaching assistants which can often remain unfulfilled. The Foundation degree was promoted in order to meet the challenges of a role which has been changed around them. Unlike most professional training and development in other comparable fields, the Foundation degree for teaching assistants is not linked to the pay and grading structure. The end result is that teaching assistants are either leaving to enter other professions or are staying and risk becoming disillusioned and frustrated. The

consequences of both options are unwelcome; both have a negative effect on the role and perceptions of a teaching assistant.

7.1 Key arguments/findings of this thesis

This thesis has five central suppositions:

- Firstly, Foundation degrees for teaching assistants are not fit for the purpose that they were developed for, which was to support the development of the evolving role of a teaching assistant (DfEE 2000b). Many respondents are both annoyed and discouraged by the lack of financial reward and status in the opportunity to reflect the knowledge gained on their Foundation degree in their workplace. Consequently, they are often being used by students embarking on them as a stepping stone to a new career, rather than as part of professional development of their current role.

- Secondly, the results of this research has identified that teaching assistants do not perceive their role as having a high status or desirable standing. It has been highlighted that teaching assistants are most likely to be working class and female. McNally (2002) has identified that class and gender differentiation reflects inequality of opportunity and experience. The teaching assistants had anticipated that by embarking on their Foundation degree, this perception might change. However, due to the feminising of the teaching assistant role, subsequent lack of financial remuneration they receive and the stagnant

position/demarcation within their workplace, this expectation has not being achieved.

- Thirdly, whilst some head teachers are recognising the value of Foundation degrees for both their teaching assistants and their schools, there needs to be a greater understanding of the knowledge and skills gained during the course. This is crucial if Foundation degrees are to meet their brief of enhancing the skills of the workforce (Beaney, 2006). Foundation degrees have been promoted as both incorporating and meeting the needs of employers. Doyle (2003) explained how the essential feature of the Foundation degree was employer involvement. With regard to those developed specifically for teaching assistants, in order for this qualification to be effective, it needs greater employer awareness, which is more likely to be achieved if it is integrated into the pay and conditions of teaching assistants.

- Fourthly, Foundation degrees are causing divisions between individual teaching assistants; those with and those without this qualification. This is most likely due to the frustrations prompted by the lack of recognition and opportunity within their role to implement their learnt knowledge and skills. This frustration may not only be affecting their future potential in the classroom, but also their current practice.

- Fifthly, Foundation degree providers are contributing towards the Widening Participation Agenda, as the teaching assistants are most likely to come from

the groups targeted by the Government under this initiative. However, Foundation degree providers need to ensure that they address the holistic needs of teaching assistants more effectively during their Foundation degree course. This provision would need to take into account both Rowley`s (2005) findings that the majority of the student cohort had negative perceptions of their past educational experiences and Taylor and Marienau`s (1995: 1) recommendation to change classroom practices to be "more supportive of...women in their ongoing development". This in turn would contribute to tackling the high dropout rate on the Foundation degree providers courses.

7.2 Directions for future research

Findings have been linked to the interplay of factors at three different levels; the macro, meso and micro levels. Any future research would also need to ensure that the interplay between these three levels is recognised as all have been demonstrated to have an influence on the provision and impact of Foundation degrees for teaching assistants.

The final implication of this thesis is that whilst accepting the many benefits to the individual and their workplace, Foundation degrees for teaching assistants are contributing towards the creation of divisions, the consequence of which is that the Foundation degree, rather than enhancing the supporting role of learning, may be counterproductive and not contribute to the overall effectiveness of the teaching

assistant role. In this case, the impact on the teaching assistant`s role needs to be explored.

Future research is recommended in order to examine the impact of a Foundation degree on the teaching assistants role in supporting teaching and learning. This would need to examine the effectiveness of the practice of teaching assistants with and without Foundation degrees on the learners they support. Considering the potentially vulnerable cohort teaching assistants are working with, evidence is needed in terms of examining if there are any differences in relation to the consequences of the pedagogical practices employed. It is recommended that the next step needed is to focus on the impact of teaching assistants with Foundation degrees on pupil learning and attainment.

Whilst the impact on pupils clearly needs to be investigated, this thesis has recognised the commitment by teaching assistants to their Foundation degree. This encompasses both financial and emotional aspects, it is therefore important to establish the longer term impact of their course by conducting a longitudinal study.

Foundation degrees are promoted as having employer involvement, strategies to encourage greater understanding of Foundation degrees for teaching assistants by head teachers need to be explored. The SWA interviewed considered that it did not matter if head teachers do not understand or have knowledge about Foundation degrees for teaching assistants, further research needs to explore if this is really the case.

This thesis also investigated the provision of Foundation degrees for teaching assistants. Whilst there are examples of providers effectively meeting the needs of

their students, it is clear that due to the responses obtained during the focus groups and the high withdrawal rate, more could be put in place to support their progress. The teaching assistants on Foundation degrees are predominantly from social classes and groups which are targeted under the Widening Participation Agenda. Research needs to investigate why so many teaching assistants are withdrawing from their courses and which strategies would be most effective in meeting the needs of these students in order for them to achieve in higher education. There appears to exist the will and motivation, as teaching assistants continue to enrol onto Foundation degrees, but the high dropout rate is a real worry in terms of not fully meeting the Widening participation Agenda and its goal of creating a society which reflects equality. Clancy (2001) also found that class inequality exists not only in terms of accessing higher education in the first place, but also the type of institution widening participation students are likely to attend, as reflected in this research.

The publication of the 2003 White Paper set out the Government`s vision of '*The Future of Higher Education*', which included proposals to make Foundation degree the main work-focused higher education qualification. In relation to teaching assistants, whilst their course continues to lack standing in terms of enhanced pay and conditions which are typically found with other graduates, it`s higher education, but not as we traditionally know it!

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APPENDIX: A

TEACHING ASSISTANT QUESTIONNAIRE
for Head teachers

TICK ALL THAT APPLY

Q1: Type of establishment:	☐ Nursery ☐ Primary school ☐ Secondary School ☐ Other please state: ☐ Inner City ☐ Suburbs ☐ Rural ☐ Other please state:		

Q2: Number of teaching assistants/learning support assistants	☐ Full time	☐ Part time

Q3: Approximately how many of those have gained or are working towards a foundation degree?	☐

Q4: In general, how do you think that gaining or working towards a foundation degree affects a teaching assistant's level of:

Effectiveness in post	☐ Very positive ☐ Positive ☐ Negative ☐ Very Negative ☐ No appreciable difference
Level of Professionalism	☐ Very positive ☐ Positive ☐ Negative ☐ Very Negative ☐ No appreciable difference
Impact on pupil learning	☐ Very positive ☐ Positive ☐ Negative ☐ Very Negative ☐ No appreciable difference
Confidence in role	☐ Very positive ☐ Positive ☐ Negative ☐ Very Negative ☐ No appreciable difference
ICT Skills	☐ Very positive ☐ Positive ☐ Negative ☐ Very Negative ☐ No appreciable difference

Q5: Could you name three MAIN ADVANTAGES of having teaching assistants with a foundation degree allocated to work with pupils in lessons.

I)   II)   III)

Q6: With regard to teaching assistants/learning support workers do you:

Have an understanding of the content of their foundation degree award	☐ Agree	☐ Disagree
Have an increase in confidence in their ability to support teaching and learning in the classroom	☐ Agree	☐ Disagree
Have no real idea what a foundation degree for teaching assistants involves	☐ Agree	☐ Disagree
Think that giving TAs time off to attend their course is not a particularly good use of your resources	☐ Agree	☐ Disagree
Believe that all teaching assistants should work towards gaining a foundation degree	☐ Agree	☐ Disagree
Not use TAs any differently than you did before they achieved their foundation degree qualification	☐ Agree	☐ Disagree
Provide opportunities for TAs to cascade and use their knowledge from their foundation degree	☐ Agree	☐ Disagree
Think that a foundation degree for teaching assistants is a really useful qualification	☐ Agree	☐ Disagree

Q:7 All things being equal, would you have more or less confidence in their ability when appointing a teaching assistant with a foundation degree over a teaching assistant without a foundation degree in supporting learning

☐ More confidence	☐ Less confidence	☐ No difference in confidence levels

Any other comments

APPENDIX: B

Type of school:

Number of teaching assistants:

Number of teaching assistants on Foundation degrees:

1. Could you tell me what you know or have heard about foundation degrees aimed at teaching assistants.

2. Have any teaching assistants approached you about wanting to do a foundation degree? If so what was your response and why?

3. Who should fund foundation degrees for teaching assistants? Both in terms of fees/time off.

4. Who do you think benefits from Foundation degrees for teaching assistants and why?

5. In your experience how has the role of the teaching assistant changed within the Remodelling of the Workforce agenda? (If indeed you think it has).

APPENDIX: C

Semi structured Interview:

To obtain views of foundation degree provider course managers

Interview questions for course managers of Foundation degrees for teaching assistants

1. Is there a `typical foundation degree` student?

2. What do they say is their motivation in enrolling onto the course?

3. In what ways does your institution support their progress?

4. What particular type of support does a typical student appear to need the

    most?

5. What is the student dropout rate?

6. Do many of them progress on to the full honours degree?

7. What do you consider to be the main changes in the students over the course

    duration?

8. How are employers involved in your FD?

9. Anything else you would like to add?

APPENDIX: D

Semi structured Interview questions – Birmingham Schoolwork advisor

1. Who should be responsible for the employment and training of teaching assistants?

2. What role do you think the Foundation degree has, if any, in the professional development of TAs?

3. Not all LAs fund the fees for Foundation degrees for teaching assistants. Who do you think should be responsible for funding their foundation degree course and why?

4. In the course of my research I have found that few very head teachers know about Foundation degrees for teaching assistants, why do you think this is?

5. Do you think that Foundation degrees for teaching assistants should be linked to pay in any way?

6. The goal for the vast majority of teaching assistants taking foundation degrees appears to be, to gain qualified teacher status. What are your views on this?