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Contemplating Participation in Higher Education: A Case Study

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THE EFFECTS OF 2012 TUITION FEE REFORM ON
CHOICES MADE BY FURTHER EDUCATION STUDENTS
CONTEMPLATING PARTICIPATION IN HIGHER
EDUCATION: A CASE STUDY.

JOHN RICHARD MARTIN RABY

A thesis submitted to the University of Huddersfield in partial fulfilment of
the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

The University of Huddersfield

April 2016

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the educational choices made by some of the first cohort of further education students at an art college to face fees of up to £9,000 per annum for higher education study. Focusing on lower socio-economic status students, potentially most easily deterred by increased fees and debt, it explores the influences on their decision-making and considers the adequacy of the theoretical models underpinning their choice processes. It is a case study essentially concerned with why students make the choices that they do, what processes are involved and what influences shape student choice.

The study was undertaken in the case study college – which delivers undergraduate programmes of study – partly as a result of the potential impact on the college of reduced FE to HE progression. Semi-structured individual interviews were conducted with 16 students on three occasions during the 2011-12 academic year, to coincide with particular points during their decision-making process. An interpretivist paradigm was adopted as the literature shows that many aspects of higher education choice relate to socially constructed realities which could only become fully apparent during qualitative inquiry, with a close relationship between the researcher and what is studied.

The study found that students were not deterred unduly by the prospect of increased tuition fee debt on graduation, but that their choices of where to study were strongly influenced by concerns about living costs whilst studying and other considerations such as proximity to home that are already documented in the literature on higher education choice, largely from the theoretical perspective set out by Pierre Bourdieu (1974). The need for ontological security (Giddens, 1991) was clearly evident in many participants' comments and was a strong underlying theme.

Fieldwork demonstrated that at the point of decision-making, actors sought to make pragmatically rational decisions, within limits conditioned by their social capital, and therefore argues for a two-stage model of decision-making similar to that espoused by Raymond Boudon (1974). Glaesser and Cooper (2014) have argued convincingly for a combination of Bourdieu and Boudon's work in this manner. Whilst this has merit, this thesis notes Hodkinson's (2008) concerns regarding the explanatory capability of existing theoretical models in simultaneously addressing key aspects of HE choice at both macro and micro levels, rather than merely severally. It argues that at a micro level Herbert Simon's 1957 model of bounded rationality best explains decision-making, and uniquely that the boundaries of actors' choices are limited by their habitus. It concludes that actors' boundedly-rational decisions and levels of satisficing are conditioned by their habitus, such that higher education choice is best characterised as 'conditioned bounded rationality'.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

API	Age Participation Index
CAE	Colleges of Advanced Education
CVCP	Committee of Vice Chancellors and Principals
DBIS	Department for Business Innovation in Schools
DES	Department for Education and Science
EMA	Educational Maintenance Allowance
ED	Extended Diploma
FE	Further Education
FEC	Further Education College
FSM	Free school meals
GCSE	General Certificate in Secondary Education
HE	Higher Education
HEAC	Higher Education Administration Charge [in Australia]
HECS	Higher Education Contribution Scheme [in Australia]
HEFCE	Higher Education Funding Council (England)
ICL	Income Contingent Loans
ICF	Independent Commission on Fees
IEO	Inequality of Educational Opportunity
IQER	Integrated Quality Enhancement Review
KS4	Key Stage 4
KS5	Key Stage 5
NAB	National Advisory Body for Local Authority Higher Education (established 1982); National Advisory Body for Public Sector Higher Education (as reconstituted in 1985 but still known as NAB)
NCIHE	National Committee of Inquiring into Higher Education
OFFA	Office of Fair Access

OECD	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
POLAR	Participation of Local Areas
PCFC	Polytechnics and Colleges Funding Council
QAA	Quality Assurance Agency
RAB	Resource Accounting and Budgeting charge
RAT	Rational Action theory
SES	Socio-economic Status
SLC	Student Loan Company
UCAS	Universities and Colleges Admission Service
UGC	University Grants Commission
UNISTATS	The official website for comparing UK HE
UUK	Universities UK
WP	Widening Participation

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW

Background

This research concerns the impact of the most recent changes in undergraduate funding in England on the higher education choices of lower socio-economic status students, including questions about whether students from disadvantaged backgrounds choose to participate in higher education – ‘widening participation’ – and, if so, where they study – ‘fair access’. An emergent theme has been the nature of higher education decision-making by students from disadvantaged areas and the adequacy of the theoretical conceptualisation of this process. These questions are closely aligned with considerations of social class and social mobility, described by Alan Milburn, Chair of the Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission, as “...the new holy grail of public policy...” (Milburn, 2015). In this context Milburn asserts that “...all sorts of things make a difference... But the global evidence suggests the key is education...”. Milburn argues that these issues are not new: “...the shocking lack of social mobility is entrenched in British society” and “...deep-rooted inequality and flat-lining mobility have been decades in the making” (Wintour, 2013). This view is not universal, and others (Goldthorpe and McKnight, 2004; Brown, 1995) place greater emphasis on labour market factors. Jackson et al (2005) question the liberal orthodoxy that represents education as playing a crucial and increasing role in intergenerational class mobility, in favour of an alternative model which highlights the influence of employment. Nevertheless, the political perspective means that difficulties in respect of widening participation and fair access should be considered in the context of the development of higher education in England.

The emergence of a system of English higher education (HE) from the late 19th Century to the early 21st Century has been linked with a number of themes. Scott (1995) argues

that higher education evolution is linked to developments in society, and that three early catalysts for change were increasing democracy and the linked issues of the industrial revolution and the rise of new professions, prompting change in the schools system and producing greater numbers of those qualified to participate in higher education (Shinn, 1986). In turn, these factors drove change in higher education, particularly the level of funding of HE by the state and the associated issues of the nature and size of institutions, and the level of participation. Alongside this, general population growth meant that, despite expansion of the HE sector, until the 1980s increases in the overall participation rate were relatively modest (Booth, 1982).

A consistent theme has been “academic drift” (Pratt, 1997) as newer institutions founded to meet local educational needs lost their distinctive character in aligning their curricula to the expectations of the sector (Collini, 2012). Just as higher education has seen institutions seeking to gain status, Hesketh (1999) notes an expansion in the size of the middle classes and Scott (2001) argues that expansion in HE has served primarily to facilitate much increased levels of middle-class participation. Whilst Chapter 2 of this thesis details the considerable change in English higher education from the 1880s to the 1980s, it should be noted that at the end of a century of significant evolution, participation in English higher education remained below 15 per cent. Notwithstanding influential milestones such as the Anderson Report of 1960, resulting in universal maintenance grants, the 1963 Robbins Report’s detailed examination of participation and funding and, soon afterwards, Anthony Crosland’s creation of the polytechnics, for lower socio-economic status students there was little improvement in their chances of participation. From 1985 there was a *volte face* by the then Conservative administration resulting in a rapid expansion in higher education, and from the late 1980s to the mid-1990s

participation grew to over 30 per cent, taking participation from 'élite' to 'mass' levels as defined by Trow (1973). Despite this expansion, and subsequent initiatives such as Aim Higher (2004-2010) and the creation of the Office for Fair Access (Ofa), aimed at widening participation, Brown and Carasso (2013) assert that the expansion of English higher education since the 1980s to its present 'universal' levels of almost 50 per cent has resulted in "virtually no reduction in the disparities in participation between students from different socio-economic backgrounds" (p.136). Boliver (2013), whilst identifying narrowing of the differences in rates of HE participation between students from working-class backgrounds and their more middle-class peers, supports the argument that there are significant qualitative differences in the nature of participation between working-class and middle-class students, concluding that questions of fair access remain. Against the background of increasing stratification and complexity in English HE, the ability of lower socio-economic status students to form a view of such a nuanced environment and then make a rational decision about HE choice emerged as a key aspect of the choice process.

Objectives of the study

At its inception the proximal objective of this research was an assessment of the impact of substantially increased undergraduate tuition fees on the higher education choices of lower socio-economic status students at the case study college. As the study progressed it became apparent that key decision-making behaviours of the students were not adequately addressed by theoretical models espoused by prominent thinkers about educational choice such as Pierre Bourdieu (1980/1993) and Raymond Boudon (1974), or the economist Herbert Simon (1956,1957). An emergent objective of the study was the formulation of a theoretical model capable of encompassing the micro-level decision-

making of students and the macro-level sociological phenomena related to inequality in educational opportunity.

Case Study Institution

The case study was undertaken in a specialist further education college in the North East of England offering art and design subjects up to degree level. It was formed in 1979 by merging colleges in two boroughs which both traced their origins to the 19th Century. The college has an FE campus in one local authority area and an HE campus in another.

The FE campus – a mixture of buildings dating from the 1960s to 2012 – delivers courses almost exclusively at level 3 to over 600 students mainly from five local authority areas, although some FE students commute from further afield. The five local authority areas constitute an area of higher than average deprivation and lower than average school achievement at GCSE. Nevertheless, the college has a higher level of student progression to higher education (about 80 per cent) than any other local FE college or sixth form college, with 25-35 per cent of those progressing choosing the college's own HE offer.

The college's HE campus serves about 500 undergraduates on 11 degree programmes. These have been validated by the Arts University Bournemouth since 2012, but at the time of the fieldwork Teesside University was the validating body. Over 80 per cent of the College's undergraduate intake come from the region, although as several programmes are relatively specialised some students are recruited nationally. The college acquired and refurbished three listed Victorian buildings in order to expand its HE campus in 2010 and 2011, with its main building – dating from the late 1960s – also being enlarged in 2011. The college did not have dedicated student residential accommodation until 2014. The college was visited by the Quality Assurance Agency during the fieldwork, with the

resulting Integrated Quality Enhancement Review (IQER) unusually making no recommendations for improvement.

Immediate Antecedents

This case study and subsequent thesis were engendered by the Coalition Government's November 2010 policy response to the *Independent Review of Higher Education Funding and Student Finance* – the *Browne Review* – published in the preceding month. The Coalition's proposals were to allow undergraduate tuition fees to rise from the 2010-11 cap of £3,290 to £9,000 in the 2012-13 academic year. Although the repayment terms proposed were more favourable – most notable being an increase in the salary level for repayment, from £15,000 to £21,000 per annum – media reaction focused on the near trebling of the headline fee, the resultant increase in student indebtedness, and the presumed negative impact on participation by the poorest students.

Contemporaneous comment in the media and by politicians (for instance see Shepherd and Stratton, 2010) presaged several of the issues considered in this research. The then business secretary, Vince Cable, highlighted the question of affordability of higher education for the state, a problem for nations moving from élite to universal higher education considered in Chapter 2 of this thesis. David Willetts, then universities minister, noted there had been insufficient progress towards fair access to universities. Shepherd and Stratton (2010), writing in *The Guardian* cited a report by the Office of Fair Access (Harris, 2010) showing increasing participation by the poorest students, but with a widening gap between rich and poor in attending the most selective universities. The challenges of participation and fair access are considered in detail in Chapter 3. Shepherd and Stratton quote Michael Gove, then education secretary, blaming state schools for failures in terms of fair access, noting that they did not provide pupils with the A-levels

needed to go to university, a matter analysed in Chapter 3 in a review of work by Boliver (2013). Gove went on to argue that there was no evidence the previous increase in fees in 2006 had put off poor students. He contended that students would make a rational decision based on the benefits that accrue to them from going to university, a comment that goes to the heart of the issue considered in this thesis – the nature of higher education decision-making and the place for rational choice within that process. It is considered in Chapter 4, where the theoretical underpinnings of student choice are discussed, in Chapter 7 where the case study findings are analysed, and more extensively in Chapter 8 where the current theoretical models of choice are analysed.

The implications for the HE sector of these policy changes would depend upon the aggregate effect of the individual choices of hundreds of thousands of potential students. As the Principal of the case study institution, the question of the impact of higher fees on students' intentions was crucial as the college had a high proportion of full-time undergraduate provision and a relatively local HE student intake from areas in Quintile 1 of the POLAR 2 dataset (those least likely to participate in higher education). For the college, the impact of policy change would be determined by the choices of only a few hundred potential students. A reduction in undergraduate intake would have had significant implications for the sustainability of the college and therefore the initial research question -

“Will the substantial increase in higher education fees for English students studying in the UK from September 2012 influence the higher education choices of lower socio-economic status students?”

- was key to the college's future.

Over the course of this study it became apparent that increased fees had little impact on students' decision to participate in higher education, as was borne out by an early UCAS

(2012) report. However, it became clear that there was an increasing propensity for local study by the lower socio-economic status participants in response to the fees change. Consequently, an emerging issue was the nature of students' decision-making which was driving this choice. Whilst the literature identified many of the considerations involved in what was pragmatically rational decision-making (for example family influence, finance or geography) along with the structural factors (such as social class or parental education) that broadly correlated with these choices, sharing a frustration with Hodgkinson (1995), I found that there was no theoretical model which explicitly addressed the ways in which decisions were made. This issue therefore emerged as an important consideration of this thesis.

Research Approach

In conducting this research I have adopted an interpretivist paradigm. There are several reasons for this. The literature in relation to the nature of educational choice considered in Chapter 5, together with my own experience of working in education, both support an interpretivist view that research needs to be grounded in people's experience. I support Coleman and Briggs' view that reality is not:

“...an amalgam of external phenomena waiting to be uncovered as ‘facts’, but a construct in which people understand reality in different ways”.
(2002, p.18)

It seems to me that the nuanced distinctions made in the process of higher education choice, as considered in the literature review in Chapter 5 and the theoretical underpinnings set out in Chapter 4, can only be fully understood through an interpretivist/qualitative approach. This case study is essentially concerned with *why* students make the higher education choices that they do, what *processes* are involved and what *influences* (e.g. parental, institutional) sway student choice. The literature

shows that many aspects of higher education choice relate to socially-constructed realities which could only become fully apparent during a process of qualitative inquiry with a close relationship between the researcher and what is studied (Denzin and Lincoln, 2003, p.13). To me, the “value-laden nature of inquiry” (p.13) necessary to begin to uncover how choice making operates was paramount, and so a qualitative approach to research was essential.

A qualitative approach has advantages as it:

- i. enables a suitable level of understanding of subjects’ concerns, considerations and motivations;
- ii. allows an holistic consideration of the issues with a full appreciation of context; and
- iii. allows a longitudinal consideration of process.

Simons (2009) notes a number of strengths, and some drawbacks, in relation to case studies. Advantages include that qualitative case studies enable the experience and complexity of programmes and policies to be studied in detail in the socio-political contexts in which they are enacted. This was a key benefit in assessing the impact of the new HE tuition fee regime. Simons argues that the case study can tell the story of the policy in action, explaining how and why events occur, help in understanding the process and dynamics of change, and that documenting and interpreting events as they unfold in a ‘real world’ setting can determine the factors which were critical (p.23). de Vaus (2001) argues that case study designs deal with issues of history and maturation by considering the wider context to enhance understanding. He argues that the quality of the case study depends on how well it identifies historical, contextual and maturational issues (p.236).

Simons (2009) highlights the flexibility and accessibility of case studies and that they may engage participants in the research process, together, importantly, with a shift in the “power base” of who controls knowledge and recognises the importance of co-constructing perceived reality through relationships and joint understandings created in the field. She acknowledges that there are questions of perception and interpretation and that whilst case studies cannot “capture...the reality as lived” (p.24) there is much that can be done to enable readers to make judgements about the relevance and significance of what is reported. Simons contends that there are a number of ways to make inferences from a case that are applicable to other contexts without meeting positivistic concerns about random sample surveys, et cetera. She concludes that in many case studies formal generalisation for policy-making is not the objective. Rather, the aim is:

“...to present a rich portrayal of a single setting to inform practice, establish the value of the case and/or to add knowledge of a specific topic.” (p.24)

This was a key objective, and on this basis that it was concluded that a case study approach was appropriate.

The research was conducted with students due to complete Level 3 study at the end of the 2011-12 academic year who would be the first cohort of students faced with the prospect of much higher fees. The study sought to concentrate on lower socio-economic status students for a number of reasons. First, it was considered less likely that they would be firmly committed to the notion of higher education participation – unlike their more middle-class peers they were less likely to believe that higher education was inevitable. Second, they were supposedly more likely as a group to be debt averse, and therefore the prospect of considerably increasing debt at graduation was reportedly

more likely to be a deterrent (Callender and Jackson, 2005). Third, the case study institution had a relatively high proportion of students from widening participation postcodes at FE, and as previously noted, a significant change in the intentions of those students would have a substantial institutional impact.

The planned research comprised a series of three individual semi-structured interviews. These took place in October 2011, and January and May 2012. The rationale for this was that:

- i. in October, subjects would be considering UCAS applications and would have undertaken an assessed unit to research higher education, but would not have made institutional choices;
- ii. by January, subjects should have completed their UCAS forms and have a rationale for their choices; and
- iii. in May, subjects would be at the point where offers from institutions should have been accepted or rejected, and interviews and further institutional visits might have taken place.

The research interviews involved 16 students who were studying Extended Diploma courses. In total 47 interviews were conducted. Detailed findings are set out in Chapter 7.

Issues of participation and access

The issues of widening participation and questions of fair access explored in Chapter 3 are central to understanding the literature in relation to higher education choice and the results of this research. In particular it is necessary to understand the changed nature of the HE sector in England since the expansion of participation rates began in the late 1980s, and the related issues of middle-class and working-class participation.

Whilst working-class participation levels have risen, increases in middle-class participation have been greater. Furlong and Cartmel (2009) apply Raftery and Hout's (1993) theory of 'maximally maintained advantage' to English higher education, arguing that expansion resulted in little change in class-based differentials in participation until 'saturation point' was achieved; working-class gains only arise once places are provided for virtually all of the middle-class (p.18). Consistent with this view, Scott (2001) argued that HE became a mass system because middle-class participation rates were 'universal' (in Trow's terms), whilst amongst the working-class HE has remained an 'élite' experience (p.193). Reay et al (2005) note that HE has become increasingly stratified, more differentiated and less straightforward. This is endorsed by Furlong and Cartmel (2009) who note:

"It is misleading to talk simply of access to higher education without highlighting the extent to which some groups of entrants access élite institutions or high status courses while others study in less advantaged context, entering an under-staffed and poorly-funded ghetto sector" (pp.21-22).

Boliver (2013) is in agreement:

"...traditional concerns about access...need to be supplemented by questions about access to the...most prestigious universities...[which] tend to be those in which social groups with historically low participation rates are least well represented" (p.345).

Reay et al (2005) argue that whilst widening participation was central to the 1997-2010 Labour Government's policy, the introduction of fees and loans compounded "...the inequalities arising from lack of information and general perplexity and confusion" about HE amongst working-class families. During this research it became clear that the key issue was not what decision was made, but the understanding of the decision-making process and, critically, the validity of the underlying theory supporting the

conceptualisation of decision-making. It is clear that differences remain in the participation rates of working-class and middle-class students, and that there are qualitative differences between these groups in the nature of participation. These issues are explored in Chapter 3. The underlying theoretical bases for these discrepancies are then considered in Chapter 4.

Underpinning theory

Much of the research relating to educational choice and widening participation is grounded in Pierre Bourdieu's theories of cultural reproduction, which vies with Raymond Boudon's work on rational choice theory to explain the class-based differentials in educational participation noted previously, and considered fully in Chapter 3. An evaluation of their merits – as in Chapter 4 – is necessary to assess the literature on educational choice, most of which is founded on an appreciation of Bourdieu's work. Writers such as Nash (2006) and Glaesser and Cooper (2014) argue that the two approaches may be coordinated and used together. In seeking to reconcile aspects of these theories it is important to note the distinction made by Boudon (1974) between the primary and secondary effects of social stratification. The primary effects of social class are differences in academic ability generated by family backgrounds. The secondary effects concern educational choices made by young people (and their parents) at transition (or "branching") points in educational careers. In considering choice at these branching points Glaesser and Cooper (2014) observe that Boudon, whilst arguing that choice is usually best explained by regarding actions as the result of motivations, accepts that these may vary depending on individual circumstance. Glaesser and Cooper regard this as closely related to Bourdieu's theory that habitus – essentially the individual's background – shapes both desired goals and the means of attaining them.

Work on pragmatically rational decision making set out by Hodkinson (1995, 2008) and Hodkinson and Sparkes (1997) allows for a similar fusion of Bourdieu and Boudon's approaches, without acknowledging Boudon's work on transition points. Like Glaesser and Cooper, Vester (2006) also considers that primary effects have affinity with Bourdieu's concept of habitus. In considering rational choice in education Goldthorpe (2007) accepts that actors often do not act purely rationally and consequently assumptions of rationality have to be weakened to 'subjective' rationality. Glaesser and Cooper (2014) argue that subjective rationality is compatible with Bourdieu's concept of habitus. They observe that one important aspect of habitus is access to knowledge about possible goals and how they may be achieved. This aspect of Bourdieu's work has been incorporated into Reay et al's (2001, 2005) concept of institutional habitus, where schools differ in terms of the quality of knowledge that they provide to pupils regarding higher education choices. Glaesser and Cooper argue that there is a basis for using Bourdieu and Boudon's approaches together, noting that individual 'subjective rationality' is shaped by experience in families of origin, insofar as the habitus acquired there provides upper and lower boundaries on expectations and aspirations, and on the sense of what is possible or impossible. There is support for this approach from Patiniotis and Holdsworth (2005) who observe variations in cultural capital amongst working-class students which they contend reflect different formations of habitus, in turn producing "divergent HE negotiations and choices" (p.92). They argue this does not mean that peoples' material and emotional experiences of class are not mediated by deep-rooted structural inequalities, but that there is scope for flexibility within socially-prescribed limits (p.92).

There is therefore a rationale for linking Bourdieu's theories of habitus with primary effects of social stratification espoused by Boudon, and also to secondary effects based upon the influence of habitus. Actors may attempt at least subjectively rational choices, but decisions are constrained by the influence of habitus on their expectations and aspirations. Thus the framing of much of the literature in respect of educational decision-making within the theoretical framework of Bourdieu's theories of habitus, field and capital can, arguably, be reconciled with Boudon's work on rational choice.

The literature relating to the HE choice

Patiniotis and Holdsworth (2005) note that Bourdieu's theory of cultural and social reproduction is now "almost *de rigeur*" when seeking to "unpack" the experience of 'non-traditional' students in HE (p84). Archer (in Archer, Hutchings & Ross, 2003) observes that Bourdieu's work has been used as the basis for the development of a conceptual framework for understanding the factors underlying choice in relation to higher education by several researchers, highlighting Diane Reay and Stephen Ball for examining how Bourdieu's concepts of 'habitus' and 'cultural capital' are inextricably involved in students' and their families' classed education choices. Both Reay et al (2005) and Ball, Davies, David and Reay (2002) contend that:

"...the perceptions, distinctions and choices of higher education institutions used and made by students play a part in reconstituting and reproducing the divisions and hierarchies in higher education". (Reay et al pp.28-29, Ball et al p.52)

Reay et al and Ball et al argue that in its most important respects choice of university is governed by issues of taste, lifestyle and – especially – social class. Potential students' social class cannot be the sole determinant of their choice of institution and course, but there is a consensus that there are class-based biases in institutional choice. The data

noted in Chapter 3 support Ball et al's view that there is a relationship between the position of universities in the reputational hierarchy, along with their social exclusivity, and student choice. Ball et al argue that this is a key factor in both the generation and reproduction of problems of differentiation. They conclude that choice is concerned with "cultural and social capital, material constraints, social perceptions and distinctions and forums of self-exclusion" (p.54), a view supported by Reay et al who contend that university choice is a lifestyle choice, and hence an issue of taste. Consequently social class is an important subtext of choice and this process operates as a means of class-matching and therefore also as a form of social closure (p.29). There is therefore a link in the literature relating to higher education access and participation between Bourdieu's concepts and the process of student choice or decision-making. The literature examines the process of choice or decision-making - not a meaningless distinction, as Ball et al observe that:

"In many respects, what we address here may be better described as decision-making ... higher education choice is a form of 'extensive problem solving'. Where choice suggests openness in relation to a psychology of preferences, decision-making alludes to both power and constraint." (p.52)

Foskett and Hemsley-Brown (2001) comment that research into higher education choice is not extensive. They cite Connor, Burton, Pearson, Pillard and Regan (1999) as the most recent and useful investigation of university choice processes. In modelling the parameters of HE choice, Foskett and Hemsley-Brown support Connor et al's argument that choice is the product of the interaction of two key influences - students and their advisers on one part and the education system on the other. This is consistent with Hodkinson's (2008) view of pragmatically rational decision-making, which emphasises that decisions are not undertaken solely by individual actors, but are a collaborative process involving other key individuals such as parents.

Foskett and Hemsley-Brown seek to identify factors underpinning the specific choices made by individuals about HE, which they observe has been the focus of research. Having emphasised the need to recognise the unique set of influences on each individual applicant, they seek to identify “... a number of key factors ... on the basis of consistent patterns in the research evidence” (p.164). They first assert that the “primacy of subject choice in the process of HE selection” (p.164) is evident and choice of subject is the limiting factor in applicants’ information searches. Accepting, then, the “primacy of the subject”, other factors identified in the literature are:

1. Educational (including entry requirements, factors relating to learning experience, other institutional factors);
2. Family background and support;
3. Geographical;
4. Financial;
5. Social; and
6. Outcomes.

Such categorisations cannot be unduly prescriptive, because the boundaries between categories may be ill-defined, and certain issues may be capable of multiple interpretations. For example, applicants may be reluctant to consider a choice of institution requiring them to live away from home. This might be considered to be a geographical issue, but the decision may be driven by consideration of additional cost (and so be Financial) or by a desire to continue living at home (and hence be a Family Background & Support issue). Mangan, Hughes and Slack (2010) note that in decision-making “locality and finance were entwined” (p.466). This was apparent from the findings, set out in Chapter 7. Foskett and Hemsley-Brown observe “...factors are, of

course, not discrete. They overlap, they reinforce or contradict each other, each may be interpreted in a negative or positive light..." (2001, p.164).

The outcomes of the case study interviews are considered in Chapter 7. The themes underlying student choice were consistent with those identified above. Three areas should be highlighted for consideration, as jointly and severally they illustrate mechanisms underlying decision-making. Consequently they are worthy of subsequent analysis when assessing the appropriateness of the theoretical underpinnings posited in relation to higher education decision-making.

The first area for consideration relates to socio-economic status. Participants were predominately from lower SES backgrounds, and were not at ease with the process of HE choice in the way that would be expected of middle-class students. They did not fully appreciate the complexities of the higher education field, nor were they properly aware of maintenance grants and institutional bursaries. Not being equipped with all the relevant facts they were less likely to make fully rational decisions. Second, participants were seeking to make explicitly rational decisions, evidenced in ways very similar to participants in Glaesser and Cooper's study (2014). Third, participants' ability to make rational choices was constrained by their limited knowledge of the higher education field. Additionally, it seemed that students were making satisficing decisions, with their level of satisfaction being influenced by their social capital. For many it was sufficient that they would go on to study for a degree, whereas for more middle-class contemporaries study at the case study institution might well be regarded as a failure; study at a 'good university' would be a prerequisite of success.

I believe that the theoretical basis for higher education choice should be sufficient not only to explain class-based differentials in access and the nature of participation at a

macro level, but also to account for the mechanisms underlying individual student choice. Consequently, a convincing theory must be capable of accommodating the key findings noted above. I consider that these three key research findings merit a careful consideration of the applicability of the theoretical underpinnings in the literature regarding higher education choice, and therefore their adequacy. Whilst the literature is persuasive in terms of macro-level influences, which may explain the distribution of students across the sector in terms of probabilities, it fails adequately to account for choice at the micro level. Similarly, whilst theories such as bounded rationality, considered in Chapters 4 and 8, may explain individual choice processes, I do not believe that they have been extended to account for the broader social influences upon individual choice decisions. As noted in the latter part of Chapter 7, there was ample evidence from the research that decision-making was consistent with much of the literature on educational choice, which is mainly rooted in Bourdieusian analysis. My concern is prompted by the micro-level issue of rational choice. It was apparent that participants wished to make a rational choice, but in many cases were ill-equipped to do so. This suggests merit in further consideration of the literature on rational choice and cultural capital, and Chapter 8 explores the use of Bourdieu's theories of habitus in combination with a rational choice model, including discussion of Boudon's work in this field. It argues that Simon's concept of bounded rationality presents a model, when combined with Bourdieu's theories of habitus, which provides greater explanatory power than a combination of Bourdieu and Boudon's approaches. This supported by the case study data, and I have termed this decision-making process 'conditional bounded rationality'.

CHAPTER 2: THE EMERGENCE AND DEVELOPMENT OF A SYSTEM OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN ENGLAND

The Coalition Government's decision to raise the ceiling for undergraduate tuition fees to £9,000 for the 2012-13 academic year, the headline-grabbing response to the Browne Review of 2010, was the catalyst for this research. Whilst the details of the Government's evolving response to the Browne Review recommendations in relation to funding English higher education were not all anticipated, the need for greater funding for UK universities had been recognised for some time (Greenaway & Haynes, (2000), *The Economist* (2002)). The development of the higher education (HE) sector in Britain – and particularly in England – has been relatively rapid over the past three decades. The key, linked, areas of change have been in:

- i. the means of funding higher education;
- ii. the nature and size of institutions delivering undergraduate provision; and
- iii. the nature and level of participation in higher education.

Change in UK higher education in the century or so from the last quarter of the 19th Century to the mid-1980s was incremental, albeit with periods of rapid growth and consolidation. The key areas of change from the 1980s to the present trace their origins to the earlier development of the sector, and so to understand the policy context and drivers for change underlying this case study it is necessary to appreciate sectoral development. As Parry (2006) notes, the manner of the relatively rapid expansion in English higher education since the late 1980s “...has a major bearing on present efforts to renew expansion and broaden the base of undergraduate education”. This chapter reviews the development of higher education until 1985, with particular reference to

England, and then considers more rapid and significant change following radical shifts in government policy in 1985.

There are two key reasons for focusing on England. As Filippakou, Salter and Tapper (2012) note, first it is questionable whether there was ever a truly British system of HE given the differences of the Scottish approach. Second, devolution of responsibility for HE policy together with national funding bodies for England, Scotland and Wales resulted in further fragmentation. This is demonstrated by fees policy at Scottish and Welsh universities from 2012-13 where students from England are charged much higher fees than those with an established local domicile. The focus of this chapter is therefore on the development of higher education in England.

[The Nature, Size and Funding of the HE Sector](#)

Much has been written about development of the English higher education system. Filippakou et al (2012) are critical of Tight's "...essentially descriptive" overview of post-war developments (Tight, 2009). The objective of this chapter echoes that of Filippakou et al - "...(assisting) the understanding of the changing character of English higher education." In so doing - despite the above criticism - it is perhaps inevitable that a partially descriptive approach is adopted. However as Scott (1995) notes the "...chronology suggests a close association between the growth of the universities and wider developments in society", going on to affirm that growth of HE systems is "...a by-product of the development of the modern nation state." Similarly Filippakou et al contend that the issue in understanding the development of HE is the "evolving relationship between the state and market forces." Comprehending the development of this relationship in English HE, especially the effects of structural change and widening participation, is important in understanding the background to the reforms that followed

the Browne Report. In this context, the taxonomy set out by Trow (1973) is useful. He considered that HE systems could be defined as élite, mass or universal. Trow argued that élite systems reproduce leadership positions in society, whereas mass or universal systems provide a broader supply of professionals and technically-qualified staff. Trow considers that systems cease to be élite when more than 15 per-cent of the population participate, are mass when 15-40 per-cent participate and universal when over 40 per-cent of the population participates. Trow (2010) argues that initial expansion of the system is dependent on change in the school system generating more students who qualify for university entry, and that subsequent expansion is a driver of change in the HE system itself, noting:

“No society, no matter how rich, can afford a system of higher education for 20 or 30 per-cent of the age grade at the cost levels of the élite higher education that it formerly provided for 5 per-cent of the population”.
(p.123)

He notes that transition results in a “levelling downwards in costs, and perhaps in quality as well” (p.123).

Structural Evolution

Scott (1995), Tight (2009) and Collini (2012) all note the small number of universities in the British Isles in the latter part of the 18th Century. At that time there were only seven universities (the four ancient Scottish universities of Aberdeen, Edinburgh, St. Andrew’s and Glasgow, Trinity College Dublin and Oxford and Cambridge). These institutions enrolled fewer than 5,000 students in aggregate. Scott notes that “pre-industrial Britain had little need of universities” and that the low number of students enrolled was because universities fulfilled a different purpose:

“...largely concerned with the training of clergymen and teachers.....Although members of the élite social groups passed through universities, they rarely completed their degrees. The subsidiary mission of the pre-industrial universities was...the socialisation of future élites, social and political.” (p.12)

It is easy, given the pre-eminence of Oxford and Cambridge, to assume that this élitist vision gives a complete picture. Vernon (2004) notes that “... over centuries of hegemony, they had acquired uniquely privileged roles in the life of the nation”. However Shinn (1986) comments that during the 18th Century Oxford and Cambridge were “...infected...from within, their ethos pervaded by complacency and neglect” and that many intellectual advances were occurring outside the universities, noting that by the end of the 18th Century English universities were not meeting the needs of the time, particularly in failing to “participate in appropriate innovations within the wider community.” She argues they were poorly placed at the start of the 19th Century:

“...whose momentous events in English social history formed the context to the development of the modern university and its contemporary relationship with the state. The events of that century were critical to an understanding of the 20th Century phenomenon of increasing centralisation consequent upon vast increases in knowledge and its availability to a much increased section of the population”. (p.13)

This raises the issue of change during the 19th Century and its impact on higher education. Scott (1995), arguing for links between the growth of universities and other developments in society, suggests that three decisive shifts created demand for a different, more extensive university system and “shaped (and continued to shape)” (p.12) its development:

1. Increasing democracy – the extension of the franchise – with the spread of polite culture amongst a burgeoning middle class and the growth of working-class consciousness contributing to an increasing emphasis on education;

2. The industrial revolution with demand for new types of labour based upon expert skills and resultant establishment of mechanics' institutes and technical colleges; and
3. The rise of new professions and the growth of a state bureaucracy creating new training needs.

Scott argues that civic universities were established to meet these needs following local initiatives by civic, commercial and professional élites. Shinn (1986) considers the rise of civic universities, begun in the mid-19th Century, as the logical consequence of a number of factors, especially the increasing availability of education which, like Scott, she links to the extension of the franchise and the related desire of government to expand the education system.

Extension of participation was not the sole driver of the development of a more educated population. Industrialisation throughout the latter half of the 19th Century necessitated a more skilled workforce and these skills had to be learned. England's world position in trade and technology was questioned at the Great Exhibition of 1851 when advances by other nations became clear. Later competition with nations such as Germany – where there was planned, state-aided HE – was a driver for change.

The 19th Century also saw a considerable population increase, particularly in the industrial towns and cities of the north. Shinn (1986) comments that areas of densest population, highest levels of prosperity and greatest dependence on scientific and industrial advance were the first to found educational institutions which evolved into universities. After the foundation of the University of Durham and University College and King's College in London, institutions emerged in the second half of the 19th Century in response to local industrial needs. Between 1851 and 1892 eleven colleges were

established, seven in centres of heavy industry. All gained university status and were closely linked with expanding local industries, community aspirations, the generosity of benefactors and academic and civic leadership. Whilst they were begun without centralised national planning in response to local need, Shinn notes that their early histories demonstrate the shift from financial dependence on the individual to the state. She observes that whilst created by private philanthropy, with relatively modest fee income, this was insufficient to sustain them. The movement for state aid and recognition strengthened and by the 1880s had considerable weight. The principle was not novel, as the four Scottish universities had received annual grants from the state – initially from the Crown – that pre-dated the union and which, by 1832, had been transferred to a parliamentary vote. By 1884 the financial difficulties of the new university colleges were acute and in 1889 the Conservative government provided £15,000, establishing an ad hoc Committee on Grants to University Colleges which distributed grants to universities and university colleges until 1914.

Scott (1995) and Shinn (1986) argue that the First World War was instrumental in highlighting the national importance of universities. Shinn observes that medicines, munitions and strategically important goods were partly the product of research in higher education institutions, illustrating that universities and university colleges were “instrumental in national survival to a degree never before envisaged” (p.32). However, Shinn notes that as student numbers declined throughout the war and tuition fee income fell “...the financial state of the universities in 1918 made it obvious that additional sums were required” (p.36), leading to the establishment in July 1919 of the University Grants Committee (UGC) as the successor to the previous committees. The increasing cooperation between universities in seeking changes in funding had other

consequences. The Committee of Vice Chancellors and Principals (CVCP), the forerunner of Universities UK (UUK), was created in 1918.

The war led to considerable social change, not least the expansion of the franchise. However, Simon (1991) observes that the Education Act of 1918, regarded as a great breakthrough at the time, led to only limited advances in schooling. Against this backdrop of slow improvement in schools, recognition of the value of HE would soon be followed by demands for greater participation. Early suggestions introduced familiar themes – that numbers in HE be expanded by providing scholarships and maintenance allowances so that greater numbers might attend existing institutions, and by creating new institutions and extending the scope and status of those already in existence. Scott (1995) notes rapid growth in demand for HE after the war. Despite a declining birth rate, by 1918 there were about 50 percent more entrants to secondary schools than in 1913/14. The 1918 Education Act also improved education funding to local authorities, prompting a considerable rise in the number of free places. In its 1921 Report the UGC noted that:

“...increased provision of secondary schools throughout the Country, together with the operation of the Education Act 1918, ought in a few years’ time to produce a steadily increasing stream of men and women qualified to benefit by a university career”. (Shinn, 1986, p.410)

Despite Simon’s comments on the development of secondary education noted earlier, this would prove to be the case. Even after the boost in participation following the war, as ex-servicemen took up or resumed their studies, numbers grew substantially. In 1913/14 there had been almost 11,000 students. After declining during the war the figures for 1919/20 rose to over 20,000 and by 1923/24 stood at almost 30,000. Subsequent growth was steadier, and figures reached their inter-war peak of just over 37,000 in 1938/39.

Salter and Tapper (1994) suggest that in the 1920s the UGC acquired a “self confidence” in its role as “propagator of traditional university values” (p.130), partly because the state had no alternative conception of university education to challenge the UGC’s traditional values: “...the middle ground between universities and state was very much common ground” (p.131). Scott (1995) argues that UGC funding enhanced universities’ independence by making them less dependent on unreliable local funding which required more scrutiny of its uses. He comments that the UGC “...uniquely, allowed...universities to be both publicly-funded and insulated from political pressure” (p.15).

Despite inter-war growth in higher education numbers, England lagged behind comparable countries, shown by 1934 data published by the UGC in Table 2.1.

Table 2.1 International comparison of higher education participation (1934)

Number of Inhabitants per University Student			
Italy	808	England	1,013
Germany	604	Scotland	473
Holland	579	Wales	741
Sweden	543	Great Britain	885
France	480		
Switzerland	387		
USA	125		

Source: Simon (1991) p.30

Simon (1991) concludes that university education was “seriously underdeveloped compared with other advanced industrial countries” and participation in HE in England was low because “the opportunity ratio” remained low. The percentage of elementary school pupils admitted to secondary schools in England and Wales rose to only 14 percent

by 1938, and of the total entering secondary school only 5.2 percent gained a place at university, as most left at fifteen or sixteen. The majority of state-educated children did not stay on long enough to qualify for university entrance. In 1938 there were only 19,000 pupils aged 17-18 in secondary schools in England and Wales. It can be argued, as for today, that education up to the age of eighteen was organised such that the likelihood of participation in HE by pupils from lower socio-economic backgrounds was reduced because they were less likely to stay on in the education system and qualify for university entry. This has parallels in the work of Boudon (1974), considered in Chapter 4, concerning the secondary effects of social stratification as a result of the educational choices made by young people at transition (or “branching”) points.

There was also clear class-based differentiation in the *nature* of participation in HE. Simon (1991) estimates that in 1937-8 over three-quarters of the students at Oxford and Cambridge were educated at secondary schools, direct grant schools and (especially) at public schools as opposed to having attended elementary schools for any of their education. For universities as a whole nearly 53 percent of students had begun their education in elementary schools. This identifies another parallel with the present: higher socio-economic status students, especially the privately educated, are much more likely to attend elite universities (Boliver, 2013).

Tight (2009), considering the nature of universities, examines links between civic universities and local industries in the early 20th Century, notes conflicts. These related to the teaching of academic content on the one hand and practical or vocational content on the other. Tight argues that as institutions grew, and their aspirations increased, links to industry weakened. This presaged the “academic drift” of the polytechnics later in the century. Citing Weiner (1981), he notes career choices heavily influenced by social class:

“In the inter-war years, there was a rise in the number of university graduates entering industry, but this occurred more out of necessity (as a mounting number of graduates confronted a scarcity of openings in the overseas civil service and the traditional professions) than choice. The better students on the whole found more gentlemanly employment, and the number of industrialists’ and engineers’ sons leaving behind their fathers’ sort of life continued to exceed the number of graduates entering it...the universities were still, as earlier, an avenue out of, not into, industry.” (Wiener, 1981, p.133 cited in Tight, 2009 pp.25-6)

In the immediate post-war period the issue of financial support for both students and institutions became more prominent. Salter and Tapper (1994) note that the Second World War produced both an unprecedented acceptance of state intervention in university affairs and a considerable appreciation of the contribution universities should make to the production of professional manpower. Additionally the proportion of universities’ income received from the UGC rose from 36 percent in 1938/39 to 60 percent by 1947/48. Shinn (1986) cites a 1944 UGC memorandum regarding proposed greater funding, and greater dependence upon the Treasury:

“...the acceptance of Exchequer money through the UGC tends to be less injurious to academic independence than reliance on municipal contributions...” (Shinn, 1986, p.278)

Shinn observes that increased Treasury support was not “as much constraining...as life-giving” (p.278). However, support came at a price. The UGC had already identified that the distribution of significantly increased funds should be accompanied by “more specific advice...and with more positive direction” to institutions (Shinn, p279). This supports Scott’s (1995) view that HE systems attract political scrutiny as participation expands from elite levels.

Tight (2009) observes that the Second World War did not provide a neat policy divide, and before the conclusion of the war the 1944 Education Act had a significant impact on the HE sector, promising to increase the number of students qualifying for university

entrance. Concurrently there was further pressure for the expansion of HE. The McNair Report of 1944 called for three-year teacher training courses, anticipating an annual requirement for 15,000 newly trained teachers. The 1945 Percy Report entitled "*Higher Technological Education*" debated the nature of HE expansion, suggesting the promotion of a small number of technical colleges as opposed to the idea of a technical university. The case for expansion of the sector was strengthened on the publication of the 1946 Barlow Report "*Scientific Manpower*". This anticipated doubling the number of science graduates within a decade and the foundation of at least one new university. One response to this report was the establishment of the University College of North Staffordshire (later Keele University) in 1949.

There is contemporary comment on the merits of the Barlow Report. Writing in *Universities Quarterly*, Ernest Simon states that:

"The most encouraging fact in the university world today is the discovery... that only one in five of the ablest boys and girls now get a university education; and the most difficult task needed for the full achievement of the Barlow plan is undoubtedly to ensure that in ten years, instead of one-fifth, perhaps four-fifths of the ablest should go to university. This would make it possible to double the size of universities..." (Simon, 1946 cited in Shattock 1996, p.42.)

Tight (2009) notes further factors in post-war expansion of HE, notably a continuation of the trend of increased staying on into the sixth form in the 1950s, resulting in HE expansion even before the impact of the post-war increase in the birth rate. The UGC described the immediate post-war expansion of the system as "revolutionary" (Tight, p.60). Gosden (1983) notes that post-war growth in student numbers was closely related to the increasingly generous provision of student awards for undergraduates. At the end of the war LEAs had discrete schemes for student support, but many only covered fees not maintenance costs, as undergraduates were expected to live at home and attend a

local university. In 1946 the government introduced supplemental awards enabling the brightest students to have the value of their award enhanced to meet full residential maintenance costs, but it was not until the implementation of the Anderson Report of 1960 that a system of universal maintenance awards was introduced (Blackburn and Jarman, 1993). Anderson recommended financial support for those gaining a full-time place at university, and implementation provided full fees and means-tested maintenance grants for all undergraduates, introducing the foundations for what became known as the “Robbins’ principle”: higher education should be available to all with the qualifications and ability to benefit from it.

The 1963 Robbins Report – the report of the National Committee on Higher Education, chaired by Lord Robbins – is “indelibly associated” (Tight, 2009, p.65) with developments in HE in the 1960s. The key influence of the Report was the establishment of the principle set out above. Thereafter, the Committee’s work concentrated on determining how many students would satisfy the principle and how HE should be organised.

The influence of Robbins is perhaps exaggerated, as developments were already underway, many recommendations were not implemented and, three years after its publication, changes announced by the next government would have greater impact. The Report notes that the UGC identified the need for more universities in 1958 and government had already sanctioned the creation of seven new universities (Sussex, East Anglia, Kent, Essex, Warwick, Lancaster and York). Robbins notes that, like the first civic universities, each owed their origin to local enterprise, in contrast to the perception that the “plate glass” universities directly resulted from central government orchestration.

There are further echoes of earlier developments. Just as the expansion of HE that followed the First World War was driven by increases in those qualified to enter higher

education, Gosden (1983) notes the key factors resulting in the establishment of the Robbins Committee were:

“...the enormous increase in the number of secondary school pupils achieving the minimum standard or better for university admission and the increasing awareness of the lack of any coherent overall plan for the rapidly exploding higher education scene.” (p.150)

Robbins recommended the foundation of six further universities in addition to those already in the process of formation. The Committee also recommended expansion for the teacher training colleges and for further education.

The Report considered funding HE by means of student loans (Robbins, 1963, p.274, para 31). As Ainley (2014) notes, Robbins suggested students should make a modest contribution (about 20 percent), but proposed no immediate action. Having considered the attractions of a loan scheme – such as lower costs to government and the avoidance of a subsidy from general taxation to those generally better off – Robbins concluded that the telling arguments against were the variable and uncertain nature of the graduate earnings premium, and that the social advantages of HE vastly exceeded the commercial return (Callender, 2014). This latter argument in respect of externalities – that society derives benefits from education over and above that received by the individual, so that there would be under-investment in university education if it was solely privately financed – was a key argument against loans advanced by Collard (1968).

Despite the association of the Robbins Report with developments in HE in the 1960s perhaps the more significant change was one which Robbins “neither recommended nor really foresaw” (Tight 2009) - the creation of the polytechnics. Polytechnics were created in the years after a speech in April 1965 by Anthony Crosland, Secretary of State for Education, which “startled the academic world” (Pratt, 1997). Pratt contends that a major

influence on Crosland, who had been in office for only a few months, was the leading civil servant, Toby Weaver, who advised ministers against accept of Robbins' major proposals, instead advocating expanding thirty of the larger regional colleges to become polytechnics. The Department of Education and Science 1966 White Paper '*A Plan for Polytechnics and Other Colleges*' that followed, established a dual (or binary) system of higher education. Crosland set out four reasons for a dual system:

- i. Universities could not meet the need for vocational, professional and industry based-courses;
- ii. The public sector would be demoralised by a system based on a 'ladder' concept;
- iii. It was preferable for part of HE to remain under 'social control' and responsive to society's needs; and
- iv. Downgrading the non-university professional and technical sector would inhibit the country's ability to stand up to foreign competition.

Crosland therefore linked the creation of the 'binary divide' to issues raised previously in HE such as national competitiveness and local higher training needs – the polytechnics being maintained by LEAs until the 1988 Education Reform Act removed local authority control. The binary divide was removed by the Further and Higher Education Act (1992), also giving polytechnics university title.

Pratt (1997) citing Burgess and Pratt (1970), Pratt and Burgess (1974) and Burgess (1977) contrasts the existing university tradition, described as autonomous, with its own values and purposes, obliquely affecting society, with the 'service' tradition of polytechnics, expected to "serve individuals and society and [be] justified in ...these terms" (p.9). He notes that institutions in the autonomous tradition tend to be exclusive, as if their activity is self-justifying, they need only accept those considered suitable to

undertake what they are doing. Consequently, such exclusivity may be social rather than academic. In contrast, he observes institutions in the 'service' tradition aim to respond to society's needs, therefore placing their knowledge at society's disposal. This is an argument that the creation of the binary divide was an aid to widening participation, although Pratt notes that the autonomous and service traditions were not "neatly packaged" in separate types of institution, but found in varying degrees in polytechnics and universities.

Pratt (1997) describes the process of "academic drift" – polytechnics aspiring to university status and moves by service institutions to gain autonomy. He notes the same process in the late 19th Century when many colleges founded to serve the educational needs of growing industrial cities became civic or 'redbrick' universities. Collini (2012) characterises this as partially driven by snobbery as the "newer and different" institutions "shed their distinctiveness" and "conformed to the culturally dominant model" (p.28), noting civic universities shed their "local and practical character", built accommodation for students from other parts of the country and altered their curricula as "the traditional hierarchy of subjects reasserted itself" (p.29). Crosland held the view that a key purpose of the binary policy was to end the academic drift that led to neglect of the local needs of the people for whom the colleges were founded (Pratt, 1997, p.12). However, Regan (1977) notes that a major objection to the binary system was the division of HE into "superior and inferior" leagues. Tight (2009) observes that it was widely acknowledged as inevitable that polytechnics would have ambitions to acquire university title, but that the binary system proved "surprisingly robust", surviving until 1992.

Tight comments on the perception of the 1960s as the "high watermark" of post-war UK higher education, describing the 1970s as "the start of the slide". Conversely, Collini

(2012) suggests these judgements... “rest on a few selectively-recalled details about the way...universities functioned in the 1950s and 1960s” (p.21). Nevertheless, Tight characterises the DES (1972) White Paper *“Education: A Framework for Expansion”* as bullish, setting out a projected rise in participation to 21 percent by 1981. However, Booth (1982) notes that participation peaked in 1972/3 at 14.2 percent and then fell back to below 13 percent for the next decade. This decline in participation rate was accompanied by an increase in cohort size, so that in absolute terms demand for places was increasing. Booth (1982) comments that this allowed notional efficiency to be increased by rising group sizes. Tight (2009) describes government concern in the late 1970s at this declining participation as “the beginning of the ‘access’ movement” (p.74), observing continuing problems with the national economy through the mid-1970s meant that “difficult decisions were increasingly having to be made” (p.75) to fund growth. Sizer (1988) argues that policy-led expansion of expenditure on higher education by successive governments in the 1960s and early 1970s both increased sectoral dependence on Treasury grants and reduced the sector’s inclination to seek funds from alternative sources. Stewart (1989) highlights the funding difficulties which meant that “from 1974 to 1977 every kind of university grant...was withheld wholly or in part at some point” (p.162). Despite these difficulties, Tight comments that worse was to come, citing Fulton (1990):

“The nadir of government support for higher education was probably reached in the early 1980s...when a new government took over in 1979 with a determination to cut public expenditure, higher education was in a particularly vulnerable position” (Fulton, 1990, pp.151-2)

Collini (2012) introduces a note of caution into discussions of university funding, observing that it was only immediately after the Second World War that the state began to provide even half of the funding of any British University, and that since the early 1960s change has been so rapid that no decade could be selected as representative of the

'normal' state of higher education. He notes that when the Thatcher Government began what he describes as its *Kulturkampf* against universities nearly half of Britain's forty-six degree-awarding institutions had not been in existence as universities twenty years before. He suggests that whilst from one perspective the 1980s and 1990s appear to be decades during which government attempted to diminish universities and attack their funding structure, an alternative view might consider the 1960s and 1970s as exceptional, being the period when Britain sustained a substantial, rigorously selective and wholly state-funded system of high quality undergraduate-centred universities. This perspective is supported by the review of undergraduate funding set out by Mayhew, Deer and Dua (2004) shown in Figure 3.2 (see Chapter 3).

Scott (1995) also considers the issue of university dependence upon state funding, challenging the interpretation that the greater the dependence of universities on state funding the more open they become to political pressure. He argues that the UGC allowed universities to be both publicly-funded and insulated from political pressure, and that pressure has, in Britain, been a result of the increasing proportion of public expenditure devoted to higher education, rather than the proportion of institutions' funding provided by the state. He contends that this change is linked to the development of a mass HE system in the UK and:

“...élite systems, whether or not state-funded, enjoy a high degree of autonomy, while mass systems, even if they become less dependent on the state, inevitably (and beneficially) attract political attention”. (Scott, 1995, p.15)

The levels of political control over higher education in the UK changed notably during the Conservative administration from 1979-1997. The period from the late 1980s to the mid-1990s saw participation shift from under 15 percent to over 30 percent (see Figure 3.2,

Chapter 3), thus crossing Trow's boundary between élite and mass systems. Policy in the early part of the first Thatcher administration was driven by the desire to cut public spending. Scott (1995) notes the growing need for ministers to consider the polytechnics as a result of increasing student numbers, an issue complicated by their funding relationship with local education authorities. Scott comments that the UGC and university vice-chancellors hoped that the Government would consider the existence of two separate HE economies, a high-cost university sector based upon maintaining the unit of resource and a low-cost 'polytechnic' economy predicated on productivity gains.

Against this background, the funding cuts of 1981 were described by Collini (2012) as "savage" and almost a deliberate attempt "...to undermine rational planning and damage morale" (p.33). The UGC retained responsibility for the detailed distribution of Government grants in what Scott (1995) terms a pyrrhic victory, as universities were asked to cut student intakes by 5 percent, partially to protect the unit of resource in the face of a 15 percent overall funding cut. This was at odds with wider Government policy for the development of a strategy for growth in student numbers, coupled with what Scott describes as "ruthless" efficiency gains. Other aspects of policy were also aimed at reducing expenditure, such as progressive withdrawal of subsidy from overseas students, and more selective research funding. Tight notes that apart from the desire to cut costs the government had little to offer in terms of HE policy. As Scott (1982) observed:

"So far as we have...any policy for higher education it is the binary policy...the division of higher education into a university and a polytechnic ... sector...establishes the political, administrative and financial context in which detailed decisions about both educational and resource priorities are made...." (Scott, 1982, p.166)

This divide was reinforced in 1982 by the creation of the National Advisory Body (NAB) for Local Authority Higher Education (later Public Sector Higher Education), established

as an intermediary body between government and the polytechnics and HE colleges. The UGC and the NAB were both asked to give advice on policy for higher education following the publication of the Oakes Working Groups report. As Tight (2009) notes, the UGC and NAB made a joint statement which included a reformation of the Robbins principle which read “courses of higher education should be available for all those who are able to benefit from them and who wish to do so.” In addition, they added a fifth objective to the four identified by Robbins: “the provision of continuing education in order to facilitate adjustment to technological, economic and social change and to meet individual needs for personal development” (UGC, 1984).

The policy set out so far, and that adopted by successive Conservative administrations, is referred to by Watson and Bowden (1999) as a ‘post-Robbins’ system with a set of priorities – termed ‘Policy A’ – “based firmly in an economy drive”. Watson and Bowden note this was based on a narrow base of participation supported by demographic projections showing a large potential reduction in the numbers of 18 and 19 year-olds applying for places. They consider that this policy direction reached its height in Secretary of State Keith Joseph’s 1985 Green Paper *‘The Development of Higher Education into the 1990s’* (DES 1985). They note that this:

“...proposed a reduction in reliance on the taxpayer, stronger links with business and industry, and rationalisation into a smaller number of institutions. The Robbins principle that higher education should be available to all those ‘who can benefit’ was glossed to add a condition that benefit should be ‘sufficient to justify the cost’ ” (p.244).

As subsequent developments show, the Conservative’s ‘Policy A’ (in Watson and Bowden’s terms) marks the conclusion of a long period of emergence and development of English HE as an élite system. The UGC remained as a “buffer” between government and the universities, at least until the economic difficulties of the 1970s, and CVCP had

continued to represent the interests of the sector. Throughout that development there were persistent themes. There were periods of rapid expansion after both World Wars, and from the late-1950s through the 1960s, although growth was not consistent. Growth was often facilitated by changes in the secondary education system which produced greater numbers of qualified entrants to HE, resulting in expansion of the number and size of HE institutions. Participation continued to be stratified in terms of social class, with growth largely seeing lower socio-economic status students entering newer institutions. Social mobility and widening participation were persistent concerns from at least the 1930s. However, as Ainley (2014) commented, the system functioned “to keep people in their place.” This is a key issue to explore in the subsequent expansion of participation in English higher education, and is considered in Chapter 3.

During the mid-1980s there was a fundamental change in Conservative HE policy. Watson and Bowden (1999) note little of Keith Joseph’s Green Paper made its way into legislation, with considerable shifts in policy “kick-started” by ministerial change and the subsequent publication of Kenneth Baker’s 1987 White Paper *‘Higher Education: Meeting the Challenge’* (DES, 1987). Watson and Bowden describe the subsequent policy direction – in their terms Policy B – as “...profound transformation of the post-Robbins inheritance, especially in demographic terms.” Smith and Boccock (1999) note this:

“... expressed the then Government’s desire for higher education to...increase admissions from students offering qualifications other than traditional A-levels. Widening participation was seen both as desirable in its own right and as the key to achieving the cost-efficient expansion of student numbers in HE. Further expansion, it was suggested, could only be achieved by widening the entry-base which in turn led back to the problem of pre-requisite entry qualifications and the narrow base provided by A-levels.” (p.285)

It is hard to imagine greater contrast between the policy objectives set out in the 1985 Green Paper and the 1987 White Paper by a Government of the same political party. Watson and Bowden note that the outcomes driven by the later document were in keeping with one key priority of Policy A – “much of the planned expansion was achieved through huge efficiency gains.” The possible reasons for the policy change are assessed in Chapter 3, which considers participation and access.

Scott (1995) notes the creation of the NAB in 1982 provided a context in which a higher education system could be managed. The UGC’s response to funding cuts had been to reduce the universities’ intake, in an attempt to preserve the unit of resource. Watson and Bowden (1999) comment that whilst the university sector maintained its overall unit of resource throughout the 1980s, it was reduced significantly in the polytechnics. However, Scott argues that the new system provided a structure to manage the HE sector and the UGC was only part of that system, in which the “...centre of gravity...shifted from universities to polytechnics” as the number of students in the polytechnics grew (p.19).

Smith and Bocoek (1999) note that themes such as prior attainment and staying on, considered by Robbins, also supported the increase in participation in HE from the late 1980s. Between 1987 and 1992 participation almost doubled from 14.6 percent to 27.8 percent (p.285), enabled and supported by significant new legislation. The 1987 White Paper led to large portions of the 1988 Education Act, resulting in the incorporation of the polytechnics and some large colleges as higher education corporations, removing them from local authority control and establishing national funding bodies for the two parts of the sector on either side of the binary divide. The NAB was superseded by the Polytechnics and College Funding Council (PCFC) and the UGC, after almost seventy years of independence, was replaced by the Universities Funding Council. Scott (1995) notes that:

“In the eyes of the universities the new UFC embodied subordination, a loss of autonomy; for the polytechnics and colleges the PCFC represented nationalisation (combined with greater operational freedom), a status gain.” (p.20)

Scott also observes:

“...the evolution of the system has had two main elements – first, the subordination of the autonomous universities to the commands of the state; and second, the take-over by the state of responsibility for other advanced institutions once provided by local government...” (p.13)

The creation of the UGC at the end of the First World War, at the time a mechanism to *preserve* universities, later gave the state a mechanism to control the sector as state funding became more significant. Equally, the abolition of the binary divide in 1992 brought the former polytechnics under more direct central government control, whilst at the time being perceived by many as positive.

In Scott’s view the new wider-participation environment favoured the PCFC because the “expansionary climate...suited the polytechnics far better than the universities.” He noted that polytechnic numbers had been boosted by students displaced in the 1981 cuts and the NAB regime between 1982 and 1989 had produced productivity gains, enabling the PCFC to “work with the grain” (pp.20-21).

Within three years there was another Secretary of State – Kenneth Clarke – who produced a further White Paper (*Higher Education: A New Framework* – DES 1991). This spawned more legislation – The Further and Higher Education Act (1992) – which drove developments to their conclusion. The binary divide, established in the mid-1960s, was dissolved by creating Higher Education Funding Councils (HEFCs) for England, Scotland and Wales. Further Education Colleges (FECs) and sixth-form colleges were removed from local authority control, just as the polytechnics had been. All the former polytechnics, and

some large colleges on the cusp of polytechnic designation, were established to award their own degrees and gained university title. New arrangements for quality assurance were also enacted. The Higher Education Quality Council was relatively short-lived, being replaced by the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) in 1997. Watson and Bowden (1999) view the speed of the shift from Policy A to Policy B and the “willingness to overturn established institutional administrative and governance patterns” as “astonishing.” Collini (2012) notes the continuation of the ‘efficiency’ driven policy strand in the 1992 changes, considering the expansion of student numbers a deliberate strategy to drive down unit costs, and even the most prestigious universities offered “remarkably little” resistance, “bending the knee” to government funding masters.

Despite the cost-control focus, the near-doubling of the age participation index (API) between 1987 and 1992 was not achieved without financial adjustments. As Smith and Boccock (1999) observe, in 1989 tuition fees were increased substantially and institutional block grants were cut in a policy known as fees-only funding. Watson and Bowden (1999) argue that John Patten, Secretary of State from 1992 to 1994, struggled to deal with his predecessor’s legacy:

“Patten....slammed the brakes on expansion as the Treasury reminded him of the implications of Baker’s open-ended promises (particularly on student maintenance).” (p.247)

Smith and Boccock note that by late 1993 the Government announced an end to expansion and began a period of consolidation, with controls on student numbers being introduced in England by HEFCE. Watson and Bowden (1999, p.247) comment that Patten had realised that the Government was simultaneously committed to reducing costs whilst expanding provision, continuing high quality, maintaining outcome standards and increasing diversity. Given the conflict between these, when Patten left in July 1994 it is

unsurprising that his successor, Gillian Shepherd, delayed intervention through the devices of a departmental review (in late 1994, which never finally reported) and then the Dearing Committee (The National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education (NCIHE), 1997).

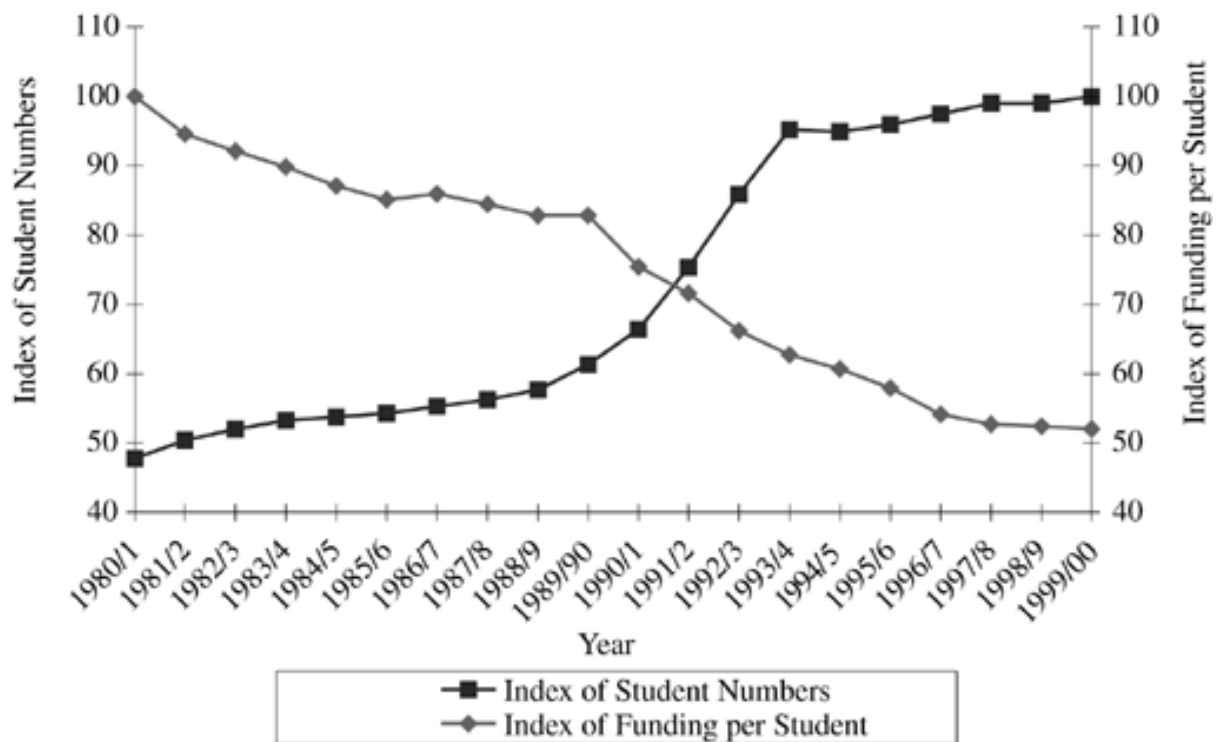
When the Dearing Committee was established there was “a real sense of crisis” (Watson, 2007, p.1) in UK higher education. Under Conservative supervision since 1979 the system had experienced significant policy ‘lurches’ (contraction, expansion and ‘consolidation’), major changes in governance and organisation, and the strains of underfunding (Watson and Bowden, 1999). The sense of crisis was accompanied by paralysis within the major political parties in terms of policy response, especially in the spring and summer of 1996 when some universities threatened to break the pattern of traditionally free HE for full-time students by charging top-up fees. Dearing was initiated before the 1997 general election by agreement (an ‘extraordinary act of collusion’ – Watson, 2007) between the Conservative government and the Labour opposition with the intention of removing HE from the election campaign. As Tight (2009) observes, the Report’s terms of reference, unlike the Robbins Report, made explicit reference to student funding:

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

Tight notes that the last third of the Dearing Report was devoted to “a close analysis of the key issue of funding.” The reason can be seen from Figure 2.1 below, which demonstrates both the shift *upwards* in student numbers and *downwards* in funding per student. If growth in student numbers was to continue without unacceptable pressures

on quality, reduction in funding per student could not be allowed to continue, hence Dearing's funding focus.

Figure 2.1. Index of Student Numbers and Public Funding for Higher Education, 1980/1-1999/2000



Source: Department for Education and Skills (2003)

Tight notes that Dearing's argument proceeds in four stages:

1. The case is made that HE is underfunded:

“...over the last 20 years: the number of students has much more than doubled; public funding for higher education has increased in real terms by 45%; the unit of funding per student has fallen by 40%; public spending on higher education, as a percentage of gross domestic product, has stayed the same.” (NCIHE, 1997, p.11)

2. The costs of HE are already shared between students and the state, as the state does not fund all costs for all students.
3. If the deficit in HE funding is to be resolved, the need for new sources of funding, or an adjustment in the shares of funding borne by the different parties, is recognised

and the shift is to be away from public funding towards increased private sources. A market solution is not proposed, but the need for continuing state oversight is agreed.

4. Within this framework the solution to the funding problem is set out, namely the transfer of a greater proportion of the increased costs onto students:

“The costs of higher education should be shared amongst those who benefit from it...those with higher education qualifications are the main beneficiaries, through improved employment prospects and pay. As a consequence, we suggest that graduates in work should make a greater contribution to the costs of higher education in future.” (NCIHE, 1997 pp.28-29)

Specifically, the Report recommended that students should contribute c. £1,000 per annum after graduation on an income-contingent basis. A linked recommendation was the return of means-tested maintenance grants. Tight (2009) observes that by the time of the Dearing Report’s publication there was a Labour administration in power which opted for a different model of student funding. Nevertheless, he concludes that the Dearing Report had:

“...done its job, in serving to legitimate one of the most significant higher education policy changes in the post-war period. The Anderson Report of 1960, which itself had been a milestone in establishing the principle of mandatory grants for undergraduate students, was finally undone.” (pp.86-87)

Bathmaker (2003) is less sanguine about the Government response, commenting that:

“...although Dearing offered detailed and carefully researched proposals, the Labour Government introduced their own policy solutions...not based on the ideas in the Dearing Report. In doing so they...perpetuated rather than resolved the funding problems facing both institutions and students, and this...precipitated a further financial crisis....The burden of cost to universities who widen access to non-traditional students had led to proposals to oppose further expansion.” (p.178)

Watson (2007) – who was a member of the Dearing Committee – observing that New Labour’s first term policy on higher education was structured around the Dearing Report, is critical, noting the key exception of:

“...a serious modification of his recommendations on fees and student support, which has haunted them ever since. Essentially, the government was too greedy. Ministers took the Dearing recommendation of a student contribution to course costs and ignored what the report said about living costs, especially for poorer students.” (p.11)

Living costs, in addition to tuition fees, are considered in more detail towards the end of this chapter. The Labour administration’s main policy response was to simultaneously introduce tuition fees of £1,000 per year for full-time undergraduates whilst reducing the teaching grant to institutions by £1,000 per annum. This had little practical effect as the fees were paid “up front” via the Student Loans Company and thus there was no net reduction in the burden on the Treasury.

Tight (2009) views the Labour’s subsequent HE policy in the early years of the 21st Century as being “...largely a period of consolidation (and tweaking) of policy and practice after a time of significant change” (p.87). Watson (2007) notes the government followed the Committee’s recommendations “in devising a policy essentially ‘with the grain’ of a formally unstratified system” (p.12). He considers that this approach reached its high point with David Blunkett’s speech in 2000 *‘Modernising Higher Education: facing the global challenge.’* Watson comments that the country had “been in serious ‘read my lips’ mode about the unacceptability of differential fees until well into the second term” (p.13). Tight perhaps under-states the position in referring to the changes introduced by the 2003 White Paper, *The Future of Higher Education* (Department for Education and Skills, 2003) as simply above-inflation increases in funding for HE for institutions and students. The legislation increased fees from just over £1,000 per year to £3,000 per year and, as

the BIS review of the impact of the changes notes, was only passed following a very close vote in parliament (Urwin, Gould and Page, 2010).

Watson's alternative view was that the change of emphasis was "sudden, and caught many supporters by surprise" (2007, p.13), noting that one of the intentions of the 2003 White Paper appeared to be "the re-emergence of a re-stratified system, endorsed at the highest level." This view is supported by Shattock (2012) who explores the tensions within New Labour relating to the introduction of the £3,000 per year tuition fee ceiling. Citing Blair (2010) he argues that the then Prime Minister was the main advocate of higher fees, and that his interest lay in a narrow range of more prestigious institutions. He notes Blair's view that the Conservative abolition of the binary divide had "fuelled the myth that all universities were of the same academic standing" (Blair, 2010, p.482). Shattock highlights the impact of a visit to Downing Street by key members of the Russell Group in 2001, urging the case for more funding. Blair recounts the process of structural reform of the sector, and it should be noted that Julian Le Grand, a leading advocate of quasi-markets, worked in the Downing Street Policy Unit at this time. Blair's specific justification of higher fees, supported by the work of Andrew Adonis, was based in an examination of the top fifty universities in the world, where he saw "only a handful in the UK". He concluded that the domination of the top fifty by American institutions was "plainly and inescapably due to their system of fees" (Blair, 2010, p.482).

Watson (2007) notes that the proposals introduced a regime of variable fees to replace the flat-rate system, concentrated public funding of research, began to categorise institutions as, for instance, 'research-intensive' or 'more focused on teaching and learning' and "lowered the bar" for university title. He describes the process of passing the legislation as "one of the most compelling Commons battles of the Parliament" (p.15)

with the result a compromise which failed to satisfy anyone, with the new maximum fee of £3,000 effectively becoming a revised flat-rate fee. Ainley and Weyers (2008) describe this as:

“...most Vice-Chancellors of Universities playing what they think of as a clever game in raising their fees to the permitted maximum so that there is no variably-priced market...” (p.131).

Ainley and Weyers anticipated that fees would rise again, but that Vice Chancellors would be unable to sustain their “ruse” when the fees cap was raised or removed. This is considered later in this chapter.

Labour’s third term was, according to Watson (2014), fraught as a consequence of the “bloody civil war of Blair and Brown” (p.139). As the new Prime Minister in 2007 Gordon Brown placed the higher education sector in the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills (DIUS). The Secretary of State, John Denham, announced in February 2008 that work was underway on a new ‘framework’ for UK higher education to include a review of undergraduate fees. He did not complete it, and neither did his successor, Lord Mandelson, in the newly-created Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (DBIS). The document ultimately produced in 2009, *Higher Ambitions*, (DBIS, 2009) might have been ironically titled as it was modest in the scope of its seventeen proposals. Labour’s “implosion” (Watson, 2014, p.140) was therefore the main context of Lord Browne’s Review into Higher Education Funding and Student Finance which was launched in November 2009 and reported in October 2010 (Browne 2010). As with the Dearing Review it was commissioned by one government and reported to the next, minimising the political interest in HE, with the exception of the notorious Liberal Democrat pledge on tuition fees.

Instead of recommendations the Browne Report had nine 'principles', which in Watson's view had a number of merits. These included: an understanding that improvements in 'fairness' and expansion are linked – the more the system is restricted, the more non-standard participants will lose out; and the “clever” decision to model a 'pivot' around a new kind of fees cap (of c. £6,000) above which a proposed 'levy' on higher fees was meant to make institutions consider pricing carefully (Watson, 2014). The government chose to implement a somewhat different approach. As with the Dearing Committee, Browne argued that more investment was needed in the HE sector. However, unlike Dearing, Browne formed the view that the student/graduate contribution should be increased so that for all but a small group of “priority subjects” tuition costs should be met *wholly* from private sources, albeit with the contribution of publicly-subsidised income contingent loans. McGettigan (2013) notes the sole piece of research commissioned on the issue revealed that:

“ ‘Most full-time students and parents...believe that the government should pay at least half the cost of higher education. This is because the personal benefits of higher education were seen by many to match the benefits to society’. This striking finding did not appear in the full report and had to be revealed through a Freedom of Information request...” (p.21)

Watson's key criticism of the Browne Report is that there was no serious long-term modelling of the effect of the enlarged graduate contribution scheme on public finances. However, Brown and Carasso (2013) note that the Committee intended overall costs be contained by the use of centrally-regulated minimum entry standards based on the UCAS Tariff. Candidates with lower qualifications would not be eligible for state support, whether directly through grants or indirectly via subsidised loans.

The two parties in the Coalition Government had approached the 2010 election with very different HE policies, and these remained problematic throughout the parliament in

implementing changes that required primary legislation. The Coalition welcomed the thrust of the report but indicated its intention to proceed differently in key areas. There would be a new threshold of £6,000 a year but in 'exceptional cases' universities and colleges could charge up to £9,000 if they met 'much tougher conditions on widening participation and fair access' (DBIS, 2010b). Institutions charging more than £6,000 would have to meet conditions, set by OFFA, demonstrating how they would use the additional income to make progress in widening participation and fair access. This would represent a significant cut in resources for established higher education providers, who received total resources (grants plus fees) of the order of £7,500-£8,000 per year. This was subsequently reflected in the core/margin average fee level (see later in this chapter). In addition the Government announced that graduates would not begin repayments until annual earnings reached £21,000, up from £15,000 previously. In a move to make the system financially sustainable a 'real' rate of interest would be charged but with a progressive taper in interest rates. In addition all outstanding payments (initially estimated by the Government at 28 percent of all loans taken out) would be written off after 30 years. The net result was forecast to be that between 25 and 30 percent of graduates with the lowest lifetime earnings would pay less than under the previous system. The Government also agreed that maintenance loans should be increased for students from families with household incomes of up to £60,000, with more generous maintenance *grants* for students with family incomes below £25,000. The House of Commons voted in favour of the £9,000 fee cap in December 2010 with much less Parliamentary controversy than had accompanied the vote to introduce 'variable' fees of up to £3,000 in 2004. However, the political cost to the Liberal Democrats was considerable, given their 2010 manifesto pledge to abolish tuition fees. Whilst at the time there was much discussion of the scheme, for Brown and Carasso (2013) the critical

change was “the switch away from subsidising institutions to subsidising students” (p.93), noting that this:

“...reflected the view, also held by the Browne Committee, that student education was now essentially a private good.” (p.93).

The increase in the fee cap was only one element of the Government’s planned reforms, which in many respects echoed and continued New Labour measures aimed at a neoliberal quasi-market approach when the £3,000 fee cap had been set. In 2011 the Government issued a White Paper seeking to justify its package of proposals (*Higher Education. Students at the Heart of the System*. DBIS, 2011). This set out that institutions’ “core” student number allocations would be reduced in order to create a “margin” for redistribution. “Core” student numbers would exclude places filled by students whose A-level grades were at least AAB (or equivalent), then estimated at 65,000 entrants (the so-called ‘AAB+’). Subsequently this was relaxed to ABB+, and abolished for 2015 entry. Places in respect of students meeting the AAB+ criterion were outside the cap, thereby attempting to create a system where provision would adjust to satisfy demand. From the core student numbers a ‘margin’ of 20,000 places was created by a proportional reduction across all institutions. Institutions charging fees of no more than £7,500 on average, after waivers, were free to bid for additional places from this margin. This created an incentive for some institutions to charge average fees below £7,500 if they were concerned that recruitment would fall, because they were unlikely to attract additional ‘AAB+’ students to make good their marginal reduction in places. Following this announcement there was only a short period before the deadline for the finalisation of Access Agreements in July 2011; to allow the policy to “bite” it was necessary for a further opportunity to be provided to institutions for the revision of agreements. A new deadline was arranged for later in the year. As Brown and Carasso (2013) comment:

“...this was a clear response to the large number of institutions that had indicated their intention to charge a maximum fee or very close to it; indeed once the details of this policy had been announced, 24 universities and one college took the opportunity...to revise their Access Agreements, and lower their fees, to enable them to bid for places from the margin.” (p.93)

Collini (2013) summarised the position:

“The core and margin device is intended to widen the gap between the few universities at the top that can attract AAB+ applicants in any quantity and the considerable number of universities nearer the bottom that are forced to lower their fees to keep their admission totals up.” (page unnumbered)

Collini noted that given the level of public subsidy inherent in the loans system the Treasury had a substantial interest in the operation of the student numbers contract process, as student numbers are the main determinant of cost. Commenting on the position for 2012-13, Brown and Carasso (2013) note that in the sector 34 institutions had seen their number limits cut by 10 percent or more and the overall reduction in places in the sector was 3 percent. As Collini (2013) argues, these were “places which had presumably been filled quite satisfactorily in previous years.” Brown and Carasso (2013) observe:

“Those hit hardest were those that have lost places under core-and-margin, were unable to successfully bid them back, and are unlikely to be able to increase significantly their numbers of AAB+ students. Many are large metropolitan universities. The medium to longer-term likelihood is that, depending on what happens with student demand, these providers will reduce their fees, downsize or merge with others.” (p.94)

Signs of such supply-side structural changes in the market have been slow to emerge. However, there were indications of shifts in recruitment patterns following the removal of the student number cap (‘Several London post-92s see falls in battle for students’, Morgan, *THE*, 28 January 2016). The *THE* article quotes Nick Hillman, former special adviser to David Willetts when he was Universities Minister, as saying “the removal of student number controls was

meant to see students shift around the sector and change their decision-making, and it does seem to be having that effect.” This reinforces Collini’s view that:

“Anyone who thinks...that things have settled down and will now carry on much as usual, simply hasn’t been paying attention. This government’s whole strategy for higher education is, in the cliché it so loves to use, to create a level playing field that will enable private providers to compete on equal terms with public universities.” (2013, page unnumbered)

Collini highlights the ‘unprecedented’ government decision, linked to the increase in the fees cap, to entirely abolish the block grant to universities and colleges to support the costs of teaching for Band C and D subjects (the lower-cost subject areas) and substantially in respect of Band A and B subjects (mainly medicine, dentistry and the natural sciences). Whilst Collini comments that from the private providers’ perspective this removed a subsidy to established universities that hitherto made private providers uncompetitive in the home market, it is not the case that there is a “level playing field.” Aside from the issue of Band A and B subjects, there remains an inequality in respect of students’ ability to access Student Loan Company (SLC) funds. For private providers there is a limit of £6,000 annually in respect of SLC-funded fees, compared with £9,000 for universities and colleges. Nevertheless, the thrust of Collini’s argument holds good – now every type institution is largely dependent upon student fees “the way is open to rig the market to drive down the price.” Collini quotes McGettigan’s (2013) view with approval – that deliberate steps have been taken to destabilise the majority of institutions “prior to the entrance and expansion of alternative providers, who in contrast will be nurtured into the new terrain.” Collini cites David Willetts in support of his view when he says: “The biggest lesson I have learned is that the most powerful driver of reform is to let new providers into the system” (2013, page unnumbered). Collini highlights Willetts’s use of ‘reform’, noting the implication that the present system requires rectification, and that

the recent reforms will address the issue by reclassifying students as consumers, “thereby reducing them to economic agents in a market.” Lewis’s (2008) arguments are relevant:

“Transformations in educational provision...are always political acts, made all the more powerful when their intentions are hidden by an uninterrogated language of educational reform for improvement”. (p.45)

Collini (2013) suggests that:

“The cunning of government propaganda...is to pose as the champion of the consumer in order to force through the financialisation and marketization of more and more areas of life.” (page unnumbered)

Smith (2004) argues that, globally, the transformation of the social and economic climate:

“...has become increasingly formulated in neoliberal terms, emphasizing the ascendancy of the private sector, the role of a ‘free market’ and the individual’s responsibility for her or his welfare, as contrasted with conceptions of the public good.” (p.35)

Collini asks in this marketised scenario who student-consumers need assistance *against* and concludes that it is universities, noting the assumption underlying government rhetoric that providing the consumer with “financial clout” will force universities to change in response to demand. He comments:

“No one has shown that they were failing previously or that these changes will enable them better to fulfil their purposes: the rhetorical pressure has been uniformly directed at insinuating that universities obstruct student wishes...” (2013, page unnumbered)

This direction of travel was reinforced by the publication in November 2015 of the BIS Green Paper *Fulfilling Our Potential: Teaching Excellence, Social Mobility and Student Choice*. This proposes the introduction of a Teaching Excellence Framework, together with measures to drive up disadvantaged student participation and improve student choice. It proposes the creation of a new “Office for Students” with the objective of greater transparency of information for students. If this latter objective could be achieved, it

would potentially assist those students who are unfamiliar with the HE environment to make better-informed choices.

Collini (2013) highlighted another problem with the system of HE student numbers and fees. Until 2015, HEFCE controlled the total number of student places at universities and colleges (and therefore the total aggregate demand for loans) by setting quotas. Collini raised an issue of principle and a practical concern. The issue of principle is that if universities are autonomous, operating in a true market, why is an unelected quango in a position to apply quotas? This is addressed by LeGrand and Bartlett (1993) who argue for the creation of quasi-markets which feature competitive providers but with key differences, including the absence of a provider profit-maximisation motive and where consumers may not make a direct purchase in money terms at the point that a service is provided (p.10). Collini's practical question is how this might be achieved given that HEFCE's previous, most effective, sanction – the withdrawal of funding – is ineffective in a situation where institutions receive little funding from HEFCE. Institutions would have few reasons to abide by any cap on numbers prescribed by HEFCE as long as their students remain eligible for loans. This may explain the subsequent removal of most student number controls. Collini concluded that:

“The core and margin system is...a clumsy way...to try to restrict numbers and redistribute places from less selective to more selective universities...it also makes it possible for the government to claim that it is not to blame – though in fact it is – when there is a significant fluctuation in the number of applicants getting places at English universities. Instead, universities can be blamed for somehow mismanaging their admissions.” (2013, page unnumbered)

Despite its potential weaknesses, Collini notes that the reasoning behind government policy is clear: the value of a degree is the income that is enables you to earn minus the cost of obtaining the degree. The logic is that applicants compare the salaries of graduates

from institutions, deduct the fees charged and make their choice on the basis of value for money. Universities, by this rationale, should compete on price. Collini contends that this is impracticable because the 'good' on offer is such that consumers cannot make such fine distinctions of quality, arguing that despite the Browne Report's confidence that price is the "single best indicator of quality", in fact price is a "feeble proxy for judgements of quality." Collini notes that a university education is a 'post-experience good', hence a full understanding of its worth cannot be gained in advance. He suggests that a university education is better regarded as a 'positional good' rather than a 'consumer good', because a place at a particular university is not available to anyone with the funds and the inclination to purchase it. Consequently the 'value' of any given place will depend partly on the status of the institution in the perceived hierarchy, something that "changes with glacial slowness." Collini explains that this is why it is in the interests of the most selective universities not to expand their numbers substantially. He notes they have been berated by Willetts for this – as the freedom to remit AAB+ applicants was meant to encourage expansion of more prestigious universities – but "sensible" universities resist this pressure, which Collini regards as "rational...even in market terms." Essentially this is because as selecting institutions they should seek to preserve their reputations, more easily achieved by limiting intakes to only the most able students. Collini (2013) argues that under the new fees regime applicants are intended to make decisions based on information that "can only ever be proxies for quality" such as institutions' expenditure per student, contending that:

"In reality, applicants are making decisions on other grounds, as they have long done: general reputation, the 'fit' with the kind of course they think they would like to take, the social amenities offered, location and so on."
(2013, page unnumbered)

Collini asks whether 'rational consumers' – 17 year olds about to make UCAS submission – should consider price as a key aspect of decision making. He considers the hypothetical case of an applicant with offers from two universities: University A is slightly older and has a slightly better reputation than University B, but University A charges fees of £9,000 against £8,000 at University B. Collini (2013) comments that:

“...given that they seem to be pretty much identical in every other way, this whopping difference in sticker price must be decisive, mustn't it? And indeed, there is anecdotal evidence that some applicants under the new fee regime are responsive to precisely this consideration.” (page unnumbered)

Some participants in this case study did consider relatively small price differences prompted by bursary schemes. However, price was only one element of the decision-making process, and participants were generally less well off than a typical student. Collini questions whether it is rational to choose University B in these circumstances by examining the loan repayment scheme in detail. Even assuming that there is no future salary difference (and he assumes that future earnings would in reality be higher having attended University A), he notes that repayments would be identical until the graduate reaches his or her late forties, when a graduate of University A would pay 9 percent in additional tax for a little longer. He concludes:

“Any applicant serious about getting a good university education would be foolish to let that distant and relatively minor period of additional tax determine their choice of university at the age of 17.” (2013, page unnumbered)

The evidence of this case study suggests that many potential students were not heavily influenced by issues of earnings and loan repayments. Collini's arguments also highlight a weakness in Labour's 2015 election commitment to reduce tuition fees to £6,000. As many students would not ultimately repay the full cost of tuition, this measure would aid students – mainly the established middle-class – attending more prestigious institutions

who, under the current regime, are most likely to bear and fully repay the cost of £9,000 fees.

Collini argues that the higher “sticker price” of University A may quite rationally be part of an applicant’s considerations on the grounds that University A will be better resourced. In addition, towards the top of the reputational hierarchy the higher price may become a positive reason for choosing what is partly a positional good. He concludes that a price differential is a “phantom factor” saying more about the institution’s confidence than about value for money, and:

“The surprising truth is that, even within the terms of intelligent consumerism, it would be foolish...to let price be any significant determinant of...choice.” (2013, page unnumbered)

Collini questions the validity of any claim that these changes have been made to reduce public expenditure because of the amount loaned which will be written off. This is known as the resource accounting and budgeting (RAB) charge. At the inception of the scheme, the government suggested that it would be 28 percent. Writing in the latter part of 2013 Collini suggested that the RAB figure might reach 40 percent. A *Times Higher Education (THE)* article (Morgan, 2014), citing research by London Economics, carried out for the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills for the 2011 White Paper, reported:

“...if the estimated RAB charge...increases beyond 48.6 percent, the economic cost of the 2012-13 higher education reforms will exceed the 2010-11 system that it replaced. David Willetts, the universities and science minister, told MPs on the Commons BIS Committee in January that the RAB estimate on new loans would be revised upwards from its current 40 percent – the latest in a series of upward revisions from the government’s original 28 percent.” (Morgan, 2014)

The article quotes Andrew McGettigan, who notes that the government’s original claim was that around £1 billion per year would be saved by the new regime “...and that such

savings were required to meet the austerity agenda... Has the upheaval been justified if there is minimal saving?" Furthermore, *THE* quotes Bahram Bekhradnia of the Higher Education Policy Institute arguing that the current modelling of the RAB charge is based upon the assumption that average earnings growth will spread equally among all earners, which "flies in the face of all the evidence." Bekhradnia stated that correcting the modelling, as BIS is set to do, adds another 4-5 percent to the RAB on top of the current 40 percent. The RAB then "gets very close to the break-even point" at which the old regime of £3,000 fees and grants to institutions would cost no more. This was probably a key factor in the Conservative Government's decision, set out relatively quietly in the Chancellor's 2015 Autumn Statement, to freeze the £21,000 salary level for the repayment threshold until at least 2022, rather than increasing it in the line with average earnings as originally planned (Connington, 2015).

Considering loan repayment in more detail, Collini suggests that repayment rate statistics will become available and will show differences between courses as well as institutions, suggesting that if a course shows a low payment rate it might be tempting for the government to "harness 'anti-scrounger' sentiment" to remove its eligibility for publicly-backed loans. Collini highlights the irony that a fee system justified as making institutions more independent might "provide an alternative lever by which to force 'market' judgements on universities in deciding which courses to offer." He cites McGettigan's view that this might achieve what direct government control had not, with the advantage that "...it will appear that universities are doing it to themselves" (2013, page unnumbered).

Collini considers the justifications offered for current higher education policies, including the need to reduce public expenditure, and concludes that they fail to persuade. Brown and Carasso (2013) comment on the strong international performance of UK higher

education – the second strongest in the world – and note its financial efficiency (pp.126-9). It is instructive to note comments by Callender (2014), in considering the Robbins Report, that Robbins was convinced that the increase in public expenditure that his proposals required would be “...remunerative both in its absolute effects on the general productivity...and in helping to maintain our competitive position in the world at large” (Robbins, 1963, p.273). To appreciate this, it should be understood that Robbins’ estimate was that the proportion of GNP devoted to higher education was to rise from 0.8 percent in 1962-3 to 1.6 percent in 1980-81 (Robbins p.273). Callender (2014) notes this was almost met in 1980 but spending subsequently declined. According to the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD, 2011), in 2010 expenditure on tertiary education in the UK amounted to 1.4 percent of GDP, below the OECD mean of 1.6 percent. Furthermore, the UK is amongst the lowest spenders of *public* funds on higher education, at 0.7 percent of GDP. In 1963, when Robbins sought an increase in expenditure, it stood at 0.8 percent of GNP. At that time expenditure of 3.4 percent of GNP was incurred on the National Health Service (Appleby, 2013), and by 2013 had increased to 8.2 percent of GDP. It is therefore difficult to justify the reform of higher education on financial grounds.

Funding and Participation – The International Context

Chapman and Greenaway (2006) note increases occurred in higher education participation in OECD and non-OECD countries alike, which was partly demand-driven, partly fuelled by policy initiatives to increase the number of universities and university places. Policy initiatives were mainly driven by economic competitiveness objectives to support the development of the ‘knowledge-based economy’. The drive to expand participation triggered a debate about how this might be funded, particularly in countries

where university education was traditionally publicly provided i.e. free at the point of consumption. Whilst this was sustainable with an élite system, in these economies a move to mass and particularly universal higher education would be unsustainable. Matějů et al (2009) observe that when countries aim to increase HE participation rates whilst the HE budget is under pressure, this implies that there will be funding shortfalls, alleviated either by lowering costs, largely by reducing quality (e.g. increasing staff: student ratios) or by supplementing public revenues with private income. They conclude that greater attention is focused on the latter, a view shared by Chapman and Greenaway (2006). Chapman and Greenaway consider that the issue triggers the questions: should the beneficiaries of HE make a larger contribution to the costs of provision, and if the answer is 'yes', how and when should the contribution be made?

As Biffi and Isaac (2002) observe, government expenditure on higher education generates private benefits to individuals and public benefits to society. This echoes the Robbins Report (this Chapter, p.44) and the Dearing Committee (this Chapter, p.56) which both recognised private and public benefits flowing from participation in HE. Private benefits accrue to graduates as human capital which typically means a higher income during their working lives. This is conventionally measured in the terms of annual rates of return, and Biffi and Isaac report the OECD-average rate of return was about 12 percent. Whilst this provides an argument for private contributions to the cost of HE, equity also plays a part. Again citing the OECD, Biffi and Isaac note disproportionately low participation in HE by lower socio-economic groups in all countries. They argue that free education does not ensure balanced social representation and is regressive because it subsidises (from general taxation) those from higher socio-economic groups at the expense of all taxpayers, including low-income earners. Biffi and Isaac also argue that the

over-representation of higher socio-economic groups provides a strong case for charging tuition fees as the basis for funding greater assistance to less advantaged students. These views are supported by Chapman and Greenaway (2006).

In considering how a charge should be made, Chapman and Greenaway (2006) consider that the critical point concerns capital market failure (p1063). This relates to the need for some students to fund their studies via a bank loan. However, an education loan is not necessarily attractive to a bank because, in the event of default, unlike car or house purchases, there is no underlying asset to sell. This would mean that some prospective students might not be able to enrol, in turn resulting in a loss of talent, and therefore a cost to society.

Chapman and Greenaway note that some countries have schemes for government-assisted loans and that whilst this addresses the capital market failure, several problems remain. First, students' access to loans is likely to be means tested, which may not be fair as there may not be equality of access to family resources. Consequently, higher education will remain unaffordable for some. Second, the costs of default will be high for the government (and therefore the public purse) as banks will put little effort into debt recovery if the government is guaranteeing the loan. Third, some students may be reluctant to borrow in case this has an impact on access to future borrowing (e.g. for house purchase). Chapman and Greenaway suggest that financing by income contingent loans (ICL), such as those introduced in Australia in 1989, avoids these problems. First, with a universal scheme there is no problem with intra-family finance issues. Second, given an efficient collection mechanism (via the tax system) the default issue for the government is largely eliminated. Last, because repayments depend upon ability to pay, student default concerns should be minimal. These views of the advantages of an ICL

system such as the Australian Higher Education Contribution Scheme (HECS) were put in similar terms by Biffel and Isaac (2002), who comment:

“...there is a strong case for changing fees based on the HECS concept on grounds of both equity and efficiency. Equity in that it imposes part of the cost of HE on those who...benefit from HE... Efficiency, arising from charging for the use of resources, using the tax collector as the repayment mechanism, thus reducing the potential of defaulting borrowers, providing greater incentive to students to graduate more quickly...there is a strong case for arguing that the HECS model, together with financial assistance in the form of grants and supplementary loans scheme subject to means test, seems to come close to the ideal funding formula.” (p.447)

Oosterbeek and Patrinos (2009) note an additional advantage of ICL systems in countries such as Australia and the UK, namely the education providers are state-regulated and therefore operate in cooperation with the tax authorities. However, they observe that few countries have implemented ICL schemes, limiting practical experience. Additionally, they question the extent to which ICL schemes affect access to higher education, especially in students from poor families:

“The only country for which this has been documented extensively is Australia.” (p.31)

[The Australian Model: Higher Education Contribution Scheme \(HECS\)](#)

Australian universities required students to pay fees until 1973, but most were in receipt of merit scholarships (Chapman, 2007). Fees were abolished in 1973 for all students. Over the course of the 1980s there was a significant increase in high school completion, resulting in growing queues of qualified prospective students, echoing the situation in Britain in the mid-1980s. The policy stance changed in 1986 with the introduction of the Higher Education Administration Charge (HEAC), although this was largely symbolic. Subsequently two cabinet ministers – those in charge of Finance and Higher Education – entered the debate in favour of fees on the grounds that the existing system was

regressive, leading to the introduction of HECS in 1989. This income contingent scheme was “...both radical and untested: there was no similar scheme internationally...” (Chapman, 2007, p.56).

The HECS system was maintained by the subsequent Conservative administration when it came to power in 1996. In 1997 charge levels were increased by 40 percent on average and the first income threshold at which graduates began to repay their loans was decreased significantly. This threshold reduction was, in turn, reversed in 2005. Given that, in differing guises, HECS has been in operation for over a quarter of a century, what evidence is there of its impact on access to higher education by lower-SES individuals? The question was addressed by Andrews (1999), who considered a range of studies and methodologies. Having observed that HECS raises the costs of higher education, Andrews noted that the work of Lesley and Brinkman (1987), aimed at determining the price responsiveness of students, found that low-income students demonstrated the highest price responsiveness. However, he identified an important difference in that their work, conducted in the USA, considered the up-front payment of fees without the deferral of HECS. He argues that the effects of HECS are more limited as:

“The higher discount rate on the future held by students, that is the more strongly they care about the present with less regard for the future, the less will HECS affect present behaviour to participate in higher education.”
(p.11)

Andrews also considered students’ rates of return from higher education by SES. He concluded that the impact of HECS on the private internal rate of return to education was limited and would not create barriers to access for the disadvantaged. He does allow for the possibility that:

“...students from low-SES backgrounds could be affected by a reduction in the financial return from higher education if the perceived rate of return from higher education was lower for them than for other groups.” (p.11)

This is possible, given the differentiated nature of participation in higher education by SES noted earlier in a UK context and also considered in Chapter 3. In essence, lower-SES students are much more likely to study at lower status institutions with lower lifetime earnings premia for their graduates. Their real rate of return from higher education is therefore likely to be lower than for higher-SES students.

Andrews also considered the evidence from attitudinal surveys, noting the work of Ramsey, Tranter, Charlton and Summer (1998) which examined the attitudes of students eligible to enter the University of South Australia through its special access scheme compared with a control group. HECS appeared to have no more of a negative impact on the enrolment decisions of access students than on the control group. Andrews also considers debt aversion and concludes that the SES background of groups had no strong or consistent effect on their level of debt aversion, and there was no support for the view that HECS deters individuals from low-SES backgrounds because of a general aversion to debt. He does allow for one possibility however:

“If there is an aversion to incurring a HECS debt it may relate to the nature of that debt in that it is necessarily tied to the purchase of educational services. The issue is with the nature of socio-economic groups’ attitudes towards higher education.” (p.17)

Andrews considers attitudes and values towards higher education, arguing that for lower SES students, more limited parental and general familial experience of higher education is a factor in lowering students’ enthusiasm for higher education. He cites Harris (1998) in considering the influence of peer groups on young people’s attitudes to HE, noting that the more disadvantaged a region, the less likely it is that people will come into contact

with the middle classes and be influenced by their values towards higher education. He concludes that whilst students from low-SES backgrounds are under-represented in higher education, this is a long-term concern unaffected by the introduction of HECS.

Cardak and Ryan (2006) found that Australian students from the most disadvantaged social backgrounds entered university at similar rates to those from the most advantaged backgrounds who had the same university entrance scores as them. Overall, they found that the most disadvantaged had much lower participation rates because they were less likely to achieve the entry requirements, and when they did, on average they achieved much lower scores. Among students with the same levels of achievement in Year 9, those from more advantaged backgrounds achieved substantially higher university entrance scores by the end of their schooling than students from poorer backgrounds. This supports Harrison and Waller's (2010) interpretation of Chowdry, Crawford, Dearden, Goodman and Vignole's (2008) work on relative performance by pupils at KS4 and KS5 in England. Chowdry et al suggest a measurable and significant effect of deprivation and education on whether those with the same GCSE results progress to higher education. Harrison and Waller contend that the fact that some of this effect disappears by KS5 is likely to be due to the motivational effect of applying to university and the aspiration that this fosters. An alternative, related, interpretation is that the habitus of more advantaged students is one in which university entrance is expected, and therefore later school work is undertaken with the understanding that university entrance standards must be achieved, issues considered more fully in Chapter 4.

Aungles, Buchanan, Karmel and MacLachlan (2002) review the work of Andrews and others and observe that many of the findings are theoretical. They counsel against over-reliance on attitudinal surveys, cited by Andrews, as actual behaviour may not necessarily

accord with attitudes. Nevertheless they conclude that there is no evidence that the introduction of HECS in 1989 had an effect on demand, and that there has been no adverse effect on the overall share of commencing students from a low-SES background.

The work of Andrews (1999) and Aungles et al (2002) is endorsed by Chapman and Ryan (2003). Subsequently, Chapman and Ryan (2005) examine the impact of HECS on 'marginal' decision-makers – those who “showed no strong preferences towards attending university after they completed their schooling”. Chapman and Ryan's reasoning is that if HECS acted as a deterrent to bright students whose school performance led them to attend university when they had not planned to, it might have affected the low-SES group more than higher-SES groups. Similar reasoning was used in selecting the participants in this case study (see Chapters 6 and 7). However, analysing data in respect of the relevant group Chapman and Ryan (2005) conclude that there is no effect on the proportion participating and that HECS did not act to deter the group of 'marginal' decision-makers.

There is much support for the view that the HECS changes have not reduced the proportion of students from lower-SES households in Australian higher education (for example Marks, 2009, Chapman and Tan, 2011). However, several notes of caution should be raised. Gale and Tranter (2011) argue in an Australian context that a simple measure of participation is inadequate as higher education is not homogenous:

“Inequalities persisted as the binary system saw low-SES students clustered in the CAEs (colleges of advanced education), newer universities and less prestigious disciplines...while students from high socio-economic backgrounds dominated the established universities and professional disciplines...Any increase in equity that might have occurred had been effectively diluted within a stratified higher education system”. (pp.34-5)

This is particularly relevant in a UK context given the highly differentiated nature of participation in UK higher education, dependent upon SES as observed by Ainley (2014) and others, and considered more fully in Chapters 4 and 5 of this thesis. Whilst concluding that the HECS changes did not affect participation by lower-SES students, Andrews (1999) observes that across the OECD Countries “...it is only when the supply of students from higher-SES groups has been exhausted that the share of students from low-SES backgrounds will rise” (p.5). Archer (1981) argues that “...there must always be a group of last entry...and this, empirically, comes from the lower socio-economic categories” (p.17). This is referred to by Kivinen, Ahola and Hedman (2001) who consider ‘last entry’, arguing that when a person from a family with few cultural resources finally achieves a level of education previously giving the children of well-educated parents a relative competitive advantage, its value has by then been reduced.

In a Sydney-based study Wright (2007) directly challenges the view that HECS has established a system characterised by equity of access:

“Even though the number of students participating in university has increased...this is a result of the higher number of places offered. The proportion of students from a higher socio-economic area has increased more than the proportion of students from a lower socio-economic area...”
(p.22)

Wright’s concerns raise similar issues to those identified in an assessment of participants in Finland undertaken by Kivinen et al (2001). They argue that the participation ratio and measures of distributional outcome are poor measures of equity because they fail:

“...to take changes in marginal distributions into consideration, or in other words, the increase in higher education on the one hand, and such changes as the rise in the educational attainment of the general population on the other”. (p.173)

A key criticism, which would also apply to Australian assessments of equity in participation, is that differences are only measured amongst *participants*. Kivinen et al argue strongly that:

“...the other side of the coin, non-participation, cannot be left out of the examination. The odds ratio accounts for both...Measuring the change by the odds ratio reveals how much more the offspring of the highly educated benefit from the expansion...” (p.174)

Kivinen et al conclude that the different measures have the potential to act differently depending on the changes in marginal distribution. Echoing Gale and Tranter’s point about the nature of participation being relevant, Kivinen et al note that during a period of expansion in participation in Finland:

“...the narrowing of the difference in participation between the groups is...surprisingly low... we can see that as the number of educational institutions increases, the system’s internal differences become increasingly significant in terms of access. As opposed to mere acceptance to university, the questions of which university one is accepted to and to which department one applies and is accepted have become increasingly important.” (p.170)

This has parallels in the UK, where Ainley (1994) and others have highlighted the increasing stratification of the higher education system, considered in more detail in Chapter 3. To date no investigation of the impact of HECS has examined the relative odds of participation by SES, or changes in the choice of institution by SES. Therefore, even though there is support in the literature for the notion that HECS has had (at most) a minimal impact on participation by lower-SES students, examination of the nature of post-HECS participation by students from this group is limited.

Wider Financial Issues

In examining student loans across Europe, Guille (2002) observes the importance of students’ living conditions. She notes that in northern Europe c.80 percent of students live

away from home, whereas in southern Europe c.80 percent of students live with parents. She considers student support schemes to be difficult to compare, and that differences reflect students' differing behaviour and social roles: the more that students live independently, the more they receive help and are considered to be young citizens investing in their future. She concludes that all students should be eligible for loans in order to promote private responsibility and that loans should be sufficient to cover all living costs, otherwise students from poor families would be disadvantaged because they would be obliged to work. As noted in Chapter 7, employment during study was an issue for case study participants. In England, as noted earlier in this chapter, the Labour administration ignored the Dearing Committee recommendations in respect of student living costs. Whilst the Coalition's response to the Browne Report made provision for maintenance grants for less well-off students, in addition to maintenance loans, in 2015 the newly-elected Conservative Government chose to abolish maintenance grants, converting the grant entitlement to a loan.

Schwarz and Rehburg (2004) argue that in discussion student fees are overemphasised and debate is narrowly-framed. Echoing Guille (2002) they seek to consider the more complex issue of overall study costs and financing. They suggest that in many countries the issue of students' living costs is neglected, demonstrating that fees are a small part of the costs students have to bear in all countries. Equally, Schwarz and Rehburg demonstrate that on a country-by-country basis the maximum extent of state grants and loans is both highly variable and a significant factor. They show that a comparison across Europe reveals that the support rate (i.e. the proportion of students receiving state aid) shows huge variations. As will be seen from Chapter 7, the issue of living costs whilst studying was significant for some case study participants.

CHAPTER 3: PARTICIPATION AND ACCESS IN ENGLISH HIGHER EDUCATION

Introduction

Brown and Carasso (2013) assert that it is “well established” that expansion of English higher education since the 1980s has led to “virtually no reduction in the disparities in participation between students from different socio-economic backgrounds” (p.136). Analysis of the theoretical underpinnings to this thesis in Chapter 4 shows this to be a contested view. Brown and Carasso assesses opinion on the issue and suggest differential participation has two components:

“...a general problem of aggregate numbers of students from disadvantaged areas participating in higher education (‘widening participation’), and a specific problem of students from disadvantaged areas participating in highly-selective institutions (‘fair access’).” (pp.136-7)

This chapter considers the background to widening participation and fair access.

The Level of Participation in Higher Education

The preceding chapter considered the means by which English higher education has developed and been funded, and the changing nature and size of institutions delivering undergraduate provision. This chapter considers changes in the level and nature of participation accompanying these sectoral shifts.

Reporting of historical student data should be straightforward in a developed country such as the UK. However, Collini (2012) notes “...all such figures are disputable; even now matters of definition dog the attempt to produce agreed statistics” (p.30). The objective was to report numbers of students studying full-time on undergraduate programmes in English institutions, whether in universities or colleges of higher or further education.

Unfortunately the available information does not permit researchers to set out information from public sources showing student data for:

- i. English institutions reported separately from the UK as a whole; and
- ii. colleges reported separately from universities.

Appendix A sets out statistics in respect of undergraduate full-time study at UK universities for a period of a little over a century. Data are from several sources including the University Grants Committee and the Robbins Report (1963). The reliability of the information is questionable as data are inconsistent. Despite this, there are several points to note:

- i. There was significant growth in students in the immediate aftermath of the First World War, with a doubling in 1919/20 compared with 1913/14;
- ii. There was steady growth in the inter-war years with numbers nearly doubled again at the outbreak of the Second World War;
- iii. After the Second World War there was an increase of approximately 50 percent in 1946/47 reflecting participation by ex-servicemen and this trend continued so that numbers grew significantly over the five post-war years, and more modestly in the 1950s;
- iv. Student numbers doubled through the 1960s and then continued to grow at a relatively modest rate until the late 1980s; and
- v. The period from the late 1980s onwards has seen the most significant growth in UK higher education.

The Nature of Participation

The Robbins Report (1963) shows data regarding participation in HE for the period up to 1962. The Report shows changes in the ages at which people stay in full-time education, the proportion of those continuing who achieve minimum entry criteria for admission into higher education institutions, and who actually entered HE. Some data are available cross-referred by parental occupation or parental educational experience. A key consideration is that not everyone stayed on in full-time post-compulsory education, and therefore the proportion of the age cohort who might sit examinations qualifying them (if successful) for university entrance was limited – see Table 3.1. As noted in Chapter 2, this has parallels in the work of Boudon (1974), considered more fully in Chapter 4, concerning the secondary effects of social stratification resulting from educational choices made by young people at transition (or “branching”) points in their careers.

Table 3.1: The percentage of young people of various ages receiving full-time education in Great Britain.

	1870	1902	1938	1962
10 year olds	40	100	100	100
14 year olds	2	9	38	100
17 year olds	1	2	4	15
19 year olds	1	1	2	7

Source: Robbins Report, Table 1

Given these low levels of staying on into post-16 education and subsequent achievement of minimum university entrance qualifications, the modest percentages of the age group entering full-time higher education set out in Table 3.2 are unsurprising.

Table 3.2: Percentage of the age group entering full-time higher education in Great Britain.

Year	PERCENTAGE			
	University	Teacher Training	Further Education	All HE
1900	0.8	0.4	Nil	1.2
1924	1.5	1.0	0.2	2.7
1938	1.7	0.7	.03	2.7
1954	3.2	2.0	0.6	5.8
1962	4.0	2.5	2.0	8.5

Source: Robbins Report, Table 4

For 1962 the Robbins Report provides further analysis:

Table 3.3: Percentage of age group entering full-time higher education by gender in Great Britain in 1962.

Establishment	Men	Women	All
University	5.6	2.5	4.0
Teacher training	1.3	3.8	2.5
Further education	2.9	1.0	2.0
All	9.8	7.3	8.5

Source: Robbins Report, Table 5

This demonstrates a bias in favour of male entry to higher education overall, but not in the case of teacher training.

The Robbins Report goes on to detail information in respect of those obtaining minimum university entrance qualifications, that is two A-level passes.

Table 3.4: Percentages of the age group obtaining minimum university entrance qualifications.

Year	PERCENTAGE		
	University entrance qualifications as % of age group	University entrants as % of age group	University entrants as % of those with minimum university entrance qualifications
1954	4.3	3.2	73
1956	4.8	3.5	74
1958	5.7	4.1	72
1960	6.6	4.1	62
1962	n/a	4.0	n/a

Source: Robbins Report, Table 2

Thus a small (and increasing) percentage of each cohort gained minimum university entrance qualifications, and in the 1950s a high proportion (>70%) of those qualified actually studied at university. By 1960 there was a small increase in those achieving the minimum standards, accompanied by a drop in the proportion of those qualified who entered university. Supply side constraints – the limited number of university places – forms part of the answer to this decrease in the proportion of those qualified who entered university, although demand factors may also have been relevant. A speculative explanation is that children whose education had been positively affected by reforms such as the 1944 Education Act would now be sitting A-levels. The effect of these reforms might have boosted staying on rates amongst more children of unskilled and semi-skilled workers who might be more likely to qualify for university entrance, but less likely to choose to study at university. This would be consistent with Boudon’s (1974) theories of decision-making at “branching points”. However, no data are available to support this

conjecture. Bennett, Glennerster and Nevison (1992) suggest that working-class young people may have a different perception of the risk of entering higher education due to lack of knowledge of HE (p.140). Williams and Gordon (1981) suggest that working-class students required a better return on HE if they are to continue their studies, and it might be reasonable to regard this as a “risk premium” (p.220).

Assessing future demand for higher education, the Robbins Report, in attempting “...to throw light on factors affecting the achievement of school children and their entry to higher education” (para 139) considers father’s occupation (as an indicator of social class) and prior educational experience. Participation analysed by father’s occupation is set out in Table 3.5.

Table 3.5: Percentage of children born in 1940/1 reaching full-time higher education by father’s occupation

Father’s occupation	PERCENTAGE				Numbers (=100%)
	FT higher education		Not IN FT HE	All children	
	Degree-Level	Other			
<u>Non-manual:</u>					
- Higher profession	33	12	55	100	15,000
- Managerial & Other professional	11	8	81	100	87,000
- Clerical	6	4	90	100	38,000
<u>Manual:</u>					
- Skilled	2	2	96	100	248,000
- Semi- and un-skilled	1	1	98	100	137,000
Total Number	23,130	16,610	485,260		525,000
Percentage	4.4%	3.2%	92.4%		100%

Source: Robbins Report, Table 21. Note: excludes those whose fathers’ occupations were not known and whose fathers were unoccupied or dead.

Children of fathers with non-manual occupations were much more likely to progress to full-time degree level higher education. However, in absolute terms there were as many offspring of skilled manual workers in full-time degree-level higher education as those of higher professional fathers.

Robbins investigates the influence of parental – *specifically paternal* – experience of education. The results are set out in Table 3.6:

Table 3.6: Percentage of children born in 1940/41 reaching full-time higher education analysed by father’s age on completing full-time education.

Father’s age on completing full-time education	PERCENTAGE				Numbers (=100%)
	Full-time higher education		No FT HE	All children	
	Degree-level	Other			
18 or over	32	11	57	100	22,000
16 or 17	14	7	79	100	41,000
Under 16	2	3	95	100	491,000
					554,000

Source: Robbins Report, Table 22 Note: excludes those whose fathers’ ages for completing full-time education were not known.

There is close similarity between the percentage entering full-time degree level higher education whose fathers left school at 18 or older (32 percent) and those whose fathers have a higher professional occupation (33 percent). Robbins notes “...a very important influence from the educational background of the parents (although this is, of course, related to their social class or occupation)” (para 141, p.51). The Report notes that just as since the Second World War more children stayed on at school for the full period of secondary education (see Table 2.1), so in turn demand for higher education will increase when more of their children come to the end of their schooling. Robbins considers the potential quality of these new entrants to higher education, noting “... impressive

evidence that large numbers of able young people do not at present enter higher education” (para 141, p.52).

Table 3.7: Analysis of leavers from maintained grammar schools by father’s occupation

Father’s Occupation	Percentage of all leavers who have 2+ A-levels	Percentage of all leavers who leave aged 18+	Percentage of leavers aged 18+ who have 2+ A-levels
Professional/managerial	37	46	67
Clerical	26	32	64
Skilled manual	22	29	65
Semi – and un – skilled	11	17	56
All children	24	31	65

Source: Robbins Report, Table 23 (extract, with amended descriptors to aid clarity)

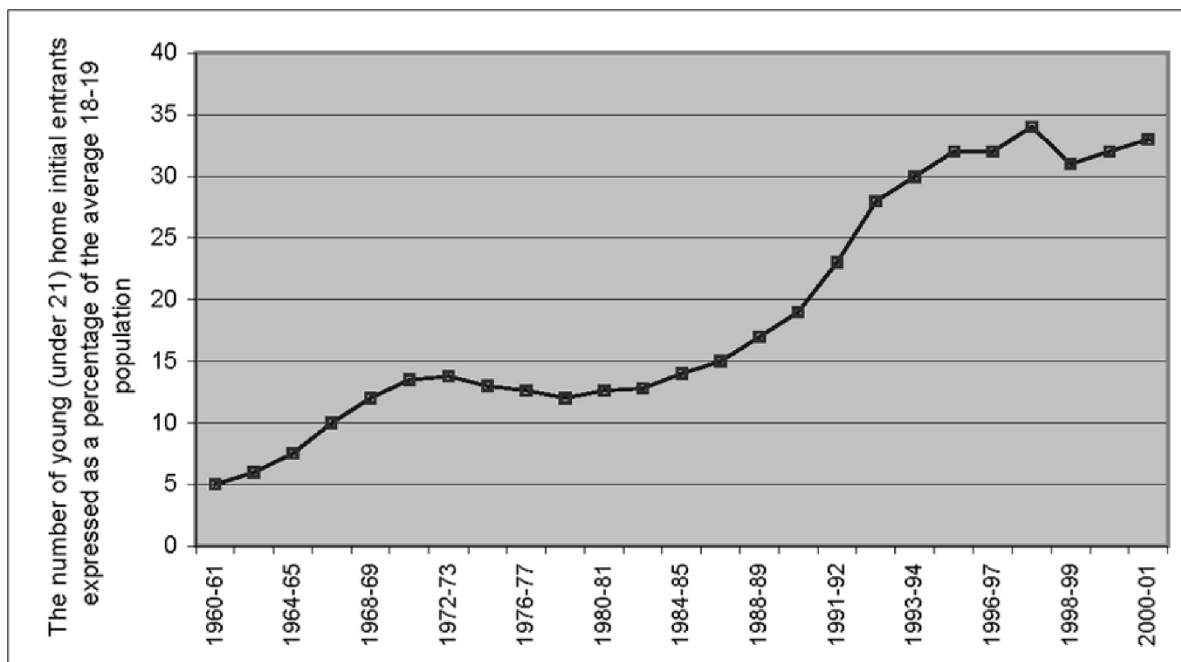
Citing data shown in Table 3.7, the Robbins Report notes that:

“...of grammar schools leavers with a given measured ability at the age of eleven, the proportion obtaining the qualifications for entry to higher education varies widely according to their social background. Children of manual workers are on average much less successful than children of the same ability in other social groups. This is largely because they leave school earlier...the proportion of the children of manual workers who stay on to [age 18] is smaller than the proportion of middle-class children who actually achieve two passes at A-level. But...those children who do stay on are on average as successful as children of the same ability in other social groups”. (para 141, pp.52-53)

Here “as successful” needs qualification. Although 56 percent of the children of semi- and un-skilled fathers staying on to 18 achieve two or more A-levels, this is lower than for other classification groups who stay on to the age of 18 – the minimum is 64 percent for those whose fathers are in clerical occupations. Bekhradnia (2003) notes this discrepancy in attainment between those of differing social classes who stay on to take A-levels has now largely been eliminated (see later in this chapter).

Figure 3.1 shows changes in the Age Participation Index (API) from the Robbins Report onwards. Greenaway and Haynes (2000) state that expansions in participation have been supply-led, resulting from changed government policy. This was the case throughout the 1960s as a result of changes underway before Robbins, those resulting from the Report and those stemming from the subsequent creation of the polytechnics. Decreasing or static participation from the early-1970s to the mid-1980s, noted in Chapter 2, was driven by concerns about public finance and the cost to the Treasury of higher education.

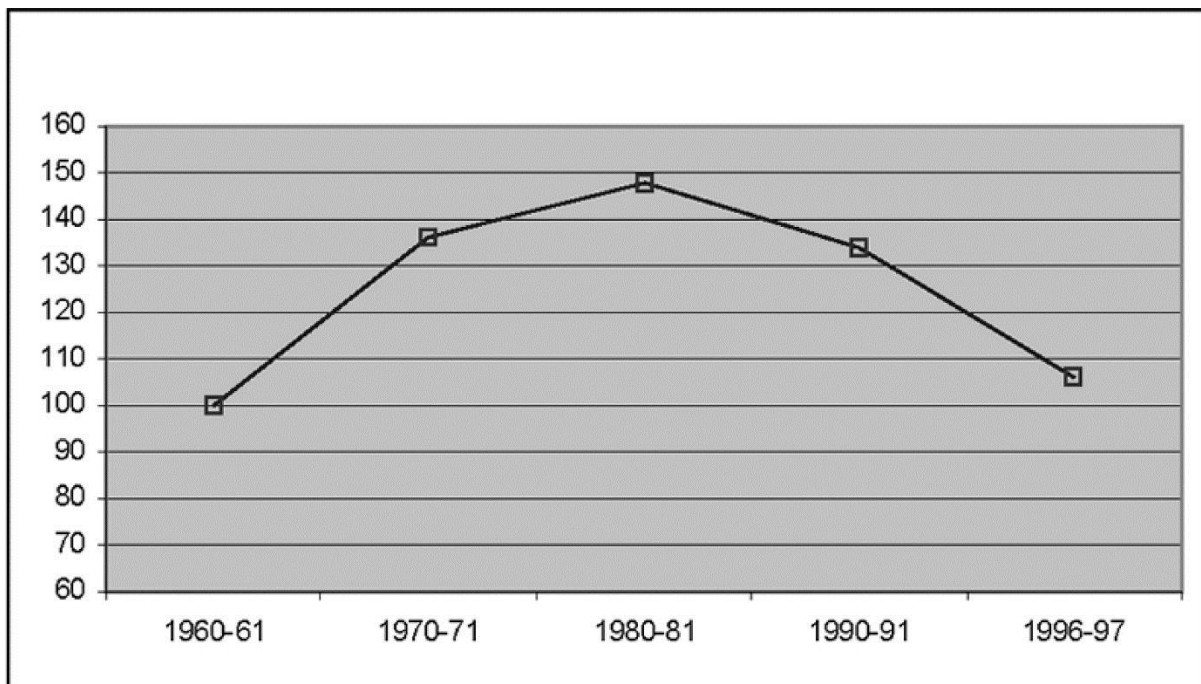
Figure 3.1: Higher Education Age Participation Index (API), 1961–2001: GB institutions



Sources: Greenaway and Haynes (2000) until 1996–97 and DfES for 1997–97 to 2000–01. (Mayhew et al (2004))

These concerns were at the forefront of the Conservative Government’s considerations from 1979 to the mid-1980s, highlighted by Figure 3.2 which shows 1980/1 as the peak year for resourcing per student.

Figure 3.2: Unit of Resource 1960–61 to 1996–97 (index: 1960–61 = 100)

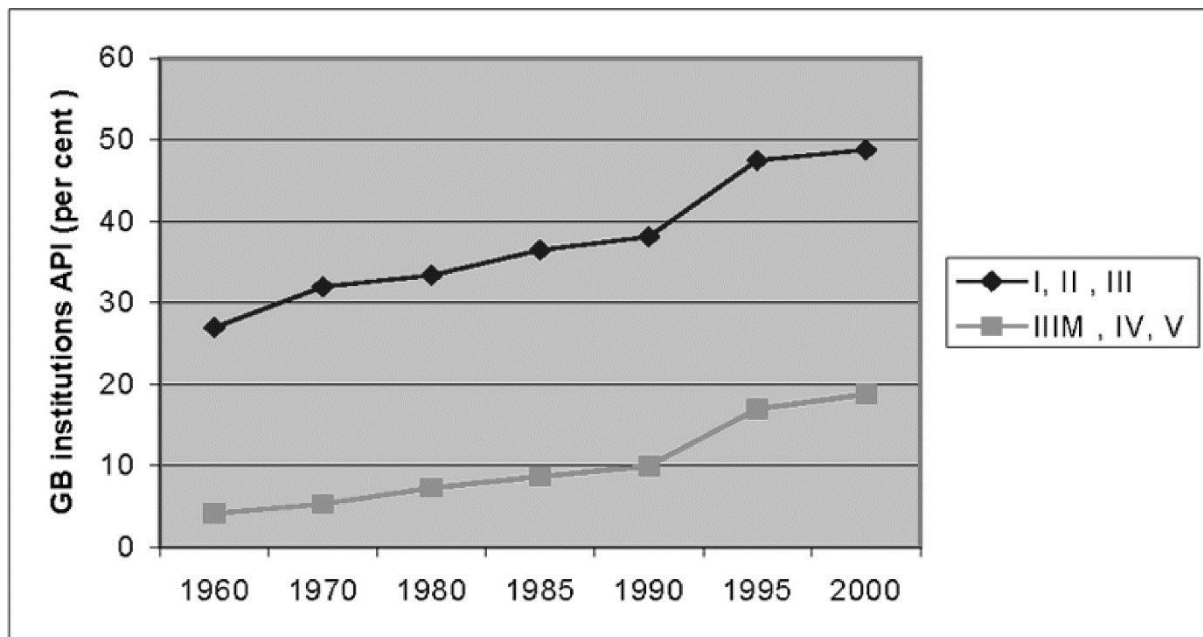


Notes: The unit of resource is defined as total government spending in real terms on higher education divided by the number of full time equivalent students enrolled.

Source: *Annual Abstract of Statistics*, Universities UK (2001).

Figure 3.3 shows the API by social class from 1960 to 2000. The 1960s expansion in participation, despite changes in student financial support following the Anderson Report, was a largely middle-class phenomenon demonstrated by the greater absolute percentage increase in Social Class I, II & III participation from 1960 to 1970 than for Social Classes IIIIM, IV & V. Whilst there is little difference between the two groups from 1970 to 1990, and in terms of absolute change this remains the case through to 2000, it is striking that for Social Classes IIIIM, IV & V the API almost doubles between 1990 and 2000. Unlike the expansion of the 1960s, the dramatic changes from the late-1980s to the early-1990s had a pronounced impact on participation by those from lower social classes, although as noted later in this chapter this was mainly at lower-status institutions (Boliver, 2013).

Figure 3.3: Higher Education Entrants by Social Class



Sources: *The Future of Higher Education*, DfES White Paper, 2003; Cameron & Heckman (2001).

A question unanswered in Chapter 2 is why the Conservative administration allowed rapid expansion in participation from the late-1980s to the early-1990s – was widening participation by those from lower social classes a government policy objective? Smith and Bocock (1999) support this conclusion. First, they note the 1987 White Paper expressed a desire for increased admissions from students not studying for A-levels, with widening participation seen as both desirable in its own right and as a means to achieve cost-efficient expansion of higher education. Second, when the 1989 increases in tuition fees and related reductions in block grants to institutions were made, the intention was to incentivise institutions to recruit additional students. The policy led many institutions, particularly polytechnics, to develop stronger links with FE colleges, thus widening participation amongst those from lower socio-economic classes.

Watson and Bowden (1999) are equivocal, noting that government policy never became a “single coherent programme”. Jenkins (1995) observes that Margaret Thatcher “appeared to feel it had all been an accident, rather than a grand design” (p.154). Watson

and Bowden conclude, on balance, that there is some consistency throughout Conservative stewardship, such as the economic imperative to reduce unit costs and enthusiasm for greater competition between institutions.

Widening Participation Post-Dearing

As Tight (2009) observes, the policies of the New Labour administration were not initially radically different from the previous Conservative government, as evidenced by cross-party cooperation in respect of the establishment of the Dearing Committee. In the next parliament the 2003 White Paper, *The Future of Higher Education* (Department for Education and Skills 2003) announced changes including above-inflation increases in fees and funding, with the reintroduction of grants for those from lower-income families. Continuing to expand access was a key theme of the White Paper, and of subsequent policy developments, as indicated by the plethora of official and semi-official reports investigating widening participation listed here:

- *Widening Participation and Fair Access: An Overview of the Evidence* (Bekhradnia, 2003, Higher Education Policy Initiative);
- *Young participation in higher education 2005/03*, HEFCE;
- *Review of widening participation research: addressing the barriers to participation in higher education* – a report for HEFCE by the University of York, Higher Education Academy and the Institute for Access Studies (2006);
- *Full-time Young Participation by Socio-Economic Class: A New Widening Participation Measure in Higher Education* (Kelly and Cook, 2007);
- *Widening Participation in Higher Education* (NAO, 2008);
- *Widening Participation in Higher Education: A Quantitative Analysis* (Vignoles, Machin, McNally and Goodman for Economic & Social Research Council, 2008);

- *Widening Participation in Higher Education HC 226* (House of Commons – Public Accounts Committee, 2009);
- *Trends in young participation in higher education: core results for England* (HEFCE, 2010);
- *Widening Participation in Higher Education: Analysis using Linked Administrative Data* (Chowdry and Crawford, Dearden, Goodman and Vignoles for the Institute of Fiscal Studies, Economic & Social Research Council, 2010); and
- *Social class and higher education: a synthesis of research* (Stevenson and Laing, 2010).

David, Parry, Vignoles, Hayward, Williams, Crozier, Hockings and Fuller (2008) consider what insights are provided by this body of work, and question:

“...whether individuals from poorer backgrounds or from particular ethnic minority groups are still less likely to attend higher education if one allows for their prior educational achievement... A finding that participation rates are similar among equally qualified individuals, regardless of their social or ethnic background, would suggest that gaps in participation rates are caused by inequalities in schools”. (p.12)

The papers quoted demonstrate that views on participation, and the answer to David et al’s question, shifted as more data became available. Bekhradnia (2003) notes that the absolute gap in participation between the higher and lower social groups widened; in 1970 some 32 percent of the higher social groups participated compared with 5 percent of the lower social groups, an absolute difference of 27 percent, compared with 2000 when 48 percent of higher social groups participated compared with 18 percent of lower social groups, a gap of 30 percentage points (para 3). Bekhradnia counters this by considering the ratio of the participation rates for the upper and lower social groups and noting a pronounced shift. On the previously-quoted figures, in 1970 those in higher

social groups were more than 6 times more likely to participate in higher education than those in lower social groups, whereas by 2000 this ratio had reduced to less than 3 times (para 4). This is similar to the approach taken by Kivinen et al (2001), considered in Chapter 2.

Bekhradnia (2003) goes on to analyse the reasons behind the observed differences in participation by social class. Echoing Robbins, Bekhradnia examines the difference in post-16 participation by social class and concludes that participation rates are lower in lower social groups, but that once they have achieved the relevant A-level qualifications at 18 students from all social groups are equally likely to participate in higher education. This result is somewhat different from findings by Robbins forty years earlier, as disparities in participation for those completing A-level qualifications have largely been eliminated. Bekhradnia concludes that achievement in school “...at A-level in particular” is the key factor in participation (para 8). However, Bekhradnia’s reasoning is open to question. As considered later in this chapter, it is possible that social class is being reproduced “under the cloak of academic neutrality” (Naidoo, 2004) because much A-level attainment is heavily influenced by social class, both in terms of achievement from 11 to 16, and propensity to stay on to study A-levels. Bekhradnia’s analysis identifies greater reduction in post-16 participation amongst those from lower classes, but fails to investigate the underlying reasons (para 8).

HEFCE (2005) identifies a key issue in examining the impact of the introduction of £1,000 fees in 1997 on the levels of participation. Its report concludes that changes in participation at this time were driven by changes in cohort size and – crucially – annual increases in the proportion of the cohort gaining at least 5 GCSEs at grades A*-C “...often regarded as a pre-cursor for A-levels” (pp.25-26). This suggests that differential

achievement of 5 GCSEs at grades A*-C might reasonably explain the drop in post-16 participation amongst those from lower social classes. Subsequent HEFCE research (2010) investigating the “substantial, sustained and materially significant participation increases for the most disadvantaged areas across the 04/05 to 09/10 cohorts” (para 28) supports this conclusion, commenting:

“...rapid increases in HE participation recorded since the mid-2000s for young people living in disadvantaged areas are supported by changes in the GCSE attainment of the matching cohorts of young people...” (para 31)

However, the analysis does not identify reasons for these changes in participation rates, noting the potential influence of changes in other possible causal factors such as spending levels in respect of pre- and post-16 education, and the introduction of the educational maintenance allowance (EMA).

Chowdry et al (2010) note that the impact of socio-economic status on HE participation rates is reduced by controlling for the effects of prior educational attainment, thus supporting Bekhradnia’s conclusion. However, they argue that “...socio-economic disadvantage has already had an impact on academic outcomes at the age of 11 and that this disadvantage explains a significant proportion of the gap in HE participation...” (pp.14-15). They add:

“...an important part of the HE participation story is what happens to the academic trajectories of the most disadvantaged students between the ages of 11 and 16 (and consequently whether they choose to stay on beyond compulsory schooling)”. (p.16)

Noble and Davies (2009) dispute the view of a differential in participation with its origins rooted in issues of social class. Whilst much of their argument relates to the theoretical underpinnings of social class as a factor in educational progression considered in Chapter 4, their arguments are considered here because they relate

directly to social class and differentials in participation. In considering cultural capital as a construct in the analysis of inequality in higher education Noble and Davies assert, based on examination of the work of others, that once students' prior attainment is factored in:

“...there is no significant association between participation in higher education and variation in parental education or occupation... It might therefore be inferred that there is no direct association between standard measures of social class differences and participation in higher education: the effects all work through schooling. If this were so then there would be no direct cultural capital effect on the likelihood of participating in education” (pp.591-2)

This reflects the earlier debate concerning correlation between GCSE and/or A-level performance and higher education participation. Data considered in Table 3.8 suggest that there is not a simple relationship between school attainment at 16, staying on and higher education participation. Nevertheless, Noble and Davies cite three papers in support of their assertion – Chowdry et al (2008), Gorard (2008) and Davies, Mangan and Hughes (2009) – concluding that:

“...after taking account of students' school attainments, there is no observable effect of parents' occupation and education on the likelihood of participation in higher education... it appears that there is no direct effect of social class ... Given the close association between social class and school attainment this is far from suggesting that cultural capital had no role in inequalities in participation in higher education. At face value it does suggest that these inequalities are generated through schooling and there is no additional effect at the point at which enrolments in higher education are directly considered and effected.” (p.593)

Harrison and Waller (2010) undertake a rebuttal of Noble and Davies' paper by undertaking their own analysis of the three cited works, suggesting that “... on closer inspection, these papers provide a more complex and nuanced picture” (p4). Harrison and Waller's approach is to consider each paper in turn.

Chowdry et al (2008) consider an Institute of Fiscal Studies report connecting school and HE datasets. Their principal finding was that educational attainment at 18 explains most variation in higher education progression rates. However, Harrison and Waller identify a small but significant effect for both household deprivation and local average educational level, and speculate that initial decisions about higher education participation are taken “either consciously or by default” *before* young people enter post-compulsory education (p.5). Consequently, many young people from lower socio-economic groups do not progress to Level 3 (A-level equivalent) study and therefore bar themselves from higher education. They also assert that many others make their choice about higher education between Key Stage 4 (KS4) – GCSE at age 16 and Key Stage 5 (KS5) – A-level equivalent at age 18. Therefore, if the concern is with how demand for higher education is constructed there needs to be a focus on attainment up to the point when decisions are made. Using this argument Harrison and Waller criticise Chowdry et al’s focus on the explanatory power of KS5 results, arguing that achievement at KS4 is more relevant. Persuasively, they reverse Chowdry et al’s analysis, showing that those progressing to higher education did better at KS5 even after KS4 attainment was controlled for, arguing that this is likely to be partly due to the motivational effect of applying to university, and the aspiration this fosters (p.6).

As noted in Chapter 2, Cardak and Ryan (2006) found that in Australia students from the most disadvantaged social backgrounds entered university at similar rates to those from the most advantaged backgrounds who had the same university entrance scores. However, they found that among students with the same levels of achievement in Year 9, by the end of their schooling those from more advantaged backgrounds achieved substantially higher university entrance scores. This may lend support to Harrison and

Waller's argument. An additional interpretation is that the habitus of more advantaged students is one in which university entrance is expected, and later school work is undertaken with the understanding, absent in those from poorer backgrounds, that university entrance standards *must* be achieved.

In considering the paper by Davies et al (2009), Harrison and Waller note their focus was a group of young people who were 'unsure' regarding progression to higher education. They find that parental education and household income were not significant predictors for this uncertainty. However, and in Harrison and Waller's view crucially, one of the significant negative predictors for being unsure was attendance at an independent school, evidence for a social class effect on decision-making (p.6).

Reviewing Gorard (2008), Harrison and Waller note that the paper focuses primarily on measuring and analysing figures for progression to higher education, particularly in the context of social class. They argue that Gorard presents no new data on the topic, and a social class difference in progression continues once results at 18 are held constant (pp.6-7).

Harrison and Waller conclude that whilst all three papers show the primary role of attainment in influencing whether suitably qualified young people seek higher education, they are equivocal about the role of parental occupation or education. They note that none of the papers addresses the question of whether the desire to progress works to enhance motivation and performance during Level 3 study. They observe, with approval (p.16), links to the concept of 'horizons for action' (Hodkinson, 1995) considered in Chapter 8.

Considering the methodology employed by Noble and Davies, Harrison and Waller argue that by restricting their sample to young people studying for A-levels they are excluding the 20 percent of young HE entrants with Level 3 vocational qualifications – often pursued by those from lower socio-economic groups. Furthermore, they note that in Noble and Davies’ study the largest school, with the lowest proportion of young people from professional or managerial households, also had the lowest response rate, potentially introducing sampling bias.

It appears that Harrison and Waller provide a sufficient rebuttal of the arguments by Noble and Davies that there is no direct effect of social class on the likelihood of participation, by implication supporting Hatcher’s (1998) view of class-based inequalities in education set out in Chapter 4.

The impact of £9,000 fees

There were two assessments of the impact of higher fees on the numbers entering HE in 2012. These preliminary assessments were based on UCAS applications data. The first was undertaken by UCAS itself (UCAS, 2012). The key findings are:

- i. The application rate of 18-year-olds from England fell by about one percentage point in 2012, against a recent trend of annual increases of about the same magnitude. In Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales applications to courses in their own countries (where tuition fees are similar to 2011) have “broadly continued” their recent trends;
- ii. There had been a substantial fall in application rates for English people in age groups older than age 18, and this decline is not seen in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales; and

- iii. Application rates for young people from more advantaged backgrounds fell by more between 2011 and 2012 than those from less advantaged backgrounds.

The second assessment of 2012 applications was by the Independent Commission on Fees (ICF)(2012). Although also based upon UCAS data there are key differences:

- i. The ICF report utilised information at the major application cut-off point in mid-January 2012. The analysis therefore excludes consideration of “late” applicants. Many applications for art and design courses were formerly made via the “Route B” application route with a later deadline. The case study institution still receives significant numbers of “late” applications;
- ii. The ICF report makes many comparisons with 2010 rather than 2011. UCAS find no indication that application rates in 2011 were affected by the announcement of changes for 2012 but the ICF report notes their approach may give a different perspective; and
- iii. The ICF report has taken 18 and 19 year olds together as a single “young” group in order to achieve consistency with the BIS measure of “young people” accessing HE. In contrast the UCAS report finds that in terms of responses to the 2012 changes 18 year olds and 19 year olds behave as separate groups.

Evaluation

It is somewhat surprising that the UCAS and ICF reports both concentrated on trends in participation without examining the potential impact on participation of underlying factors in any detail. Previous work on changes in the English HE fees regime (HEFCE, 2005) examined change in GCSE performance as well as demographic shifts in seeking to assess the impact of fees. The HEFCE conclusion was that there was a strong relationship between HE participation, changes in cohort size and GCSE performance, although

subsequent HEFCE work (2010) notes a more complex relationship between GCSE performance and HE participation. A review of the data suggests that if the originally postulated linkage between improved GCSE performance held (HEFCE, 2005) then there should have been a much more significant increase in 18 year old HE participation between 2009 and 2012, as GCSE performance – gaining at least 5 GCSEs at A*-C – improved by over 16 percentage points for these cohorts but HE participation increased by only 2 percentage points. The evidence from Table 3.8 does not support a simple relationship between improved GCSE performance and HE participation, bringing into question the conclusions of HEFCE’s earlier work (HEFCE, 2005) and introducing additional uncertainty into the assessment of the impact of £9,000 fees on HE participation.

Table 3.8: Changes in cohort HE application rates and GCSE performance.

	Application rates England		Cohort GCSE results 5 A-C%
	18yr olds	19yr olds	
2008	29%	10%	57.3%
2009	30%	11%	59.9%
2010	33%	12%	64.4%
2011	34%	13%	69.8%
2012	32%	11%	76.1%

Source: UCAS (2012) Figs 21-24, DCSF SFR 34/2009, DFE SFR 03/2012

Other work for the Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI) (Bekhradnia, 2007) is dogmatic in stating that differences in school achievement determine participation in higher education. This concludes that social class is not the issue except in so far as it relates to differences in school achievement. Moreover, it concludes that the proportion

of young people taking A-levels is the major factor in influencing the numbers that go on to higher education, partly because of the numerical dominance of A-levels as the qualification used to secure entry into higher education, and partly because of the much lower rates of progression to HE by those studying for vocational Level 3 qualifications. However, subsequent work (Coleman and Bekhradnia, 2011) introduces doubt regarding the importance of A-levels as a determinant of HE participation:

“... whereas in the past higher education numbers went hand-in-hand with A-level numbers, in recent years the rate of increase in higher education entry has been about twice that of the number of A-level passes”.
(paragraph 9)

Coleman and Bekhradnia conclude that this discrepancy is as a result of an increase in applications by those without UCAS tariff points. This ignores the possible impact of applicants with BTEC qualifications which are becoming more significant (UCAS, 2014, Fig.57). There are other reasons for questioning Coleman and Bekhradnia’s view of the dominance of A-levels in determining HE participation. Most significant is their view that vocational qualifications are of limited importance. This is based on HEFCE’s 2007 work on BTEC courses as pathways to higher education. However, this report is based upon those starting BTEC qualifications in 2002. It notes only 24% of qualifying BTEC students progressing on to three- year degree programmes with a further 17% progressing on to other undergraduate-level programmes, mostly HNCs and HNDs. However, this data is no longer current and the case study institution’s experience is that there is significant progression to HE from BTEC diplomas. This is supported by the recent data UCAS (2014) (Fig.57-59, pp. 58-60).

Reverting to the issue of the impact of GCSEs, HEPI’s more recent work considering HE participation (Coleman and Bekhradnia, 2011) examines the issue and identifies high

non-progression by pupils with good GCSE results as a key source of disparity in the expected levels of demand for HE.

Table 3.9: Non progression to higher education by number of GCSEs

GCSEs (A*-C) at 16	% not in HE by 19
0	99%
1-4	91%
5	79%
6	73%
7	65%
8	55%
9	38%
10+	26%
Total	69%

Source: DFE matched administration data, 2003-04

A major factor in this non-progression to HE is that many of those concerned do not progress to Level 3, as shown in Table 3.10.

Table 3.10: Non progression to Level 3 from GCSE by number of GCSEs

GCSEs (A*-C) at 16	% not progressing to Level 3
0	96%
1-4	76%
5	56%
6	50%
7	40%
8	29%
9	16%
10+	10%
Total	51%

Source: DFE matched data 2009.

It seems likely that the relationship between improved GCSE performance and participation in HE is moderated by changes in staying on rates for 16 year-olds. Despite questions about the correlation between GCSE performance and subsequent HE participation, Croll and Attwood (2013) conclude that differences in school-level attainment, associated with social background, are the most important explanation for social background differences in university participation. Their view is supported by Callender (2014), Vignoles (2013) amongst others. Croll and Attwood note that despite increases in participation by traditionally under-represented groups, in the case of those from lower socio-economic groups relatively little progress has been made, despite the commitment of government and universities. Tight (2012) notes that if potential entrants to higher education are judged solely or largely on the basis of prior qualifications then:

“...what is being assessed...is not so much the success of higher education in widening participation, but the success of prior schooling in doing so.”
(p.212)

Boliver (2013) notes the use of the phrase 'potential to benefit' in the 2003 White Paper as evidence of:

“...the beginning of a growing acceptance of the idea that prior attainment in formal examinations may not be a reliable indicator of prospective ability without some consideration of the socio-economic context in which that attainment came about...” (p.346)

She cites supporting evidence in the form of non-traditional students' superior performance at degree level when compared with others with similar A-level grades.

As discussed earlier, traditionally the minimum admissions criterion for UK universities has been the possession of two A-levels. Archer et al (2003) show the class-based distribution of young adults with these qualifications and demonstrate a correlation between higher social class and the possession of minimum entry qualifications. Subsequently, Furlong and Cartmel (2009) noted an increase in the number of school leavers qualified to enter higher education. They ascribe this increase to two factors:

- i. labour market changes leading to “a significant decrease in the availability of jobs for minimum aged [school] leavers”; and
- ii. the degree of scepticism amongst young people about the value of “government-supported work-based training schemes.”

Furlong and Cartmel contend that these factors meant that remaining at school became more attractive. It is implicit in considering these factors that they are more relevant to those from intermediate and lower socio-economic classes. As Furlong and Cartmel argue there is a problem of fair access for under-represented groups because the main barrier is a result of having poorer qualifications (pp.27-28). Consistent with this view, Ball et al observe that working-class students are:

“... distinctly atypical in relation to their class peers. They are...‘lucky survivors’ from social categories ‘improbable’ for the position they have achieved. In terms of educational trajectories and aspirations, they are already exceptions ...They are, as Bourdieu and Passeron put it: ‘the least disadvantaged of the most disadvantaged.’” (2002, pp.53-54)

Furlong and Cartmel argue that qualifications are used as a means of filtering student applications so that a “veneer of fairness” can be maintained, based upon a perceived link between performance and merit. They contend that the failure by some disadvantaged groups to increase levels of participation can then be ascribed to a lack of effort, ability or aspiration (p.28). A common theme is set out by Ball et al (2002):

“HE choice takes place within two registers of meaning and action. One is cognitive/performative and relates to the matching of performance to the selectivity of institutions and courses. The other is social/cultural and relates to social classifications of self and institutions.” (pp.52-53)

This issue will be examined in Chapter 5, but it raises the issue of where lower SES students study for their degree.

Participation in English higher education – qualitative issues, fair access

The previous section examined quantitative changes in higher education in England. This section addresses the issue of qualitative changes and fair access, noting Ainley’s observation:

“More, as everybody keeps saying, means different” (1994, p.29)

Trow (1973) considers many aspects of change as higher education systems undergo transition from élite to mass systems. The relevant concerns in the context of this case study are not shifts in academic quality or modal degree classifications but in a different stratification of higher education related to socio-economic class. As early as 1994 Ainley noted a change in the composition of undergraduate student bodies when considered in

terms of social class, partly as a result shifts in the general balance of employment and expansion of non-manual occupations. Consequently, he observes that higher education was already open to the children of parents who would not have considered remaining in post-compulsory education themselves. Ainley (1994) suggests that:

“For these new entrants, negative ‘push’ factors (no jobs) are complemented by positive ‘pull’ factors as a higher education experience becomes more widely prized for its biographical stratification as well as for its value in the labour market.” (p.29)

Both factors are apparent in this case study, as set out in Chapter 7.

Whilst acknowledging increases in working-class participation, there is an alternative perspective. Central to this view is that whilst working-class participation has increased substantially, increases in middle-class participation have been greater. Furlong and Cartmel (2009) apply Raftery and Hout’s (1993) theory of ‘maximally maintained advantage’ to English higher education, noting that:

“...their argument was that educational expansion tends to occur in a way that results in little change in class-based differentials until a ‘saturation point’ is reached. In other words, applied to higher education, it could be suggested that working-class gains will occur once places have been provided for virtually all members of the middle-classes.” (p.18)

This is consistent with the suggestion that lower-SES students are the group of ‘last entry’ as considered in Chapter 2 (Archer, 1981 and Kivinen et al, 2001). This echoes Scott’s (2001) view that despite increases in participation since the 1980s there has been little overall shift in the social class composition of the student body. Scott observes that:

“British higher education has become a mass system because participation rates among the spreading middle-class are now ‘universal’ (in Trow’s terminology) while among the working classes access to higher education had remained an ‘élite’ experience...” (p.193)

This is borne out by age-participation index data analysed by social class presented by Connor, Dewson, Tyers, Eccles, Regan and Aslam (2001), and is further supported by data presented by Ball et al (2002) and Furlong and Cartmel (2009). As Reay et al (2005) observe “...the expansion of higher education has been of greatest benefit to the offspring of the middle-classes” (p.9). Hesketh (1999) suggests a nuanced position:

“...the burgeoning expansion in the demand for higher education is clearly contingent on the structural changes at work in Britain’s class structure which has seen a dramatic expansion in the size of the middle-classes...the so-called new or aspiring middle-classes still remain different to their more established middle-class contemporaries in significant ways. For Bourdieu, the trick is to establish the variations between those who are middle-class and those who seek to become middle-class.” (p.395)

Reay et al (2005) support this view observing:

“In contemporary Britain, with the transition from an élite to mass system, higher education is going through the process of increased stratification ...Instead of a system underpinned by relatively straightforward class-based inclusion and exclusion, we now have a far more differentiated field of higher education...” (p.9)

The literature supports the view that it is not simply a question of differential participation driven by social class differences; not all universities are the same. Reay et al (2005) note that although more working-class and ethnic minority students are participating in higher education, generally they are studying at different institutions from their middle-class counterparts (p.9). This can be seen from Figures 3.4 and 3.5.

Ainley’s 1994 work considered the reforms of the 1992 Further & Higher Education Act, abolishing the binary divide, as central to the creation of a competitive university market in an already “elaborate pecking-order” of universities (p.25). He suggested this would lead to a concentration of research in specialist centres and a diminution in status for teaching-only institutions:

“Most employers...have always looked more favourably on Oxbridge degrees...and rank HE institutions thereafter... although within academia all degrees were officially held to be equal, outside of it some degrees were demonstrably more equal than others.” (p.26)

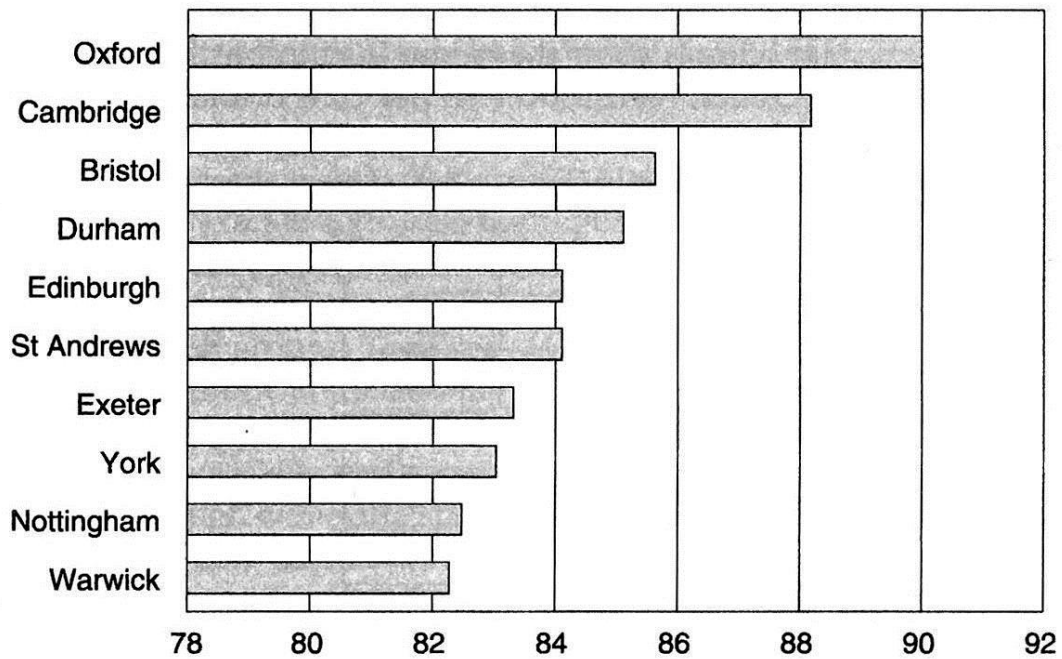
Macrae and Maguire (2002) highlight some unintended consequences of policies to increase participation by working-class students, noting the risk that they may become ‘ghettoised’ in lower-status universities (p.24), and speculate that for these students access to high status and élite occupations may be no nearer. There is support for this view from Scott (2001), who observes a heavy concentration of working-class students in lower status institutions, and that there has been little change in the student mix in élite universities (p.193). Reay et al (2005) note the hierarchy of institutions and observe that the substantial expansion of HE from the 1990s onwards, together with the abolition of the binary divide, whilst removing the titular distinction between institutions, has not produced equity as a hierarchy remains, with more prestigious research-intensive universities at the top. These élite universities remain overwhelmingly middle-class, with working-class students being more prevalent in the large groups of recently designated universities which are teaching-led institutions (p.10). Power, Edwards, Whitty, and Wigfall (2003) support the notion of a ranking of institutions. Acknowledging that status is contested, and that universities may have different reputations for specific subject areas, they suggest a ‘hierarchy of prestige’ (p.87,93), endorsed by Furlong and Cartmel (2009) who highlight inequalities and stratification:

“Figures relating to the overall distribution of places in higher education... between members of different social classes...provide a vivid picture of persistent inequality... the magnitude of the situation can only be appreciated by building in patterns of horizontal stratification that describe inequalities in the distribution of entrants between institutions and subject areas. It is misleading to talk simply of access to higher education without highlighting the extent to which some groups of entrants access élite

institutions or high status courses while others study in less advantaged contexts, entering an under-staffed and poorly funded ghetto sector.” (pp.21-22).

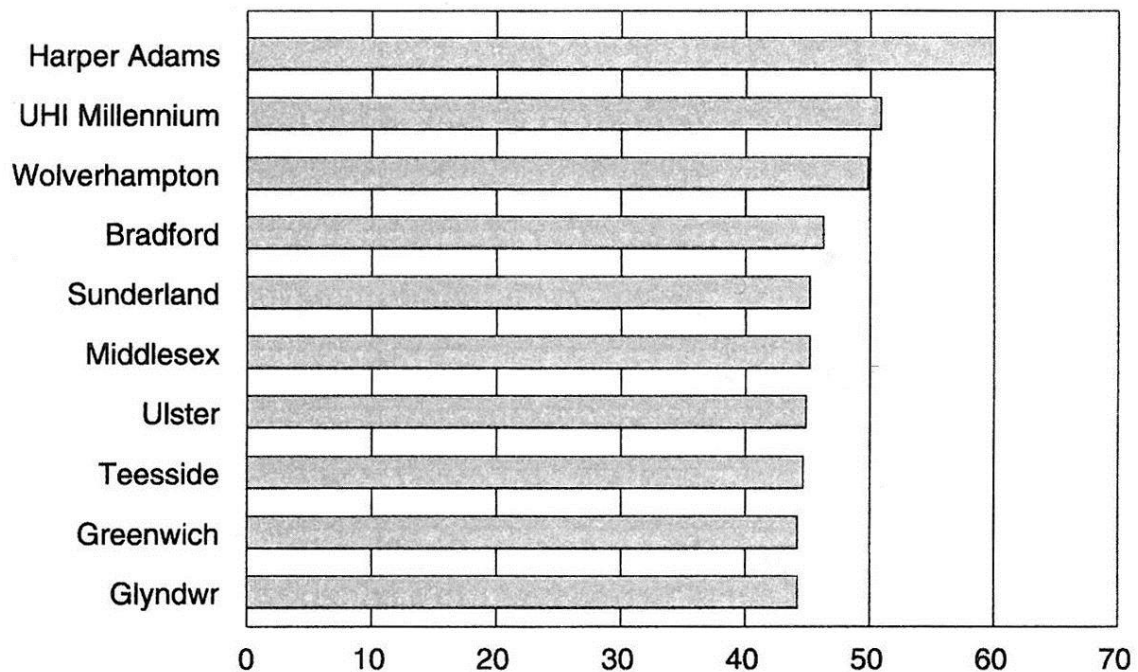
Furlong and Carmel highlight a relationship between the social class of students and the institutions that they attend, supported by data in Figures 3.4 and 3.5.

Figure 3.4 Universities with the highest percentage of students from middle-class families.



Source: Furlong and Cartmel, 2009, Fig. 2.3, p.23

Figure 3.5 Universities with the highest percentage of students from working-class families.



Source: Furlong and Cartmel, 2009, Fig. 2.4, p.23

Boliver (2013) acknowledges that it is important not only to consider who attends university but also where they go. She argues that despite the demise of the binary divide, prestige differences have persisted and further distinctions have emerged between less and more research-intensive (mainly 'old') universities, notably members of the Russell Group:

“Given the increasingly differentiated nature of the UK higher education sector, it is clear that traditional concerns about access to higher education in general need to be supplemented by questions about access to the UK’s most prestigious universities...[which] tend to be those in which social groups with historically low participation rates are least well represented.” (p.345)

Boliver makes similar observations about participation by state school pupils when compared with their privately-educated peers. Ainley (2014) argues that divisions in secondary education between institutional types have:

“...moved up the education hierarchy to tertiary level to distinguish internationally selecting and researching universities from nationally recruiting and mainly teaching campus universities as against what are becoming locally clearing and training institutions.” (p.228)

Roberts (2010) notes that whilst the working class makes up about half of the adult population it provides only 30 percent of all university students and just 16 percent of those at leading research universities. He observes differences amongst institutions in terms of the size of their middle-class majorities and the sections of the middle class from which their students are drawn (p.220). He suggests a hierarchy, with Russell Group institutions having the most obvious bias in participation by higher socio-economic classes. In 2006/7 he notes 29 percent of new young undergraduates at Russell Group institutions were from independent schools which only educate 7 percent of the school age group. Roberts argues that the recent increase in participation by young people from working-class families has been largely at lower-ranked institutions, and that there has been no rise in the proportion entering the most selective universities (p.220). He suggests that:

“...self-selection is a more powerful mechanism that congregates upper-middle-class and working-class students at different universities...At all levels in the social class structure, students appear to self-select towards universities that are perceived to be ‘for people like me’.” (p.221)

Roberts implies that working-class students consider only those institutions where they would feel content, and that these are generally not Russell Group institutions. This has links to the concept of ontological security set out by Giddens (1991), considered in Chapters 5 and 7.

With increasing differentiation between universities, the ability of applicants to understand the choices facing them is also important. Reay et al (2005), citing Brooks (2004), argue that whilst widening participation was central to the Labour Government’s

policy, the introduction of a system of fees and loans has compounded “...the inequalities arising from lack of information and general perplexity and confusion” about higher education amongst working-class families. Bennett et al (1992) highlight the need for working-class potential students to receive high quality information and advice if they are to choose HE (p.140). This is supported by Archer and Hutchings (2000) who consider that lower levels of demand for higher education from working-class families should be “...considered within the context of social power relations, as intertwined with differential access to knowledge” (p.557). This proposition is supported by Pugsley (1998) who suggests that the middle classes use education as a means to reproduce social advantage, describing middle-class parents as having decoded the ‘rhetoric of equality’, able to guide their children towards ‘good’ universities whereas working-class families, lacking this knowledge, were disadvantaged. McGivney (1996) suggests the domination of higher education by the middle classes has made it an ‘unknown’ and ‘alien’ culture to the working-classes. Reay (1998) considers that:

“...social injustices lie not just in continuing exclusions from higher education, but are also to be found in the unequal patterns of choice... Rather than being engaged in the same process, higher education applicants can be seen to be engaged in highly differentiated unequal processes.” (p.519)

This is supported by case study evidence in Chapter 7, where it is apparent that participants, and especially their parents, were ill-equipped to undertake finely-honed assessments of higher education choices.

Collins (1999), referencing Bourdieu (1984), is supportive of Reay’s view, considering the issue in terms of social capital:

“... in the transition from an élite to a majority system, the situation changes from one of a relatively straightforward class-based inclusion and exclusion, to a more differentiated educational field. The question then

becomes how the complex legacies of class, gender, religion and ethnicity influence students' knowledge of and strategies towards a highly differentiated system. Who knows which institutions have better degrees, which degrees lead to well-paying careers and which to well-populated dead-ends?" (p.235)

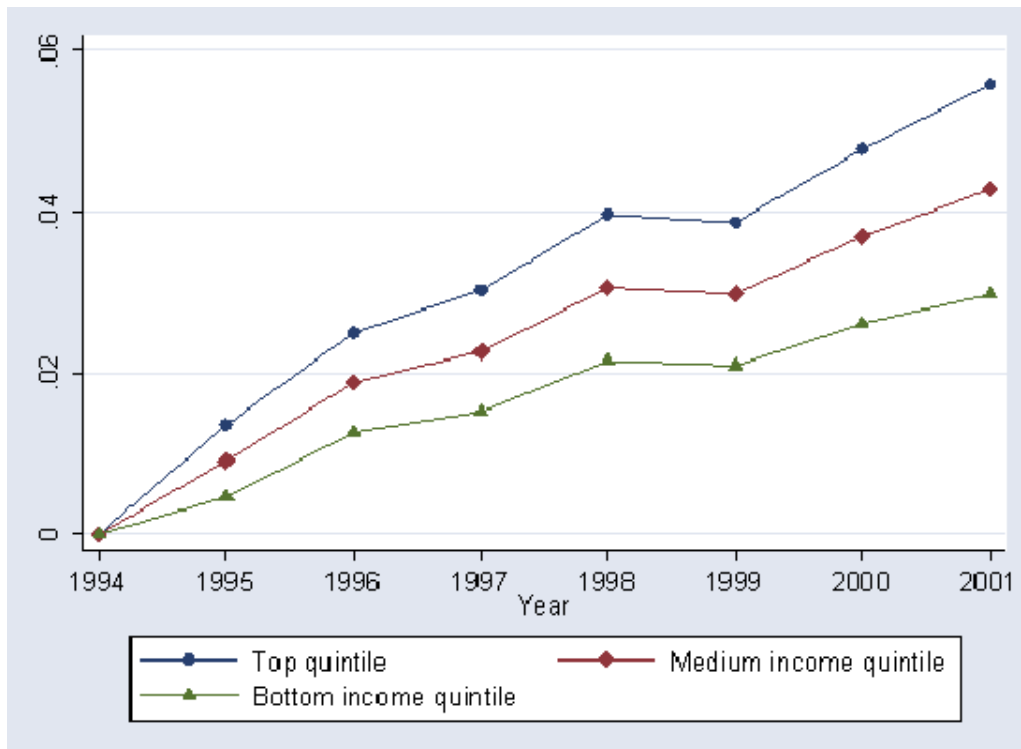
Whilst much of the analysis of the effects of social class on participation and choice has utilised Bourdieu's forms of 'capital', Naidoo (2004) is unusual in considering the functioning of Bourdieu's concept of 'field' – social formations being structured around groupings of social fields in which various forms of power circulate. Citing Bourdieu (1988, 1996), Naidoo comments:

"Higher education is conceptualised as a sorting machine that selects students...according to an explicit academic classification which in reality is very similar to the implicit social classification The education system therefore designates those endowed with cultural capital...generally inherited as a result of social origin, as 'academically talented.' In this way, higher education establishes a close correspondence between the social classification at entry and the social classification at exit without explicitly recognising, and in most cases denying, the link between social properties dependant on social origin (such as class) and academic selection and evaluation." (p.459)

Naidoo asserts that the higher education system reproduces the principles of social class domination "under the cloak of academic neutrality." Considering this, Boliver (2013) has questioned the value of prior attainment as a reliable indicator of undergraduates' performance. This is borne out by Figures 3.6 and 3.7.

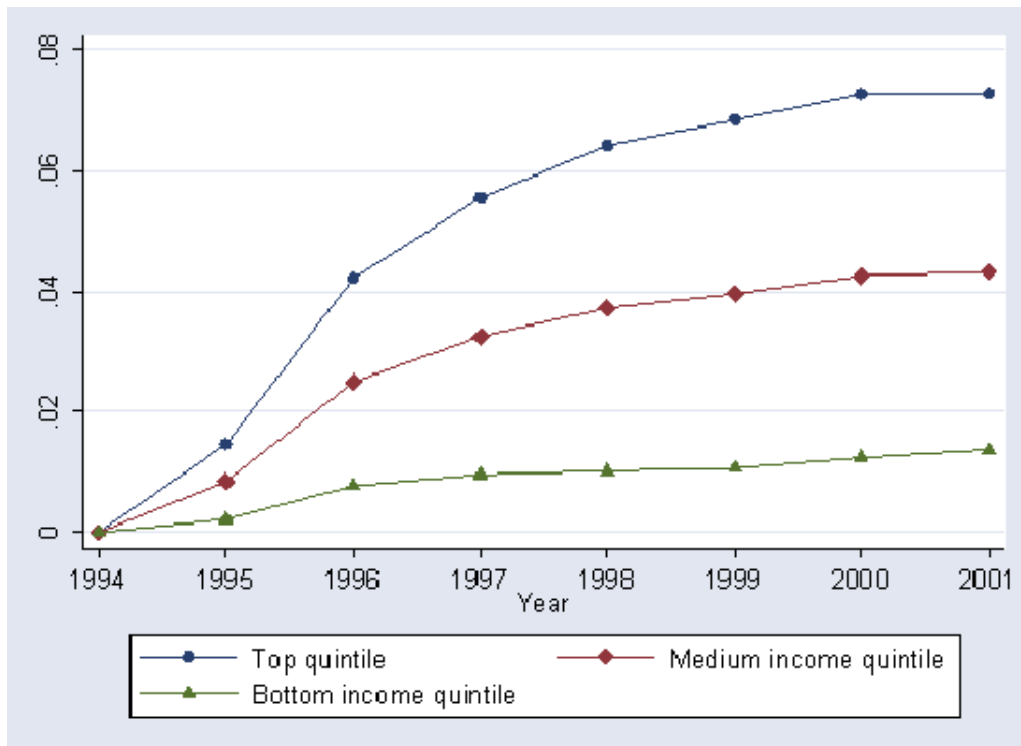
Figure 3.6 shows a similar increase in participation at "new" universities across all income groups, whereas Figure 3.7 shows that in "old" universities there is a less pronounced increase in participation from 1995 to 2001 by students from the bottom quintile, by income.

Figure 3.6: Changes in postcode-level HE participation over time (“new universities”), by neighbourhood income level



Source: Galindo-Rueda, Marcenaro-Gutierrez, and Vignoles, A. (2004, Fig. 4, p.25).

Figure 3.7: Changes in postcode-level HE participation over time (“old universities”), by neighbourhood income level



Source: Galindo-Rueda, Marcenaro-Gutierrez, and Vignoles, A. (2004, Fig. 5, p.25).

Reay et al (2005) conclude:

“While more working-class and ethnic minority students are entering university, for the most part they are entering different universities to their middle-class counterparts.” (p.9)

Boliver (2013) considers the class-based nature of participation in some detail. Examining UCAS data she investigates the influence of social class origin and school background on the likelihood of entering a Russell Group university. Table 3.11 sets out some of her findings.

Table 3.11: Rates of entry to Russell Group, other Old and New universities.

	Russell Group	Other Old	New	Total
Social class origin:				
Higher professional/managerial	35	23	42	100
Lower professional/managerial	25	22	53	100
Routine non-manual	20	17	70	100
Manual	13	17	70	100
Social background:				
Private	53	24	23	100
State	20	20	60	100

Source: Boliver (2013) Table 1; original data: UCAS

Boliver concludes that there is a steep social class gradient. She investigates the two main components of rates of entry: rates of application and rates of receiving offers of admission. Her findings are set out in Table 3.12.

Table 3.12: Rates of application to and receipt of offers from Russell Group, other Old and New Universities via UCAS.

	Application			Offer of admission		
	Russell Group	Other Old	New	Russell Group	Other Old	New
Social Class origin:						
Higher Professional/managerial	62	60	62	74	76	83
Lower Professional/managerial	51	54	71	68	74	81
Routine non-manual	44	49	77	64	72	81
Manual	36	43	83	56	66	79
Social background:						
Private	83	72	41	80	79	89
State	45	51	78	65	73	85

Source: Boliver (2013) Table II; original data: UCAS

Boliver determines that prospective students from lower social class backgrounds and state schools are under-represented amongst entrants to Russell Group universities, partly because they are less likely to apply to these institutions (given that they apply to any university), but also because they are less likely to be admitted when they do apply. This has relevance when considering the theoretical underpinning discussed in Chapter 4 concerning the relevance of work by Boudon on choices in education, particularly at 'branching points' when individuals consider whether, and how, to continue their education. Boudon considered the likelihood of students from lower social-class backgrounds choosing higher-status institutions, analogous to the situation considered by Boliver.

Boliver goes on to examine the extent to which these disparities in participation rates at Russell Group universities by students from lower social class backgrounds and state

schools might be said to be fair. She does this by looking at odds ratios in applications to Russell Group institutions. This approach mirrors that adopted by Kivinen et al (2001), considered in Chapter 2. Boliver’s findings are set out in Table 3.13.

Table 3.13: Comparative odds of application to a Russell Group university

	Model 1 Basic	Model 2 A-Level Qualification and Score	Model 4 Grades and 'facilitating subjects'
Social class (higher professional/managerial)	1	1	1
Lower professional/managerial	0.78*	0.89*	0.94
Routine non-manual	0.61*	0.77*	0.84
Manual	0.46*	0.69*	0.77*
Social background (private)	1	1	1
State school	0.29*	0.48*	0.58*
Has A-level qualifications		2.90*	yes
A-level score		1.30*	

Source: Boliver (2013) Table III; original data, UCAS

Note: Figures reported are odds ratios. Asterisks indicate odds ratios that are statistically significant at the $p < 0.05$ level

Model 1 includes basic controls for applicant characteristics and shows that those from manual-class backgrounds are less than half as likely as those from higher professional/managerial origins to apply to a Russell Group University (0.46 to 1). Model 2 introduces controls for prior attainment, specifically whether applicants hold A-level qualifications. Holders of A-level qualifications are shown to be nearly three times as likely to apply to a Russell Group University (2.9 to 1). Model 4 examines the position for those with A-level qualifications, controlling for specific grades at A-level as well as whether candidates have A-levels in any of eight 'facilitating' subjects (as identified by

the Russell Group in 2011). Boliver considers that this represents a test of fair access that is “sympathetic to the preference of Russell Group Universities for A-level qualifications,” concluding that:

“...even after controlling for specific grades and subjects at A-level, substantial social class and school background disparities in the odds of application to Russell Group Universities remain.” (p.355)

Boliver (2013) investigates the odds of receiving an *offer* from a Russell Group institution.

Table 3.14: Comparative odds of an offer of admission from a Russell Group University

	Model 1 Basic	Model 2 A-Level Qualification and Score	Model 4 Grades and 'facilitating subjects'
Social class (higher professional/managerial)	1	1	1
Lower professional/managerial	0.73*	0.84*	0.97
Routine non-manual	0.65*	0.82*	0.87*
Manual	0.48*	0.72*	0.93
Social background (private)	1	1	1
State school	0.47*	0.66*	0.59*

Source: Boliver (2013) Table IV; original data, UCAS

Note: Figures reported are odds ratios. Asterisks indicate odds ratios that are statistically significant at the $p < 0.05$ level.

Boliver notes that after controlling for prior attainment (Model 2) the odds ratios in relation to social class and school background “improve appreciably, but substantial inequalities remain”. However, in considering Model 4, Boliver observes that the ‘facilitating’ A-level subjects *do* facilitate receiving an offer of admission to Russell Group Universities, concluding:

“Net of these controls for prior attainment, social class disparities in the likelihood of an offer from a Russell Group University largely disappear.” (p.358)

However, she concludes that substantial school background differences remain, but does not consider the possible reasons for this. Tight (2012) considers that the issue is linked to “poorer school qualifications, lack of knowledge regarding post-school options and parental attitudes” (p.217). Citing Crozier, Reay, Clayton, Colliander, and Grinstead (2008) he goes on to observe:

“Educational success...entails a range of cultural behaviours; privileged children have learned these as have their teachers. Underprivileged children have not.” (Crozier et al 2008, pp.175-6)

One of these “cultural behaviours” may relate to the vexed issue of the UCAS personal statement. A free-text area of 4,000 characters this is a key differentiator for those institutions (the majority) where student interviews are no longer the norm. This may be an area where cultural capital plays a role. Students at independent schools are likely to receive more assistance in preparing their personal statements, and to be able to include extra-curricula activities likely to influence admissions tutors. Ainley (2014) argues that:

“Widening participation has not led to fair or equal access to equal types of higher education or outcomes in the labour market. Nor has it increased social mobility...In fact the opposite is the case; as elsewhere in education, the system functions to keep people in their place. Social divisions are heightening and hardening in higher education, where the general rule is that the older the university, the younger, whiter, more male and posher the students.” (p.233)

Whilst it is evident that disparities in rates of HE participation between students from different social classes have narrowed as HE participation has become near universal, evidently differences in participation rates remain. It is apparent that there are qualitative differences in the nature of participation between working-class and middle-

class students. Boliver's work suggests that this may be explained by analysis underpinned by the work of Boudon. Other research (e.g. Tight, 2012) supports a Bourdieusian conceptualisation. These two theoretical approaches are considered in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 4: THEORETICAL BASES FOR CLASS-BASED DIFFERENTIALS IN EDUCATIONAL PARTICIPATION

Introduction

The previous chapter considered issues of widening participation and fair access, mainly from a quantitative perspective. This chapter considers the theoretical underpinnings relating to participation and fair access. Chapter 5 will then consider the literature relating to educational choice.

As noted in Chapter 1, the participants in this case study were all students at a specialist further education college in the north of England. All studied vocational qualifications (rather than A-levels, also taught at the college) and were selected on the basis of their likely lower socio-economic status (SES). Chapter 7 provides information about the methodology for the study, but a higher proportion of the participants were from Widening Participation (WP) postcodes than was typical for the college. The issue of social class is therefore ineluctable, and deliberately so, as the research explores the impact of higher undergraduate tuition fees on the choices of lower-SES students.

Several themes are considered within this chapter. The first is social class. If social class is a specific factor in educational progression and decision-making it follows that any related underpinning theoretical framework must also be considered as it is relevant to the methodology used and the choice of areas for inquiry. As Glaesser and Cooper (2014) observe:

“Theories are essential for the explanation of phenomena. Statistical analysis can establish that there is an association between parental social class and children’s educational careers... But researchers interested in going beyond description to explain these correlations have to rely on theories addressing underlying mechanisms.” (pp.2-3)

Second, and also relevant in terms of the choice of areas for inquiry, is the question of the nature of educational decision-making. There is literature relating to educational choice and decision-making, and a somewhat smaller body of literature relating to decision-making in the context of HE choice. There is also related research concerning widening participation in HE. Most of the research relating to educational choice and widening participation is grounded in Pierre Bourdieu's theories of cultural reproduction, one of two main competing theories – the other being based in Raymond Boudon's work on rational choice theory – used to explain class-based differentials in educational participation. An evaluation of their merits is necessary to assess the literature on educational choice, most of which is built on an appreciation of Bourdieu's work.

Social Class and Educational Progression

The effects of class and the nature of educational choice are considered by Hatcher (1998) who notes persistent class inequalities in educational attainment in many Western European nations, a view supported by Thompson and Simmons (2013), citing evidence in the UK (Bukodi and Goldthorpe, 2011; Jackson, Goldthorpe and Mills, 2005) and in other OECD nations (Shavit and Blossfeld, 1993; Breen, 2004; OECD, 2011).

Hatcher cites Sweden as a decisive instance, and notes that the Swedes combine relatively low levels of inequality with an egalitarian education system, but notes work by Erikson and Jonsson (1996a,b) producing evidence from Sweden of "...deeply entrenched class inequalities in education" (Hatcher, p.6). Hatcher also cites evidence from Britain, noting work by Micklewright (1989) on choices at the end of compulsory schooling. As noted in the previous chapter, this is still a contested field, but Hatcher

(1998) found that family background was a major factor in considering the likelihood of leaving school as soon as possible, whilst:

“...of more interest and immediate policy relevance is the fact that between half and two-thirds of this effect remains when controls for the children’s academic ability and type of school are introduced.” (p.36)

In a British context Hatcher cites work by Roberts (1993) examining the post-16 choices of a broad range of young people and finding that middle-class young people with above average GCSEs were more likely to progress to higher education than similarly-qualified working-class young people:

“...because they had more self-confidence, higher aspirations, more supportive family and friend networks, and could bear the costs more easily” (Hatcher, 1998, p.8)

Hatcher notes the distinction made by Boudon (1974) between the primary and secondary effects of social stratification. The primary effects of class are those differences in academic ability generated by family backgrounds; the secondary effects concern the educational choices made by young people and their parents at transition points in educational careers. Hatcher asserts that the context for the operation of secondary effects is the organisation of education systems as a progression through a series of pathways and branching points. The branching points may channel pupils into different pathways within the education system or they may serve as exit points.

Hatcher cites Duru-Bellat’s 1996 research on choices in French education in support, noting Duru-Bellat’s explanation for widening differences after primary school as being a combination of class differences in both academic ability and choices at transition points. Duru-Bellat observes that objective criteria in relation to academic achievement explain only a part of the social inequalities in selection, calculating that, controlling for

attainment, inequalities in choice account for 30 percent of class difference in French education.

Hatcher therefore establishes differences in the nature and extent of participation in education in Sweden, France and Britain with quantified differentials in participation, when attainment is controlled for, of between one third (France) and up to two-thirds (Britain). He considers how differences in educational choices, over and above differences in academic attainment, might be explained. There are two main explanatory mechanisms for educational inequality: cultural reproduction and relative risk aversion.

Cultural reproduction theory seeks to explain class variations in education by cultural differences between social classes using Bourdieu's theories of habitus and cultural capital to explain dispositions reflecting familial class of origin. Relative risk aversion theory argues that educational inequalities can be understood by between class variation in the necessity of pursuing education at branching points where decision making involves cost-benefit analysis. Relative risk aversion is central to the work of Boudon (1974). These theories are often seen as conflicting, and Nash (2006) comments:

“The real target of Boudon's critique is, of course, Bourdieu's influential theory of cultural reproduction (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990). This could hardly go unnoticed and may even be one of the reasons for the indifferent reception it has received from sociologists of education.” (p.158)

Whilst Nash also notes subsequent waning of enthusiasm for Boudon's thesis, there has been renewed interest in relative risk aversion or rational action theory. Whilst Glaesser and Cooper (2014) comment that Bourdieu's and Boudon's theories have been seen as conflicting, they and others (Van de Werfhorst and Hofstede, 2007) see means of combining the theories to produce a more useful theoretical underpinning of

educational choice. This chapter will therefore explore aspects of Boudon and Bourdieu's theories closely, and consider whether they may be usefully combined. It will also examine the possibility that alternative theories may have greater explanatory power in this research. Before doing so an overview of each theory will be provided.

Rational Choice Theory

Collini (2013) highlights the issue of rational choice by potential students in the context of higher (variable) fees. This was considered in Chapter 3. A key issue for this case study is whether those considering studying for a degree seek (and are able) to act rationally, and if they do, the extent to which institutional fees are a factor in choice.

Goode (1997) argues that rational choice theory originated in the field of economics, although De Haan and Vos (2003) and Rawls (1992) note its earlier roots in moral philosophy. Friedman and Hechter (1988) set out a framework for all rational choice theories as part of a discussion about the linkage of micro and macro level sociological inquiry.

Rational choice models rely on conceptions of actors as purposive and intentional, and as having stated preferences. They are assumed to act to achieve ends consistent with their hierarchy of preferences - in economic theory classically assumed to involve wealth maximisation. In rational choice theory actors' ends (and preferences) must be specified in advance. Without such pre-identification of actors' ends, rational choice explanations are liable to be tautological. Goode provides an example of this:

“William the Conqueror did not try to conquer Scotland because the conquest was not valuable to him. Proof? If it had been, he would have tried to do it. Since he did not, Scotland must not have been valuable to him.”
(p.31)

Friedman and Hechter note that individual action is not solely a result of intention, but is also subject to at least two constraints. The first is scarcity of resources, and whilst this was originally formulated in economic terms, a Bourdieusian analysis based on limited social capital would also (arguably) be relevant. Differential access to resources will make some ends easy for individuals to attain, some more difficult and others impossible. Consequently, actors will not always be able to choose that course of action that satisfies their most valued ends. Second, social institutions can be a source of constraints. In terms of economic considerations these might be legal limitations on available courses of action, but Friedman and Hechter (1988) also refer to the “enforceable rules of the game” which allows for a Bourdieusian interpretation.

In summary, within rational choice models variation in outcomes can be due to variations in preferences, in resources and/or in institutional constraints. Friedman and Hechter note two further features common to all rational choice models. The first is an aggregation mechanism by which individual actions are combined to produce social outcomes, and in non-market situations there is frequently an unacknowledged assumption that actors have similar preferences. The alternative is to specify an aggregation mechanism that reflects the preferences of the constituent actors. Friedman and Hechter note:

“It has been difficult to formulate such a mechanism: when actors have heterogeneous preference orderings, no determinate collective outcome may be able to be predicted.” (p.204)

This is an important issue in the context of higher education choice which will be addressed later in this chapter.

The final feature to be considered in rational choice models is information. In considering such models in economics, actors are assumed to have perfect or sufficient

information necessary for making purposive choices amongst alternative courses of action. In more recent work the quantity and quality of available information is taken to be a variable, and potentially highly significant, which will be considered later in this chapter.

Rational choice theory has been raised in an educational context by Boudon (1974) as well as in the field of sociology, notably by Coleman (1986, 1990). Within the field of sociology several writers (Freidman & Hechter, 1988; Huber, 1997; Goode, 1997; Blau, 1997) identify the reason for interest in rational choice theory, expressed most clearly by Huber (1997):

“The prime reward of using a rational choice model is that it will bring sociology closer to solving its most significant and most persistent theoretical and empirical problem – how to link individual behaviour and belief i.e. how to link individuals and societies.” (p.44)

There are several criticisms of rational choice theory, some (but not all) of which are found in the sociological literature and stem from Coleman’s (1990) espousal of rational choice theory as a central tenet of sociology. As these criticisms of rational choice theory are key to its validity and utility, they are considered here.

Heckathorn (1997) regards rational choice theory as contentious, observing that the attitudes of sociologists towards it have been “overwhelmingly negative” (p.6). Whilst there are several aspects of Coleman’s conception that sociologists take issue with, there is one fundamental concern. Blau (1997) notes that Coleman’s implicit emphasis is not on the influences of social systems and structures on people but on individual behaviour “as the foundation of social systems and changes in them”. This is summarised by Rawls (1992):

“Coleman... begins with the assumption of the rational individual and says nothing about the problem of communication or shared ideas... he is comfortable assuming the very phenomenon that all classical social theorists and philosophers were trying to explain, shared understanding and shared reason, as though they were completely unproblematic... he has assumed as a starting point what social theorists and philosophers... have been trying to establish: the characteristics of the social individual... He believes he has assumed nothing and in fact has assumed a superstructure so extensive that we cannot even begin to address the positions of the classical theorists from within it.” (pp.237-8)

De Haan and Vos (2003) refer to rational choice theory as “...a dubious form of ‘economic imperialism’ ” (p.32) expressing unease that the theory misunderstands or disregards the importance of meaning and morality which concerned the classical sociological theorists, and is therefore unwarranted in its claim to be a general theory of social action. This is supported by Wrong (1994) who comments:

“Are we likely to rest content with a theory that makes a purely pragmatic case for itself...Are we not likely at some point to be driven to ask: ‘but what are human beings really like and how do they get that way?’” (pp.200-1)

A similar point is made by Rawls (1992):

“...from a classical theoretical perspective, we cannot evaluate the rationality of an action, understand the reasons for an action, or understand the meaning of an action apart from the circle of value that has shaped the persons and their relationships to one another in a given society”. (p.222)

Rawls quotes Marx (Tucker, 1978) in support of her argument:

“Society does not consist of individuals, but expresses the sum of interrelations, the relations within which these individuals stand.” (p.247)

She suggests that, for Marx, the interests of persons in society are not likely to be the sum of their individual human interests but are influenced by their positions in society and their “real” human interests will be masked by these socially-defined interests. Rawls cites the example of how workers can be persuaded to do and believe things that are not in their own interest. This is problematic from Coleman’s perspective, but

explicable from a classical sociological approach in terms of social norms and relationships, not individual intentions. Rawls suggests this is the crux of the tension between rational choice and social theory:

“Rational choice posits individuals. Social theory argues that social individuals are socially constructed phenomena and should be understood as such. The positing of individuals before society obscures the social origins of their interests...If it is the order and pattern of the social that creates and contextualises the individual, then rational choice individuality cannot be the source for the order and pattern of the social... Focusing on rational choice as a source of social order is to bypass all the causes and sources of social order and merely to focus on the use to which individuals put that order.” (pp.223-4)

Sociologists have other criticisms of rational choice theory that involve more detailed criticism of the approach. One of these concerns is the extent to which actors are truly rational. For instance, Kahneman and Tversky (1979) identify that actors in certain circumstances “systematically violate” expected rules of rational choice theory by misidentifying the optimum choice because of how probabilities are perceived. Tversky and Kahneman (1986) argue:

“...the deviations of actual behaviour from the normative model are too widespread to be ignored, too systematic to be dismissed as random error, and too fundamental to be accompanied by relaxing the normative system.” (S.252)

In an educational context, Goldthorpe (1996) addresses this issue by relaxing assumptions in his formulation of rational action theory. This is considered in more detail later in this chapter.

Blau (1997) notes that the theory ignores non-rational human behaviour, neglecting influences on behaviour such as emotional and moral (normative) ones. This raises one of the initial appeals of rational choice theory, expressed by Goldthorpe (1996) and Boudon (1998, 2003) and drawing on the work of Coleman (1986), which is that the

theory is a complete conception of action and “that we need ask no more questions about it”; quoting Hollis (1977) “rational action is its own explanation.” Boudon (2003) develops this notion, observing that a valid theory should eliminate obscure concepts and should “have the property of constituting... a set of uncontroversial statements.” He notes that to proponents of rational choice, explaining a phenomenon means making it the consequence of a series of readily acceptable statements. Coleman (1986) argues:

“Rational actions of individuals have a unique attractiveness as the basis for social theory. If an institution or a social process can be accounted for in terms of the rational actions of individuals, then and only then can we say that it is ‘explained’. The very concept of rational action is a conception of action that is ‘understandable’ action that we need ask no more questions about.” (p.1)

Boudon (2003) observes that a theory appears less convincing as soon as it evokes psychological or cultural forces, for instance when sociologists claim that a given collective belief is the result of socialization. He notes that:

“In contrast to rational explanations...these explanations raise further questions: they include black boxes... Moreover, the notion of socialization generates a black box that seems hard to open: nobody has yet been able to discover the mechanisms behind socialization...I am not saying that socialization is a worthless notion...but merely that [it] is descriptive rather than explanatory. It identifies and christens the various correlations that can be observed between the way people have been raised and educated and their beliefs and behaviour; it does not explain them.” (p.3)

Boudon’s criticism is probably partly directed at Bourdieu’s theory, which brings us to negative reasons for supporting rational choice theory. Several authors, from Goldthorpe (1996) to Thompson and Simmons (2013), have noted a weakness of theories such as Bourdieu’s espousing reproduction of class cultural difference, which is the absence of evidence that class differentials have widened as higher education opportunities have expanded. The point is summarised by Thompson and Simmons who argue that, whilst Bourdieu’s analysis has value, its flaw is that it does not adequately

account for the realities of educational expansion, because if differences in habitus explain both performance and orientation, then class inequalities in educational attainment would widen, as advantaged groups would take up new educational opportunities at a greater rate than their disadvantaged peers. They cite Goldthorpe (1996) who points out that this contradicts the evidence for stability in differentials in participation.

There is, however, a weakness in this argument, which assumes that higher education is homogenous – that there is no difference in the *nature* of participation. It is not the case that all higher education is the same (as is discussed in Chapter 3). It is plausible that higher socio-economic status students would generally wish to attend higher-status institutions. It has been noted in Chapter 3 that amongst the middle-classes participation is now almost universal, and also that increased middle-class participation has not favoured newer universities. Recent evidence (Milburn, Shephard, Attwood, Carrie, Cleal, Gregg, and Williams, Child Poverty Commission, 2013) makes it clear that at elite universities participation supports Bourdieu’s theory, in that levels of inequality are widening:

“In contrast to the overall progress made by the higher education sector in becoming more socially representative over the last decade, the most selective universities have, overall, become more socially exclusive. [The] Russell Group universities’...overall...intake has become less socially representative, not more.” (p.5)

This seems to be reasonable evidence of advantaged groups taking up opportunities at a greater rate, and therefore to counter suggestions that Bourdieu’s theories cannot be operating in practice. The work of Kivinen et al (2001) adds weight to the argument. In Finland, where there has been expansion of higher education and participation, they

argue that the participation ratio and measures of distributional outcome are poor measures of equity because they fail:

“...to take changes in marginal distributions into consideration, or in other words, the increase in higher education on the one hand, and such changes as the rise in the educational attainment of the general population on the other.” (p.173)

The key criticism is that differences are only measured amongst participants. Kivinen et al argue that:

“...the other side of the coin, non-participation, cannot be left out of the examination. The odds ratio accounts for both...Measuring the change by the odds ratio reveals how much more the offspring of the highly educated benefit from the expansion...” (p.174)

Kivinen et al examined a number of data sets and concluded that the different measures of participation had the potential to act differently depending on the changes in marginal distribution.

Before addressing arguments about the relative strengths of Boudon and Bourdieu's theories it is worth considering how they have been developed by others. In particular Goldthorpe (1996, p.485) develops the notion of rationality. He considers a weak notion of rationality. Goldthorpe assumes only that actors have goals, usually have alternative means of pursuing these goals and, in choosing their course of action, tend to assess probable costs and benefits rather than unthinkingly following social norms or giving unreflecting expression to cultural values. He also assumes that actors are to a degree knowledgeable about their society and their situations within it – for example, about opportunities and constraints relative to their goals. Goldthorpe recognises that departures from the standard of 'perfect' rationality are very frequent and makes no assumption that actors are always entirely clear about their goals, always aware of the

optional means of pursuing them, or ultimately always follow the course of action that they know to be rational. Thus Goldthorpe's formulation of what he refers to as Rational Action Theory (RAT) is distanced from the strictures of rational choice theory. Goldthorpe sets out the relatively undemanding requirements of Rational Action Theory:

“... all that need be supposed is that the tendency of actors to act rationally in the circumstances... is the common factor influencing them – even if relatively weak – while propensities to depart from rationality operate randomly in many different ways.” (p.485)

Thus Goldthorpe's RAT had moved considerably from the postulates of rational choice theory, for example as set out by Boudon (2003) and including, as the third postulate, the *requirement* to act rationally. Lindenberg (1992) considers the means by which theories are developed, noting in respect of rational choice theory a disaggregation into a fixed core of assumptions about human nature and a “variable belt” of “bridge” assumptions that can be increasingly close to the reality of the situation. He notes conflicting motivations in theory development, observing first that empirical accuracy in predictions and explanation are valued. Second, the more widely a theory can be applied (that is, in more diverse fields) the greater the analytical power of the theory and the more theory-driven the analyses can be. However, in order to have theory-driven analyses, the description of phenomena is simplified – that is, it has to become somewhat removed from reality. Consequently, the theory becomes less empirically accurate. To restore accuracy the theory must be tailored to the phenomena in question and therefore be more complex, diminishing its analytical power. He notes that:

“Economists thus generally are unwilling to forego their highly simplified (...often very unrealistic) models in favour of more realistic but analytically less powerful models, and sociologists generally are unwilling to forego descriptive richness.” (p.4)

Lindenberg discusses a process of decreasing abstraction (that is, decreasing simplification) that aims to achieve both theory-driven analysis and empirical accuracy as a series of versions of the theory are developed to increase empirical accuracy, whilst early versions provide analytical power. He refers to core theory and bridge assumptions:

“A core theory consist of a number of guiding ideas that can be made more specific by auxiliary assumptions that bridge the gap between the core and the more or less simplified reality.” (p.6)

However, Lindenberg does not detail how the validity of both theories can be established. Here, the validity of Goldthorpe’s (1996) assumptions regarding Rational Action Theory have been questioned; without the necessity for truly rational action, the analytical power of RAT is surely limited, and this criticism is made by De Haan and Vos (2003):

“As soon as there is no way of denying the prevalence of systematic irrational or non-rational action, rational action theory fails and clearly more explanatory work needs to be done.” (p.33)

In these circumstances Goldthorpe (1998, p.186) concedes that this is the case and that Boudon’s “‘black boxes’ remain”. However, Goldthorpe argues that there is a ‘family’ of Rational Action Theories that can be distinguished on the basis of whether they have:

- i. weak or strong rationality requirements;
- ii. a focus on procedural or situational rationality; and
- iii. a claim to a general rather than a special theory of action.

Goldthorpe acknowledges that no version of RAT which had a requirement for substantive rationality has gained wide acceptance because of the difficulty encountered in specifying the related criteria. He acknowledges that the issue of realism

is bound to arise – do actors make choices according to the rationality requirements of the theory? Goldthorpe also acknowledges that since it had been shown empirically that very often they do not, theorists have sought to develop versions of RAT in which these requirements are weaker, and in this context the key idea is that of *subjective* rather than *objective* rationality. This is the notion that actors may hold beliefs, and in turn pursue courses of action, for which they have ‘good reason’ in their particular circumstances but which may fall short of the standard of rationality that theory would presuppose. He highlights a version of RAT developed by Boudon (1989, 1994) based on the idea of subjective rationality but orientated more towards sociological concerns in which Boudon is primarily interested in how individuals may (with good reason) hold and act upon beliefs that are objectively mistaken. Here, reasoning that is perfectly valid in itself may lead to false beliefs, because it is carried out in the context of implicit (and unexamined) propositions that are inappropriate, though not necessarily obviously so. Goldthorpe argues that Boudon then maintains that where individuals appear to act in a way that falls short of rationality because of their mistaken beliefs, it should not be assumed that these beliefs are in some way externally caused. Goldthorpe links this to issues of situational or procedural rationality, where the requirements of subjective rationality are at their weakest. In this case the aim is to understand action as rational simply in the sense of being appropriate given actors’ goals and their situation of action, taken to include their beliefs which are also exempted from rationality requirements.

Goldthorpe (1998) goes on to consider variation in the emphasis given to rationality as situational or procedural (sometimes psychological). In mainstream economics, rationality is understood as a response to the situation, and given their preferences, actors’ options for rational action are situationally constrained. This may well lead to

the paradox that 'rational choice' may allow little choice in practice as the actor's situation may allow only a 'single exit'.

Alternatively, Goldthorpe considers the possibility of subjective rationality together with a shift away from the situation of action to the acting individual:

“If one begins with the idea of objective rationality... then all conditions of interest are located 'outside the skin' of the actor; but with the idea of subjective rationality...attention has to centre on conditions existing 'inside the skin' of the actor and in particular on human computational – i.e. information-processing – capacities and the constraints that they impose.”
(1998, p.173)

Goldthorpe therefore describes this, given that requirements of objective rationality are rarely met, as a way of modelling the processes of thinking and choosing in ways that are consistent with experimental findings and therefore providing a defensible empirical grounding.

Goldthorpe notes a complimentary perspective, set out by Boudon, concerned with the formation of subjectively rational (if objectively mistaken) beliefs, but for Boudon it is also important that the psychological processes involved should be better understood in terms of their social determination. Boudon would see the development of a “new sociology of knowledge” in order to “try to identify and clarify typical situations where the mental processes characteristic of subjective rationality lead to false beliefs” (1994, p.247).

Finally, in considering whether RAT may provide a general rather than a special theory of action, Goldthorpe notes that even authors such as Coleman, who grounds his major theoretical work in rational choice theory, nevertheless gives:

“... an important place to modes of action that lie beyond its explanatory range, in particular in the formation of trust relationships and of ‘social capital’ more generally.” (1998, p.177)

Goldthorpe concludes that rather than always striving to find a means of “saving” action as rational, RAT should be viewed not as constituting a general theory of action, but as being a special theory, around which efforts to achieve greater generality could best be organised. This is consistent with the views of Glaesser and Cooper (2014), discussed later.

In an educational context, Goldthorpe (1996) considers situational rationality in more detail, considering how actors choose particular courses of action in pursuit of their goals using the resources they command, and adapting to the opportunities and constraints characterising their situation. He notes that it is essential to consider not only how actors’ goals are understandable in relation to their class positions, but how their actions directed towards these goals are conditioned by the distribution of resources, opportunities and constraints that the class structure as a whole entails.

Goldthorpe invites us to consider educational careers as a series of transitions or ‘branching points’ and notes that, as these arise, children of less advantaged class have been more likely to leave the educational system, or to follow courses that reduce their chances of further progression, than children of more-advantaged origins. Goldthorpe rejects the notion that rather than class differences in levels of aspirations being interpreted culturally, they may more simply be understood in structural terms. He supports Keller and Zavalloni’s (1964) argument that the aspirations of individuals should be assessed not by an absolute standard but relatively. Alternatively, this might be regarded as an implicit acknowledgement of Bourdieu’s concept of habitus.

Goldthorpe (1996) argues that aspirations to attend university on the part of children of working-class and of service-class origins would not be treated equally but the working-class child should be regarded as having higher aspirations. Therefore it should not be supposed that the tendency of children from working-class families generally to pursue less ambitious educational careers than children from service-class families stems from a supposed 'poverty' of ambition. Goldthorpe argues it is simpler to assume that there is no systematic variation in levels of aspiration among classes, and that variation in choices arises from the fact that in pursuing a given goal different 'social distances' will have to be travelled from different class origins. As Boudon explains, different opportunities and constraints, and therefore the evaluation of different sets of probable costs and benefits, will be involved (1974, p.23). Goldthorpe also notes that this conception is consistent with the experience of educational expansion – as greater opportunities for secondary and higher education have been created, children from less-advantaged class backgrounds have been ready to take them up.

Goldthorpe (1996) considers that Boudon's endorsement of the positional theory of aspirations is linked to the distinction that Boudon proposes between the 'primary' and 'secondary' effects that stratify educational attainment. Primary effects are those resulting in class differentials in initial achievement and therefore in pupil ability. Here Boudon acknowledges the importance of class cultural influences – but with regard to actual performance rather than aspirations. He focusses his attention on secondary effects: those coming into play as children make choices at branching points in the educational system. Here, considerations arising from the relationship between class origins and envisaged destinations – both educational and occupational – become vital. According to Goldthorpe, Boudon sees choices being determined as a result of the

evaluations that children and parents make of the costs, benefits and risks of the options open to them. Consequently Goldthorpe notes:

“...even among children who, though the operation of primary effects, reach similar education situations early in their school careers, secondary effects will still produce class differentials in attainment in so far as these children start from – and view their prospective careers from – differing class origins”. (p.491)

Goldthorpe observes that Boudon’s primary concern is to establish that as children’s education progresses the influences of secondary rather than primary effects on attainment begin to dominate. Goldthorpe seeks to develop Boudon’s approach to show that secondary rather than primary effects must be the focus if the question of how to narrow class differentials under conditions of educational expansion is to be addressed.

Brynin (2012) considers the expansion of higher education. He cites Chevalier & Lindley (2009) who find that over-qualification increased by about one third during the expansion of higher education in the UK in the 1990s, and consequently “non-traditional graduate jobs have been upgraded to make sure of the additional supply of graduates” (p.333). Brynin comments that this raises the risk environment of school-leavers, as more occupations become partially graduate, making occupational signals less clear, and thus the educational decision more difficult and more risky. This is especially the case as the cost of higher education is transferred to the individual, and a rising proportion of graduates receive only average pay. A related point is made by Van de Werfhorst and Hofstede (2007), who consider cultural reproduction and relative risk aversion as explanatory mechanisms for educational inequality. They consider within risk aversion the primary goal of members of each social class is to avoid downward social mobility, and citing Holm and Jaeger (2005) suggest support for the idea that utility derived from educational choices would increase up to the level of schooling that

ensures class maintenance. They cite Van de Werfhorst and Andersen's (2005) argument that if educational choices function to realise the primary goal of class maintenance, children would invest *more* in schooling if education has lost part of its labour market value relative to their parents' generation.

Van de Werfhorst and Hofstede (2007), examining the competing claims of cultural reproduction and risk aversion, connected the theories to Boudon's primary and secondary effects taxonomy. They demonstrate that primary effects are substantially cultural and that these affected school performance at primary and secondary level. In relation to secondary effects they concluded that there is almost no variation across social classes and parents' education in children's concern with downward mobility. This mirrors the views noted earlier that there is no distinction by social class in the level of ambition. Van de Werfhorst and Hofstede conclude that there is no effect of cultural capital on ambitions, and cultural capital theory is unlikely to be helpful in explaining secondary effects. They conclude that relative risk aversion affects ambitions and is therefore relevant to understanding of secondary effects. Van de Werfhorst and Hofstede acknowledge that this view is contested, principally citing Nash (2006) as holding a contrary view. Nash argues that secondary effects make up only a minority of the total effect on schooling. Nevertheless, Nash states that:

"Boudon's insight that a two-component process of differentiation is involved may...be accepted as sound and potentially useful." (p.171)

Nash concludes that primary and secondary effects:

"...might, more often than Boudon thought, prove to have the same causes, and if the relative importance of [secondary effects] proves to be less important, those facts will not negate the validity of the conceptual distinction." (p.171)

Nash also considers the competing claims of Boudon's and Bourdieu's approaches, concluding that there is "room for methodological pluralism" (p.171). This theme is taken up by Glaesser and Cooper (2014), who note that although the theories are seen as conflicting "...we argue that they can fruitfully be used together" (p.1). Glaesser and Cooper observe that Boudon, whilst arguing that behaviour is sometimes best explained by regarding actions as the result of motivations and reasons, also accepts that these can vary according to individual circumstances (1998). They regard this as being closely related to Bourdieu's claim that habitus shapes both desired goals and the means considered suitable for attaining them. Vester (2006) notes that whilst it draws on Rational Action Theory, Boudon's model of primary and secondary effects already extends beyond the classical rational choice paradigm. Vester's view, endorsed by Glaesser and Cooper, is that primary effects have some affinity with Bourdieu's concept of habitus. Van de Werfhorst and Hofstede (2007) also argue that primary effects can be explained by Bourdieu's concepts, most notably cultural capital. They believe that secondary effects are better conceptualised by relative risk aversion.

Devine (2004) in her study of middle-class social reproduction uses Bourdieu's theories but, noting some of their limitations, also draws upon Goldthorpe's discussion of RAT and cost-benefit analysis. Goldthorpe (2007) refers to cultural influences on primary effects but then argues that sociologists should focus on secondary effects. Whilst he is essentially in favour of rational choice based explanations, given that actors very often don't behave purely rationally, assumptions of rationality have to be weakened to subjective rationality. Glaesser and Cooper note that as a consequence of this view of subjective rationality, it follows that actors do not always act on the best information possible, but instead on that available to them at reasonable cost. If they are unaware

that they do not have access to all relevant information, or if it would be prohibitively costly or difficult to obtain, they may act on incomplete information, described as 'satisficing'. Glaesser and Coopers' view is that 'subjective' rationality is both a useful explanatory notion and compatible with Bourdieu's claim that habitus shapes both desired goals and preferred means of achieving them. Particularly relevant in this context, again noted by Glaesser and Cooper, is that one aspect of habitus is access to relevant knowledge about possible goals and how they might be achieved. This element of Bourdieu's work has been incorporated into Reay, David and Ball's (2001) notion of institutional habitus, where schools differ in terms of the extent and depth of knowledge they can provide in relation to post-compulsory education choices. This is relevant in the case study context. Many students enter college without considering that undergraduate study might be possible for them. However, they are obliged to assess the option, and the institutional habitus is such that most progress to HE.

Glaesser and Cooper conclude that there is a basis for using both habitus and subjective rationality:

"...especially given many RAT theorists' understanding of educational goals in relative terms, something Bourdieu's account of the class conditioning of habitus incorporates." (p.5)

They go on to observe:

"We...make use of Bourdieu's habitus concept, showing that individuals' 'subjective rationality' is shaped by their experience in their families of origin, insofar as the habitus acquired there provides upper and lower boundaries on their expectations and aspirations, and on their sense of what is possible or impossible for them." (p.5)

There is, however, an important caveat to this approach:

"...we have to be aware of the possibility that respondents do not normally engage in rational cost-benefit analyses to the degree they have in our

interviews. They may have felt...pressure... to account for their decisions in a 'rational' manner. But...these respondents readily accessed and employed cost-benefit scripts and it would...be over-cautious not to regard these as evidence that they do engage in the process assumed in RAT accounts." (pp.13-14)

Glaesser and Cooper have established a rationale for the use of Bourdieu's theories in considering educational choice, whilst also allowing the possibility of rational choice models on the basis of 'subjective' rationality. Much of the literature on educational choice is grounded in Bourdieu's theories and the following section considers these theoretical underpinnings.

Bourdieu's Concepts

As noted earlier in this chapter, authors considering educational choice have found the theoretical framework postulated by Pierre Bourdieu to be useful and relevant. The position is summarised by Reay et al (2005):

"Higher education choice takes place within two registers of meaning and action. One is cognitive/performative and relates to the matching of performance to the selectivity of institutions and courses. The other is social/cultural and relates to social classifications of self and institutions. What are we trying to do...is to understand how higher education choice is exercised in different ways for different groups of students across both registers and have found Bourdieu's theoretical framework useful." (p.19).

Others routinely draw on Bourdieu's theoretical framework, to the extent that it is the dominant conceptual framework within the field. This section will therefore outline Bourdieu's key theoretical concepts employed in the relevant literature: habitus, field and capital. This will inform not only the review of the literature on the nature of educational choice in Chapter 5 but also the methodology for this study considered in Chapter 6.

Habitus, field and capital in Bourdieu

i. Habitus

Whilst she notes that habitus “lies at the heart of Bourdieu’s theoretical framework” (p.431) Reay (2004) comments on the difficulty of engaging with Bourdieu’s theories. Maton (2008) describes the concept of habitus as “enigmatic” and “anything but clear”, noting that the concept’s origins lie in a conundrum:

“Experientially, we often feel we are free agents yet base everyday decisions on assumptions about the predictable character, behaviour and attitude to others. Sociologically, social practices are characterised by regularities – working-class kids tend to get working-class jobs.” (p.50)

Bourdieu (1994/1987) states that:

“...all of my thinking started from this point: how can behaviour be regulated without being the product of obedience to rules?” (p.65)

Maton (2008) poses the question – how can social structure and individual agency be reconciled? In seeking an answer, Maton explores Bourdieu’s theories in detail. Bourdieu (1994) defines habitus as a property of social agents – individuals, groups or institutions – that comprises a “structured and structuring structure” (p170). Maton clarifies this, noting that habitus is *structured* by past and present circumstances such as family upbringing and education. He comments that it is *structuring* in that habitus acts to shape present and future practices, and *structured* in that it is ordered rather than random or unpatterned. He states that this structure entails a system of dispositions which generate perceptions, appreciations and practices (Maton, p51; Bourdieu, 1990, p.53). Maton observes that the term “disposition” is critical in uniting the concepts of structure and agency, citing Bourdieu (1977):

“It ...designates a way of being, a habitual state (especially of the body) and, in particular, a predisposition, tendency, propensity or inclination.” (p.214)

Bourdieu (1993, p87) asserts that these dispositions are *durable* as they persist over time and *transposable* as they are capable of becoming active in a wide variety of social contexts. Maton notes that habitus does not act alone but that Bourdieu believes that practices are the result of what he terms “an obscure and double relation” (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p.126) between habitus and a field. Reay et al (2005) contend that it is through the workings of habitus that practice (agency) is linked with capital and field (structure) (p.22). Maton (2008) “unpacks” this relationship:

“...practice results from relations between one’s dispositions (habitus) and one’s position in a field (capital), within the current state of play of the social arena (field).” (p.51)

Maton considers that this highlights the significance of the interlocking nature of Bourdieu’s three concepts of habitus, field and capital. He notes that practices are not simply the result of habitus, but rather of relations between habitus and current circumstances (p.52). This view is supported by Reay (2004). In considering the issue of determinism, central to the conundrum noted initially, she cites Bourdieu (1990) who argues that:

“...habitus becomes active in relation to a field, and the same habitus can lead to very different practices and stances depending on the nature of the field.” (p.432)

Maton observes that the relationship between habitus and field is one of “ontological complicity”. The field, as part of the on-going context of life, structures the habitus and simultaneously the habitus is the basis for individual’s understanding of their lives, including the field. This is set out by Bourdieu & Wacquant (1992):

“On one side is a relation of conditioning: the field structures the habitus...On the other side it is a relation of knowledge or cognitive construction. Habitus contributes to constituting the field as a meaningful world.” (p.127)

Maton characterises Bourdieu's exposition as abstract and restates the relationship in more straightforward language, noting that habitus focuses on our ways of acting, feeling, thinking and being. It captures how we carry within us our history, how we bring this history into our present circumstances, and how we then make choices to act in certain ways and not others. Maton argues that this is an on-going and active process, but not under conditions entirely of our own making. He observes that:

"Where we are in life...is the result of...events...that have shaped our path. We are faced with a variety of possible forks in that path...this range of choices depends on our current context (the position we occupy in a particular social field) but at the same time which of these choices are visible to us and which we do not see as possible are the result of our past journey..."(p.52)

Maton's explanation of habitus seems at this point to have reached a similar concept to Boudon's notion of branching points, especially when he argues that:

"Which choices we choose to make...depends on the range of options visible to us, and our dispositions (habitus), the embodied experiences of our journey. Our choices...then in turn shape our future possibilities, for any choice...sets us on a particular path that further shapes our understanding of ourselves and of the world. The structures of the habitus are thus not 'set' but evolve..." (pp.52-3)

Maton concludes that in order to understand practices it is necessary to understand both the changing fields within which social agents are placed and the changing habituses they bring to their fields of practice.

Bourdieu explores the nature of habitus:

"You can use the analogy of the game in order to say that a set of people take part in a rule-bounding activity...which, without necessarily being the product of obedience to rules, obeys certain regularities...Should one talk of a rule? Yes and no. You can do so on condition that you distinguish clearly between rule and regularity. The social game is regulated, it is the focus of certain regularities." (1990, p.64).

Maton considers Bourdieu's game analogy in more detail, noting that Bourdieu uses the notion of "strategy" to emphasise the active and creative nature of practices. Maton argues that each social field can be understood as a "field of struggle" in which social agents "strategically improvise...to maximise their positions" (p.54). Maton acknowledges that social agents "do not arrive in a field fully armed with god-like knowledge" (p.54), but learn the rules of the game only with time and experience. He observes that Bourdieu suggests the notion of a "feel for the game" which Maton contends is a "...particularly *practical* understanding of practice" perhaps encapsulated by Reay's phrase "...the mastery of an art" (2004, p.432). Maton develops this, contending that to understand practice it is necessary to relate the *regularities* of social fields to the *practical logic* of social agents and:

" 'the feel for the game' is a feel for these regularities." (p.54)

Maton argues that the relationship between habitus and field is essential in understanding habitus as an explanatory tool, stating that habitus and field are related structures and the *relation between* them provides the key for understanding practice. The two structures represent objective and subjective realisations of the same underlying social logic and are mutually constituting, in that each helps shape the other. Maton describes them as both evolving, so relations between habitus and field are on-going, dynamic and partial (p.57). Maton observes that this allows for a mismatch between a field and the habitus of its members, where social agents may feel like a "fish out of water". The contrast arises where one is at ease and therefore where the social agent's habitus matches the logic of the field and is "...attuned to the *doxa*, the unwritten 'rules of the game' underlying practices within the field" (Maton, p.57). Given the potential for mismatch between field and habitus, Reay (2004) notes that "Bourdieu

sees habitus potentially generating a wide repertoire of possible actions.” Bourdieu (1990) posits that:

“Habitus is a kind of transforming machine that leads us to ‘reproduce’ the social conditions of our own production, but in a relatively unpredictable way, in such a way that we cannot move simply and mechanically from knowledge of the conditions of production to knowledge of the products.” (p.87)

Connell (1983) argues that Bourdieu’s theory of reproduction is an overly-deterministic approach to class and the role of education in producing inequalities. Jenkins (1992) contends that Bourdieu’s theory “does not allow for meaningful agency or process at individual level” (p.118). In contrast, Reay (2004) observes that habitus both allows for individual action at the same time it predisposes individuals towards certain choices. She notes that:

“Despite this implicit tendency to behave in ways that are expected of ‘people like us’, for Bourdieu there are no explicit rules or principals that dictate behaviour, rather ‘the habitus goes hand in hand with vagueness and indeterminacy’.” (p.433)

Maton contends that this relationship between habitus and field is central to Bourdieu’s accounts of a range of social fields of practice and in particular their role in social reproduction and change. He identifies the field of higher education, and citing Bourdieu and Passeron (1977, 1979) considers why social agents from middle-class backgrounds are more likely to attend university than those from working-class backgrounds. Maton observes that Bourdieu and Passeron describe how stimuli during upbringing shape the outlooks, beliefs and practices of social agents in ways that impact on their educational careers. Their argument is that rather than the educational system blocking access to social agents from non-traditional backgrounds, these social agents relegate themselves out of the system, seeing university as “not for the likes of me”. They argue that

conversely, middle-class social agents are more likely to consider university education as a natural step. When at university they are also more likely to feel 'at home' for the underlying principles generating practices within the university field – its unwritten 'rules of the game' – align with their own habituses. Maton notes that Bourdieu argues that people thereby internalise the objective chances they face – they come to 'read' the future and to choose the fate that is also statistically the most likely for them. Practices within a given situation are, Bourdieu argues, conditioned by expectation of the outcome of a given course of action, which is in turn based, thanks to the habitus, on experience of past outcomes (p58). This is supported by Reay (2004) who comments that:

“...the operation of the habitus regularly excludes certain practices; those that are unfamiliar to the cultural groupings to which the individual will be far more likely to make a virtue out of necessity than attempt to achieve 'what is already denied'.” (p.433)

Similarly, Maton states:

“We learn, in short, our rightful place in the social world, where we will do best given our dispositions and resources, and also where we will struggle... Social agents thereby come to gravitate towards those social fields (and positions within those fields) that best match their dispositions and try to avoid those fields that involve a field-habitus clash.” (pp.58-9)

In considering Bourdieu's studies of education, Maton asserts that Bourdieu repeatedly examines questions of how and why social agents think and act as they do, and how their actions and beliefs impact on social reproduction and change. He considers that:

“The notion of degrees of what I have called...field-habitus match or clash is not only crucial to the processes outlined...but also to how these processes are normally rendered invisible to the social agents involved. As 'fish in water', social agents are typically unaware of the supporting, life-affirming water...Moreover, by virtue of field-habitus match, social agents share the doxa of the field, the assumptions that 'go without saying' and that determine the limits of the doable and thinkable.” (p.59)

ii. *Field*

Several analogies are used by those considering Bourdieu's concept of *field*. Thomson (2008) notes that Bourdieu referred to social life as a game, observing that:

“...just as football, the social field consisted of positions occupied by social agents (people or institutions) and what happens on/in the field is consequently bounded. There are thus limits to what can be done, and what can be done is also shaped by the conditions of the field.” (p.69)

Thomson argues that for Bourdieu the game is competitive, with social agents' strategies being to maintain or improve their position. The “score” in the game is determined by the accretion of *capitals*, being “...both the process within, and the product of, a field.” Thomson describes four forms of capital nominated by Bourdieu: economic (money and assets); cultural (e.g. forms of knowledge, tastes, language, cultural preferences); social (e.g. affiliations, networks, family) and symbolic (things which represent other forms of capital e.g. credentials). Thomson contends that the “playing field” is not level because players begin with unequal amounts of the different forms of capital and that fields depend on, and produce more of, some forms of capital. Some fortunate “players” will therefore be able to use their initial capital advantage to advance further than others (p.69).

Thomson observes that a social field is not fixed, and that collectives of people occupy more than one social field at any time, thus can be thought of as occupying a common social space which Bourdieu refers to as the *field of power* consisting of multiple social fields. Thomson considers that for Bourdieu there are important likenesses between social fields; specifically the regular and predictable practices within each field are similar and there are also “relationships of exchange” between fields which make them inter-dependent. Thomson asserts that Bourdieu:

“...suggests a mutual process of influence and on-going co-construction; what happens in the field of power shapes what can happen in a social field, at the same time as what happens in a social field shapes the field of power and also may influence other social fields.” (p.71).

Thomson asserts that Bourdieu posited a social world (the field of power) comprising multiple fields including large fields that may be divided into the subfields of literature, painting, photography et cetera. Each subfield, whilst following the overall logic of the main field, has its own rules and so moving from the larger field to a subfield – or between subfields – may require adjustments both for social agents and those who seek to investigate it. An example here might be the shift from post-compulsory education to higher education. Linked to this Bourdieu suggested that institutions within fields also operated as subfields. In this context it is worth considering some of the nuances of higher education choice examined in more detail in the following chapter. As an example, Power et al (2003) comment on a ‘hierarchy of prestige’ within the HE sector; there are different subfields within HE with different rules which may not be apparent to all applicants, as discussed in Chapter 3.

A key issue when considering *field* is individual agency. Thomson notes that despite the unequal distribution of capital to social agents, and thus the existence of hierarchies within a field, there is still agency and change. Bourdieu was clear that social agents make choices, even if they are not fully informed, and that they are:

“...not particles subject to mechanical forces, and acting under the constraint of causes: nor are they conscious and knowing objects acting with full knowledge of the facts, as champions of rational action theory believe...(they are) active and knowing agents endowed with a practical sense of action.” (1988, p.25)

This is an important point. Whilst Bourdieu argues that actors do not fulfil the requirements of a perfectly rational choice model, he acknowledges that as “active and

knowing agents” actors will seek to make rational choices within the constraints of knowledge and understanding that apply to them. This is considered further in Chapter 8, where the possibility of bounded rationality in relation to education choice is examined.

iii. *Capital*

Bourdieu’s use of the term “capital” is much broader than the merely economic:

“It is... impossible to account for the structure and functioning of the social world unless one reintroduces capital in all its forms and not solely in the one form recognised by economic theory... the most material types of capital – those which are economic in the restricted sense – can present themselves in the immaterial form of cultural capital or social capital and vice-versa.” (Bourdieu, 2006, pp.105-6)

Moore (2008) considers that by extending the sense of “capital” wider systems of exchange Bourdieu is shifting the term from the narrowly mercantile into “...a wider anthropology of cultural exchanges.” Moore observes that forms of capital such as cultural and social can be regarded as “transubstantiated” forms of economic capital.

Moore explores how forms of symbolic capital should be understood, suggesting that:

“In the first, the values, tastes and lifestyles of...social groups...are, in an arbitrary manner, elevated...in a way that confers social advantage... In the second way, forms of capital such as cultural capital can be understood in terms of quantitative differences in forms of consciousness within different social groups...that is in terms of habitus as a specialisation (“cultivation”) of consciousness and recognised mastery of some technique(s). In other words, social membership in itself (membership of a particular status group per se) does not automatically translate into a habitus that confers symbolic capital in a uniform way for all members...” (p.102)

Moore considers this issue as central to the distinctiveness of Bourdieu’s concept of symbolic capital. If only the first usage is employed then there is little meaningful differentiation between Bourdieu’s ideas and more traditional notions such as social class. Moore therefore concludes that the second understanding of capital’s significance

is that it allows analysis by examining the effects, notably in education, of variations within groups and similarities between class factions rather than merely examining differences between social classes.

Moore considers forms of capital, noting Bourdieu's broad distinction between economic capital ("mercantile exchange") and symbolic capital, contending that the key difference is that for economic capital the "...instrumental and self-interested nature of the exchange" is obvious (p.103). Moore observes that mercantile exchange is not of intrinsic value but is always merely a means to an alternative goal (e.g. profit, a wage). He highlights Bourdieu's contention that this applies equally to forms of symbolic capital, but that these:

"...deny and suppress their instrumentalism by proclaiming themselves to be disinterested and of intrinsic worth." (p.103)

Moore argues that Bourdieu demonstrates that though the process of transubstantiation, the fields of symbolic capital are homologous to the structure of the economic field. Each field of symbolic capital reproduces the system of unequal relations in the economic field (relations of class and power) and, in doing so, reproduces the fundamental structure of social inequality. Their logic is ultimately that of the structured inequalities and power relations of the economic field, and it is in terms of this logic that such fields are decoded (p.104).

Moore believes that symbolic capital has an effect because of the particular "illusion" stemming from its claimed intrinsic principle. He contends that fields can be understood as both the means of production of symbolic capitals and the regulators of the social distribution of these capitals. Moore suggests that the most important feature of a field is that it is dynamic, and that capital can be understood as the "energy" that drives the

development of the field. In order to understand this Moore notes that capital is able to exist in different forms:

“...in one form, capital is objectified. It is materially represented in things such as art works, galleries...In another form, capital is embodied ...Between these two is a third expression of capital in the form of habitus. Unlike objectified and embodied capital, habitus, does not have a material existence in itself in the world since it includes attitudes and dispositions...”
(p.105)

Moore emphasises that these forms of capital are separate instances of the same phenomenon – “continuous with each other” – not different varieties of capital. Moore likens the objectified forms of capital to raw material and invites the reader to consider a large store that sells books, music on CD and films on DVD. He notes that the items have already been organised on the shelves and racks in categories and genres governed by principles that Bourdieu (1984) terms “legitimate culture.” If two shoppers with equal funds were to visit the shop, when they reached the till their selections would probably be very different. Moore notes that for Bourdieu a “dual logic” would be in operation. There would be the “logic of association” whereby each shopper would make individual choices and the other would be the “logic of difference” relating to the differences their choices. Moore contends that these logics are connected. The logic of association is based on the idea that a person’s choice of literature, music and film is likely to be linked, and that there are calculable statistical probabilities relating to the individual’s taste, mapped by Bourdieu in *Distinction* (1984), associated with the person’s social background, and shared by those of similar background, who use similar “cultural logics” in making selections. The logic of difference entails the principle that a person with a particular habitus will sometimes select what he or she does precisely because it is *not* what another person would select. Moore suggests that the “logics of selection” are connected in that they are culturally and socially at polar opposites:

“At the extremes, one logic of selection would entail “distinction” and the other “vulgarity.” (p.170)

Moore considers the example of the hypothetical shoppers selecting the same item. He suggests that their choice would have been based upon different “cultural logics”:

“For one it is a thing of beauty, but for the other it is delightfully kitsch and will amuse his or her friends at their next dinner party (and, so, increase their stock of social capital in their circle where being clearly amusing in this way is valued as a sign of distinction).” (pp.107-8)

Moore concludes:

“The inequalities associated with cultural capital reflect inequalities in capacities to acquire capital which themselves reflect prior inequalities in the possession of cultural capital.” (p.109)

Here, there is the possibility of a linkage between the works of Bourdieu and Boudon. Boudon’s concept of primary and secondary effects, as Van de Werfhorst and Hofstede (2007) argue, can be explained by cultural capital. Inequalities in cultural capital may obviously inhibit actors’ ability to acquire additional capital at “branching points”, thus the primary effect of cultural capital may shape decision-making, adversely affecting the actors’ ability to acquire greater levels of cultural capital. Education has a singular role to play:

“Those highest in cultural capital in the form of possession of “legitimate culture” are those highest in educational capital” (Moore 2008, p.113).

This explains the crucial role of educational choice in social mobility, and hence the focus of the Labour governments of 1997-2010 on widening participation in higher education, and fair access, as means of promoting social mobility.

Habitus and Rational Choice: Bourdieu, Boudon and rational action revisited

This Chapter has considered the theoretical underpinnings of educational choice mechanisms. Essentially this was an examination of competing theories – Bourdieu’s theories of cultural reproduction and Boudon’s rational choice model. In seeking to reconcile key aspects of these competing theories it is important to note the distinction made by Boudon (1974) between the primary and secondary effects of social stratification. The primary effects of social class are those differences in academic ability generated by family backgrounds. Secondary effects concern the educational choices made by young people (and their parents) at transition (or “branching”) points in educational careers. Boudon’s “simple theoretical scheme” is set out at Appendix B. Boudon notes that primary effects will result in very different academic distributions of higher- and lower-class children, but that if a child from each class reached the same decision point – so that despite primary effects they were faced with the same academic decision – the probabilities of them making the same decision would be different. In the context of my subsequent arguments it is essential to note this is because Boudon argues that the costs and benefits of the decision will vary for each child solely as a result of the differing social status of their families.

In considering choice at branching points Glaesser and Cooper (2014) observe that Boudon, whilst arguing that choice is usually best explained by regarding actions as the result of motivations and reasons, accepts that these may vary according to individual circumstances. Glaesser and Cooper regard this as being closely related to Bourdieu’s theory that habitus shapes both desired goals and the means of attaining them. Vester (2006) considers that primary effects in Boudon’s rational choice model have affinity with Bourdieu’s concept of habitus.

Here it is helpful to consider the nature of rational choice in education. Issues relating to rational action were discussed earlier, and it was noted that Goldthorpe (2007) accepts that actors often do not act purely rationally, and consequently assumptions of rationality must be weakened to 'subjective' rationality. *Subjective* rationality, allowing for the subjective belief of an actor, is distinct from maximising expected utility in the classical economic sense of rational action. Glaesser and Cooper (2014) note that Goldthorpe (2007) sees the need to modify assumptions of rationality given that actors commonly do *not* make choices consistent solely with objective rationality:

“The key idea that has been explored in this connection is that of subjective, as opposed to objective, rationality; that is, the idea that actors may hold beliefs, and in turn pursue courses of action, for which they have ‘good reasons’ in the circumstances in which they find themselves, even though they may fall short of the standard of rationality that utility theory would presuppose.” (Goldthorpe, 2007, p.143)

As for Boudon’s theory, where actors make different choices because of their differing social status, Goldthorpe acknowledges they may make different choices because of differing beliefs. At issue when comparing Boudon and Goldthorpe’s theories of rational action with Simon’s theory of bounded rationality is the nature of rational decision-making and, particularly, constraints on actors’ abilities to make rational choices. Glaesser and Cooper argue that there is a basis for using Boudon and Bourdieu’s approaches together:

“We...make use of Bourdieu’s habitus concept, showing that individual’s ‘subjective rationality’ is shaped by their experience in their families of origin, insofar as the habitus acquired there provides upper and lower boundaries on their expectations and aspirations, and on their sense of what is possible or impossible for them.” (p.5)

Patiniotis and Holdsworth (2005) observe variations in cultural capital amongst working-class students which they contend may also reflect different formations of habitus, in turn producing “divergent HE negotiations and choices” (p.92). They argue that:

“...this does not mean that peoples’ material and emotional experiences of class are not mediated by deep-rooted structural inequalities, but that there is room for fluidity and difference within socially prescribed boundaries.”
(p.92)

There is therefore support for a rationale linking Bourdieu’s theories of habitus to the primary effects of social stratification espoused by Boudon, and also to a secondary effect based upon the influence of habitus. Actors may attempt subjectively rational choices, but these decisions are constrained by the influence of habitus on their objectives. Thus the positioning of much of the literature in respect of educational decision-making within the theoretical framework of Bourdieu’s theories of habitus, field and capital can be reconciled with work on rational choice by Boudon and Goldthorpe.

Glaesser and Cooper (2014) make a convincing argument for combining Bourdieu’s concepts with a rational choice model, as espoused by Boudon, Goldthorpe and others, at the point of decision-making. They argue that rational choice and habitus are not mutually exclusive but complementary, and in combination “give a fuller picture of the social processes under study” (p.475). In many respects I agree, and argue that higher education decision-making is a process in which actors’ decision-making operates in a boundedly rational manner, where the constraints involved have already been ‘conditioned’ by the actors’ habitus. The arguments for a process of ‘conditioned bounded rationality’ are considered more fully later in this chapter and also in Chapter 8.

Glaesser and Cooper test the possibility of combining Bourdieu’s theories with rational choice models in their own case study research on educational choice, setting out a

methodological rationale for their work and noting that they would expect to find some evidence of RAT-type reasoning in individuals' accounts of their choice processes. They then explore whether there is such evidence from participants in their own case. They assess this initially in fairly broad terms, and note that almost all of their interviewees exhibit at least one instance of such of reasoning. In this case study, as I note in Chapter 8, there is universal demonstration of aspects of rational choice – as illustrated by this participant's comment:

“...if you're...determined to make something of your education then it really is worth investing, erm, that amount of money...because, hopefully, you'll be earning enough money to pay it off.” Subject G5, Interview 1, p.5.

Glaesser and Cooper contend that the young people in their study have an instrumental view of educational credentials; all are seen as leading to more money and/or better jobs. Again, this is mirrored in my research, demonstrating consideration of the benefits of undertaking a degree. The following comment is typical:

“I think if you end up goin' ...it's better...like, you end up getting a better job. Or better prospects.” Subject T3, Interview 2, p.2.

In Glaesser and Cooper's study there was also evidence of consideration of both direct monetary costs and more indirect costs of further study such as less time with family and friends. Again, these issues are contemplated by participants in my research, as this comment demonstrates: “...I'm quite close with my mum...I thought that...if I move away...I'd get homesick.” Subject G8, Interview 2, p.2

Glaesser and Cooper note that interviewees expressed concern that they might not complete a more demanding course of study, showing that they took potential failure and its costs into account. They note that this concern was only exhibited by working-class

respondents. Similar concerns were expressed by some respondents in this case study.

The following comment, concerning possible drop out, illustrates this:

“...‘cos if ya that far away and you didn’t really like it, it’s like, now that the fees have gone up, it’s just wasting yer money.” Subject T3, Interview 1, p.2

It can be argued, then, both in Glaesser and Cooper’s work and in this research, that interviewees demonstrated rational thinking, considering the costs and benefits of future actions. It is also evident that there are differences in this assessment process rooted in considerations of habitus and social class. In Chapter 5, I note that Ball et al (2002) distinguished higher education decision-making from a process of choice. In doing so they argue that decision-making “alludes to both power and constraint” (p.52), implicitly introducing the notion of boundaries to higher-education decision-making. This formulation has significant parallels with Simon’s (1956) theories of bounded rationality. Both assume a largely rational decision-making process constrained in one respect by the actors’ ability to choose and secondly by issues of context or environment.

Here the concept of careership (Hodkinson, 1995; Hodkinson and Sparkes, 1997; Hodkinson, 2008) is worthy of exploration. Explicitly this literature concerns careers advice rather than higher education choice, and is rated in a Bourdieusian analysis of subjects’ motivations and circumstances. However, there are aspects of the work that consider Boudon’s notion of decision-making at branching points, without citing his work, and a detailed consideration of the nature of rational decision making. Whilst ultimately suggesting a more nuanced theoretical approach, I find much in the work on careership that is consistent with my own findings, considered in Chapter 8.

Key features of careership are set out by Hodkinson and Sparkes (1997):

“Sociological literature emphasises the dominance of socially-structural pathways, whilst policy-making operates on assumptions of individual freedom to choose...we draw upon the work of Pierre Bourdieu to present a new model of career decision-making, given the shorthand title of ‘careership’. There are three completely integrated dimensions to the model. These are (i) pragmatically rational decision-making, located in the habitus of the person making the decision; (ii) the interactions with other in the...field. Related to the unequal resources different ‘players’ possess; and (iii) the location of the decisions within the partly unpredictable pattern of turning-points and routines that make up the life course. This model avoids the twin pitfalls of implicit social determinism or of seeing (young) people as completely free agents.” (p.29)

Hodkinson and Sparkes raise the issue of the failure of the literature to consider ways in which young people actually make educational choices, and address the question in some detail. They conclude:

“Within a field, people make pragmatically rational decisions within their culturally-derived horizons for action, at turning-points. These turning-points are both preceded and followed by periods of routine, which themselves are located within the field and the macro-context. The periods of routine and the turning-points are themselves inter-related, so that neither can be fully understood without the other...” (p.41)

Careership thus encompasses key aspects of Boudon and Bourdieu’s theories, together with issues of constrained rational choice very similar to Simon’s concept of bounded rationality, explored in the following section.

Bounded Rationality

Economic Theories:

Having established that a rational action type decision-making process is in operation it is useful to briefly consider the literature in this area. There is, however, an issue to resolve in terms of nomenclature. Rubenstein (1998) notes that Simon distinguishes between *substantive rationality* and *procedural rationality*. Substantive rationality refers to choices that are appropriate to the achievement of given goals within the limits imposed by given conditions and constraints, whereas procedurally rational choices are

the outcome of appropriate deliberation; that is, there is some strategy of reasoning. Procedurally rational choices might therefore be regarded as *subjectively* rational (in Goldthorpe's terms); they are not the outcome of impulsive responses lacking adequate thought (Rubenstein, 1998).

Boudon (1992) refers to subjective rationality in seeking to explain social behaviour. He cites Simon, who uses the terms *subjective* and *bounded* rationality interchangeably:

"In a broad sense rationality denotes a style of behaviour that is appropriate to the achievement of given goals, within the limits imposed by certain conditions and constraints...The conditions and constraints...may be objective characteristics of the environment external to the choosing organism, they may be perceived characteristics, or they may be characteristics of the organism itself that it takes as fixed and not subjective to its own control. The line between the first case and the other two is sometimes drawn by distinguished objective rationality, on the one hand, from subjective or bounded rationality, on the other." (Simon, 1982, p.8)

It seems reasonable to assume that what sociologists such as Goldthorpe term *subjective rationality* is similar to behaviour that Simon refers to as *bounded rationality*. This is significant, as there is a body of economic literature that deals with bounded rationality, which may provide useful theoretical insights into the decision-making processes of students in this case study.

A key conceptual element of bounded rationality is the notion of *satisficing*. This was considered earlier, where it was noted that Glaesser and Cooper consider that if a subjective view of rationality is allowed within a rational choice model, it follows that actors do not always act on the best information possible, but rather on that available to them at reasonable cost. If they are unaware that they do not have access to complete information, or if it would be too costly (or unfeasible) to obtain additional information, they may make a decision on the basis of incomplete information. Described by Glaesser

and Cooper as 'satisficing', this is a direct link with the economic literature in respect of bounded rationality.

Rubinstein (1998) notes that, although Herbert Simon has written papers on bounded rationality since the 1950s, this had little impact on mainstream economic theory until relatively recently. Simon himself noted that his suggested approach had not spread "in more than small degree" to other social sciences (Simon, 2000, p.31). This may explain why explorations of Rational Action Theory by Goldthorpe and others did not address consideration of bounded rationality. Gigerenzer and Goldstein (1996) note that Simon's insight that individuals should be understood relative to the environment in which they developed, rather than by the "tenets of classical rationality" (p.3) had so far had little impact on research. There is surely a suggestion here that Bourdieu's theories of cultural capital – most specifically habitus and field – might be relevant in considering the operation of models involving bounded rationality.

Gigerenzer and Selton (2001) contend that bounded rationality cannot be precisely defined, but instead is "a problem that needs to be explored" (p.151). However, in exploring bounded rationality in outline it is possible to see how the attitudes and actions of the case study participants may be considered consistent with a theoretical model with its foundations in bounded rationality.

To some extent bounded rationality sits in contrast to classical rationality. A classically rational decision maker selects an alternative after a process of consideration in which three questions are answered:

1. "What is feasible?"
2. "What is desirable?"

3. "What is the best alternative according to the notion of desirability, given the feasibility constraints?" (Rubinstein, 1998, p.7).

Rubenstein notes a key assumption regarding the rational chooser: the operations of discovering the feasible alternatives and defining preferences are entirely independent. In addition, the decision maker has full knowledge of the range of alternatives available, and a complete ordering of preferences over the entire set of alternatives. Moreover, the chooser has the skill and knowledge necessary to assess the optimal course of action and mistakes are not made. It is perhaps unsurprising that Rubinstein should observe:

"Economists have often been apologetic about the assumption that decision makers behave like the 'rational man'. Introspection suggests that those assumptions are often unrealistic. This is probably the reason why economists argued...that the rational man paradigm has to be taken less literally." (p.10)

In contrast, what is bounded rationality? Theories of bounded rationality incorporate constraints on the information-processing capacities of the actor (Simon, 1982, p.162) or, as Gigerenzer and Selton characterise it, "nonoptimising procedures" (2001, p.15). As Lindenberg (2001) notes, Simon relaxed some of the central assumptions of classical rationality, essentially on empirical grounds. First, Simon suggests that alternatives are generally not fixed in advance, but identified or generated by the actor. In addition, the process of identification or generation is not an optimal search but is heuristic, because the possibilities and combinations are such that search costs are not known in advance. Second, he argues that it should not be assumed that the probability of outcomes is known in advance. Instead, it should be assumed that people develop strategies for dealing with uncertainty that do not assume complete knowledge of probabilities. Third, Simon argues that utility maximisation should not be assumed. Instead he argues that the heuristic search for alternatives ends when a certain criterion is reached (a stop rule), and that the

consequences of alternatives are estimated by simple heuristic strategies. Simon (1956, 1982) termed this process *satisficing*, as a blend of *sufficing* and *satisfying*. Jointly, he called these three propositions *bounded rationality*. Simon (2000) summarised his arguments as follows:

“...choices people make are determined not only by some consistent overall goal and the properties of the external world, but also by the knowledge that decision makers do and don't have of the world, their ability or inability to evoke that knowledge when it is relevant, to work out the consequences of their actions, to conjure up possible courses of action, to cope with uncertainty (including uncertainty deriving from the possible responses of other actors), and to adjudicate among their many competing wants. Rationality is bounded because these abilities are severely limited.” (p.25)

Simon (1956) emphasised that minds are adapted to real-world environments. He argues that:

“Human rational behaviour is shaped by a scissors whose two blades are the structure of task environments and the computational capabilities of the actor.” (1990, p.7)

Gigerenzer and Goldstein (1996) comment that Simon's insight that people should be understood relative to the environment in which they developed, rather than by the levels of classical rationality, has had little impact so far in research (p3). However, whilst Simon urges this understanding, he does not set out how it should be achieved. To re-state Wrong's critique of Coleman's rational choice theories considered earlier in this chapter:

“Are we likely to rest content with a theory that makes a purely pragmatic case for itself...Are we not likely at some point to be driven to ask: 'but what are human beings really like and how do they get that way?' ” (1994, pp.200-1)

I believe that this potential criticism of Simon's bounded rationality theory is capable of being addressed by allowing the possibility that constraints on actors arise by means of

the operation of Bourdieu's theories of habitus, field and capital. Actors may attempt at least subjectively rational choices, but these decisions are constrained by the influence of habitus on their expectations and aspirations. The framing of much of the literature in respect of educational decision making within the theoretical framework of Bourdieu's theories of habitus, field and capital can, arguably, be reconciled with Boudon's work on rational choice. The next chapter considers the application of Bourdieu's theories within the literature on educational decision making.

CHAPTER 5: THE LITERATURE RELATING TO HIGHER EDUCATION CHOICE OR DECISION MAKING

Bourdieu's theories of habitus, field and capital: links to higher education decision making.

Patiniotis and Holdsworth (2005) note that Bourdieu's theory of cultural and social reproduction is now "almost *de rigeur*" when seeking to "unpack" the experience of 'non-traditional' students in HE (p.84). Archer (in Archer et al, 2003) observes that Bourdieu's work has been used as the basis for the development of a conceptual framework for understanding the factors underlying choice in relation to higher education by several researchers. She singles out Diane Reay and Stephen Ball (and colleagues) for examining how Bourdieu's concepts of 'habitus' and 'cultural capital' are inextricably involved in students' and their families' classed education choices. Indeed, Ball et al (2002) and Reay et al (2005) identify the same passage in Bourdieu's work to explain the relevance of Bourdieu's concepts, and contend that:

"...the perceptions, distinctions and choices of higher education institutions used and made by students play a part in reconstituting and reproducing the divisions and hierarchies in higher education". (Reay et al pp.28-29, Ball et al p.52)

This is expressed succinctly by Ball et al – "...this is social class 'in the head'." Both Reay et al and Ball et al contend that in its most important respects choice of university is governed by issues of taste, lifestyle and – especially – social class. Potential students' social class cannot be the sole determinant of their choice of institution and course, but there is a general consensus that there are class-based biases in institutional choice. The data noted in Chapter 3 support Ball et al's view that there is a relationship between the position of universities in the reputational hierarchy, along with their social exclusivity,

and student choice. Ball et al argue that this is a key factor in both the generation and reproduction of differentiation. They conclude that the process of choice is concerned with “cultural and social capital, material constraints, social perceptions and distinctions and forms of self-exclusion” (p.54). Consequently social class is an important subtext of the choice process, operating as a means of class-matching (p.29). There is therefore a link in the literature relating to higher education access and participation between Bourdieu’s concepts of field, habitus and cultural capital, and the process of student choice or decision-making. The literature explores the process of choice or decision making. This is not a meaningless distinction. Ball et al observe that:

“In many respects, what we address here may be better described as decision-making...higher education choice is a form of ‘extensive problem solving’. Where choice suggests openness in relation to a psychology of preferences, decision-making alludes to both power and constraint.” (p.52)

The notion of constraint raises the issue of barriers to entry, considered more fully later in this section. Clearly a fundamental initial barrier is the possession of the necessary qualifications for university entry. Ball et al observe that these are notionally objective differences “driving or excluding” choices, some of which are only made accessible by certain levels of academic achievement. Here the work of Boliver (2013) is relevant, as is that of Naidoo (2004) who asserts that the higher education system reproduces the principles of social class domination “under the cloak of academic neutrality.” (see Chapter 3)

Beyond considerations of entry qualifications it is clear that because of course-level stratification even well-qualified working-class applicants may be disadvantaged in the selection process. Furlong and Cartmel (2009) consider this, noting a strong division between vocational and non-vocational subjects. They comment that traditionally, with

the exception of law and medicine, vocational subjects were unusual in the university sector and tended to be studied, often at sub-degree level, in colleges and polytechnics. Furlong and Cartmel observe that a large element of the growth in HE has stemmed from the requirement for degree entry in areas where this was not previously required. They argue that working-class students have been consistently more likely to choose vocational subjects in preference to academic disciplines, especially if these subjects are unfamiliar or regarded as “posh” (2009, p.25). Furlong and Cartmel go on to note evidence demonstrating that even when young people from working-class families obtain the highest grades, they are disadvantaged in the selection process, especially in areas with high middle-class demand, such as medicine (p.28). They describe differences in cultural and social capital experienced by the ‘qualified but disadvantaged’ (p.29). This is fundamental in understanding decision-making by young people from working-class backgrounds when contemplating higher education. As Hatcher (1998) says “...rational choice ... is a significant element in many transitional decisions, but it is neither a necessary nor a sufficient one” (p.16). This is supported by Ball et al (2002) who observe that “...the process of choice is a lot more than just a matching of qualifications to attainments.” As noted in Chapter 3, Furlong and Cartmel argue that if qualifications are used as a “filter”, an illusion of fairness can be preserved, and failure by the disadvantaged can be ascribed to deficits in ability or effort. Ball et al (2002) contend that HE choice takes place in different “registers of meaning”, one cognitive/performative, matching anticipated performance to the selectivity of institutions, the other social/cultural based in social classifications of self and institutions, with the weight placed on these “registers of meaning” likely to be skewed by social class.

Furlong and Cartmel (2009) note that usually "...it is the middle-class student who embarks on a process of 'rational' decision-making" (p28). This is considered by Reay et al:

"Middle-class young people ... talked of going to university as 'automatic', 'taken for granted', 'always assumed'. The decision to go to university is a non-decision. It is rational and it is not. This is the work of 'class wisdom' ...these middle-class young people move in their world as a fish in water and 'need not engage in rational computation in order to reach the goals that best suit their interests!' " (2005, pp.33)

This indicates that choice is less constrained for middle-class students. However, I believe that middle-class choice is not quite as easy as Reay et al suggest. Whilst middle-class students may be less anxious about *whether* they will participate, HE is highly stratified, thus the middle-class choice process is potentially fraught with anxiety – will a place be secured at the 'right' university? Hence the nature of the constraints upon decision making, and the kind of outcome considered satisfactory, are different for middle-class students. This has a direct bearing on the notion of conditioned bounded rationality discussed in Chapter 8. A similar point to that made by Reay et al is set out by Maguire, Ball and Macrae (2000) who found that for middle-class students, with increased social and economic capital, the choice process is different. Maguire et al argue that working-class students experience greater risks and constraints framing their decision-making. They suggest that, for working-class applicants, the importance of 'fitting in' and 'feeling comfortable' within an institution may dissuade them from applying to prestigious universities which transmit a message that they are 'not for the likes of us' through an institutional habitus that alienates working-class students (p5). Again, this links to the concept of conditioned bounded rationality, and can be seen from the case study findings, set out in Chapter 7. There are also links to the concept of ontological security, which also emerged strongly from the case study. For all

participants the choice was far from being clear-cut. Some of those who were able to visit more prestigious institutions were discomfited by their experience. Archer et al (2003) suggest that within the arena of higher education “...participation is an inherently more risky, costly and uncertain ‘choice’ for working-class groups.” This was certainly the case for participants in this research, who found the choice process to be notably stressful.

A more nuanced view is offered by Ball et al (2002):

“...it is important to make the point that the ‘normal’ biographies of middle-class students are neither without risk nor without reflexivity. The differences here are a matter of degree. The risks and reflexivity of the middle-classes are about staying as they are and who they are. Those of the working-classes are about being different people in different places, about who they might become and what they must give up.” (p.69)

Ball et al also suggest this is particularly an issue for students closest (on either side) to the ill-defined boundary between the working and middle-classes:

“Choice is heavily imbued with meaning-giving perceptions, but most heavily...in the choice-making of those students and families seeking to achieve or maintain (with varying success) middle-class social positions and lifestyles. HE access and choice is a key area of social reproduction struggles, but these struggles cannot be reduced to the emotionless and acultural development of ‘rational action’ – wherein education is viewed simply as an investment good.” (p.69)

This is considered by Power et al (2003) who “question ... the implied homogeneity of middle-classness and the consequently assumed ease of progression.” (p81)

What, then, is the nature of higher education choice or rather decision-making? Ball et al’s differentiation between cognitive/performative considerations and those that are social/cultural appears both to align with Bourdieu’s theories and be supported in the rest of the literature on HE choice. The literature mainly deals with ‘social/cultural’ factors.

Higher Education Choice

Foskett and Hemsley-Brown (2001) comment that research into higher education choice is not extensive. In modelling the parameters of HE choice they consider the work of Watts (1972), who sought to develop a theoretical model of the HE process, but conclude that the model is limited and not transferable to more current circumstances. They prefer Connor et al's (1999) argument that choice is the product of the interaction of two key influences – students and their advisers on one part, and the education system on the other. They observe that this model could be built on the work of Bredo, Foessom and Laursen (1993) and suggest that a more complete model would subject Connor et al's two elements to external social, economic and political influences.

Having established a conceptual model of HE choice, Foskett and Hemsley-Brown seek to identify factors underpinning specific choices made by individuals about HE, which they observe has been the focus of much of the existing research in the field. Emphasising the need to recognise the unique influences on each individual applicant, they seek to identify “... a number of key factors ... on the basis of consistent patterns in the research evidence” (p.164).

Foskett and Hemsley-Brown first assert that the “primacy of subject choice in the process of HE selection” (p.164) is evident from the research literature, and choice of subject is the limiting factor in applicants' information searches. This seems unexceptional, and whilst there is nothing in the literature on student choice, widening access and first generation entry to HE to contradict Foskett and Hemsley-Brown, equally there seems little to expressly support it. This is perhaps because much of the literature is concerned with widening access. Accepting, then, the “primacy of the

subject”, what other factors are identified in the literature? The position is summarised in Table 5.1:

Table 5.1 Broad factors influencing HE choice

Broad nature of key factors influencing decision	Identified in the literature by:		
	Foskett and Hemsley-Brown (2001)	Connor et al (2001)	Forsyth and Furlong (2000)
Relating to learning experience	✓	✓ (“educational”)	✓ (“educational”)
Relating to entry requirements	✓	✓ (“educational”)	✓ (“educational”)
Anticipated lifestyle	✓	✓ (“HE institutional”)	✓ (“social”)
Output factors incl. graduate employment prospects	✓	✓ (“financial”)	✓ (“financial”)
Geographical	✓	X	✓
Background and support	X	✓	X

There is a broad consensus on the nature of the factors involved in choice if some categories are interpreted loosely. A modest adjustment is suggested as follows:

1. Educational (including entry requirements, factors relating to learning experience, other institutional factors);
2. Family background and support;
3. Geographical;
4. Financial;
5. Social; and
6. Outcomes.

Such categorisations cannot be unduly prescriptive, because the boundaries between categories may be ill-defined and issues may be capable of interpretation in a variety of

ways. For example, applicants may be reluctant to consider a choice of institution that would require them to live away from home. This might be considered to be a geographical issue, but the decision may be driven by consideration of the additional costs (and so be financial) or by a desire to continue living at home (and hence be a family background & support issue). Mangan, Hughes and Slack (2010) note that in decision-making “locality and finance were entwined” (p.466). This is apparent in the case study findings, set out in Chapter 7. As Foskett and Hemsley-Brown observe “...factors are, of course, not discrete. They overlap, they reinforce or contradict each other, each may be interpreted in a negative or positive light...” (2001, p.164)

Factors affecting higher education choice and access

1. Education

The notion of “qualifications as currency” to achieve higher education access was raised in Chapter 3. Given the primacy of being qualified to participate, Furlong and Cartmel (2009) agree that the most significant issue with respect to HE access – particularly for under-represented groups – is that the quality of secondary schooling isn’t merely an issue of producing students with the qualifications needed for university entry. A key consideration is knowledge about, and attitudes towards, the higher education system, both from families of potential students but, where this is lacking, from schools themselves. Furlong and Cartmel observe that potential students from schools or families with extensive knowledge of the university system can draw on information about opportunities that other groups lack. Connor et al (1999) suggest that first generation applicants from schools that send few pupils on to HE can find it difficult to choose between institutions and courses, and the process of choice may be perceived as unduly complex (p.30). In this case choice is made easier if the institutional habitus of the school

is supportive of informed higher education choice. This is clear in this research, where the process of choice has been perceived as complex by the participants, but supported by the institution.

Information, advice and guidance (IAG) can be decisive. Reay et al (2005) note that the quality of careers advice impacts directly on students' higher education destinations. IAG provided by teachers and careers advisors can be perceived as inadequate and superficial by those with little or no insight into the functioning of the higher education system or future careers (Thomas, Quinn, Slack and Casey, 2002). Forsyth and Furlong (2000) found that pupils felt that teachers and careers officers should be more proactive in motivating potential students. In schools serving deprived areas, pupils frequently felt teachers placed an emphasis on entering employment in preference to higher education. Forsyth and Furlong found what Furlong and Cartmel (2009) refer to as a "culturally-framed communication gap" which had at its roots class-based stereotypes among teachers and careers advisors who were perceived by potential applicants as undermining their plans and belittling their aspirations.

In contrast, Forsyth and Furlong reported neutral support systems through which young people who aspired to higher education helped to support and encourage each other. Importantly, they found a sense of belonging in a school context where their aspirations made them atypical. However, Forsyth and Furlong also identified that some potential applicants faced pressure from family and friends not to pursue higher education, and consequently a strong counterbalancing influence was often necessary for them to maintain their university applications.

Both Reay et al (2005) and Connor, Dewson, Tyers, Eccles, Regan and Aston (2001) found a contrasting position in respect of further education. Connor et al, whilst noting variation between colleges, observed that “FE college tutors were almost unanimously praised for their support, encouragement, advice and help in decision making” (p.37). Reay et al make similar observations whilst examining the extent to which student decision-making is a collective or individualised process, part of the organisational practices which make up institutional habitus. They note marked differences in their study between the FE college and other institutions in the extent to which higher education decision-making was a collective rather than an individualised process. They found that FE students were much more likely to use the collective ‘we’ when discussing the choice process, and both FE tutors and students talked extensively about processes of mutual support, which were less evident elsewhere (pp.54-55). Reay et al (2005) explore whether this approach is based in differences in students’ social class or arises as a result of institutional influences. They do not reach a conclusion, but believe that the FE college process was a significant influence. In the context of Access to HE students Reay et al observe decision making in:

“...a context independent of the family, schooling and social networks... This greater degree of separation from other possible influences increases the impact that FE colleges can exert over choices. Paradoxically, the greater freedom and distance from other conventional sources of influence...means that [access students] no less than the private students, are subject to a more powerful institutional habitus than would generally be found in the non-selective state sector.” (p.54)

They note that this is because the influences of family and friends outside the college are relatively weak compared to that of the educational institution. As will be seen in Chapter 7 there are some clear parallels in this research.

Reay et al (2005) identify educational status and institutional habitus as key in limiting possibilities for applicant choice, noting that:

“Perception, expectation and choice all relate to and play their part in reproducing social structures. The private school students express high levels of preference for Oxbridge and virtually no interest in the post-1992 universities. The FE students do not even consider Oxbridge. It is ‘not for the likes of them’ ”. (p.44)

Reay et al argue that the curriculum is integral to institutional habitus and underpins the status of institutions. They note that private schools offer subjects which anticipate that pupils will choose ‘traditional’ courses at more élite universities, whilst in the state sector subjects available are more novel and vocational, and have a greater degree of fit with course offerings at new universities. Reay et al observe that in different circumstances of advantage and disadvantage a good choice may mean different things, and result in quite different options. They cite an independent boys’ school where the head of careers describes a good university in terms clearly linked to Oxbridge and the Russell Group. They contrast this with an FE college where:

“... advice and support is shaped by a recognition of not only the necessity to think local but also of existing prejudices, particularly in the élite universities, towards...[FE] students. A good choice is one which builds on longstanding relationship with a number of local higher education institutions....” (pp.46-47)

Reay et al note these observations highlight the importance of the institutional habituses of schools and colleges.

Anticipated experiences within HE were a factor within the choice process for case study participants. Often this was prompted by ‘hot’ knowledge. Thomas and Quinn (2007) highlight problematic experiences within HE, which concerned difficulties in transition to higher education. These included difficulty in adapting to less interactive teaching;

reliance on independent learning; large groups with insufficient practical work; lack of formative assessment and feedback; and more distant relationships with staff. For some students Thomas and Quinn note that the combination of an increased workload and the freedom to 'cop out' was an unfortunate combination. They also observe that difficulties were experienced even by more able students who had 'coasted through' school or college, and for these students their confidence was impacted, leading to feelings of loss of control. Many students didn't feel that they had any relationship with teaching staff, who were often perceived as unapproachable by students whose names they did not know (pp.89-91). Many of these issues were anticipated by case study participants.

Bathmaker (2010) considers 'dual sector' institutions, such as the case study college, and their role in creating a 'seamless' system which overcomes the boundaries between sectors in post-secondary education. Whilst she argues that duality may mean access to certain forms of lower-status higher education only, Bathmaker acknowledges that such dual sector institutions offer a particular opportunity compared with other HE institutions to enable students to deal with boundaries related to space, place and knowledge. In terms of space and place she suggests that duality may make HE a "less alien world". In respect of knowledge she highlights:

"...boundaries between levels and types of knowledge, particularly between theoretical and applied knowledge, or academic and vocational knowledge, and the varying relationship and balance between these different forms of knowledge at different levels of study." (p.89)

Bathmaker argues that dual sector institutions are in a position to create connections between FE and HE which support transition, removing barriers between them. However, she urges caution, noting that dual sector institutions do not necessarily try to align their work across two sectors. She cites Wheelahan (2009) who suggests that:

“...epistemological boundaries must be explicitly navigated rather than ignored, if students are to be supported in crossing them.” (p.36)

Issues of transition across FE/HE boundaries were certainly considered by many case study students. As Cristofoli and Watts (2007) observe, without access to HE through the FE sector many students would not be engaging with HE at all. Whilst Bathmaker reminds us that dual sector institutions form part of a system of higher education that is not merely differentiated but stratified, and that they are positioned at the bottom of the hierarchy of institutional status, she cites Cristofoli and Watts with approval. They argue that:

“...we should acknowledge that the HE experiences of these students in the FE sector is preferable to the alternative of not engaging with HE at all.” (p.63).

2. Family background and support

Several aspects of family background may affect potential applicants' higher education choices. Forsyth and Furlong (2003) assert that those from disadvantaged backgrounds face cultural barriers in every stage of transition to HE, from whether to stay in post-compulsory education to which institution and what course to study. This reflects Boudon's primary and secondary effects of social stratification considered in Chapter 4; Thomas and Quinn (2007) argue that parents play a major role in first shaping students' decisions about whether to participate in post-compulsory education and then where to study and what course to follow. They note a class-based division: those from higher managerial / professional backgrounds encourage participation in HE, whilst some working-class participants self-excluded or selected options where they would 'fit in' (p.75). Whilst there was evidence of case study participants applying to institutions where they believed that they would be comfortable, there was also evidence of parents

from lower socio-economic groups actively encouraging their children to study for a degree:

“I talked through it a lot with my parents and I think they em...helped sort of keep me on track....” Subject G5, Interview 2, p.6

In the context of first generation entry to higher education, Thomas and Quinn note key shared assumptions that circulate in relation to the impact of family background. These are summarised by Knighton (2002) – in a Canadian context – who states that parental educational attainment is a persistently strong factor in terms of students’ post-secondary educational success. Knighton considers that parents with more education more often share their children’s intellectual interests and engage in a manner conducive to achievement. She argues that they have greater involvement with their children’s education and higher expectations for academic success. Consequently they provide their children with an environment conducive to educational success (p.18). Bowers-Brown (2006) notes that students from lower socio-economic groups who enter HE are more likely to have familial experience of higher education than those who do not progress to study for a degree.

Parental influence may be positive or negative. Reay et al (2005), citing Tysome (2004), note that “parents are having an increasing impact on how candidates choose courses and institutions” (p.61). They consider the issue of which parents exert influence and in which ways, including parental interest, influence, investment and intrusion whilst drawing on the notion of familial habitus – “the deeply ingrained system of perspectives, experiences and predispositions family members share” (p.61). They assert that familial habitus is “profoundly” influenced by the educational attainment and experiences of parents, to the extent that even for the middle-classes, if there is limited experience of

HE families are less secure within the field than those families where a member has experience of university (2005, p.62). Reay et al cite Bourdieu in support of their contention, noting his assertion that familial habitus results in the tendency to acquire expectations that are adjusted to what is acceptable 'for people like us' (Bourdieu, 1984, pp.64-5). Thomas and Quinn (2007) argue that:

“Although parental education is closely linked to social class, educational background has its own significant dimensions...Parental education is a significant determining factor for cultural, social and economic capital for a young person in relation to progressing to HE.” (p.78).

In respect of higher education, Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) assert that where families' views on the possibility of access to HE fall – whether impossible, probable or banal – influences everything in the conduct of those families and children as “...behaviour tends to be governed by what is 'reasonable' to accept” (p.26). Reay (2005) argues for young people from working-class families, educational decisions are often framed by the need to secure an identity underpinned by class-based 'authenticity' (p.7). Thomas and Quinn (2007) assert that where students are from communities where participation is not the norm they need to develop a sense of entitlement to participate in higher education, rather than perceiving it as a privilege, otherwise they will feel that they are “breaking the mould” and this may act as a barrier. They argue that students who are the first in their family to attend university can feel that they do not have the right to be there, harming their self-confidence (p.77). It is arguable that such an absence of a sense of entitlement is linked to self-selection by non-traditional students who avoid more established and prestigious institutions. Thomas and Quinn state that many students from under-represented groups feel as if they have to learn to 'play the game', and Forsyth and Furlong (2003) found that these young people had a lack of prior knowledge of what student life involved. Participants in the UCAS (2002) study expressed similar

views and felt that they were insufficiently prepared for the move from a “cosseted learning style to...independent HE” (p.30). This was supported in the case study:

“You think that when you get to uni you’re gunna be all grown up and you’re gunna be ready and you’re not...” Subject G3, Interview 3, p.3.

Thomas and Quinn (2007) cite two studies which found that non-traditional students were discomfited by a perceived lack of supervision and guidance. Students felt that they were expected to be “too independent too early”, and were anxious as a result of being unsure how to structure academic writing and uncertain about assignments. A similar attitude was apparent in the case study:

“See I look at how much one-to-one time you would get. That, that’d be something that swayed me the most because I like, to be like, to be able to sit down with someone and know if I’m doing something that is totally off the mark or if I’m giving something that is gunna get me the grade.” Subject G8, Interview 1, p.12.

Thomas and Quinn argue that this lack of knowledge may be viewed as a lack of cultural capital which is “further compounded” for first-generation students who are unable to seek guidance from family (p.77).

Whilst not disputing Thomas and Quinn’s views, there is an alternative perspective on this evidence. This is that first time entrants may recognise some or all of these issues; their ‘self-selection’ away from elite institutions may be a rational choice recognising the importance of higher education and seeking to minimise the risk of non-completion. Thus, post-1992 universities and other local choices for HE may – in ‘subjectively rational’ terms - be more suitable for students whose range of options seem limited by familial habitus. Cristofoli and Watts (2007) suggest that for many – if not most – students choosing HE in FE, the alternative would be to not enter HE at all. They argue that for these students FE colleges are “not a last resort but a first choice” (p.62) and

note that for these students choice may be constrained by factors such as socio-economic backgrounds, the need to study close to home, and conflict between individual and institutional identities. Importantly, they suggest that restricting choice to more traditional forms of higher education might result in them dropping out altogether. They note seamless progression from FE to HE and a student-centred, supportive environment for learners who have the aptitude for HE but need their skills and confidence developing, as key advantages of HE in FE (p.7). This contrasts with what Reay et al (2005) describe as the “majority of the middle-class families [for whom] university attendance was taken for granted” (p.62). They note that:

“Familial habitus results in the tendency to acquire expectations that are adjusted to what is acceptable ‘for people like us’... A significant majority of middle-class applicants in our study were engaged with higher education choice in contexts of certainty and entitlement” (p.62).

This brings to mind Bourdieu’s claims that middle-class children “move in their world as fish in water” (1990, p.108), an analogy highlighted by Ball et al (2002) in their analysis of young people’s university choices. However, the middle-classes should not be regarded as homogenous: Reay et al (2005) note the “...conscious application and hard work novitiate middle-class families had to engage in” (p.63) observing also that “For other middle-class families there was no seamless process.” Davey (2012) similarly observes that the “middle-class ‘tag’ is one that obscures varied compositions of capital and widely divergent dispositions to the university decision-making process” (p.2).

Ball et al observe a high level of middle-class parental involvement in the process of higher education choice, whether explicit or implicit; middle-class parents and children noted that students asserted their individuality and spoke in terms of making their own

decisions, and parents spoke of listening and giving advice rather than attempting to make decisions for their children. Reay et al argue that:

“...the influences of, in particular, established middle-class habitus...meant that some young people’s minds had been made up long before the move to sixth form...” (p.66).

They contend that established middle-class families, particularly those whose children are privately educated, engage in processes of cultural reproduction which ensures the reproduction of familial habitus. They describe such students as being “subtly, tacitly, yet still powerfully influenced by family dispositions” (p.68).

In contrast to this middle-class picture of intense involvement, Reay et al note that students from working-class families felt their parents lacked the necessary competence to engage constructively with the higher education choice process. They quote one student:

“They haven’t been to university themselves so they don’t know a lot about which are the best places to go. My dad says ‘it’s just up to you’...” (p.65)

The case study experience of some students was similar:

“They don’t know anything about uni so they kind of can’t help.” Subject G4, Interview 2, p.2

Patiniotis and Holdsworth (2005) note a strong desire from many working-class parents for their children to follow middle-class patterns and study for a degree. However, they note that:

“...for some students, responding to parental aspirations was a source of anxiety if these aspirations were not backed up by practical experiences of HE, which meant that they felt that their parents did not understand the difficulties that they faced and could not support them.” (p.90)

Beyond working-class unfamiliarity with higher education, Reay et al (2005) quote a student indicating the unsuitability of working-class familial habitus for dealing with higher education choice:

“All of us are very short-term people, we don’t think about the future that much until it arrives. Which is good to some degree but not really in situations like sorting out university because you don’t sort of get what you need to get done.” (p.65)

Reay et al cite Pugsley (1998) who noted that some young people chose to bypass parents in the choice process, recognising that many are “ill-equipped to engage with the discourses of the higher education market” (Pugsley, 1998, p.85). Reay et al comment:

“Social class is again key. It is parents with no history of higher education themselves who are primarily seen as unable to make a contribution.” (p.75)

Reay et al note that most of the students in the study who were the first generation in their family to apply to university – in particular the FE students – presented both of their parents as “peripheral to the higher education choice process” (p.75). In the case study whilst parents may have been ‘peripheral’ in many respects, this did not preclude them from involvement in some aspects of choice. For example, they may have acknowledged only limited ability to assess the merits of institutions, but felt free to exhort students not to study away from home:

“Erm, they don’t want me to go away...well not too far away, but they, like they are really supportive of it like, they want me to go and do well in everything, but they just don’t really want me to move away yet...” Subject T1, Interview 1, p.2.

Brooks (2002) establishes that although parents are widely consulted, they are not regarded as the most useful source of advice. However, Reay et al conclude that – despite the denials of many students – even when they were not exercising direct influence,

“parents and families exerted powerful indirect influences that delineated the field of possible choices” (p.78).

The issues raised in this section in relation to institutional and familial habitus and the class-related involvement of parents in HE decision making are all relevant in the context of the case study institution. Participants are mainly students with little or no familial experience of higher education. Consequently, as seen in Chapter 7, in many cases family influence on the choice of institution was limited, but it was clear that familial factors influenced other aspects of choice, particularly geography.

3. Geography

Research by MORI (2005) highlights the tendency of working-class students to continue to live with their parents, preferring the company of friends in their local community. Often they are obliged to commute relatively long distances. MORI show the ability to continue living at home is twice as important for working-class students when compared with their middle-class contemporaries, even though three in five students feel that those who live at home do not get the full student experience. Whilst Patiniotis and Holdsworth (2005) found in their survey 78 percent of students reported that they were doing so for financial reasons, and that living at home is a money-saving strategy, in fact the choice also related to confidence, awareness and expectation, community and tradition. Patiniotis and Holdsworth argue that for students with no familial experience of HE, the choice of higher education itself represents a departure from “traditional norms” and thus “disjuncture and uncertainty”, and consequently risk. They argue that decisions about how to participate in HE are not merely influenced by cultural capital but also the need, particularly amongst students from lower socio-economic status families, to adopt risk avoidance strategies. They cite Giddens (1991), who contends that during wide-scale

social change, individuals seek 'ontological security' – defined as having confidence in one's self-identity, and as the security derived from shared background, equivalent to 'habitus' in Bourdieusian terms. Dupuis and Thoms (1998, p.29) in developing Giddens' work identify the home as a key source of ontological security. For Giddens, ontological security is undermined at 'fateful moments': times when a course of action takes individuals away from established practices, and may have profound consequences for their futures. Patiniotis and Holdsworth argue that the decision of non-traditional students to live at home may reflect a need to preserve the ontological security of family and community when contemplating the uncertainties of HE. This can be seen in the case study interviews:

"You get that thing where you feel safer...I would feel much more comfortable if I was going with someone that I knew..." Subject G5, Interview 2, p.10.

and:

"...it's like a comfort sort of thing...because like it's hard to explain, like just, I'll be, I think I'll be out of my comfort zone." Subject T1, Interview 1, p.5.

Furlong and Cartmel (2009) assert that this working-class tendency to remain at home is mainly an economic decision, with many students clear that moving away was not affordable. As seen in Chapter 7 this was a factor for some students in this case study:

"I also think about like the (pause) cost of living in London (pause). Like would I be constantly skint? ... I think that anyone that goes there would be skint 'cos like the living fees are going to be so much more expensive than here." Subject G8, Interview 1, p.5.

However, Furlong and Cartmel also contend that some students preferred to stay near friends and family for social and cultural reasons, noting that:

“Lack of confidence about their ability to cope with independent living and being away from family and friends was often compounded by... uncertainties about student life...and a more general underlying lack of confidence. Going to university was a big enough step, without adding other risks...” (p.64).

In the case study there was evidence of anxiety about students’ ability to live independently:

“I don’t think I’d wanna go that far [regional choice]...it’d be too much hassle for me...[pause] I’m not, like, an independent person...” Subject G2, Interview 2, p.4.

Patiniotis and Holdsworth (2005) note that “staying local” is not a decision that working-class young people make in isolation from their parents. They argue that the impact on parents needs to be recognised, and parents gain status through their children’s participation in HE (p.91). Both findings are supported by the evidence of the case study. Thomas and Quinn (2007) argue that working-class students sometimes went against their own inclinations to preserve family harmony (p.53). Whilst this was in the context of staying at home rather than going away, the same might be argued in respect of a decision to study for a degree locally rather than seeking employment.

It could be therefore argued that working-class students are making a rational choice by opting to stay at home. Whilst their student experience may not be as rich as for those who study away from home, their risk of non-completion (through financial and other reasons) is likely to be reduced. However, the poorer quality of student experience enjoyed by home-based students was highlighted by Education Research Services (2007) in research showing they were less likely to participate in optional parts of their course, such as work placements, and felt isolated from their fellow students due to limited opportunities for socialising. They were also less likely to secure graduate employment. Patiniotis and Holdsworth (2005) observe that many parents of students from low-

income backgrounds who live away from home were motivated by a desire to see their children not only go to HE, but also to have a similar quality of HE experience as students from more affluent backgrounds. They note that for some parents this involved significant cost. This was not apparent, however, from the case study interviews:

“She’s (mother) more supportive on the idea of me staying at home...because of the cost...” Subject G1, Interview 1, p.7.

Forsyth and Furlong (2000) note that for some students the prospect of moving away to go to university was “seen as an opportunity to ‘escape’ ” (p.37). They state, however, that this raised the problem of finding term-time accommodation, “...quite a challenge for young people who were not familiar with mechanisms used by students from more standard backgrounds” (p.37). For those students who were sufficiently bold to leave home, an absence of social capital could highlight additional barriers not present for their middle-class peers.

4. Financial

There are several financial aspects to the student decision-making process. There are also financial issues that might be regarded simply as barriers to entry. Some of these considerations are influenced by the socio-economic status of the potential student.

In terms of financial decision making, Stafford, Lundstedt, and Lynn (1984) note that educational demand theory may, on one hand, view the choice to participate in HE as an investment decision or, alternatively, as a current consumption decision. The ‘investment’ approach assumes individuals will choose or purchase a university education if the present value of the expected social and economic benefits resulting from the education exceed the present cost of the education (Stafford et al, 1984, p.593). Several aspects of this proposition should be examined.

First, it is unlikely that anyone would actually calculate the present economic benefits of undertaking a degree. Instead, students estimate the present value of future costs and additional earnings. In this respect there is some evidence that, unlike their middle-class contemporaries, working-class students do not place sufficient emphasis on future earnings that are further into the future, and consequently they are less likely to choose to participate (Micklewright, 1989).

Gorard, Adnett, May, Slack, Smith and Thomas (2007) note the shifting of the cost of UK HE from taxpayers to students and their families and suggest there are concerns that this will affect marginal entrants with a high aversion to debt and relatively low expected post-graduate earnings. They suggest such changes will disproportionately affect non-traditional students and those from low-income families. This is supported by Patiniotis and Holdsworth (2005, p.82). Gorard et al note that the most debt-averse students include those from low income social classes (pp.52-3). Debt aversion is likely to skew the judgment of lower-income students as to the value of undertaking a degree. It should also be noted that art and design students have the least favourable post-graduation prospects of any subject group.

Stafford et al (1984) note that in making decisions the current cost of a degree must be fully assessed, including not only costs in terms of books and materials, travel, differential living costs et cetera but also opportunity costs, for example income foregone. In the consumption approach, education also has an immediate value including social and intellectual benefits (pp.593-4). Again, there is evidence that students from lower socio-economic status backgrounds place less emphasis on these benefits.

Bowers-Brown (2006) notes the cost of higher education is one of the key considerations for students in making the decision to undertake a degree, and that fear of debt is a

deterrent (p.61). She argues that students from poorer backgrounds are more likely to leave university with larger debt than those from wealthier socio-economic groups. Consequently the choice between entering employment or studying is more daunting (p.62).

Mangan et al (2010) investigate student finance information and decision-making in some detail. First, they conclude that students have “got the message” that HE participation is costly and will leave them in debt, with 67 percent of students believing that attending university was financially risky in terms of being able to afford living expenses whilst also studying (p.464). There was strong support for this in the case study, as seen from Chapter 7.

Mangan et al find that students’ concerns about the cost of HE are revealed through their assessment of alternative sources of income and their willingness to live at home to limit cost (p.465). They note that students from better off households were much less likely to consider paid employment as a source of additional income, and much more likely to indicate parental support as a source of funding. They found that socially-disadvantaged students were often already undertaking significant paid employment and likely to consider continuing this whilst studying for a degree (p.465). Similarly Reay et al (2005) comment:

“The importance of paid employment for the working-class students, its centrality in their lives, meant it sometimes had an impact on choice that rarely emerged in the transcripts of young people from established middle-class families...Many students were juggling extensive labour market commitments and domestic responsibilities with studying.” (pp.89-90)

This was certainly a factor for case study participants:

“I think I would be more settled (in College HE) because I have a job...I’d have to find a job if I went to (regional specialist HE college)...that’s why I get scared ‘cos unemployment is really high”. Subject T8, Interview 3, p.5.

Others recognised a need for additional income if they studied away from home:

“...I know that if I went to university I...would probably need to get a job as well. Like...I think you would need to get a job to support yourself more...” Subject T5, Interview 1, p.8.

Mangan et al (2010) found that studying locally gave students the chance to limit costs by staying at home, whilst enabling them either to continue an existing part-time job or search more effectively for employment in a familiar local labour market. This is supported by evidence from the case study. Mangan et al found that students from more disadvantaged backgrounds were most likely to apply to local universities. They also found correlations with not being from a family with parental experience of HE (p.466). This is supported in this research (see Table 7.9). Interestingly, Mangan et al found that when asked to rank reasons why they had decided on a local university, financial reasons were given as the most important by only 30 percent of students. The course was given as the most important reason by 60 percent of respondents, reinforcing the previously noted primacy of the course as a factor. However, Mangan et al posit that these responses may, in part, represent the students’ “ex-post rationalisation” of their decision (p.466). Some support for this view comes from Bowers-Brown (2006) who notes that although finance is not the only reason for low participation rates amongst lower socio-economic groups, it is a major factor (p.63).

Mangan et al report that many students did not take into account “the financial package” when making decisions about university applications. They note a “large proportion of students with a perceived family income that would have entitled them to a full or partial maintenance grant did not consider themselves eligible” (p.459). They found that whilst

a majority of students indicated that they were well informed about institutions and courses, only a minority believed themselves to be well informed about finance (p.463). Mangan et al examine the possible reasons for this level of ignorance, discounting the possibility that students are unconcerned, noting that:

“...many were making decisions that reflected their anxiety over their financial situation while at university. This was more strongly the case for first-generation students coming from low-income families.” (p.467)

Expressions of anxiety about HE choice in general, and financial factors in particular, were evident in the case study. Mangan et al conclude that students had not engaged in a meaningful search for information on financial support, and that information was readily available (p.468). They consider whether students had failed to search in the belief that there is little variation in financial support, but conclude that they found no evidence of this (p.469). Finally, Mangan et al considered that many students believe they are ineligible for financial assistance. Their findings suggest that many students “display ignorance of all forms of support” (p.469). They conclude that:

“Many students had not...acquired a broad structural knowledge about the kind of financial support...available for them, with...interviews revealing ...many had not heard of, or did not understand, the various strands of financial support. Without this...a ‘rational’ search procedure based on the marginal costs and benefits cannot be carried out and this study suggests that many students are ignorant of the grants and loans to which they are entitled, although the information is readily...available through the internet and other sources.” (p.470)

Mangan et al argue that students are interested in financial information, but that the timing of its provision is too late (p.468). They also suggest that students are finding difficulty with the complexity of institution and course choice, and this means that students do not have “spare capacity” to deal with what they may regard as second order issues. As one of their interviewee’s states:

“I’m just going to wait ‘til like I know where I’m going and then I’ll look at it all” (p.468).

This has distinct echoes in my own research:

“Erm, I’ve not kept up with it, em..., as much as, er, I probably should have done but I think that’s partly due to the fact, erm..., as with a lot of students, it’s...it’s quite a sort of scary issue. Erm..., and if you can, if you can you push it to the back of your mind and think ‘No, I’ll just concentrate on what I’m doing and I’ll cross that bridge when I come to it.’ ” Subject G5, Interview 1, p.5.

Gorard et al (2007) note that the complexity of student funding impeded entry and that interpretation of information was difficult for students. Uncertainty about access to discretionary funding was a barrier. I suggest that such issues of complexity and timing of financial information are, for more disadvantaged students, entwined with other more fundamental uncertainties about higher education. In relation to financial information, Mangan et al (2010) argue that:

“It will only be possible for policy to work if support can be provided that effectively influences the decision heuristics of students.” (p.459)

I suggest that this needs to be widened; disadvantaged non-traditional students need a better understanding of the higher education market as a whole, at an earlier stage, if they are not to be at risk of feeling overwhelmed by unmanageable choice. As Bowers-Brown argues “university culture must be demystified for prospective first-generation higher education entrants” (2006, p.65).

5. Social

Some social considerations have already been noted. For instance, as Patiniotis and Holdsworth (2005) observe, the motivation of many parents of students from low-income backgrounds in wanting their children to live away from home was for them to have a similar quality of experience as students from more affluent backgrounds (p.90).

In this vein, Thomas, Yorke and Woodrow (2001) note for some students part-time work was undertaken to fund attempts to fit in with a middle-class lifestyle.

Patiniotis and Holdsworth (2005) argue that students from disadvantaged backgrounds require greater levels of self-determination to “ ‘think outside’ familial and community norms” (p.92) and that this represents an identity risk. This is associated with concepts of change discussed by Archer and Leathwood (2003), who argue that post-16 choices are linked with the expression and suppression of identities, and that working-class participation in higher education is associated with a dominant government discourse as a way of achieving ‘good’ change by promoting a more middle-class identity. However, they contend that whilst working-class individuals’ negotiations about participation may involve “engagement with this ideal of identity and social class change”, many “engage in complex, sometimes contradictory negotiations” (pp.176-7). Similarly, Reay (2005) argues that for young people from low socio-economic status backgrounds, educational decisions are frequently bounded by the need to retain an identity with its foundations in a class-based ‘authenticity’. For Reay, participation choices of working-class students are driven by desire to accommodate new experiences within a framework which respects their working-class origins (p.6).

6. Outcomes

Patiniotis and Holdsworth (2005) found that 95 percent of students in their study believed a degree would help them obtain a good job. They therefore argue that a majority of students view HE as a route towards a financially secure future (p.87). For those from lower socio-economic status backgrounds:

“...a degree is seen as the key to self-determination and an escape route from the poverty traps of low-paid, low-status jobs or benefit dependency.”
(p.88)

This was supported in the case study:

“...this is the time to be optimistic about the future...positivity is something that helps you achieve what you want. If...you’ve got this mind-set that you’re not gonna get far it’s unlikely that you’re going to.” Subject G5, Interview 2, p.8.

Hutchings (2003) notes, however, that rates of return from higher education vary, with returns to graduates from social classes IV and V being on average 7 percent lower than for graduates from social classes I and II. He also notes that different returns are associated with different institutions. He argues that the rate of return would not be an incentive if these issues were well known to all potential students. Here the work of Cristofoli and Watts (2007) is relevant. In their study of HE in FE colleges they note that the students taking part thought that a degree obtained from study in an FE college would be as highly regarded as one achieved in a university – and in some cases better (p.63). This applied to many of the students in the case study:

“But when I started to think about it more realistically I thought that (college HE) is probably best ‘cos it’s close to home and you get a lot of benefits from going and you know it’s quite handy to have somewhere... with a good reputation so close really. So it seemed daft not to take up the offer.” Subject G2, Interview 2, pp.1-2.

Cristofoli and Watts also argue that students’ understanding of HE (and not just in FE) was usually constructed in instrumental terms of employment – as a means to an end, rather than an end in itself (p.63). Students in the case study also saw a degree as a route to (better paid) employment. Davies, Mangan, Hughes and Slack (2013) question, however, previous assumptions about graduate premia. They rely on the work of Green and Zhu (2010), who note a sharp decrease in the benefits of a graduate education at the bottom end of the wage distribution. Green and Zhu argue that this is a result of an increasing proportion of graduates being over qualified for the jobs that are available.

They distinguish between formal over-qualification (where the employee is over-qualified but experiences full skills utilisation) and real over-qualification (where skills are not utilised). Their work indicates that real over-qualification is more prevalent in those graduating from post-1992 universities. Hutchings (2003) notes different returns from different courses, institutions and (arguably as a consequence) that graduates from different social classes will enjoy different returns from higher education, commenting that:

“...the economic benefits of higher education are not the same for all graduates... they are least for the groups for whom participation is the most costly and debt levels on graduation the highest. As a result, the rate of return available would perhaps not be an incentive if it were ‘well known by potential students’ ”. (p.169)

Tellingly, Hutchings argues that some students were clear that they were investing in their futures and that the investment was worthwhile. However, the students did not appear to have meaningful knowledge of either the likely level of debt on graduation or their potential future earnings (p.169).

In assessing these returns, Hutchings notes that one difficulty is that “those from the lower social class groups tend to trust ‘hot’ knowledge rather than official information.” (p.170). He argues that data therefore have much less effect than knowing someone who has relevant HE experience to recount. This was apparent for some case study participants. One chose to rely on the opinions of others rather than visit a university within walking distance of his home. ‘Hot’ knowledge was described by Ball and Vincent (1998), investigating the sources relied upon by parents in secondary school choice. ‘Hot’ knowledge was acquired through the ‘grapevine’ of personal contacts whilst ‘cold’ knowledge was official or formal. They observed that working-class parents tended to use ‘grapevine’ knowledge unquestioningly, seeing it as a way of making decisions

“grounded in the opinions of other parents like oneself” (p.392). They contend that the grapevine is seen as *more* reliable than ‘official’ sources of information (p.380). Connor, Dewson, Tyers, Eccles, Regan & Aston (2001) found that lower social class potential HE entrants saw people as the most useful source of information rather than prospectuses or other published information. Kidd and Wardman (1999) similarly reported that formal IAG had little impact, and that parents, teachers, friends and the judgments of other young people were more influential. This was supported by case study evidence:

...there was a couple of people from last year who went that I got on with...so I messaged (them)...to me it makes sense to use social media...”
Subject G5, Interview 2, p.4.

Appadurai (2004) considers possible reasons for the emphasis on ‘hot’ knowledge and argues that people from low-SES backgrounds have more fragile horizons of aspirations as a result of having fewer concrete experiences, resources and opportunities to call upon when working towards imagined outcomes. Vicarious experiences of HE gained through the experience of others are therefore one resource available to students when imagining whether HE is for them. Smith (2011) argues that for young people living in low-SES contexts, less family experience of HE means reduced access to valuable forms of hot knowledge about HE. She contends that transgenerational experience of HE is therefore important because participation becomes readily accepted and part of the ‘family plan’, and relates this to Bourdieu’s concepts of habitus and field. Hutchings (2003) observes that family members in HE are a key source of ‘hot’ knowledge, and notes that contributions involve not just fact but emotions, and that negative reports were also useful. The key requirement was for the informant to be trusted; ‘people like me’ are perceived as having no personal interest (p.170).

CHAPTER 6: THE RESEARCH PROCESS

Overview

Denzin and Lincoln (2003) identify five headings or phases for qualitative research: the researcher and the researched; major paradigms and interpretive perspectives; research strategies; methods of collecting and analysing data; and interpretation and presentation. These seem consistent with other literature relevant to educational research and have been adopted as a framework for the consideration of this research process.

The Researcher and the Researched

Denzin and Lincoln (2003) assert that the age of value-free inquiry for the human disciplines is over and:

“...there is no clear window into the inner life of an individual. Any gaze is always filtered...There are no objective observations, only observations socially situated in the worlds of – and between – the observer and the observed.” (p.31)

This highlights the challenges and uncertainties of research enquiry. Coleman and Briggs (2002) note the desire of researchers to reach the ‘right’ conclusions in fields where the established literature may be unclear. McKenzie (1997) observes that:

“...research is embedded in a churning vortex of constructive and destructive tensions in which old educational ‘certainties’ are replaced by new ‘certainties’.” (p.9)

Coleman and Briggs suggest that these uncertainties and tensions generate key questions for researchers. These concern three related areas:

- 1) Ontology – what is the nature of reality?
- 2) Epistemology – how do we find and recognise knowledge?
- 3) Methodology – how do we gain knowledge of the world?

Hitchcock and Hughes (1995) argue that the researcher's ontological assumptions produce epistemological assumptions, giving rise to methodological considerations which drive issues of instrumentation and data collection (p.21). This moves the research process beyond a technical exercise, recognising that it is shaped by the researcher's desire to understand the world and the research subjects' place in it, and that this is ineluctably shaped by the researcher's ontological, epistemological and methodological premises (Denzin and Lincoln, 2003, p.33). These may be termed a paradigm or interpretive framework: a "basic set of beliefs that guides action" (Guba, 1990, p.17).

This raises issues of reflexivity. As the head of the case study institution there is a risk that I may have an unconscious bias in the process. Whilst I would obviously wish students to achieve the best outcomes, I was not involved in teaching and learning, and therefore had much less "investment" in their choices than the teaching staff. Nevertheless, there is a risk that I may have been blind to institutional issues or that I may have influenced student choice. I am only aware (as a result of a "corridor conversation") that students felt obliged to gather their thoughts and consider the reasons for their choices in greater depth before attending interview sessions.

Major Paradigms and Interpretive Perspectives

When considering sense-making the researcher implicitly draws upon a set of ontological, epistemological and methodological beliefs which may be termed a *paradigm* or an interpretive framework regarding how analysis may be patterned, reasoned and compiled (Denzin and Lincoln, 2003; Coleman and Briggs, 2002). Denzin and Lincoln assert that all research is interpretative, guided by a set of beliefs and feelings about the world, and how it should be understood and studied. In their view

each interpretive paradigm makes particular demands on the researcher, including the questions asked and the interpretations the researcher brings to them (p.33). Coleman and Briggs contend that researchers favouring a particular paradigm hold a level of consensus about what constitutes 'normal' research. Bassey (1999) describes a paradigm as:

“...a network of coherent ideas about the nature of the world and the function of researchers which, adhered to by a group of researchers, conditions the patterns of their thinking and underpins their research actions.” (p.42)

A number of writers seek to categorise the major interpretive paradigms. Whilst there is not an agreed taxonomy, Denzin and Lincoln (2003) set out major groupings which are capable of reconciliation with those adopted by others: positivist and post-positivist; constructivist – interpretive; critical (Marxist, emancipatory); and feminist – post-structural. They note, however, that these paradigms become more complicated at the level of “specific interpretive communities” (p.33). Key paradigms are briefly considered before setting out the approach adopted in this study.

Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2000) contrast positivistic and interpretive perspectives as the main, and competing, views of educational research. The positivist view includes a number of nuanced approaches. The interpretive view encompasses a broad range of research methods including those associated with phenomenology and ethnography. The positivistic approach assumes close parallels between the social and natural sciences and is “concerned with discovering natural and universal laws regulating and determining individual and social behaviour” (Cohen et al, p.5). Smith (1983) identifies Dilthey as among the first to challenge the positivist school when he argued that, unlike the natural sciences, the social sciences did not deal with inanimate external objects, but the product

of human minds, and was thus inseparably linked to subjective factors such as emotions and values. Consequently the involvement of the investigator could not be separated from the object of inquiry. Smith (p.7) cites Dilthey's objection to positivism - that the complexity of the social world, which changes over time, and cultural differences make it impossible to discover laws as in the physical sciences. Instead, he believed the emphasis must be on an attempt to understand the individual or type.

Inherent in the contrasting positivistic and interpretive approaches are different ontologies – that is they assume different ways of viewing social reality (Cohen et al, 2000, p.6). Allied to these ontological differences are differences in epistemology – the nature and validity of human knowledge (Wellington, 2000, p.196) – where the two schools of thought also make different assumptions.

Positivism and Interpretivism: development, ideas and concepts

The emergence of the positivistic approach to social science research has close parallels in the development of research in the natural sciences, and was the key factor in shaping the ideas and concepts underpinning positivism. To some extent, the emergence of the interpretivist approach was a reaction to positivism and can be seen in its description as “anti-positivist”.

Smith (1983, p.7) observes that the roots of positivism are closely identified with 19th Century theorists including Mill and Durkheim but most closely with Comte. Kincheloe and Tobin (2009) note that in the 1820s Comte endorsed scientific reasoning as a method of discovery, and that he favoured scientific methods of induction and deduction, summarising Comte's approach as the assumption:

“...that the natural and social worlds could be understood and improved by using reason and systematic observation... in terms of causal, invariable, and universal laws.” (p.515)

Cohen et al (2000) contend that deductive reasoning can be traced back to Aristotle's contribution to logic of a sequence of formal steps from the general to the particular. They note that reasoning underwent significant change in the 17th Century when Francis Bacon's emphasis on the observational basis of science led to an inductive method proposing the study of a number of cases leading to a hypothesis and eventually to generalisation. They observe that Bacon's inductive approach was in time followed by the inductive-deductive approach (p.4). Mouly (1978) notes this consisted of an iterative process in which the investigator works inductively from observations to hypotheses and then deductively to their implications in order to check their validity. Hypotheses are then subject to further test by experimental data collection. Michell (2003) also notes a relatively modern tendency to link positivism with what he refers to as a quantitative imperative, which he states as “the view that studying something scientifically means measuring it” (p.6). He comments on the 19th Century linkage of the quantitative imperative to reasoning by the Victorian scientist William Thomson, who associated meaningful knowledge with the ability to make numerically-based statements about phenomena. Michell goes on to cite references to the imperative for measurable numerical data from late-19th Century researchers culminating in Hans Eysenck (1973) who believed that knowledge began when it could be expressed numerically. The pre-eminence of positivism within social science research in the 20th Century was also noted by Kincheloe and Tobin (2009) who comment on logical positivism and the desire to “express all true statements about the world in a single scientific language” (p.516).

Smith (1983) also considers the question of language, noting that positivists sought to characterise social investigation as a neutral activity and that it must therefore develop a language of scientific neutrality. Sparkes (1995) however highlights that 'scientific language' is not blandly neutral: "Language...is a constitutive force that creates a particular view of reality. No textual staging can ever be innocent" (p.159). Smith, commenting on Dilthey's development of an anti-positivist alternative, notes that the assumption that human experience was inevitably context-bound, which precluded the use of "neutral scientific language" (p.8). This highlights the main conceptual differences between the two approaches.

Dilthey was one of the first to formulate alternative ideas in contrast to the positivist movement, giving a significant impetus to a different methodology in social science, which became known as interpretivism. Dilthey argued that whereas the natural sciences dealt with tangible objects seen as existing outside individuals, this was not the case for the social sciences where the subject was inextricably linked with the human mind and inseparable from attendant subjectivity, values and emotions. In Dilthey's view the interrelationship of the investigator and the investigated was inseparable, and what existed in the social world was what investigators *thought* existed. Smith comments, "...we were the subject and the object of inquiry, and the study of the social...was the study of ourselves..." (p.7). Smith (1983) notes similarities between the views of Dilthey and those of Weber, which involved a distinction between *phenomena* (the external world that we perceive) and *noumena* (the perceiving consciousness). This became a distinction between the natural and social sciences. These key differences are summarised by Burrell and Morgan (1979). They deal with the two conceptions of the social world by

considering the explicit and implicit assumptions underpinning them and identifying key sets of assumptions. Considering ontological assumptions they ask:

“...is social reality external to individuals ... or is it the product of individual consciousness? Is reality of an objective nature, or the result of individual cognition? Is it a given ‘out there’ in the world or is it created by one’s own mind?”(p.1)

They identify this as the nominalist-realist debate, where the former view is that objects of thought are just words and there is no independent thing constituting the meaning of a word. This is contrasted with the realist position which posits that objects of thought have an existence independent of the knower. Second, Burrell and Morgan identify epistemological assumptions concerning the bases of knowledge – its nature and forms, how it can be acquired and communicated to others – asking whether knowledge is “...hard, real and tangible...” or is “...softer, more subjective...based on experience and insight...” (p.1). How the researcher aligns themselves in this respect fundamentally affects how they approach the issue of examining knowledge of social behaviour. Cohen et al (2000) note that an observer role akin to the natural sciences will be adopted by researchers who view knowledge as objective and tangible. Researchers who see knowledge as personal, subjective and unique will seek an involvement with their subjects (pp.6-7).

Burrell and Morgan (1979) identify a third set of assumptions which concern the relationship between individuals and their environment. At one extreme humans are seen as responding mechanically to their environment, whereas the opposite view has individuals as the initiators of their own actions, where free will is central, positions identified with determinism and voluntarism (p.6).

Cohen et al (2000) note that Burrell and Morgan's first three sets of assumptions have implications for the methodological concerns and approaches of researchers "...since the contrasting ontologies, epistemologies and models of human beings will in turn demand different research methods" (p.6). Consequently, Burrell and Morgan's fourth set of assumptions relate to questions of methodology. Those who adopt a positivist approach to the social world are likely to treat it in the same way as the world of natural phenomena – external to the individual, real and "hard". Therefore they are likely to choose traditional methodologies such as surveys and experiments. Those favouring the anti-positivist view will be likely to select from techniques such as phenomenology, discourse analysis, life history or ethnography (pp.6-7).

Positivism and interpretivism: epistemological and methodological differences

Commenting on the relationship between facts and values in the process of investigation Smith (1983) notes that the notion of objectivity is key. He acknowledges a definitional problem, as both positivist and interpretivist researchers claim objectivity but mean different things by the term. Smith notes that for positivist investigators objectivity has its reference point in what is external to the researcher in the world of facts that "stands independent of the knower" (p.10). He concludes that such a researcher would consider an investigation to be objective if "...the process and results are unbiased; that is, undistorted by the particular dispositions of, and the particular situation surrounding, the investigator". Consequently Smith notes the primacy of methodological concerns which "...prevent the self from disrupting or distorting this 'journey of the facts' ". A fundamental criterion for objectivity is the ability, using the same approach, to duplicate the researcher's findings.

In contrast, Smith notes that the interpretivist researcher is concerned with the knower, the central issue being that reality is dependent upon the individual's perspective. Consequently the researcher cannot conduct investigations detached from their own place in the world, and so from an interpretivist perspective, objectivity is no more than a matter of agreement. He contrasts the approaches, noting:

“In quantitative research, facts act to constrain our beliefs; while in interpretive research beliefs determine what should count as facts. In the former, facts and values are separate; in the latter, facts and values are inextricably intertwined”. (p.11)

However, interpretivist approaches have developed since Smith's paper was written. Hammersley (1992) notes an increasing debate amongst interpretivist researchers about the nature of validity in assessing findings. Hammersley ascribes this development to a shift from the situation where interpretivism was simply an “oppositional force” against a dominant quantitative body of research. He states the positivist idea of determining truth by the adoption of scientific method in similar terms to Smith, but considers validity for positivist researchers in terms of reliability not objectivity. In essence predictive validity, as proposed by Hammersley, corresponds with Smith's fundamental concern that research findings be repeatable. In respect of interpretivist research, Hammersley states “...validity is interpreted as the correspondence of knowledge claims to the reality investigated”. Hammersley is critical of this view of interpretivist validity. He identifies what he refers to as relativism, noting that:

“Relativism leads to a rather different view of validity...validity as correspondence with an independent reality clearly is not appropriate, since it is denied that there is any such reality. But neither is the idea accepted that validity can be guaranteed by following scientific method.... The belief that there may be multiple, contradictory (or at least incommensurable) truths is the hallmark of relativism. Validity is here defined in terms of consensus within a community, that consensus being based on values, purposes and interests...” (p.197)

Hammersley notes that this generates a problem, namely that “relativists” must accept that their own claim that truth is relative is *itself* only true relatively, that is for some frameworks it *may* be false. He also notes an additional problem with relativism – because there can be no limit to the number of frameworks that can be constructed and that each of these must be treated as true in its own terms, this amounts to “anything goes”. He regards this as potentially unpalatable – for instance that racist views would have to be accepted as valid in their own terms.

Hammersley also rejects the positivist idea that the method “can provide guaranteed access to the truth” (p.199). For him, validity “still means the degree of correspondence between a claim and the phenomena to which it relates” (p.199). However, Hammersley is unable to suggest a methodology to produce valid knowledge, either by following a prescribed method or by getting “close” to reality. He believes this raises a key question – at what point should the researcher stop in offering or demanding evidence for a claim? He concludes that no “absolute and pre-defined” (p.200) end point can be justified, and the point at which researchers should stop depends on judgement about whether conclusions can be justified “beyond reasonable doubt” (p.200). The issue of standards of evidence is also considered by Tilley (1980) in relation to standards required in scientific enquiry. Quoting Popper he notes:

“The empirical basis of objective science has thus nothing ‘absolute’ about it. Science does not rest upon solid bedrock. The bold structure of its theories rises...above a swamp. It is like a building erected on piles. ...if we stop driving the piles deeper, it is not because we have reached firm ground. We simply stop when we are satisfied that the piles are firm enough to carry the structure...” (pp.39-40)

Positivism and Interpretivism: development of theory and knowledge

Positivism continues to be responsible for much theory development in the natural sciences. Tilley (1980) sets out the views of Popper – regarded as a positivist by many, although not Tilley – on the development of science as “the interplay of bold conjectures and challenging attempts at refutation” (p.33). He notes Popper is critical of inductivism – the derivation of laws from experience – stating that:

“...no matter how many times we may observe A following B we can never thereby justify a law to the effect that A always follows B: the next observation we make may contradict that ‘law’.” (p.32)

Tilley sets out Popper’s conditions for the development of theory as follows:

- “(a) it must be falsifiable;
- (b) it must not be falsified – although it may be false;
- (c) it must be ‘bold’; that is, it must, compared to its predecessors, possess excess content some of which is corroborated; and
- (d) it must successfully explain the successes and at least some of the failures of its predecessors.” (p. 33)

Tilley notes that truth is important as a regulatory principle – when a theory is used to derive statements and these are found to be untrue, this constitutes grounds for rejection. Theories are seen to progress when they are increasing in truthfulness – that is when they increase in correspondence to what the world is like.

A key element of positivistic theory development for Tilley (1980) is the removal of hypotheses when it is decided that these do not fit the world. However, perhaps crucially, this is dependent on the decisions of the scientific community which must be

“...heterogenous and critical...” (p.34). Whilst this is the ideal scientific community, there is a risk if scientists collectively fall short of this ideal. Tilley notes:

“...an uncritical, homogenous community may become slave to a particular set of ideas ... where the possibility of alternative interpretations, incompatible with existing ways of thinking, are ruled out.” (p.36)

Hammersley (1987a) comments that interpretivist research in an educational context has been “exploratory and descriptive” (p.283). He notes that research has been somewhat lacking focus rather than “systematically investigating” aspects where work has already been started, and calls for effort to develop and test theory. Similarly, Delamont (2009) is critical of interpretivist research that is experiential rather than analytic. Hammersley critiques the methods adopted by interpretivistic researchers who seek to argue that their work contributes to the development of theory. Hammersley defines theory such that it makes explanatory claims of the form “...given the occurrence of (A1...An) then (B1...Bn) will probably occur” (p.285). He goes on to set out an alternative to Popperian descriptions of theory development as follows:

- “(a) Addition of new concepts/variables and relations (or elimination of unnecessary ones);
- (b) Clarification and development of concepts/variables and their relations;
- (c) Developing and testing measures for variables; and
- (d) Testing relations between theoretical variables.” (p.285)

Hammersley (1987b) is critical of interpretivistic researchers who do not “systematically select cases in order to test theoretical ideas” (p.315) and cites Pollard (1984) favourably in this respect. He notes Peirce’s typology, set out by Reilly (1970) for phases of theoretical development as “...distinguishing between abduction (the generation of theoretical ideas), deduction (the development and elaboration of those ideas), and

induction (the testing of hypotheses derived from those ideas)" (p.312). Hammersley continues to stress the validity of the hypothetico-deductive method (Peirce's approach) and to question the approach of interpretivistic researchers where the claim is 'grounded' in data, an apparently critical reference to Glaser and Strauss's (1967) work on grounded theory.

Hammersley (1987a) contends that if a theory is developed from one data set then hypotheses can be confirmed from the study of further cases, particularly if those cases have been selected to rule out competing hypotheses. He argues that a sequence of studies is the only extended example of theory-testing to be found in educational research, and concludes that theory development is a priority for interpretivistic researchers, but that there is no consensus on how that will be achieved.

Hammersley (1997) re-visits issues of theory development and evidence in interpretivist research in response to Hargreaves' 1996 TTA lecture which argued that much educational research is non-cumulative, and that there are few areas which have yielded sound and useful findings. Hammersley is critical of what he describes as a move away from the scientific model of research with a shift to qualitative methods based on unresolved problems with positivist research, and the view that social life is different in character from the world studied by natural scientists. Whilst Hammersley judges that "...the arguments for the distinctiveness of the social world have been overplayed..." he concedes that there are "...serious problems...in producing conclusive knowledge about causal patterns in social phenomena" (p.145). In particular he asks:

"How are we to control competing factors in such a way as to assess the relative contribution of each one in what is usually a complex web of relationships? More than this, can we assume that causation ... involves fixed, universal relationships, rather than local, context-sensitive patterns ...?" (p.145)

Hammersley (2005) comments further on qualitative research and its contribution to theory and knowledge in response to Hodkinson (2004). He champions objectivity as “...the rational pursuit of inquiry...” (p.149) and this:

“...does not require abandoning all preconceptions or pretending that as a researcher one has no value commitments...but it does mean trying to ensure that these do not prevent one from presenting the truth...” (p.145).

Whilst Hammersley on occasion appears critical of the direct development of theory from data based in grounded theory, his comments are consistent with the requirement for reflexivity as noted by McGhee, Marland and Atkinson (2007). Suddaby (2006) also expresses concern about grounded theory, noting its use as “rhetorical sleight of hand” (p.633) by those who wish to avoid close description of their methods.

Positivism and Interpretivism: advantages, limitations and conclusions

A positivist approach to educational research has a number of advantages, principally that there are clear methodological guidelines and, if these are followed, the research findings should have a degree of value as conclusions about the field in general. A drawback of positivist research in an educational context is that the approach gathered considerable criticism on the grounds that it failed properly to identify the true nature of the complex phenomena being investigated. The primary advantage of interpretive research is that it allows the researcher to get ‘closer’ to the phenomena being investigated, with the objective of obtaining a more complete understanding of events. However, as a result, the research is likely to have limited (if any) general applicability because it is likely to be context-specific. Methodological issues are likely to be less clear cut for interpretivist research, and it is debatable whether it can be of worth in establishing generally applicable theory.

Perhaps as a consequence of their respective strengths and shortcomings it has been suggested that positivist and interpretivist approaches could be combined. Nash (2005) notes that statistical techniques may be used to enhance interpretivist explanatory narratives, citing Kemp and Holmwood (2003) as arguing convincingly that events in the social world provide “...an ontological basis for quantification and non-positivist explanations” (p.186). Hammersley (1992) also notes that interpretivistic researchers have used positivist methods to establish the validity of their claims, and “...realism has been used to urge the superiority of ethnography against quantitative method, while Methodism has been employed to defend it against criticism that it is impressionistic and therefore unscientific...” (p.196).

Choice of Research Paradigm

In conducting this research I have adopted an interpretivist paradigm. The literature in relation to the nature of educational choice, together with my own experience of working in education, both support an interpretivist view that research needs to be grounded in people’s experience. I support the conceptualisation set out by Coleman and Briggs (2002) that reality is not:

“...an amalgam of external phenomena waiting to be uncovered as ‘facts’, but a construct in which people understand reality in different ways”. (p.18)

It seems to me that the highly-nuanced distinctions made in the process of HE choice, as considered in the literature review in Chapter 5 and the review of theoretical underpinnings set out in Chapter 4, can only be fully understood using an interpretivist/qualitative approach. This research is essentially concerned with *why* students make the higher education choices that they do, what *processes* are involved and what *influences* (e.g. parental, institutional) sway student choice. The literature

shows that many aspects of higher education choice relate to socially-constructed realities which could only become fully apparent during a process of qualitative inquiry, with a close relationship between the researcher and what is studied (Denzin and Lincoln, 2003, p.13). To me the “value-laden nature of inquiry” (p.13) necessary to begin to uncover how choice making operates was clear, and so a qualitative approach was essential.

In examining different aspects of interpretivist paradigms I have sympathy with the *symbolic interactionists’* view of life as an “unfolding process” in which individuals interpret their environment and act upon it based upon that interpretation (Coleman and Briggs, 2002, p.18). A proponent of this approach is Herbert Blumer, who argued that symbolic interactionism rests upon three premises:

1. Human beings act towards things on the basis of the meanings that things have for them;
2. The meanings of such things is derived from or arises out of the social interaction that human beings have with one another; and
3. These meanings are dealt with and modified through an interpretative process used by people in dealing with what they encounter (1969, p.2).

Arguably there is a degree of ‘fit’ between this paradigm and educational choice at “branching points” as considered in Chapter 4; decisions are made at key points based upon meanings derived from previous social interaction and dealt with through an interpretive process of decision-making. An implication of this approach has been emphasis upon researchers being closely involved in the process being investigated (Coleman and Briggs, 2002, p.19). It is also clear from the literature that interpretivism

is implicitly linked with qualitative research such as interpretive case studies (Denzin and Lincoln, 2003, p.34).

Research Strategies

The linkage between interpretivism and qualitative research is reinforced by Coleman and Briggs (2002) who observe that from an interpretivist perspective there cannot be an objective reality divorced from the meanings human beings bring to it. They suggest (pp.19-21) that qualitative research has several key features, including:

- i. The centrality of the subject's perspective, with understanding of those perspectives being critical, as therefore is the need to "penetrate the meaning frames in which they operate" (p.20). This suggests a preference for prolonged work 'in the field';
- ii. Rich description and attention to detailed observation;
- iii. Detailed consideration of the holistic picture in which the research topic is embedded, and researchers can *only* make sense of the data collected if they are able to understand it in a broader educational, social and historic context;
- iv. Because research is frequently concerned with processes there is often a longitudinal element to the research;
- v. There may be reluctance to impose prior structures on investigation but a case can be made for pre-structured qualitative designs "especially for those new to qualitative studies" (p.21);
- vi. There may be a (linked) reluctance to impose prior theoretical frameworks, but notable writers in the field (e.g. Bulmer, 1954) discuss the importance of "sensitising concepts"; and

- vii. In contrast to quantitative research, the emphasis is on words rather than numbers.

Given the nature of this inquiry and these considerations I considered a qualitative approach was appropriate as this:

- i. Enables a suitable level of understanding of subjects' concerns, considerations and motivations;
- ii. Allows an holistic consideration of the issues with a full appreciation of context; and
- iii. Allows longitudinal consideration.

Given the conclusion that a qualitative approach should be adopted, Denzin and Lincoln (2003) suggest researchers should then consider research design, involving a clear focus on the research question, the purposes of the study, consideration of what information will answer the research questions and the most suitable strategies to obtain it. In this study, where fieldwork was conducted between May 2011 and May 2012, the central research question was:

“Will the substantial increase in higher education fees for English Students in the UK from September 2012 influence the higher education choices of lower socio-economic status students?”

In advance of starting fieldwork solely with students due to enter higher education in 2012 it was difficult to predict the answer to this question. As noted in Chapter 3, the introduction of £3,000 fees in 2006 – also a near tripling of the previous student fees – resulted in a modest, and short-lived, decline in participation. Questions of participation were considered in Chapter 3, but it should be noted that in advance of the fieldwork the

researcher expectation was that higher fees would have a modest impact on participation.

The study was conducted with students due to complete Level 3 study at the end of the 2011-12 academic year who would be the first cohort of students faced with the prospect of much higher fees. It concentrated on lower socio-economic status students for a number of reasons. First, it was considered less likely that they would be firmly committed to the notion of higher education participation – unlike their more middle-class peers they were less likely to believe that higher education was inevitable. Second, they were more likely to be debt averse, and therefore the prospect of considerably increasing debt at graduation was more likely to be a deterrent. Third, the case study institution had a relatively high proportion of students from widening participation postcodes at FE, and a relatively high proportion of students from Quintile 1 of the POLAR2 dataset – those least likely to participate in higher education – amongst its HE students. A significant change in the intentions of those students would therefore have a substantial impact upon the institution.

The purposes of the study were to establish:

- i. If the increase in fees would deter lower-SES students from participation;
- ii. If lower-SES students still chose to undertake a degree, would their choice of subject or institution be influenced by higher fees?; and
- iii. From the case study institution's perspective, were there issues that it should be aware of as it sought to maintain HE student recruitment?

In considering the information necessary to answer these questions it was judged that hearing student comments, rather than obtaining survey responses, would be the most

appropriate form of data collection. It was decided to conduct a small pilot study in May 2011, the intention being to examine the feasibility of different means of data collection.

This work included:

- i. Several student focus groups comprising:
 - a. Students from the institution who were about to complete their studies and begin an undergraduate programme of study in September 2011; and
 - b. Students from the institution who would, if they chose to continue to study at degree level, be the first cohort to pay much higher fees in September 2012.
- ii. The administration of a questionnaire to all participants with the intention of determining their social class and parents' level of education.

It was made clear to participants that their involvement was voluntary and consent forms were provided and signed. Sessions were recorded, and this was made explicit.

The focus groups were conducted by two members of staff from the institution's marketing department. I was also present. Staff were drawn from a small team on each occasion. Prior to the interviews the team was briefed on the reason for the session, including an overview of the research questions and some of the key issues apparent from the literature. There were several reasons for conducting the pilot study in this way. First, there were practical considerations. Student contact with the institution would diminish substantially after the end of the month (for those completing their studies) and this was a busy time for students as final major projects were nearing completion. A series of focus groups was therefore considered the most practical means of obtaining a range of student views in the time available. Second, the issue of

communication with students was considered. The majority of the students involved were female and aged 17 or 18. The author is a middle-aged male, and the head of the institution. The marketing staff involved were all female and aged 22 to 28. Most were also graduates. It was felt that participants would feel more at ease, and therefore be more frank, if sessions were conducted by these staff. The author was present as an observer to assess the effectiveness of the sessions.

Consent forms were discussed, distributed and signed at the start of each session. Questionnaires to determine participants' socio-economic status were also distributed. However, it became clear that participants had insufficient knowledge of parental occupations and educational qualifications to produce accurate data. An additional difficulty was apparent; in many cases students' parents had separated and had found new partners. This created uncertainty – for example, should the student base their response on their father's occupation and education or on that of their mother's current partner? Whilst there may be a "correct" response, the influence of the individuals on the student's familial habitus might vary depending upon circumstances that would be difficult to capture using a relatively simple survey instrument.

There were some key findings in terms of research strategies and methods from the focus group sessions which are considered here. First, the use of a questionnaire to determine participant SES was impractical. I was present as the questionnaires were completed and students were unsure of parents' education level and the precise nature of their employment. The validity of responses was questionable. Consequently it was decided that future participants would be selected from those students from widening participation postcodes. Whilst this is an imperfect proxy for lower-SES it was a measure with some consistency. Second, the conduct of the interviews by marketing staff raised

concerns, mainly their lack of familiarity with key “sensitising concepts” (Bulmer, 1954). Even a thorough initial briefing for staff cannot identify all aspects of the literature that might arise in an interview situation. This lack of familiarity meant that some issues of interest from a research perspective, hinted at by participants, were not explored by the facilitators. As de Vaus (2001) notes, whilst it is not essential to have a well-formulated theory to test, there is a need to be well-read and well-prepared theoretically. If researchers are unaware of theories, concepts and debates they may fail to recognise the significance of what they might come across (p.244), which was the case in the focus group interviews. Third, there was an issue in terms of the limited diversity of views expressed in the focus group. Occasionally a dominant participant made comments which elicited some support from the group. It subsequently became apparent that a contrary view was held by some, but this took time to emerge given the stridency with which the original viewpoint was expressed. Simons (2009, p.49) notes the risk of ‘group think’ or dominant individuals preventing diverse responses and that group interviews can be difficult to transcribe. This was the case with the pilot study interviews. There was therefore a risk that a full range of views would not be captured.

Following the pilot study it was decided that focus group sessions were not appropriate to capture student views in the full study, but that individual interviews would be preferred. Focus groups had mainly been adopted as a means of gathering views from a range of departing students without delay. A key concern was the lack of familiarity of facilitators with the literature, clearly a bigger potential barrier to achieving a good understanding of student views than any issues generated by greater involvement by me. Unfortunately, the facilitators could not be briefed sufficiently well to enable them to explore avenues for discussion that might be apparent to a more informed

interviewer. Also, the interview team did not have enough interest in the project, given their other priorities, to gain the necessary understanding.

It was concluded that a different approach would be adopted for the substantive phase of the project in the 2011-12 academic year, and that I would be the sole researcher. A key issue in the design of the main research phase was the available time. It has been noted that a qualitative approach was favoured because of the complex and nuanced decision-making process likely to be involved, therefore the ideal approach would have been as a participant observer with intensive, prolonged contact with the subjects. It would have been informative to be present when students were briefed on how they should approach their research assignments in relation to higher education choice, and to listen to the subsequent discussion and debate amongst them. However, it is unlikely that any researcher would be able to be present for all of the informal discussions that ensued over a period of months, and this was impractical given the constraints on my time.

Case Study Approach: Rationale

It is appropriate to consider at this point why a case study approach was adopted. Simons (2009) notes a number of strengths, and some drawbacks, in case studies. Key advantages include that qualitative case studies enable the experience and complexity of programmes and policies to be studied in detail in the socio-political contexts in which they are enacted. This was a factor in respect of the government's changed HE tuition fee policy. Simons also argues that the approach can tell the story of the policy in action, explaining how and why events occur, and help in understanding the process and dynamics of change. She argues that documenting and interpreting events as they unfold in the 'real world' can determine factors which were critical. Simons also highlights the

flexibility and accessibility of case studies, and that they may engage participants in the research process, together, importantly, with a shift in the “power base” of who controls knowledge, recognising the importance of co-constructing perceived reality through relationships and joint understandings created in the field. Importantly, it provides researchers with an opportunity to adopt a reflexive approach in understanding the case (p.23).

Simons highlights a number of potential weaknesses of case study approaches. Citing Walker (1986) she notes:

- i. The uncontrolled intervention that case study research represents in lives of others;
- ii. Its potential to produce a distorted picture of the way things are; and
- iii. The essential conversation of a case study “locked in time while the people in it have moved on” (p.24).

Recognising these concerns, Simons does not agree that they are necessarily limitations. She argues that there are issues of perception and interpretation, and that whilst case studies cannot “capture...the reality as lived” (p24) there is much that can be done so that readers can make their own judgements about the relevance and significance of what is reported. Indeed, de Vaus (2001) contends that case study designs deal with issues of history and maturation by considering the wider context to enhance understanding, arguing that the quality of the case study depends on how well it identifies historical, contextual and maturational issues (p.236).

Simons argues that there are a number of ways to make inferences from a case that are applicable to other contexts without meeting positivistic concerns about random sample

surveys, et cetera. She asserts that the usefulness of case study findings for policy determination is partly dependent upon acceptance of the different ways in which validity is established (see later discussion). She concludes that in many case studies formal generalisation for policy-making is not the objective. Rather, the aim is particularisation:

“...to present a rich portrayal of a single setting to inform practice, establish the value of the case and/or to add knowledge of a specific topic.” (p.24)

This was a key objective, and on this basis it was concluded that a case study approach was appropriate. Methodological and other issues in relation to case studies will be considered later in this chapter, after the outline of the approach has been described.

It was decided that students from two of the institution’s BTEC Extended Diploma Level 3 courses would be selected: Textiles and Graphic Design. The Textiles course was exclusively female but the Graphic Design course was mainly male. Whilst the institution as a whole had a predominance of female students, this selection allowed a more even gender split in the study. Eight subjects were selected from each course on the basis of postcodes (i.e. widening participation addresses). The suitability of participants was discussed with the Course Leaders but no adjustments in selection were made.

The planned research comprised a series of three individual semi-structured interviews with the subjects. These were planned to take place in October, January and May, the rationale for these timings being:

- i. In October, subjects would be finalising UCAS applications and would have undertaken an assessed research unit to consider higher education but would not have made institutional choices;

- ii. In January, subjects should have completed their UCAS forms and have a rationale for their choices, having progressed their considerations of higher education; and
- iii. In May, subjects would be at the point where offers from institutions should have been accepted or rejected and interviews and institutional visits might have taken place.

This approach allowed for informal “corridor conversations” with either Course Leaders, members of the Course Team or individual students. Unfortunately these tended to be undocumented.

The institution did not have an Ethics Committee as it did not routinely undertake academic research. However, the planned research was considered by the institution’s Quality and Academic Standards Committee and approval was granted. Ethical approval was also granted by the University of Huddersfield.

The project was discussed with the subjects, including focus group participants. A note outlining the proposed research was provided. Subjects had the opportunity to discuss any concerns. In all cases they agreed to participate and signed consent forms. All sessions were recorded and transcribed.

At the conclusion of the third phase of interviews in May 2012 the author undertook semi-structured interviews with each Course Leader. Further interviews with subjects and their parents were considered in August 2012 but were not undertaken. There were two reasons for this:

- i. It was considered unlikely that many students would attend, limiting the utility of the exercise; and

- ii. It was even less likely that parents would attend, and it was clear that in many cases both parents were involved in new relationships, and that choice had been the subject of discussion in the extended family, creating practical difficulties i.e. those attending might not be the main parental influence.

Nevertheless, it is possible that parents might have voiced opinions that differed from those expressed by the students on the nature of the choice process, or may have introduced valuable additional perspectives. The absence of direct evidence in respect of parental views in this study therefore highlights an issue to be investigated in the future.

There was subsequent data gathering via Course Leaders who keep in touch with former students, and were aware of some of the reasons for students' changed intentions.

Methods of Collecting and Analysing Data

Issues relating to case studies

The design of case studies is considered by de Vaus (2001) and Simons (2009). de Vaus characterises the case study as the “ugly duckling” of research design, considered a “soft” option methodologically. He notes that some commentators believe that case studies should only be used for exploratory research to generate hypotheses for future testing. Even if this perspective was wholly appropriate – and de Vaus advances contrary arguments – a case study approach would still be valid in the context of this research. As prospective research it can be argued that in the UK a comparable study had not been undertaken in 2011-12. Although tuition fees of £1,000 had been introduced in the 1990s and increased in 2006 to £3,000 per year, the change in 2012 to a maximum of £9,000 per year represented a step change and meant that graduating students would of necessity incur debts of several tens of thousands of pounds.

de Vaus (2001, pp.219-232) develops a typology of case studies and this is adopted here to consider the merits of the approach.

i. Holistic and embedded units of analysis

de Vaus (2001) states that the case is the object of study, and that this is not of necessity an individual or group of individuals; for instance, an event or decision might be the object of study. de Vaus distinguishes between cases as a whole and cases that consist of different levels or components. Yin (1989) refers to this as 'holistic' and 'embedded' design. In illustrating multiple levels de Vaus cites a school example involving teaching staff, administrative staff, staff at different levels of seniority and experience, students in different year groups, parents, regulators and community organisations. He notes that the school both exists as an entity and has level characteristics. de Vaus argues that a well-designed case study will avoid examining merely *some* of the consistent elements. This view is not disputed, and this case study would have potentially provided richer data if parents and whole staff teams had been interviewed as part of the research. As noted, practical considerations mitigated against this, and in many cases interviews with subjects had already indicated that parental involvement was highly constrained by lack of knowledge and experience of higher education choice.

ii. Case studies and theory

de Vaus (2001) notes that the task of the case study researcher is fundamentally theoretical, and that collecting and analysing information must be guided by theory. He seeks to distinguish *explanatory* and *descriptive* case studies. He notes that explanatory case studies seek to achieve both more complex and fuller explanations of phenomena (p.221). They seek to achieve a narrow or *nomothetic* explanation – partial explanations of a class of cases – or, in contrast, an *idiographic* explanation which focuses on a

particular event or case and seeks to develop a complete explanation of each case (p.233). de Vaus suggests that a case study adopts an idiographic approach when a full and contextual understanding of a case is achieved, but a nomothetic approach may be used to achieve a more generalised understanding of broader theoretical propositions (p.234). In this instance the design did not envisage that generalisable conclusions could be drawn. The intention was for a narrower nomothetic case study, examining decision-making process of a relatively small number of students in detail.

de Vaus suggests three main approaches to the theoretical aspects of case studies:

- i. Theory testing;
- ii. Theory building; and
- iii. Clinical case studies.

Clinical case studies are clearly outside the scope of this work. Yin (1989) sees theory testing as being at the heart of case studies. On the basis of a theory, an outcome is predicted for a case with a particular set of characteristics. If the theory works then it is supported (but not proven). If it doesn't work then the researcher seeks to understand, from careful analysis of the case, why the predicted outcome did not come to pass. This process might lead to the refinement or outright rejection of the theory. de Vaus notes that regardless of the complexity of the theory, this begins with expectations derived from previous research and/or theories. In contrast, he observes that a theory-building approach involves the development of a theory that fits the cases we study. de Vaus compares the approaches, noting that in the case of theory *testing* the researcher *begins* with a set of relatively specific propositions and then determines whether these are applicable in reality, whereas in theory *building* the researcher begins with a question and

a basic proposition, and *derives* a more specific theory or set of propositions by examining actual results.

In considering descriptive case studies de Vaus notes that descriptions used cannot be atheoretical, but will be shaped by pre-existing conceptual categories or theories evident from research literature. He considers the use of typographies and the generation of ideal types to serve as a yardstick to judge actual cases, arguing that this avoids mere description, instead resulting in an approach that is structured, planned and purposeful.

In this case, although there is relatively extensive literature on the introduction of higher fees and income contingent loans in Australia (see Chapter 2), a theory building rather than a theory testing or descriptive approach has been taken. This is because whilst I was willing to steer interviews to provide evidence to support existing theories, I was reluctant to enter the fieldwork phase as a “champion” of a particular theory and so risk imposing preconceptions and pre-existing categories on the data (de Vaus, 2001, p.243). However, I was content to adopt the approach set out by Simons. She advocates changing questions as interview phases progress and refining interpretive thoughts (2009, p.119), suggesting ultimately these may become what Cronbach (1975) terms “working hypotheses” (p.125).

iii. Other elements of case study design

Single or multiple cases

de Vaus (2001) argues that a single case will normally be less compelling than multiple cases (p.226). However, citing Yin (1989) he argues that with a single *critical* case – where there are well-formulated propositions and the case meets the requirements of the theory – a “moderately convincing” test of a theory may be provided (p.227). This case study,

although the subjects were selected with a proposition in mind, can only hope to be persuasive. Further work would be required to test any theory. de Vaus (2003) argues that multiple cases, if strategically selected, provide a more rigorous test of a theory. He raises the caveat that researchers should strive to treat each as a 'stand-alone' case prior to engaging in cross-case comparisons (p.227).

Retrospective or prospective

As de Vaus (2001) observes, most case studies, and all explanatory case studies, will incorporate a time dimension. A *retrospective* design involves collecting on one occasion information relating to an extended (past) period, and requires reconstruction of the history of the case. de Vaus notes this has difficulties associated with the loss or distortion of evidence. A *prospective* design, as adopted in this case, involves tracking an issue forward over time. It has the advantage of enabling the researcher to consider events as they occur (p.228).

iv. What a case study is not

de Vaus (2001) avoids a simple equation of case studies with qualitative methods (p.230), arguing that equating case studies with particular data collection methods misunderstands case study design. He contends that any method of data collection may be used so long as it is practical and ethical (p.231), and that multiple methods of data collection may be employed. Yin (1993) distinguishes case studies from ethnographies on the grounds that ethnographies are unsuited to theory testing (p.60).

v. *Methodological issues*

Internal and external validity, trustworthiness and authenticity

Simons (2009) notes that attempts to apply positivistic approaches to validity are less relevant in qualitative case study research, arguing that attempts to apply these concepts to qualitative inquiry may be invalid or distort the nature of qualitative inquiry: “straining the data to meet the concept and losing the meaning in the process” (p.128). This view is supported by Denzin and Lincoln (2003) who endorse the use of terms such as *credibility*, *transferability*, *dependability* and *confirmability* in place of the positivist criteria of internal and external validity, reliability and objectivity (p.35). Wolcott (1994) argues against the use of the terms ‘validity’ and ‘reliability’ – in their original technical sense – in qualitative inquiry. Simons argues that credibility is a major criterion in case study evaluation, but citing House (1980) argues that this is not merely a technical or methodological issue. Instead she notes that validity claims differ according to whether the research follows positivist or anti-positivist (in House’s terms ‘subjectivist’) approaches. As an example, de Vaus (2001), who adopts a positivistic approach, whilst acknowledging that case studies may achieve excellent *internal* validity by providing a deep understanding of a case, may lack *external* validity because “ a case is just that – a case – and cannot be representative of a larger universe of cases” (p.237). In contrast, Simons notes that subjectivist approaches “appeal to experience and the actual situation as the basis for validity rather than scientific method” (p.128). She suggests not only that there must be accuracy in reflecting the situation, but that in evaluating public programmes evaluation must be “normatively correct”. Simons goes on to consider the range of validity criteria developed by Guba and Lincoln (1985) which they believe are more appropriate to qualitative inquiry. They introduced the concept of *trustworthiness* and suggested a parallel set of criteria – credibility, transferability, dependability and

confirmability. These are primarily methodological criteria and positivist in tone. Subsequently, Guba and Lincoln (1989) introduced the concept of *authenticity*. This includes considerations of fairness and respecting participants' perspectives. As Simons notes, this relates more closely to the process and quality of the evaluation and "how the data come to be negotiated and understood" (p.128), considered further by Denzin and Lincoln (2003), who posit that:

"Validity...points to a question that has to be answered in one way or another: Are these findings sufficiently authentic that I may trust myself in acting on their implications?" (p.274).

They raise the concern that one of the issues around validity is the conflation of method and interpretation. Arguing that no single method, or group of methods, represents "the royal road to ultimate knowledge" Denzin and Lincoln (2003) highlight the importance of interpretative validity, noting that:

"...we have two arguments... The first, borrowed from positivism, argues for...rigour in the application of method, whereas the second argues for both a community consent and a form of rigour – defensible reasoning... - in ascribing salience to one interpretation over another..." (pp.274-5)

Denzin and Lincoln acknowledge the utility of methodological criteria, but note that interpretive rigour has received more recent attention. They return to a mildly revised formulation of their earlier question, namely how can we know when conclusions are sufficiently faithful that we may feel safe in acting on them? They conclude that there is no final answer, but that there are several relevant areas for discussion. Authenticity is one such area, and Denzin and Lincoln note the hallmarks of authentic, trustworthy, rigorous or "valid" constructivist or phenomenological inquiry as fairness, and a variety of sub-categories of authenticity. In the context of this case study fairness is the most useful of these constructions. Denzin and Lincoln define it as:

“...a quality of balance; that is, all stakeholder views, perspectives, claims, concerns, and voices should be apparent in the text. Omission of stakeholder or participant voices reflect, we believe, a form of bias” (2003, p.278).

With this in mind Chapter 7 provides a quantitative assessment (in Table 7.9) of a range of central issues, indicating the balance of participant views. Denzin and Lincoln conclude that objectivity exists only “in the imagination of those who believe that knowing can be separated from the knower” (p.279).

Reflexivity

Reflexivity is a key aspect of qualitative research related to authenticity. Denzin and Lincoln (2003) define it simply as “... the process of reflecting critically on the self as researcher, the ‘human as instrument’ ” (p.283). Simons (2009) notes that “to be reflexive is to think about how your actions, values, beliefs, preferences and biases influence the research process and outcome” (p.91). She emphasises the importance of reflexivity in qualitative case studies where the researcher is re-presenting the experience of others in a process of constructing an interpretation of observed reality. She concludes that demonstrating reflexivity is a critical factor in ensuring the validity of the study.

Coleman and Briggs (2002) comment that at one level reflexivity means that educational researchers are unlikely achieve an entirely objective view because they inhabit the social, political and educational worlds they are studying. They argue that reflexivity requires researchers to consider that in making sense of research situations their perceptions and judgements are affected by, and reflected in, the norms and values they have absorbed as part of their life experience. This is not necessarily problematic, and Simons (2009) regards the subjectivity of the researcher as inevitable and “essential in understanding and interpreting the case” (p.24).

Simons (2009) addresses how reflexivity is demonstrated in the final case study. This is considered in the interpretation and presentation section.

Reactive Effects

The risk that the researcher's presence may produce changes in the case is noted by de Vaus (2001) who cautions against confusing the effects of doing the study with the effects of other variables (pp.236-7). This, he notes, depends on the type of case and the data collection methods, being highly unlikely in a retrospective study.

Data collection in this research indicated the possibility of some reactive effects. One Course Leader interview suggested that participating students considered their choices, reasoning and motivation in more detail because of research discussions. This was confirmed by one student interview. There is therefore a risk that outcomes have been influenced by the nature of the data collection process.

Case selection and sampling

In observing that case studies cannot provide statistically valid generalisations beyond the case in question, de Vaus (2001) accepts that such external validity is not sought. Instead, de Vaus suggests that case studies may seek *theoretical* generalisation in order to help develop, refine and test theories. He argues that case studies achieve this through the logic of *replication* in research design, that is experiments using non-probability samples achieve external validity if repetition in the same conditions produces the same (predicted) results. This approach goes beyond claims made by others (e.g. Simons, 2009) who state that formal generalisation is not the aim of case studies. de Vaus argues that the external validity of case studies is enhanced by the *strategic* selection of cases in order to contribute to theoretical replication (pp.238-9). In this case study, the closest parallel

was work indicating that the introduction of the Australian HECS system of income contingent loan repayment did not have a significantly adverse effect on participation by the least advantaged students. It was on this basis that students from widening participation post codes were selected, but this provides only limited opportunities for replication.

In terms of sampling, there is a consensus that there is no point in seeking to select cases that are in some respect representative of a wider population (de Vaus, 2001, p.240; Simons, 2009, p.30). First, statistical generalisation is not sought. If theoretical generalisation is sought, cases that provide illuminating examples of a type of case or that will provide an appropriate test of a theory should be selected. de Vaus and Simons note an erroneous desire for typicality, on the flawed basis that this will have greater potential for transferability, ignoring the fact that generalising to a wider sample of cases is *not* the purpose of case studies. Second, as de Vaus observes, there is no sure way of knowing or estimating whether a case *is* truly typical. Additionally, Simons (2009) notes the potential value of an unusual case which may help to illustrate matters which may be overlooked in 'typical' cases. Simons is of the view that the primary criterion should be to maximise what can be learned (p.30). Finally, both de Vaus and Simons acknowledge that, as in this case study, practical issues (cost, time, access) may be relevant to case selection.

Data Collection

a) Participant Selection

Simons (2009) discusses random or semi-random participant selection, noting that sampling will be purposive where the aim is to understand or gain insight into the case. Purposive participant selection was undertaken in this case study (that is participants

from Widening Participation (WP) postcodes were prioritised as an imperfect proxy for lower socio-economic status).

b) Choosing methods

Simons (2009) observes that whilst interview, observation and document analysis are qualitative methods most often used in case study research, methods should be selected on the basis of their ability to inform the research question(s). Given an interpretivist epistemological approach she suggests that interview and observation-based case studies are preferred.

In this study the main method has been recorded semi-structured individual interviews with a single researcher, an approach selected on the basis of assessment of the method most likely to inform the research questions. This is supported by Simons' view that:

“...interviews enable me to get to core issues in the case more quickly and in a greater depth, to probe motivations, to ask follow-up questions and to facilitate individuals telling their stories” (2009, p.43).

The desire to probe motivations and ask relevant follow up questions were key.

c) Interview considerations

Whilst Simons (2009) focuses on unstructured or open-ended in-depth research interviews, a completely unstructured approach did not seem the most effective means of data collection. Instead the approach set out by Kvale (2007) in respect of semi-structured interviews was adopted. This focuses on gathering data on the research question whilst allowing a flexible and evolving approach:

“the semi-structured...interview seeks to obtain descriptions of the life-world of the interviewee with respect to interpreting the meaning of the described phenomenon; it will have a sequence of themes to be covered, as well as some suggested questions. Yet at the same time there is openness to

changes of sequence and forms of question in order to follow up the specific answers given and the stories told..." (2007, p.51)

Simons (2009, p.43) sets out four major purposes or benefits of interviewing:

- i. To document the interviewee's perspective;
- ii. The engagement of interviewer and interviewee in identifying and analysing issues as a learning process;
- iii. It offers the flexibility to change direction to pursue emergent issues, to probe a topic or seek a more extensive response and to engage in dialogue with interviewees; and
- iv. Critically it offers the potential for uncovering and representing feelings and events that cannot be readily observed and can produce far greater insight for the interviewer.

Kvale (2007) notes methodological issues relevant to the interview process. He highlights the importance of the first minutes of an interview, as interviewees will want to have a feel for the interviewer's approach before allowing themselves to speak freely and potentially expose their experiences to a relative stranger. Kvale stresses the need for good contact to be established by means of attentive listening, with the interviewer showing interest, understanding and respect for what the subject says. He notes that the interviewer should be at ease and clear about what is being asked. He suggests that interviews should be introduced by a briefing in which the interviewer defines the situation for the subject, sets out the purpose of the interview and any practical matters e.g. the use of the tape recorder. Kvale suggests the subsequent use of an interview guide or script which sets out the structure for the interview. This may be as limited as

containing some topics to be covered or as detailed as a sequence of precisely worded questions. He suggests that the approach selected will be dependent on the particular study – questions may be strictly determined or an interviewer may use judgement and tact, following up on answers to open up discussion. Kvale also suggests a rounding off at the conclusion of the interview which as a minimum asks if the interviewee would like to say anything further.

This case study involved interviews with an initial briefing followed by a relatively loose coverage of topics. A more prescriptive approach was avoided because:

- i. The case study was exploring, without any fixed views as to the underlying theory and literature; and
- ii. There was a wish to build rapport with interviewees in order to promote trust, and flexibility to pursue topics to their conclusion was important.

Kvale's suggestion of a debriefing was minimally followed, in that students were provided with the opportunity to add additional comments.

One of Kvale's suggestions was not followed, a weakness of the research process. Kvale notes that the interviewee's voice, facial expressions and body language provide richer insight into the subject's meaning than the transcribed text allow. Consequently Kvale suggests that the interviewer should set aside 10-15 minutes of time to reflect on each interview and to note or record relevant thoughts and impressions relating to the interview. Simons (2009) considers the use of video as part of case study observation. This was not considered at the time of the research though, in hindsight, interviews could have been captured on video. A consideration would have been between the possibility of gaining better insight into the interviewees' meanings from subsequent analysis. Set

against this would be the potential for the equipment to create an additional barrier, causing interviewee disquiet which might inhibit expression. On balance, were the case study to be repeated, interviews would not be recorded on video but the interviewer's reflections would be recorded after each session.

In terms of the interview questions, Kvale (2007) considers thematic and dynamic issues. *Thematically* the questions relate to theoretical conceptions of the research topic whereas *dynamically* questions relate to the 'how' of an interview; they should promote a positive interaction, keep the flow of the discussion going and ideally prompt interviewees to talk about their feelings and experiences. In the case study, the intention was to maintain discussion. Kvale notes that the interviewer's ability to sense the immediate meaning of an answer, and the possible meanings that it opens up, is decisive. There is, however, a risk for the interviewer in progressing on the basis of an untested assumption if meaning is unclear. This is considered by Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, and Tipton (1985) who deliberately brought their perceptions and questions to the interview:

“...we did not seek to impose our ideas on those with whom we talked....we did attempt to uncover assumptions, to make explicit what the person...might rather have left implicit.” (p.304)

A similar approach was adopted in the case study interviews.

In considering the style of interviews Simons (2009) notes a shift towards a more interactive or conversational style of interviewing, to equalise the relationship between interviewer and interviewee to create opportunity for active dialogue and “co-constructed meanings and collaborative learning” (p.44). Whilst acknowledging that research is different from conversation, and that interviewers may not be skilful conversationalists, Simons considers that the underlying intention of a conversational

interview holds good. A more conversational style was certainly the objective of the interviews in this research.

Simons (2009) considers how interactive and personal research interviews should be. She notes that usually in conventional interviewing the interviewer is in control asking the questions or listening and the participant is “a passive knowledge-giver” (p.44), and the interviewer refrains from giving information. Simons suggests this restraint may stem from a belief that this might interfere with the gathering of ‘objective’ data. She notes that Bellah et al (1985) and Oakley (1981) have questioned the underlying assumptions and explored a more interactive and personal methodology. Simons questions how far this approach should extend, whilst acknowledging the need to establish empathy and be responsive.

Oakley (1981) argues that interviewers are most productive when willing to invest “his or her personal identity in the relationship” (p.41), and found that interviews regarding subjects’ personal experiences led to more personal involvement by the interviewer. Oakley opted to take an interactive responsive approach partly because she did not see interviewees merely as sources of data, finding from previous research that deflecting answers was unhelpful and that “no intimacy without reciprocity” (p.49) seemed important in longitudinal in-depth interviewing.

In this case study one of the priorities, given the interviewer’s position in the institution, was to seek to equalise the interviewer-interviewee relationship in order to promote dialogue. Consequently I sought to answer any questions raised and volunteered personal information to promote trust.

All interviews were recorded and transcribed, which Simons (2009) notes ensures the accuracy and truthfulness of reporting, and frees the interviewer from the need to take extensive notes, allowing greater concentration on interaction in the interview. However, she also observes that recording can lull the interviewer into inattentiveness at the time. She notes that transcription is time consuming, and delay between recording and subsequent analysis makes recall of the nuances of the interview, and the full extent of the interviewees' meaning, more difficult.

In this case study the advantages of recording were felt to outweigh the disadvantages. The primary reason was the freeing of the interviewer from extensive note taking and the possible generation of a better rapport with interviewees. A drawback was the delay in transcription. Each phase involved 16 individual interviews and it was not always possible to transcribe interviews before the next phase. This meant there was no opportunity to share transcripts with participants for checking accuracy and fairness.

Data analysis

Simons (2009) defines data analysis as coding, categorising and theme generation that allow the researcher to organise and make sense of data to produce findings and an overall understanding (or theory) of the case. She notes this is often a formal inductive process of breaking down data into segments which may then be categorised, ordered and examined for connections and patterns that explain the data.

i. Data analysis perspectives

Miles and Huberman (1994) suggest a systematic approach centred on three inter-related processes: *data reduction*; *data display*; and *conclusion drawing and verification* (pp.10-12). Data reduction is the process of selecting and abstracting key data from interviews,

observations and field notes. It is guided by the conceptual frameworks used, and through data organisation by coding, categorisation, clustering and identifying themes. Data reduced in this way are displayed in visual form such as a diagram, matrix, chart or network. The intention is to allow the reader to 'see' what is happening and what might be necessary to move the analysis forward. Data conclusion drawing and verification is the process through which emerging patterns, propositions and explanations are confirmed and verified. Simons (2009) notes that this approach is ordered, sequential and easy to follow, but may appear overly rational (p.120). It is perhaps tinged with a feeling of positivism, and is the approach suggested by de Vaus (2001) who adopts that perspective.

Walcott (1995) sets out a different approach; data reduction remains the initial stage but Walcott describes three ways of organising and making sense of qualitative data – description, analysis and interpretation – to emphasise the different ways in which data can be transformed. Following data reduction, *description* seeks to stay close to the originally recorded data and answer the question 'what is going on here?'. Next, *analysis* identifies key factors and relationships, themes and patterns from the data to examine the question of how things work, or why they don't. *Interpretation* focuses on the question of meaning – 'what is to be made of it all?' Walcott states that the objective is to go beyond that which can be explained with the degree of certainty usually associated with analysis to produce an understanding that "transcends factual data and cautious analyses and begins to probe into what is to be made of them" (1994, p.36).

Similarly, Smyth, Down, McInerney and Hattam (2014) champion the notion of 'craft' as distinct from 'methodology' in educational research. They draw extensively on the work of Mills (1971). Gitlin (2000) argues that for Mills:

“Methodology was rigor mortis...Craft was done with respect for materials, clarity about objective and a sense of the...stakes of intellectual life...A mastery of craft required not only technical knowledge and logic but a general curiosity.” (p.232)

These approaches (Miles and Huberman, 1994; Walcott, 1994; Mills, 1971) are perspectives focusing on meaning. As Kvale (2007, p.103) observes, no standard method exists to arrive at the essential meanings and deeper implications of what is said in an interview. Kvale (2007, pp.110-113) highlights alternative analyses focusing on meaning that address different forms of linguistic analysis, including:

- i. *Linguistic analysis* addressing characteristic use of grammar and linguistic forms in an interview.
- ii. *Conversation analysis* investigating the structure and process of linguistic interaction and how this creates understanding. It stays close to the verbal interaction of the speakers and foregoes interpretation in depth.
- iii. *Narrative analysis* examining narrative structure of stories that people tell.
- iv. *Discourse analysis* focusing on how truth effects are created within discourses.

Given that the essential objective of the research was to seek meaning from the participant interviews these alternative approaches were not considered helpful.

Kvale (2007), Denzin and Lincoln (2003) and others highlight another form of analysis – *bricolage*. This derives from the French *bricoleur*:

“... ‘someone who works with his (or her) hands and uses devious means compared to those of the craftsman’...the bricoleur is practical and gets the job done” (Weinstein and Weinstein, 1991, p.161)

Here there are parallels with the notion of researchers’ craft (Smyth et al, 2014), but Kvale (2007) defines bricolage as mixed technical discourses where the interpreter moves

freely between different analytical techniques. Denzin and Lincoln (2003) refer to a pieced-together set of representations that “are fitted to the specifics of a complex situation” (p.5) whilst Kvale refers to an “eclectic form of generating meaning through a multiplicity of ad hoc methods and conceptual approaches” (p.115) which is a common mode of interviewer analysis. He notes the technique may bring out connections and structures significant to a research project in interviews initially lacking an overall sense.

ii. Data analysis process: Coding, categorisation, authenticity.

Coding and categorising are processes commonly adopted in the initial stages of data analysis as part of initial sense-making. Coding identifies different data segments and assigns a name to them, which may be descriptive or more analytical and explanatory. These are reviewed as data analysis continues, being refined or renamed if necessary as a more accurate ‘reading’ of the data emerges. The most significant or frequent codes may then be used to review large amounts of data and categorise them at a more theoretical level (Simons, 2009, p.121).

The coding and categorisation of data is a systematic, comprehensive and cumulative process which builds understanding and explanations gradually. Simons identifies a risk that the process may become mechanical and formulaic, and consequently that it remains merely descriptive, hence coding remains fixed rather than open to change and development as more data are examined, and understanding grows (p.122).

Simons (2009) discusses whether to use a system of *precoding* (which may be content or process-focussed) or *subsequent* coding developed from the data. For example, precodes may be generated from the theoretical framework. Simons comments that researchers who prefer to generate codes and categories from the data often seek to use or adapt the language of participants to emphasise that categories are grounded in the data rather than

arising from the preconceptions of the researcher. Simons identifies risks with both approaches. With precoding it may be difficult for researchers to remain open to the possibility of unanticipated categories, and in generating coding from the data there is always a risk that the researcher's thoughts and values will introduce bias into the selection.

Ultimately in analysing the interview transcripts a system of data coding was not utilised. Initially formal coding was undertaken. However, I began to feel that this was a sterile exercise. Comments made by participants often touched on two or more themes from the literature in a single sentence. It seemed to me that there was limited value in separating the coding of comments, and to quote Gitlin's appreciation of Mills (1971) was "...so fetishized as to have eclipsed the real stakes of research" (2000, p.232).

The approach adopted was first to review all interview transcripts. A second full read through was then undertaken, identifying key comments and themes. A third read through was performed, recording comments made in each phase of interviews by each participant in relation to the key themes. This grid was then used to ensure that there was fairness in reflecting the comments of participants in Chapter 7, being mindful of Denzin and Lincoln's view that fairness is the result of balance, and that all views should be apparent (2003, p.278)..

Multiple readings of the transcripts were useful in identifying themes, but more importantly in prompting consideration of possible factors underlying the themes, the inter-relationship between issues and links to the background literature. This was an attempt to determine 'what is to be made of it all?' (Walcott, 1994 p.36). Additionally, multiple read-throughs were helpful in seeking to ensure the authenticity of the student voices reflected in Chapter 7.

Interpretation, Presentation and Analysis

Interpretation

Simons (2009) argues that all case studies should be data-rich, set in socio-political context and fairly and accurately represent participants' judgements and perspectives. She contends that case studies should have a clear focus and should tell the story of the evolution, development and experience of the particular case, arguing that evidence produced should be sufficient to justify the conclusion or implications drawn. She counsels that alternative or contending perspectives need to be included and negative cases should be examined for their contribution to overall meaning. She argues that sufficient evidence should be present to enable readers to reach an independent judgement of the merit of the analysis and interpretation put forward. However, de Vaus (2001) argues that facts do not "speak for themselves", and it would be wrong to argue otherwise. He contends that describing a case always involves selection, ordering and implied or explicit construction of sequences and interpretations, noting that the logic of research design should remain clear; the reader should be able to see a structure. He argues that any report simply recounting a number of stories is incomplete; it is critical that cases are related to propositions and that comparisons are drawn between cases in order to arrive at valid generalisations or more refined proposition.

Presentation

Simons (2009) notes that in many contexts in educational research, reporting takes a linear form, and that such case studies habitually begin with an introduction describing the research and the case, including the question to be investigated. Subsequent chapters outline the nature of the project, its history and evolution, how it is located in a national or international policy context and the methodology used. Later chapters outline the

findings or results, frequently with a theme or issue focus. She notes that the final chapter draws conclusion and discusses implications for action and policy. The format of this thesis is consistent with this approach.

Analysis

de Vaus (2001) stresses that a case study should fundamentally be theoretically-informed. He notes that case study analysis revolves around assessing the 'fit' between an individual case and the theory or theories being tested, with the goal being *theoretical* rather than *statistical* generalisation. Consequently de Vaus argues whilst case study analysis may involve statistical or numerical description, the small number of cases involved make further detailed statistical analysis redundant.

The descriptive and explanatory typologies of case studies developed by de Vaus were considered earlier. As noted, I have sought to adopt a theory-building approach. de Vaus observes that this approach moves from individual cases and seeks to identify commonality, with the common element providing the basis of theoretical generalisation. de Vaus notes this may result in the need for further case studies to test revised theoretical propositions and reformulate them. This is discussed in Chapter 8 which considers the implications of the case study. The findings themselves are considered in Chapter 7.

CHAPTER 7: PARTICIPANT INTERVIEWS AND OUTCOMES

Participant Characteristics

Participants were drawn from two Extend Diploma (ED) courses and participant selection, and interview conduct, is considered in Chapter 6. This section sets out the key characteristics of participants, prior to discussion of the interview data. The gender and ages of the participants are presented in Table 7.1a.

Table 7.1a: Participant Age and Gender

Gender	Age on Commencement of Extended Diploma					Total	%
	16	17	18	19	18+		
Female	9	3	Nil	1	Nil	13	81.25
Male	1	Nil	1	1	Nil	3	18.75
Total	10	3	1	2	Nil	16	100.00
%	62.5	18.75	6.25	12.5	Nil	100	

Source: college data

The majority of participants were aged 16 at the start of their course and had come directly from school. The overwhelming majority were female. The age and gender distributions of ED students at the institution at the time are shown in Tables 7.1b and 7.1c.

Table 7.1b: Student age at start of Extended Diploma in 2010.

Percentage of Cohort	Age at Commencement of Course					Total
	16	17	18	19	20+	
	63.2%	15.3%	12.4%	5.3%	3.8%	100%

Source: college data

Table 7.1c: Student gender at the start of Extended Diploma in 2010.

Percentage of Cohort	Gender %		Total
	Female	Male	
	66.5%	33.5%	100%

Source: college data

In comparison with their peers, the case study participants are:

- a. Equally likely as students in the case study college to be aged 16, or to have come to the institution having made alternative choices aged 16; and
- b. More likely to be female.

An analysis of participants' domicile is set out in Table 7.2a.

Table 7.2a: Participants' Domicile

	Deprived postcode for Widening Participation	Other postcode	Total
Number	14	2	16
Percentage	87.5%	12.5%	100%

Source: college data

The Widening Participation (WP) postcode measure is FE-specific and considers the likelihood of participating in further education (at 16) rather than higher education (at 18). Table 7.2a shows a high proportion of case study participants coming from WP households. As noted in Chapter 6, this was a deliberate selection criterion in order that participants were – as far as it was possible to determine – those least likely to participate in higher education, and arguably most likely to be deterred by higher tuition fees. Table 7.2b shows the WP postcode position at the case study college.

Table 7.2b: Students from WP postcode households starting Extended Diploma in 2010.

	WP household	Non-WP household	Total
Percentage of Cohort	41.1%	58.9%	100%

Source: college data

This illustrates the much higher proportion of students from WP postcodes in the case study groups, which should be borne in mind when considering participant destinations.

Participants' familial experience of higher education, as reported in interviews, is shown in Table 7.3.

Table 7.3: Participants' Familial Experience of Higher Education.

	Nature of familial participation			Total
	None known to participate	Member of extended family	Close family member	
Number	11	2	3	16
Percentage	68.75%	12.5%	18.75%	100%

Source: interview analysis

Just as almost 90% of participants were from WP households, over 80% of participants had no immediate familial experience of higher education on which to draw throughout the HE choice process. As data was self-reported through the interview process there is no comparison data for the whole institution. All participants were white. However, this is largely consistent with the ethnicity of the local area, which is overwhelmingly white. The case study college draws its students from five main local authority districts, and beyond. Table 7.4 shows the prevalence of white people in the main catchment areas.

Table 7.4: Ethnicity in the five main local authority, 2011 Census

Local Authority	White (any)
1	96.2%
2	97.6%
3	88.3%
4	98.6%
5	94.7%
All	94.8%

Source: ONS, Ethnicity and National Identity in England and Wales: 2011

All students at the case study institution are routinely screened for dyslexia and other learning support needs and invited to disclose any such support needs. The position in relation to the case study participants is set out in Table 7.5.

Table 7.5: Incidence of dyslexia within case study group.

	Male	Female	Total
Total participants	3	13	16
Identified as dyslexic	1	2	3
% of participants	33%	15%	19%

Source: college data

At the time of the fieldwork, entitlement to free school meals (FSM) did not continue into college-based post-16 education. However, the case study college did provide hardship funds to students, including a meal subsidy. The position in respect of the participants is set out in Table 7.6a.

Table 7.6a: Financial support within the case study group.

	Number	Percentage
Food bursary plus other payment	3	18.75%
Other bursary payment only	2	12.5%
No bursary payment	11	68.75%
Total	16	100%

Source: college data

It is useful to consider the data in the context of the college's main catchment areas in Table 7.6b.

Table 7.6b: Analysis of GCSE achievement in the five local authority areas by pupil characteristics, academic year 2009 to 2010.

Local Authority	N° of FSM pupils	Achievement %	N° of FSM pupils achieving	N° of non FSM pupils	Achievement %	N° of non FSM pupils achieving
1	154	34%	52	1,012	58%	587
2	234	25%	59	1,015	55%	558
3	477	27%	129	1,214	50%	607
4	289	29%	84	1,659	57%	946
5	347	20%	69	1,973	59%	1,164
Total	1,501	26%	393	6,873	56%	3,862

Source: National Statistics: GCSE and equivalent attainment by pupil characteristics in England 2009 to 2010. [Note: FSM = Free School Meals]

It can be seen that of the 8,374 local area pupils (1,501 plus 6,873) some 1,501 (17.9 per cent) are in receipt of FSM. Given that 18.75 per cent of the case study participants were in receipt of college food bursaries it seems the case study group is typical of the area as a whole.

Issues relating to dyslexia and hardship were not raised specifically as part of the interview process. Reasonably open questions were asked and no issues were raised by participants in relation to specific support needs relating, for example, to dyslexia. Some did raise questions relating to hardship and the affordability of the process of higher education choice. These are considered more fully later.

Participants stated their intended destinations during the interview process. This was followed up after the end of the academic year to determine actual destinations, set out in Table 7.7.

Table 7.7: Participant Destinations by Participant Characteristics.

		Employment	Higher Education Institution:			Total
			Local	Regional	National	
Overall:	number	3	10	2	1	16
	%	18.75%	62.5%	12.5%	6.25%	100%
Age:	16	2	6	1	1	10
	16+	1	4	1	Nil	6
Gender:	F	3	7	2	1	13
	M	Nil	3	Nil	Nil	3
Domicile:	WP	2	10	1	1	13
	Non WP	1	Nil	1	Nil	3

The only change between intended and actual destinations was that one participant who had intended to undertake an undergraduate programme at the case study institution's higher education campus instead elected to go into employment.

Table 7.7 shows a high rate of participation in higher education (81.25%). This is a relatively unusual level of HE participation from an FE college and therefore bears further examination. There are several matters to consider.

First, is this degree of HE participation unusual at the case study institution? Expressions of intention at the end of Level 3 study would suggest that in most years at least 90 per cent of students intend to enter higher education. However, this figure is probably inflated by students studying for a Foundation Diploma, a post A-level, pre-university qualification. In addition, stated student intentions may not reflect actual enrolments on an undergraduate programme of study. However, the College did participate in a pilot exercise to track subsequent continuation in higher education. This identified students who enrolled on an undergraduate programme of study and stayed at the institution until the first data return. This exercise, undertaken after the case study, indicated that 78 per cent of students continued into higher education and were still enrolled at the first census point. Collection of this data is now undertaken routinely on a national basis. At the time of writing the most recent data for the 2013/14 academic year showed immediate progression to HE of 78 per cent. This was higher than all local sixth form colleges and considerably above the rates in all local general FE colleges.

The second issue is whether the level of progression into higher education from the case study college is unusually high for an FE college. Connor, Sinclair and Banerji (2006) show that progression to HE is more likely to involve participation at an HE or FE college, rather than a university, for those whose Level 3 qualification is vocational, such as the BTEC Extended Diploma studied by the case study group. Their findings are set out in Table 7.8.

Table 7.8: Highest qualification held by young accepted applicants to full-time degree courses (2004 entry).

Qualification	Russell Group university	Other Pre-92 university	Post-92 university	HE or FE college
L3 Vocational qualification (BTEC, AVCE)	3.2%	11.2%	19.9%	30.1%
GCE A-level only	71.2%	64.5%	58.9%	49.1%
L3 qualification but no GCE A-level	2.8%	7.5%	11.4%	18.7%
L3 Vocational (BTEC, AVCE) but no GCE A-level	0.5%	3.7%	8.6%	13.1%
Numbers	60,573	67,756	184,324	20,865

Source: Connor, Sinclair and Banerji (2006)

Note: Percentages of applicants accepted with these different qualifications /combinations at different types of institutions.

Significantly, Connor et al note that when examining data by subject area, applicants with Level 3 vocational qualifications constitute 32 percent of applicants within art and design subjects, and that in this subject area the minority (30 percent) of accepted applicants had only A-level qualifications. Building on this, Carter (2009) identifies that only 41percent of learners with BTEC qualifications progress to higher education compared with 90 percent of those with A-levels.

Smith and Joslin (2010) undertook a multi-year analysis of the progression of Level 3 FE learners in the Kent and Medway area into higher education, which provides data for comparison. Their study tracked three cohorts (2005/06 to 2007/08) comprising 38,916 students, some 16,646 of whom (43 percent) were studying for a vocational qualification.

The study produced several relevant findings:

- i. Between 20 and 22 percent of vocational students progressed directly to higher education;

- ii. For BTEC courses the immediate progression rate varied between 26 and 31 percent, with progression of 18 to 19 year olds within this group varying between 25 and 29 percent;
- iii. Overall, 67 percent of learners who progressed to HE studied at local institutions, a figure that remained constant across the three years of the study;
- iv. A greater proportion of students studying A-level go out of the area to study at HE, but for all other types of FE qualifications students are more likely to study locally;
- v. The proportion of students studying in FE colleges who progress to HE who live in disadvantaged areas (POLAR Quintile 1 and 2) was considerably higher than the proportion in the region generally – 44 percent compared with 23 percent. This suggests that disadvantaged students in the region are more likely to progress to HE from an FE college than from a school sixth form; and
- vi. Students in POLAR Quintile 1 and 2 were also more likely to study locally than elsewhere, whereas for students in the middle and upper quintiles the reverse was the case, although differences were small.

The rate of progression to higher education by students at the case study college therefore appears unusually high. That it has remained high year on year suggests that such levels of progression to HE form part of the institutional habitus of the College (see Chapter 5).

Participant Interview Outcomes: Overview

Discussions with participants were wide-ranging and examined many aspects of higher education choice. Semi-structured interviews were conducted, broadly aligned to the key literature themes identified in Chapter 5.

Through the three phases of interviews it became clear that for some students the process had been a 'journey' to a conclusion whereas, for a few, there was greater uncertainty regarding their choices by Phase III. Some Phase III interviews were relatively brief, because there was little change since Phase II interviews. In all cases the Phase I interview was the most extensive, generally taking about an hour.

Themes emerged from the interviews and there was a substantial degree of alignment with considerations identified in the literature review. However, issues were not sharply delineated. An example is the question of geography, which demonstrates an inter-relationship with other factors from the literature, including:

- i. Geography/personal development: some felt that they would not be able to cope with the challenges of independent living associated with study away from home;
- ii. Geography/finance: many believed they would be unable to afford the additional costs associated with living away from home. This was distinct from issues of tuition fee costs;
- iii. Geography/parental influence: for some there was a level of parental influence to study at an institution close to home; and
- iv. Geography/course: some identified a conflict between a desire to study on what was perceived as a better programme (usually in London) and considerations of distance/finance.

An over view of student responses is provided at Table 7.9.

Table 7.9: Summary of subjects' responses on key issues.

Issue	Number		
	Yes	No	No comment / neutral
Contemplated HE prior to FE study	6	10	-
Parents studied at degree level	2*	14	-
Parents support HE study ambitions	15	-	1
Parents able to assist in decision-making	3	12	1
Fully/largely aware of current fees issues	9	7	-
Difficulty in attending open days	6	-	10
Concerned about living costs whilst studying for degree?	14	-	2
Need to work whilst studying for degree	6	-	10
Indications of need for ontological security	12	-	4
Implications of stress of choice process	10	2	4

**Note: as mature students*

Whilst outcomes of the interview process are reported under the headings of key themes, these are not always neatly compartmentalised. Inter-relationships with other themes will be highlighted.

Key theme: Increased Tuition Fees

Some participants had been involved in the May 2011 focus groups. It was apparent that for them there was a shift in the perception of increased tuition fees by the individual interviews in October 2011. Students were mainly better informed about the terms of loans, even if their knowledge was imperfect. Early publicity had been a deterrent:

“...I don't watch the news very often. Like I'm too caught up in my own kinda world....and just suddenly there's like riots and everything. I suddenly realised like, it's gunna be very difficult for me.” Subject G2, Interview 1, p.3

Concerns were initially high, as this comment, which also demonstrates a subsequently changed attitude, shows:

“...my family isn’t well off... so I was panicking that I wouldn’t be able to continue education into uni, but since it’s all started being [explained] about the money y’know, erm, I’m not worried anymore. I know I’m gunna get into a university and I know that ya ’av to earn a certain amount of money to pay that back and even if I do pay it back it’ll be a tiny amount, I’ll barely notice it so I’m not worried.” Subject G6, Interview 1, p.2

Whilst the attitudes had shifted, lack of clarity was evident for some students at Phase I interviews:

“...what confused me is that everyone’s saying that the tuition fees are goin’ up...and all these riots have been about them, and they’re tellin’ us that we actually don’t even have to start paying them back until we are earning over 20,000...which is kinda making me confused because there’s been so much about it, and everyone’s saying ‘oh they’re really expensive, really expensive’ when you’re not actually paying them back...(it) just confuses me ...” Subject G1, Interview 1, p.3

Others demonstrated less concern during Phase I:

“We didn’t see it as a big problem...it’s not as bad as people make out really.” Subject T8, Interview 1, p.3.

Some had moved beyond novel concerns relating to tuition fees to more usual questions about selecting programmes and institutions:

“...everyone’s going to uni they’re just not sure which one...none of them are worried about the money...the main concern is getting the education that they want...” Subject G6, Interview 1, p.4.

Once armed with sufficient information about tuition fees, students were seeking rational choices:

“...the hopes are...if you’re really sort of focused and determined to make something of your education then it really is worth investing, erm, that amount of money...because hopefully, hopefully, you’ll be earning enough money to pay it off.” Subject G5, Interview 1, p.5.

Others were less sanguine about tuition fee debt, and this influenced their geographical preferences:

“...it’s the cost, you know, even though it’s not cash in hand...it’s still the fact that ya gunna be paying it off, it is your money that you’re paying to an extent it’s just not yours yet. I think if it was cheaper I’d definitely move away and have more of an experience of it all.” Subject G2, Interview 1, p.4.

Notably the cost of the degree is, for this student, linked to a decision about whether to study away from home even though there is a recognition that tuition fees are not an immediate cost. This was a common concern. For others, concerns were more rationally expressed:

“Yeah see the debt...if ya not gunna be paying it back until you earn £21,000 it’s not gunna be that hard to pay back if you’re earning that money. It’s the fact like now, as of next year, I wouldn’t be able to afford to go live in halls of residence for the full year ‘cos it’d just be too much.” Subject T6, Interview 1, p.5.

This raises the question – unanswerable without detailed knowledge of the individual’s financial circumstances – whether this concern is entirely rational or whether comment about tuition fees prompted a more general, perhaps less considered, concern about the costs of studying for a degree.

There was a variable attitude towards tuition fees during the Phase I interviews. Some had already satisfied themselves that fees should not be an issue, whereas for others fees still generated unease, in an already anxiety-provoking process. The mood at Phase I is encapsulated by the following:

“I wouldn’t like to think that I’d made a choice based purely on finance but I think it definitely needs to be a factor...but...if it wasn’t a particularly large gap in fees I wouldn’t pick one place over the other due to (fees)...for me it’s about picking the place...that suits me most in all areas, all round, rather than selecting it on one particular thing.” Subject G5, Interview 1, p.8.

By Phase II in January 2012 students had submitted their UCAS forms, or were on the point of doing so. After the passage of approximately three months there had been time

for thinking to have moved on, although concern about tuition fees was not entirely absent:

“...the debt still worries me a bit but not as much now. I sort of put myself at ease with that.” Subject G4, Interview 2, p.3.

Concern at the possibility of moving away from home was expressed more frequently, although living cost considerations were, in some cases, conflated with tuition fee costs:

“I think that [fees change] swayed it a bit ‘cos I was like...‘I’d love to move away’. And then I thought if I went to [college HE] I could keep my job and still work on the weekends while I was at university. Which could also help me like with money an’ like stuff like that...’cos it is like costing a lot more to go this year.” Subject T5, Interview 2, p.3.

This comment indicates that despite a rational appreciation by students that increased tuition fees should not be an issue, at least for some students the change has resulted in greater levels of concern about the more general affordability of studying for a degree. Other students seemed confident that tuition fees should not be a significant factor in decision-making:

“I decided not to really think about the money because people have been saying that you probably won’t end up paying it all back anyway and you don’t realise its goin’. So that wasn’t really an issue any more...so like I just concentrated on my course and how good it was an’ stuff like that.” Subject T8, Interview 2, p.2.

This focus on choosing the most appropriate course was echoed by others:

“I didn’t want course fees to in any way sway my decision because I want to feel I was going to this place because it was the best place of education for me regardless of cost.” Subject G5, Interview 2, p.8.

It was apparent that for many, wider considerations came to the fore as the UCAS deadline approached:

Q: “Was money a factor in deciding to go to [college HE]?”

A: "It wasn't a massive factor, no...it was at first when I didn't know that much about it...but...we do get a lot of help. The biggest factor that I took into account is 'would the uni fit my personality?' And many people haven't really thought about it but...I don't want to go to a university where I feel like I shouldn't be there." Subject G6, Interview 2, p.3.

These wider considerations are discussed later. It is perhaps unsurprising that expressed concerns regarding tuition fees had diminished by Phase II, as if they were significant students would be opting not to submit a UCAS form. Students were seeking to make rational choices, and an investment approach was adopted some, encapsulated by the following:

"The idea of course is that you're going to – hopefully – you're gonna make enough money to pay that off tenfold if you, if you work hard enough and you get the job that's right for you, and that might be a slightly unrealistic view...or a slightly optimistic view of things. I know it doesn't, certainly doesn't work for everyone..." Subject G5, Interview 2, p.8.

This is an interesting quote. Whilst largely positive in tone, it expresses reservations about the security of outcome for some students. It is unclear whether this relates to art and design students generally – for whom the 'graduate premium' is lower – or to students studying at the case study institution. Generally by Phase II concerns regarding tuition fees and related debt were negligible, and most students exhibited a positive attitude:

"...this is the time to be optimistic about the future...positivity is something that helps you achieve what you want. If...you've got this mind-set that you're not gonna get far then it's unlikely that you're going to." Subject G3, Interview 2, p.8.

There was no evidence of concern regarding tuition fees by the time of the Phase III interviews in April or May 2012. Therefore, as a single issue considered in isolation, this research suggests the impact of increased fees on participation amongst more disadvantaged students was minimal. However, the decision-making process was far

from straightforward for some. Whilst the majority elected to study for a degree from 2012, the nature of their choice may well have been influenced by the issue of fees.

Key Theme: Geography/Place and non-fees financial issues

Questions of geography, as well as the stresses of the choice process and the views of parents (and others) were of greater importance to most participants than tuition fees. Financial issues were, however, significant for many. This is supported by the literature considered in Chapter 5. Mangan et al (2010) conclude that students have “got the message” that HE participation is costly and will leave them in debt, with 67 percent of students believing that attending university was financially risky in terms of being able to afford living expenses whilst studying (p.464). Concerns were evident about affordability of living away from home, in terms of increased costs and reduced income, as many students already had one (sometimes two) part-time jobs that they would lose if they moved away. Again, there is support for this in the literature. Mangan et al (2010) find that students’ concerns about the cost of HE are revealed through their assessment of alternative sources of income and their willingness to see living at home as a means of limiting cost. They found that studying at an FE college was one of the factors likely to increase the probability of students considering alternative sources of finance (p.465). They note that students from better off households were much less likely to consider paid employment as a source of additional income and more likely to indicate funding from parental support (p.465). They found that socially-disadvantaged students were often already undertaking significant paid employment and likely to consider continuing this whilst studying for a degree. These findings were supported in this case study, as many students already had a part-time job. Concerns about living expenses were common, the

need for part-time work was apparent and living at home was seen as a cost saving measure:

“I am a little bit concerned like where it is because I was thinking like money wise, if I...need to get a job while I was at university like how I’m gonna support myself while I’m like away. Well if I stayed closer to home...I could still live at home...like it’s a big thing...how am I goin’ to like support myself completely...” Subject T5, Interview 1, p.5

Moving away from home was an initial consideration for several participants:

“...I felt that’s what you had to do at university...because, you know, you wanna make the most of it, you don’t wanna stay at home you wanna go away and become more independent...” Subject G2, Interview 2, p.2.

Those considering studying away from home were, typically, interested in studying at prestigious London institutions. The cost of living away from home (especially in London) was not the sole deterrent:

“That [London] was... where I really wanted to go but then I thought about living there and that was even more daunting...I would love to go to London but I don’t think it would be possible...I’m just a bit scared.” Subject T8, Interview 2, p.6.

“...I also think about like the (pause) cost of living in London (pause). Like would I be constantly skint?...I think that anyone that goes there would be ...‘cos like the living fees are going to be so much more expensive than here.” Subject G8, Interview 1, p.5.

“...St. Martin’s was me favourite one... it was one of me choices I was gonna put and then I thought about it, and then I thought I dunno. If I was a rich kid I would go there.” Subject T8, Interview 2, p.8.

Whilst in these instances finance is an explicit, and rational, reason for options to be constrained there may be other factors relating to the background and cultural capital of the students involved. This is hinted at in the comments “...I’m just a bit scared” and “If I was a rich kid I would go there.” As noted in Chapter 5, there is support for this in the literature. Patiniotis and Holdsworth (2005) found that in their survey 78 percent

of students reported living at home as a money-saving strategy, and that the choice also related to confidence, awareness and expectation, community and tradition. Patiniotis and Holdsworth argue that for students with no familial experience of HE, the choice of higher education itself represents a departure from “traditional norms” and thus “disjuncture and uncertainty”, and risk. They argue that decisions about how to participate in HE are not merely influenced by cultural capital but also the need, particularly amongst students from low-SES families, to adopt risk avoidance strategies. This is related to ‘ontological security’ – having confidence in one’s self identity and as the security derived from shared background, equivalent to ‘habitus’ in Bourdieu’s framework, and considered in Chapter 5. Patiniotis and Holdsworth argue that the decision of non-traditional students to live at home may reflect a need to preserve the ontological security of family and community when contemplating the uncertain world of HE. Issues of ontological security were very much apparent in this research, but often were not explicitly expressed as such. Risk and fear of the unknown were expressed to be issues for most students.

Nevertheless, some students opting for a local course believed this to be the most rational choice for them:

“...there’s people who are keen on moving away... and there’s others that are more realistic. Like I’d say I’m being more realistic...I realise that I’m gunna be in a lot of debt if I move away and I realise that...I’m not gunna get another chance at it...So I think I’ll teck it more seriously...” Subject G2, Interview 1, p.6.

This Phase I comment was reinforced during the Phase II interviews:

“...at first it [college HE] didn’t really occur to me because I, just wanted to go somewhere else...But when I started to think about it more realistically I thought that [college HE] is probably best ‘cos it’s close to home and you get a lot of benefits from going and you know it’s quite handy to have

somewhere like with a good reputation so close really. So it seemed daft not to take up the offer.” Subject G2, Interview 2, pp.1-2.

As noted in Chapter 5, Mangan et al (2010) found that attending a local university gave students the chance to limit costs by staying at home, and also enabled them to either continue an existing part-time job or search more effectively for a new job in a familiar labour market (p.466). This was borne out in the case study:

“I think I would be more settled in [college HE] because I have a job...I’d have to find a job if I went to [regional specialist HE college]...that’s why I get scared ‘cos unemployment is really high. And I think I might not get any money so it’ll run out.” Subject T8, Interview 3, p.5.

For other students non-financial factors were also relevant:

“...I’m quite close with my mum so I thought that maybe if I move away and like, I’d proper like...I think I’d get homesick, and like living costs are like really big if I went to London...I don’t think I’d be able to cope like...” Subject G8, Interview 2, p.2.

Inability to cope with living independently was significant for several students:

“I did originally wanna move away but when I looked at it like I thought ‘aw I wouldn’t be able to cope anyway’...” Subject T6, Interview 2, p.2

Patiniotis and Holdsworth (2005) note that “staying local” is not a decision that working-class young people make in isolation. For many participants there was a clear feeling that parental desire to see them choose a local option was driven by concern for the student rather than merely parental selfishness:

“Me parents...want me to stay at home and go to [college HE]...’cos they’re worried about me livin’ and they don’t think that I could live by meself ‘cos I couldn’t do the washin’ and stuff.” Subject T8, Interview 1, p.6.

The need for ontological security may explain participants’ desire for a feeling of ‘belonging’. Students in the case study were keen to get a feel for the institution:

“...when I was looking at [college HE] money wasn’t the factor it was the fact that it felt very like [college]. I love [college] because...I went to [local college] and it was horrible...it was the worst place I’ve been to and here is feels more like everyone’s part of your family. So that was a big part of, like, looking at [college HE].” Subject G6, Interview 2, p.3.

Participants often linked two or more factors when discussing decision-making processes:

“...at least if I stay [locally] I can like live at home and then I won’t have accommodation costs or that to think about, [but] it’s not just the money, I don’t feel like I’m ready to move away...[metropolitan city] is such a big place I just don’t feel ready for it” Subject T4, Interview 1, pp.4-5.

It is possible to take a number of different, not necessarily mutually exclusive, views of such comments. It can be argued that the students’ (more middle-class) peers would be less likely to express such reservations because their home life – their accumulated cultural capital – has better prepared them for a university experience. It may be argued that students are demonstrating a degree of self-awareness by recognising that they are less well-prepared for a university experience than some of their peers, and at greater risk of “dropping out”. This is supported by this comment:

“...it’s like the money really, ‘cos if ya that far away and you didn’t really like it... now that the fees have gone up, it’s just wasting yer money... whereas if you stay local...” Subject T3, Interview 1, p.2.

Gorard et al (2007) note the shifting of the cost of UK HE from taxpayers to students and their families and suggest that there are concerns that this will affect marginal entrants with high aversion to debt and relatively low expected post-graduate earnings. Findings from this research do not, however, reflect Gorard et al’s concerns. Participants’ financial concerns were much more short-term, focused mainly on immediate living costs. Once they were fully aware of the repayment arrangements for student loans their concerns diminished. However, media focus on the increased costs of tuition left many students

with the concern that HE was expensive. This may have resulted in an increased level of concern about living costs, because students could see that tuition fees were affordable. In turn, worry about living costs, perhaps combined with a more general consternation about change and uncertainty in a poorly-understood field, may have resulted in an increased likelihood of choosing local study. This might have been because of increased financial concerns and/or because local provision was more familiar and 'safe'. This comment illustrates the point:

"Well, I'm not concerned about the actual fees ... It's finding the living allowances for accommodation and everything...I just don't think there's a way I can afford to move..." Subject T6, Interview 1, p.5.

For many the decision-making process is *explicitly* rational:

"I think a part of me thought that [college HE] is a bit of a cop out because I think...well obviously it takes a bit of guts to move away...but I don't think it's necessarily a cop out...I looked at like, what the College will actually provide me with, and I thought that it was still what I wanted. It wasn't 'oh it's just local'. So I think I've made the right choice... like the more I found out ... the more I realised it was like kinda for me...when I found out it was gonna be significantly cheaper I looked into it a bit more and then,...it was also...the course content. 'Cos a lot of the [...] courses elsewhere didn't cover the things I wanna do, where this one did so...everything sort of made it seem right..." Subject G3, Interview 3, p.2.

This seems a rational multi-faceted approach, although it may include an element of *post-hoc* rationalisation. For others, whilst a similar thought process has been involved, it is clear that whilst the outcome is the same – studying for a degree at the case study institution – the level of contentment with the decision is different:

"...I'm realising about the fees and stuff ... I think I'll be going to [college HE] just because of the benefits [names bursary scheme]... I think that's the only reason that's kind of encouraging me to go there because I know it'll just be so much money and I'm struggling now, like this year, 'cos EMA's been cut... it just made me realise...I think I'll be going to [college HE] because it's probably the cheapest and easiest option, and I don't have to move away.

Which probably isn't like the best way to look at it...I don't know if I'm doing it for the right reasons." Subject G2, Interview 1, p.2.

There was a lack of understanding from many about what funding was available, despite information sessions run by the college:

"I get very confused like what I could be entitled to and what I can't 'cos depending on what I get depends on whether I can move away and go to a different uni or whether I have to stay home and go to [college HE] or what... I couldn't take it in, d'you know what I mean?" Subject T6, Interview 1, p.3.

There is a suggestion here that students are unable properly to assess the financial implications of their HE choices, compromising their ability to make a rational choice. There is support for this in the literature. Mangan et al (2010) report that many students did not take into account the "the financial package" when making decisions about university applications. They note a "large proportion of students with a perceived family income that would have entitled them to a full or partial maintenance grant did not consider themselves eligible" (p.459), and whilst a majority of students indicated they were well informed about institutions and courses, a minority believed themselves to be well informed about finance (p.463). Mangan et al considered that students might be ignorant of financial support because they believe they are ineligible for such assistance. Their findings suggest that many eligible students do indeed form this erroneous impression and "display ignorance of all forms of support" (p.469). Mangan et al do not reach a conclusion concerning the reasons for the mistaken formation of these views, though habitus may well be a factor, as they report a negative association between attending an independent school and the number of sources used to assess financial / funding arrangements. This may be because higher socio-economic status participants rely on parental support to fund their studies, and consequently are less likely to need to consider bursaries. For lower socio-economic status students, finance

is a further aspect of the complex field of higher education, with which they may feel ill-equipped to engage.

Whilst many participants were in difficult financial circumstances, there was a doubt that some wished to consider moving away to university:

“...my mam was trying to work out how much money I’d have like every month, every week whatever. She was just saying like you’ll have money to like afford it but you’ll be struggling like you’ll have to get another job and I’ve already got two so it’s like a bit hard. It’s just one of them things. Er, I think I’d rather stay at home as well in a way.” Subject T6, Interview 2, p.10.

This reflects considerations in the literature. Stafford (1984) notes that in making decisions the current cost of a degree must be fully assessed, and includes not only books and materials, travel, differential living costs et cetera but also opportunity costs, including income foregone. In the consumption approach, education also has an immediate value including social and intellectual benefits (pp.593-4). There is evidence that students from lower socio-economic status backgrounds place less emphasis on these benefits. In the case study there were examples of students making an assessment of the full range of costs that they would incur and the likely level of income they would forego. In addition, students were also considering the potential for enhanced social benefits from studying away from home, as well as the costs, as this comment illustrates:

“I just wanted to move away and get the full sort of uni experience so...thought it’d be good.” Subject T3, Interview 3, p.1.

There are complex, nuanced emotions and motivations involved in the choice process, which participants found stressful, as discussed later. It is probably unwise to be dogmatic in suggesting students’ motivations but, for some, alternatives to local study were not explored diligently. This might be because there was difficulty in dealing with a complex system of student finance and institutional bursary offers. There may also

have been financial difficulties associated with finding part-time employment. However, it could be that, obliged to consider the reality of moving away from home to study, many students did not find the prospect appealing or comfortable:

“...I don’t really like change...college was a big step for me ‘cos I wasn’t surrounded by friends...it was a big change and I don’t really like big changes...Birmingham was my second option... as soon as I got the job here and my whole life is here, I prefer it just to be closer to home, whereas Birmingham...it’s just too much of a change...” Subject G1, Interview 1, p.7.

Whatever the motivation, for many the conclusion of their deliberations on the ‘home or away’ question is expressed in the following comment:

“...I did originally want to move away...the other side of the country or summat, but it’s just not possible...At the end of the day I’ll have a place at [college HE] so I’ll just stay there...After uni you’ve got the rest of your life to move away...” Subject T6, Interview 1, pp.9-10.

Others never considered moving away, and consistently expressed this over the interview phases:

“I never really wanted to move away from home ‘cos I’m not that kind of girl... I never really thought of going away to like uni’s where I’d have to move away...” Subject G1, Interview 2, p.3.

As a specialist FE institution the case study college draws its FE students from a relatively wide geographical area. A decision to stay at home did not necessarily mean a default choice of studying at the college’s HE campus, as potentially three post-1992 universities and one civic university could be within daily commuting distance. It is evident from student comments that having decided to study locally they undertook further research:

“...I wanna be sure that if I pick it (college HE) I’m making the choice because it’s the best place for me and not because it’s nearby and it’s a safe option.” Subject G5, Interview 1, p.4.

This matter is considered in more detail in the next section. However, there is a question about the rigour with which provision was investigated. Several subjects mentioned difficulties in attending university open days. The following comment is representative:

“...if I did wanna go to Middlesex...I’d have to get the money to go there, visit it...but...I’m not getting the chance to go and have a look...’cos of my own financial situation, or I’d have no one to come with me...” Subject G3, Interview 1, p.6

However, this comment calls into question the thoroughness with which even local institutions were appraised:

Q: Did you look at [local university]?

A: I literally live about three minutes away from [local university] so it would have been phenomenally easy...but the thing that put me off it was...I asked people who went [to local university] and I’ve asked people who [have visited] in case they saw something I haven’t seen...and the information that I got was...the work that you do there is very similar to the work that I’ve already done for College. So the one thing that I want is obviously to go to higher education and be challenged...so...I thought it pointless going to [local university] if what I’ve heard is true...” Subject G6, Interview 2, p.6.

Evidently this student was content to rely on the views of others rather than visit an institution so close to home. The issue of ‘hot’ knowledge, identified in Chapter 5, is considered elsewhere in this chapter, but this is a notable example showing the willingness of students to rely on the views of others in circumstances where first-hand investigation would have been easy.

The issue of geography has been clearly focused, in the students’ minds, around the question of whether it was feasible for them to live away from home or not. This may be in contrast to their more middle-class peers, for whom the issue might be ‘how far away from home is comfortable?’ For more middle-class students this is not so much an issue

of finance as one of 'comfort zone' – and indeed, there is clearly a 'comfort zone' issue for some case study participants, but one of whether to study away from home at all.

Key Theme: The Course

Foskett and Hemsley-Brown (2001) assert that the “primacy of subject choice in the process of HE selection” (p.164) is evident from the research literature and that choice of subject is the key limiting factor in applicants' information searches. The case study involved students studying on specialist Level 3 Extended Diploma qualifications so, unlike most A-level students, they had already made a firm *subject* choice for undergraduate study. Irrespective of whether they had chosen to stay at home or to go away to university, students were consistent in identifying their assessment of the quality of the course as a key factor in decision making:

“...the thing that made me decide was that I thought it was the best course...”
Subject G3, Interview 2, p.2.

“...doin' the course over the last year...I just got really into it, do you know what I mean? And I thought 'oh yeah, this is something I really like to do, I'm good at so, I enjoy doin' it' ... so I thought I might as well go on to higher education to a degree course.” Subject T6, Interview 1, p.2.

“I think like if you really like the course you're not gunna be bothered how much it costs, 'cos you know you really wanna do it...” Subject T5, Interview 1, p.7.

Here it is useful to consider how 'quality' is defined. It may be seen as “...meeting the customer requirements, and this is not restricted to the functional characteristics of the...service” (Oakland, 1993, p.20). This is not a trivial point. Educational professionals have their own perceptions of quality, and several elements of 'professional' judgement of course quality may be absent from students' considerations. This is considered later, but the issue of customer requirement is highlighted in the earlier comment about the

course being “better suited for me”. This highly personal assessment of suitability is also shown here:

“I’m looking at [college HE] ‘cos I like the fact of not having exams...it’s sort of like the follow on of the course I’m already doing. I’m already relaxed in the...erm...like sort of style of work. So I think I’d actually progress a lot more.” Subject G1, Interview 1, p.4.

This quote hints at concerns raised earlier about students’ ability to complete a degree. For some, a key factor is their assessment of their likelihood of completing a particular programme degree. They see a relatively undifferentiated graduate labour market so getting any degree is supposedly the key to better lifetime earnings, and therefore the key question becomes ‘where am I most likely to complete a degree?’ Whilst others might be sceptical about the *quality* of that degree, it is arguable that students making decisions on this basis are in fact being rational. They may be ‘liminal’ students, less likely to secure a place at another institution and/or less likely to complete a degree elsewhere. Consequently, they may be optimising their earning potential if their choice is between entering a (difficult) local employment market and graduating from a local institution with a limited reputation.

This has some support in the literature considered in Chapter 5, where Cristofoli and Watts (2007) note that for many – if not most – students choosing HE in FE the alternative would be to not enter HE at all. They argue that for these students FE colleges are “not a last resort but a first choice” (p.62), and that choice may be constrained by factors such as socio-economic background, the need to study close to home, and conflict between individual and institutional identities. Importantly, they suggest that restricting choice to more traditional forms of HE might result in them dropping out of HE altogether. They note seamless progression from FE to HE and a student-centred,

supportive environment for learners who have the aptitude for HE but need their skills and confidence developing as key advantages of HE in FE (p.7). This was apparent in the case study; participants who chose to study at the institution appeared happy with their choice, but I felt many also believed their options were not extensive, and they had convinced themselves that HE in FE was a good, or the best, option. This has been illustrated by earlier comments. Mangan et al (2010) found that students from relatively disadvantaged backgrounds were more likely to apply to a local university but argued that for most this was not linked to financial considerations. Rather, they suspected that this was due to students' ex-post rationalisation of their decision as "locality and finance were entwined" (p.466).

Participants had problems in assessing the quality of courses and institutions:

"...there's a lot of jargon on the websites...but it doesn't actually give you a very clear idea of how it's different...I think that it can sometimes be confusing to pick between two places that both say they're superb for the same reasons and you know that they're going to be completely different..."
Subject G5, Interview 1, p.10.

"... they all try to sound good on paper...but...they... scoot around the problem areas...a lot of people only get a view from what's on paper."
Subject G2, Interview1, p.9.

This may be an issue of lacking sufficient cultural capital to assess courses or institutions.

Students who attend open days do seek to make an assessment of quality:

"...when I go to the open days I just like to ask the questions to make sure they know what they are talking about..." Subject T6, Interview 1, p.10.

However, it is also clear that even those who value open days have limited opportunities to attend them:

"...I've just liked what I've seen really, but I haven't really been anywhere else to see anything." Subject T6, Interview 2, p.2.

Students were keen to get a feel for the institution:

“...when I was looking at [college HE] money wasn’t the factor it was the fact that it felt very like [college]. I love [college] because...I went to [local college] and it was horrible...it was the worst place I’ve been to and here it feels more like everyone’s part of your family. So that was a big part of, like, looking at [college HE].” Subject G6, Interview 2, p.3.

“The feel of the place is one major factor... When I viewed the room they have their own spaces and staff and like the machines and stuff ...are... all top notch, so I know I’ll do well there. I know I’ll be happy there.” Subject T2, Interview 3, p.4.

Concern with ‘feel’ or atmosphere is in line with the definition of quality set out by Oakland (1993) in that assessment is not restricted to purely functional characteristics. Students often linked objective and subjective assessment factors, as demonstrated by the following, which also shows reliance on ‘hot’ information:

“She (past student) said...she had to book in advance to use the facilities ‘cos it was always busy and...you could never get hold of teachers, yeah? I want somewhere where I feel comfortable to just go to the facility and do my work.” Subject T8, Interview 2, p.1.

This is consistent with this comment which identifies a more objective basis for assessment – contact time:

“...the two main [aspects] of the course are...the way we’re taught ...and...contact time...a lot of places you have to book your time in and obviously that would be really stressful when you need to do it now and you’re on a waiting list.” Subject G2, Interview 1, p.9.

Concerns about contact time were echoed by others:

“...teaching hours play a massive part in my decision...my worst fear would be starting university...then saying ‘aw God y’know I need help here, but there’s no help for me’ ...” Subject G6, Interview 1, p.5.

“... some of the best universities like [X] they hardly got any tutor time and like we’re paying – what – nine grand a year?...I would expect like a lot more tutor time than they’re giving.” Subject G8, Interview 3, pp.4-5.

There is a perceived value for money aspect to tutor contact apparent in previous comments which raise a particular issue in relation to participants and the case study college in as much as there is a level of student anxiety about their ability to work independently within an HE environment. Participants in the UCAS (2002) study expressed similar views and felt that they were insufficiently prepared for the move from a “cosseted learning style to mass independent HE” (p.30). Thomas and Quinn (2007) cite two further studies which both found non-traditional students were discomfited by what they perceived as a lack of supervision and guidance. This is reflected in this student comment:

“I think a lot of it’s been based...on what would suit my own needs...rather than necessarily course reputation. It’s more about the way they teach you or the way they kind of guide you I think.” Subject G5, Interview 2, p.5.

Several different factors may underly this concern. For some of the students academic success will not have been the norm, and on starting at the case study college their levels of skill and confidence may have been relatively low. They also may not, until recently, have contemplated undertaking undergraduate study. This may mean they feel that they need the reassurance of high levels of tutor support.

A more troubling interpretation, from the perspective of the case study institution, is that FE courses focus on technical skills, to the extent that the scope for independent creative thinking, a key aspect of undergraduate study, is too limited. Consequently students may perceive quality of work in terms of technical standards rather than creativity and/or originality. This might be because their FE course has not equipped them adequately to assess creativity or originality and to value it sufficiently. Consequently, they may place a quantitative rather than qualitative emphasis on lecturer/tutor involvement, neglecting to consider the input of technician-demonstrator

staff at universities. Encouraging students to contemplate entering HE, and equipping them with high grades, possibly without fully preparing them to both assess the courses they are applying for and operate as independent thinkers may be an unfortunate aspect of the college's institutional habitus.

The link between contact time and the possibility of 'drop out' was mentioned by other participants:

"[X University's] like one of the top ones for art like for people going into job opportunities after it...it was one (my) top ones like...but...I think it depends who you are, doesn't it?...like if you slack off and everything then you're probably not gonna get as far...the contact time really swayed me 'cos I like the amount of contact we get here...if you see like your tutor like...once a week or like it's got to the night before, 'cos they're not there all week I'd just think 'oh I can put it off, I'll do it tomorrow' and it'd never get done, I would slack off." Subject G8, Interview 2, pp.2-3.

'Hot' knowledge is also relevant here, as these comments demonstrate:

"Like, like my friends who are at university told me like, they never, they've only ever seen (tutors) in like lectures, and like, probably like once or twice a week..." Subject T5, Interview 1, p.9.

"I know...you have more one-on-one time with the tutors...there's a girl left last year from the course that I'm on now and she went to (regional specialist institution) but she's left...she was basically saying that she didn't see a tutor as much and everything...just hearing from someone else's experience...is a good thing 'cos you get to know their view..." Subject T2, Interview 2, p.6.

'Hot' knowledge is considered in the literature review in Chapter 5 and was described by Ball and Vincent (1998), who contend that the grapevine is seen as *more* reliable than 'official' sources of information (p.380). Connor et al (2001) found that lower social class potential HE entrants saw people as the most useful source of information rather than published material. Archer et al (2003) support this view, noting that one difficulty is that "those from the lower social class groups tend to trust 'hot' knowledge rather than

official information” (p.169). They argue that data therefore have much less effect than knowing someone who has a relevant experience to recount. This is supported by participant comment (cited earlier) which demonstrates not merely willingness to rely on the opinion of others but almost a preference for this. It seemed as if the participant was unwilling to trust their own assessment, and may demonstrate insecurity as a result of (in Bourdieu’s terms) low levels of cultural capital. It is relevant to note the suggestion that lower socio-economic status students are making decisions without awareness of the full facts that may be considered by their more middle-class peers. Such class-based constraints upon students’ ability to make fully-informed choices about higher education are considered in Chapter 8.

Key Theme: Employability

Whilst case study participants were anxious to gauge the suitability of potential undergraduate courses in terms of teaching and learning, it is interesting to consider the extent to which employability assessed. Some participants were keen to judge post-graduation employment prospects. One commented:

“I’m looking at the course...because obviously it’s...way too much money...you want to have your money’s worth...so I’m just researching what I’ll get out of it after I’ve done it.” Subject T7, Interview 1, p.6.

For many the essential judgement was whether it was more financially advantageous to seek employment or study for a degree:

...you’re not guaranteed a job anymore...you have to weigh up whether it’s best to spend all that time trying to get a degree...or whether you’d be best getting a job and getting some money straight away.” Subject G4, Interview 1, pp.1-2.

“...at first I never wanted to go to university, but now I’ve changed my mind...when [I] started just doing little bits of research, [it] just made me think [that] there was, like, basically two options either go to university or

try and search for a job and I said I would rather go on to...education...because...to do a degree...makes me think like I'd get a better job..." Subject T1, Interview 1, pp.1&7.

This view of the employment benefits of studying for a degree is supported by the literature review in Chapter 5. As noted there, Patiniotis and Holdsworth (2005) found that 95 percent of the students in their study believed that a degree will help them obtain a good job. They argue that a majority of students view HE as a route towards a financially-secure future (p.87). As is apparent from the earlier quotes, similar views were expressed by many of the case study participants.

For other students parental influence was evident, with employability over a longer timeframe in mind:

"...I did have a point where I didn't wanna go to uni... Then me mam...was saying if you leave now and get a full-time job you're always going to be stuck in that same job like...and you'll only get, what, £10,000 a year for like shop work or whatever." Subject T6, Interview 2, p.2.

Parental influence is considered later. However, in most cases influence was at a macro level – to go or not to go, to study away from home or not – rather than on choosing between competing institutions.

For some, employability was considered simplistically:

"I think if you end up goin' to uni it's better...you get like, you end up getting a better job. Or better prospects." Subject T3, Interview 2, p.2.

For others, consideration was beyond what they were comfortable contemplating:

"...how my mind's working is...primarily [the] focus [is] on university and not worry[ing] about jobs in the future, that'll just, it'll blow my mind if I worry [it]...all I do is just concentrate on university and get the best grades I can..." Subject G6, Interview 1, p.3.

Some considered higher education only when career options dictated:

“I was planning on going to just get a job, but the job that I’m looking for I’ve got to go to university... to get that job so... So I’m willing to put in hard work to go to uni to get a job that I’ll enjoy... Subject T2, Interview 2, p.2.

This links to the literature considered in Chapter 5. Furlong and Cartmel (2009) consider the issue of course-level stratification in detail, initially noting a strong division between vocational and non-vocational subjects. They argue that working-class students have been consistently more likely to choose vocational subjects in preference to more academic subjects, and observe that a large element of the growth in higher education has stemmed from the requirement for degree entry in areas where this was not previously necessary.

Others also considered the impact that institutional choices would have on subsequent employability:

“I’d love to go to London...’cos I think it’d open up like a lot more opportunities...obviously the industry [is] down there...” Subject G8, Interview 1, p.4.

Hutchings (2003) notes that rates of return from higher education are not the same for all students, with returns to graduates from social classes IV and V being an average 7 percent lower than for graduates from social classes I and II. He also notes that different returns are associated with different institutions and that the rate of return would not be an incentive if these issues were well-known to all potential students. This seems plausible based upon the case study discussions. Here the work of Cristofoli and Watts (2007) is relevant. In their study of HE in FE colleges they note that students thought that a degree obtained in an FE college would be just as highly regarded as one achieved in a university – and in some cases better (p63). This is borne out by some participants’ comments:

“So [college HE] looks like, er, it does look like an excellent institution...”
Subject G5, Interview 1, p.4.

Some expressed the need for a fulfilling career as an outcome of further study:

“I wanna do something where after I’ve got my degree and all that I will actually have a job at the end of it. I don’t wanna be goin’ into a dead end thing...” Subject T6, Interview 1, p.10.

Students were asked about their use of information in respect of graduate employability and salaries at different institutions. No student was able to cite such data as part of their choice process, although when prompted some expressed awareness of the UNISTATS website. The typical attitude is apparent from the following:

“... I’m fighting...to get a good university, to get a good education...I’m still 100 percent wanting to get the best possible future that I can...so when it does come to the point where I can get a job, fingers crossed it’s a good one...” Subject G6, Interview 2, p.8.

This comment supports arguments by Cristofoli and Watts (2007) that students’ understanding of HE (and not just in FE) was usually constructed in instrumental terms of employment – as a means to an end, rather than an end in itself. This was supported by this research, where it is clear that students were trying to make rational choices about their futures with little appreciation of likely outcomes, as illustrated by this (and previous) comments:

“...I think that ya could get a job ‘cos then there is people that get jobs, it does happen but...with the recession...there’s so many people out of work and that can’t get back in work that...like if someone went for a job with a degree and if someone went with, like, nothing...that the person with the degree is more likely to get the job, even if the degree’s not in the job.”
Subject G8, Interview 1, p.3.

Archer et al (2003) argue that some students were clear they were investing in their futures and the investment was worthwhile, but did not have meaningful knowledge of

either the likely level of their debt on graduation or potential future earnings (p.169). As previous quotes indicate, similar uncertainties were apparent in this research.

Key Theme: Influence of family, peers and lecturers

Three main groups of people influenced students' deliberations:

- i. Parents/guardians;
- ii. Peers – fellow students, past students or family contemporaries; and
- iii. Lecturers.

The extent to which advice was sought, and the emphasis then placed on the advice received, varied substantially from student to student. Two factors were relevant:

- i. The perceived quality of the advice being given, which depended on the depth and currency of the knowledge of the person expressing a view; and
- ii. The level of trust felt towards the person.

Students had difficulty in receiving informed advice from their parents concerning choice of institution and/or course, but no difficulty in trusting parents' motivation. In contrast, students had little difficulty in believing the relevance of advice from lecturers but did (occasionally) have problems in trusting the lecturer's motivation if (s)he advised that the student should consider a degree at the case study college's HE campus.

The overall utility of advice from parents or lecturers was therefore often compromised by a deficiency in one of these respects, possibly explaining why students appear to place reliance on comments by peers, because they have little difficulty in trusting the relevance of the advice or the motivation for giving it. The influence of the three main groups is considered in turn.

i. Parents / Guardians

With one exception participants lived with at least one parent. This section will therefore refer to parents/guardians as 'parents'. As discussed earlier, parental influence covered three main issues:

- 1) Should the student 'go to university'? – a phrase always used but meaning 'study for a degree' irrespective of the place of study;
- 2) Should the student live at home or not?; and
- 3) Details of fees, grants, loans and institutional choice.

The strength of parental opinion, and influence, was greatest in respect of the first two matters and weakest in respect of the third. There was a range of comments regarding parental influence on the decision to go university (or not). No participant indicated that parents were actively opposed to the idea of them studying for a degree, though one student indicated no express parental influence:

“...they're very open like they let me make my own choices, I got no pressure.” Subject G2, Interview 1, p.3.

However this may be because parents feel insufficiently informed, rather than because of confidence in students' ability to choose. Another quote from the same participant hints that lack of information may be the issue:

“...it'd be useful for the parents to get told what's actually going on” Subject G2, Interview 3, p.3.

It should be noted that the case study college:

- a) Produced an information booklet regarding the new loans system for all students which was posted to their home address in August 2011, with the express intention that it be shared with parents; and

- b) Before the UCAS deadline, held a parents' evening principally in order to provide advice and guidance about UCAS and the application process.

The same participant expanded on the earlier comments quoted from Phase I in Phase III:

"...they [parents] didn't go, so they didn't expect me to go to university to an extent. They expected me to do whatever I preferred... Whereas some people, like, kind of think that the way it has to go is like, you know, school, college, university – that's the way it has to be. So maybe it is to do with the upbringing, but I'm sure there's...other factors." Subject G2, Interview 3, p.6.

This comment was a response concerning whether family background was perceived to have influence in the choice process. The following, whilst indicating a similar level of parental openness, shows a high level of parental concern about the quality of the decision being made:

"She wanted me to make sure...it was really something I wanted to do and I wasn't gonna drop out or think 'this is too hard'. I had to be set on...what I wanted but apart from that she told me she'd just let me do what I wanted ..." Subject G1, Interview 2, p.3.

As highlighted in Chapter 5 Patiniotis and Holdsworth (2005) note a strong desire amongst working-class parents for their children to follow middle-class patterns and study for a degree, but observe:

"For some students, responding to parental aspirations was a source of anxiety if these aspiration were not backed up by practical experiences of HE, which meant that they felt that their parents did not understand the difficulties that they faced and could not support them." (p.90)

A parental stance in favour of students studying for a degree was usual:

"Mam and Dad have just said 'go for it' really...I'm the first one going onto uni from like the family so they want me to just go there and do my best and no matter what the outcome they'll be proud of me for going anywhere..." Subject T2, Interview 2, p.5.

“They want me to go to uni. There’s no question that...they like, they were annoyed when I was like ‘oh I don’t know’. They were like ‘no, we want yer to go ‘cos no one in our family has been’ so they want at least one of us to go so.” Subject T6, Interview 1, p.2.

There are varying levels of parental involvement and influence, but no significant indications that this was unwelcome:

“...my mam will have a very big input...she always does. Sometimes she tries to take over but sometimes I’m glad for it ‘cos I wouldn’t have had the decisions I would have made without our mam.” Subject G1, Interview 1, p.7.

There was a feeling that choice was, for some, a joint enterprise with parents and this was helpful:

“...you can’t shake that the sense of this being a big decision...I talked through it a lot with my parents and I think they...helped...keep me on track and...persuade me it’s the right decision [college HE]...obviously my mum knows me erm...and how I work...so that really did...help me...” Subject G5, Interview 2, p.6.

Whilst there was a picture of parental support for many, and freedom for students to make their own decision, often students identified a parental preference for local study:

“...I’m grateful that...they’re allowing me to make my own sort of informed choice...even though I know they’d like me to go to [college HE] [they’re] letting me look at other places.” Subject G5, Interview 1, p.8.

“...she [mother] didn’t say ‘aw stay at home’ but like she’s happy for it and everything...I think that’s [college HE] what she wanted me to do like in her own head...but she didn’t like tell me ‘oh you have to’...” Subject G8, Interview 2, p.4.

For many there was a perception that parental desire to see them choose a local option was driven by concern for the student rather than selfishness:

“Me parents...want me to stay at home and go to [college HE]...’cos they’re worried about me...they don’t think that I could live by meself ‘cos I couldn’t do the washin’ and stuff.” Subject T8, Interview 1, p.6.

For others there was a more significant level of parental input to the final decision:

“I was like ‘aw I wanna go here...’ and she was like ‘that’s three hours down the road’ and I was like ‘yeah’. She was just like sat there looking at me like ‘what’s wrong with you, like, just go to [college HE].’ I was like, ‘alright.’” Subject T6, Interview 2, p.3.

There is interesting tension between parental influence and the acknowledged low level of parental knowledge:

“...she’s not, like, really in touch with all that kind of thing so she doesn’t understand what I’m telling her most of the time.” Subject G3, Interview 1, p.1.

This was particularly so in relation to the relative merits of institutions or courses:

“She [mother] doesn’t really know that much about it like...I haven’t really spoke that much about that much with her...just dunno, just no point ‘cos she doesn’t like she doesn’t know what’s good and what’s not good in [the subject], she hasn’t done that so there was no point in going to her about like that side of it.” Subject G8, Interview 3, p.3.

Similar considerations applied in relation to fees and loans, even when parents had personal experience of higher education:

“...I asked our mam about the erm...fees...and she said...all the scheme about the loans and that... came through after, so she, she was before all that happened...she doesn’t really have much to say. She didn’t have to handle all this stuff so.” Subject G7, Interview 1, p.2.

There was clearly a sense, for some, that this was a joint family issue and that students’ uncertainties and fears were shared by parents:

“Erm, I kind of...I think my parents are fairly sort of clueless on the matter really, erm...and I don’t think that’s for the information not being available to them but I think that the idea of it probably frightens them more than it frightens me...” Subject G5, Interview 1, p.7.

As highlighted in Chapter 5, Reay et al (2005), citing Tysome (2004), note that “parents are having an increasing impact on how candidates choose courses and institutions”

(p.61). Reay et al consider that a key aspect of familial habitus is the “values, attitudes and knowledge base” that families possess in relation to higher education. They assert that familial habitus is “profoundly” influenced by the educational attainment and experiences of parents, and cite Bourdieu in support of their contention, noting his assertion that familial habitus results in the tendency to acquire expectations that are adjusted to what is acceptable ‘for people like us’ (Bourdieu, 1984, pp.64-5). However, despite coming from households where parents were not graduates, the case study participants received support for the notion of studying for a degree. A possible explanation is that levels of HE participation have been increasing steadily, as considered in Chapter 3. Consequently participation by lower SES students has become more widespread, perhaps resulting in a re-evaluation by parents and students of what is acceptable for ‘people like us’.

Thomas and Quinn (2007) assert that where students are from communities where participation is not the norm they need to develop a sense of entitlement to participate in higher education, rather than perceiving it as a privilege, otherwise they will feel that they are “breaking the mould” which may act as a barrier (p.77). They argue that students who are the first in their family to attend university can feel they do not have the right to be there, which harms their self-confidence. Whilst case study participants were lacking in confidence about their HE choices there was no evidence that they did not feel entitled to participate as undergraduates. By way of illustration one participant was from a travelling background, and therefore exceptional in continuing to study to Level 3, but nevertheless felt comfortable at the prospect of studying for a degree. However, participants did show evidence of concern at their ability to “fit in” and cope with studying at more prestigious London-based institutions.

ii. *Peers*

Faced with a difficult major decision, students discussed choices and issues with peers:

“We sometimes say that we just wanna get away from our families...but that’s probably as far as the conversations go...it’s literally just what looks good and why we wanna get away, that’s all we talk about.” Subject G1, Interview 1, p.5.

However, there were also indications that even this kind of discussion could be stressful.

Asked about speaking to others on the course one student commented:

“I think it’s getting to everyone...(the) stress and the pressure and everything else. So a lot of the time we just say ‘let’s not talk about it today.’” Subject G2, Interview 1, p.5.

There was however an indication that fellow students’ opinions were influential for some participants:

“...a factor is other students’ perception of what you’re doing...that definitely does have an impact on the way you feel...Particularly because you spend so much time around these people and you’re all in the same boat together.” Subject G5, Interview 2, p.9.

For some this extended to influence course choice – almost collective decision-making, driven by anxiety about the almost unknown world of higher education:

“You get that thing where you feel safer...I would feel much more comfortable if I was going with someone that I know...I know that people on my course [have] picked, not necessarily an institution but a course...because... a friend’s doing it as well...” Subject G5, Interview 2, p.10.

There was also a feeling of shared financial constraint, and a collective narrowing of options:

“...a lot of people [are] sayin’ the same an’ they’re looking at all these other places and thinking ‘oh I can’t, I can’t afford it’ so they’re all going ‘I’m just gonna go to [college HE] ‘cos it’s easier’...but there’s some people I reckon they wanna go somewhere else but they just can’t so.” Subject T6, Interview 1, p.7.

To some extent this is unhelpful, as students' financial circumstances differ, as do the bursary offers of institutions. This collective anxiety may have narrowed options, when different choices might have been possible with further investigation. For some students the outcome of others' decisions helped to confirm the logic of a different choice:

"I am...a lot more happy with my decision now...mainly due to...other students who applied to different universities who've been for interviews – the feedback I've got from them has made me feel more confident that I've made the right decision." Subject G5, Interview 3, p.1.

There was reasonably extensive evidence of students seeking information and advice from former students and others in order to assist their decision making:

"...at me job I met this girl called Lauren and she'd done the [college HE] degree and she was telling me about it. She said it was the best time ever. She didn't want to leave." Subject T8, Interview 2, p.4

"I looked...quite a lot into [specialist college] and there was a couple of people from last year who went that I got on with...so I messaged [them]... got a lot of information back from, er, a lad I used to talk to..." Subject G5, Interview 2, p.4.

For some, a relatively small degree of contact or information was enough to prompt serious consideration of an option:

"They did have one student...she went to Chelsea and she's saying that it's really good...erm...'cos she does the textile design as well. That's basically what made me, well not made me change my mind to like apply but, yeah, made me more interested I suppose." Subject T3, Interview 2, p.2.

This student seriously considered studying locally but ultimately took up a place at Chelsea. In this case a further factor was that the students' father lived in London – although he was unaware of the deliberations.

For most, choosing a course of action was a difficult process of 'sensemaking' in which information from friends was just another complication:

“...it’s [information] basically just the internet, looking myself, an’ hearing off some of my friends that have already gone to uni... So they’ve told me a bit but you still don’t understand it all when they’re tellin’ yer. There’s a lot to think about an’ I think that’s just what I need to get straight...” Subject T6, Interview 1, p.7.

iii. *Lecturers*

For many students, lecturers were a trusted source of advice and information:

“...I know that what they...tell me comes from the heart, but also it comes from the brain as well. They’re thinking what they would do, thinking how they would do it better going on past experiences.” Subject G6, Interview 1, p.4.

Others were sceptical about lecturers’ motivations:

“...obviously your tutors at [college] would like people to go to [college HE]...so there’s, there’s always that feeling that maybe...is it necessarily the best thing for you or is it also the best thing for the college and for the tutors for you to stay? I think that’s...something that students need to be aware of.” Subject G5, Interview 2, p.7.

For those who sought advice or validation from a number of sources, ultimately there was recognition choice was theirs:

“...You have to step outside of other people’s opinions...and I had to make the decision that...this is for me...I [had] this classic internal sort of struggle, the argument with yourself, is this the right thing for me? But you reach the point where you’re fairly confident and that’s all you can do.” Subject G5, Interview 3, pp.2-3.

Key Theme: The Stress of Choice

For many students the stress of decision-making was the dominant feature of the process. There are several features of students’ choices to explore.

First, a significant factor in students’ stress was they felt ill-prepared for the process of choice. Consequently, they felt it was difficult to obtain information in a timely manner and felt rushed, and more stressed. It should be noted that some students were involved

in a May 2011 focus group session on university fees, and all students were obliged to undertake a taught and supported research module examining university options. Nevertheless, many felt unprepared. About half of the participants had not considered going to university prior to attending college. The following is typical:

“I wasn’t actually thinking about going on to uni I was just focussing on the college aspect first... Then...the college helped me decide what I wanted to do afterwards, ‘cos I didn’t have a clue.” Subject G1, Interview 1, p.1.

This indicates that many participants were not prepared for the choice process by their cultural capital. In contrast Maguire et al (2000) found that for middle-class students “...choice is presumed as natural, orderly, clear-cut, almost beyond question, very unlike the chancy, uncertain process many working-class students are caught up in” (p.5). Maguire et al argue that working-class students experience greater risks and constraints framing their decision-making. There was certainly a feeling that additional ‘lead time’ would have been beneficial:

“I wish that a few years back I could have done all this instead of, like, now, at this time, but I just have to deal with it.” Subject G2, Interview 1, p.10.

This may be a point of difference when contrasted with more middle-class students for whom university is an expected destination. Whatever the cause, a significant number of students felt short of time, and surprise at considering university was common:

“...as soon as [tutor] said ‘well this is your last year before you’re off to university’ it hit me like a stack of bricks. It was awful...the time that we had to make a decision...wasn’t as much as there could have been.” Subject G6, Interview 3, p.4.

The perception that time was short often led to feelings of anxiety:

“You think that you’re gonna be ready and you’re not...and it comes round quicker than you think... it’s just a bit scary...” Subject G3, Interview 3, p.3.

For some, discomfiture at the notion of higher education led to procrastination and avoidance:

“Em, I’ve not kept up with it, erm, as much as, er, I probably should have done but I think that’s partly due to the fact, erm, as with a lot of students, it’s...it’s quite a sort of scary issue. Erm, and if you can, if you can you push it to the back of your mind and think ‘NO, I’ll just concentrate on what I’m doing and I’ll cross that bridge when I come to it.” Subject G5, Interview 1, p.5.

Others experienced feelings of helplessness, particularly in Phase I interviews:

“I don’t know how ter apply for anything or get prospectuses. I don’t know what to do.” Subject G1, Interview 1, p.4.

It was suggested that stress was reduced by:

“...finding out more about the courses...and picking where they wanted to go so that they had some idea of what they were doing...” Subject G3, Interview 3, p.3.

As the interview phases progressed it became apparent that for most, though not all, stress levels were reduced by greater understanding:

“...it was really stressful to begin with because I didn’t really know much about anything until I researched into stuff...doing that on the course was helpful...I didn’t think it was at first but...when you think back it was really good ‘cos we sort of got the guidance of how to do our research and what to look for. Whereas I think if we were just left to do it by ourselves ...everybody would have been...panicking, being like ‘oh I don’t have a clue like what to do’ and stuff. So that had been really helpful...” Subject T1, Interview 2, p.5.

Stress levels were variable across the participants. Some identified peers who had a different approach:

“There’s no getting away from it being stressful... it just seems like you’ve got to decide so soon...some people are really, like, forward thinking about the future an’ you know people and are more like keen on it whereas others are a bit, like, intimidated...I think it depends on their outlook...I think it’s all about confidence.” Subject G2, Interview 3, p.5.

The students in the case study were all from lower-SES backgrounds, but this was not the case for all their peers. Very few of the participants were relaxed about the process.

One (atypical) student did express a calm attitude:

“I am very chilled. I don’t like to stress ‘cos if you stress then you get panicky, ya worries, ya mind goes all over...” Subject T2. Interview 2, p.8.

This degree of *sang-froid* was rare. Most were on the horns of at least one dilemma:

“I’m thinking oh god, everybody else has decided where they wanna go and they’ve got all these universities and they’ve been to open days and they have done this, this and this, and I’m thinking oh god, what am I doing? And then I’m thinking do I need to make a decision now? ...should I have to rush it? What if I make the wrong decision? What if I decide on I just go there and then I hate it when I’m there because I’ve rushed into it? But obviously you don’t wanna leave it too late.” Subject T5, Interview 1, p.7.

Consequently, some concluded that they were unable to decide in favour of higher education at that time:

“I think it’s a really big deal...I don’t wanna pick the wrong course and I think I feel that I need more time to decide...I don’t feel ready so I’m not gunna stress myself out by deciding right now when I don’t have to.” Subject T5, Interview 2, p.8.

It seems that some participants were on the verge of choosing not to participate in higher education. This was borne out in 2014 at the case study college where the most popular choice by students who had opted to accept a place on a degree programme but did not in fact enrol was to opt not to go on to higher education. Students’ difficulties seem to have been generated by:

- i. Real (or perceived) financial hardship;
- ii. Difficulties in gathering information and visiting institutions;
- iii. A lack of preparedness to make the decision;
- iv. Limited advice and guidance; and

- v. The wide range of options available.

This latter point was emphasised by one student:

“It’s not even summat big that’s stopping [me from] making the decision. It’s a lot of little things but the more choices we have the harder it is...”
Subject G4, Interview 1, p.5.

For most participants there was a steady increase in their degree of comfort, as quotes from Phase II and Phase III illustrate:

“...I don’t think anyone feels completely comfortable about their university choice...” Subject G2, Interview 2, p.10.

which became:

“I think everyone’s just kind of relaxed about it...We know what to expect.”
Subject G2, Interview 3, p.1.

It was also clear that for many, decisions were based upon what was possible for them:

“I just thought, like, er...it had more pros then the rest of the options had...I think it’s the best decision I could make right now to be honest.” Subject G3,
Interview 2, p.5.

One sentiment was widely held:

“I’m glad that it made a decision and I’m glad it’s over with” Subject G8,
Interview 3, p.6.

CHAPTER 8: CONCLUSIONS – IMPLICATIONS FOR THEORY AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Introduction

At its core this thesis is an examination of the decision-making processes of a group of individuals in a particular context faced with the uncertainties of an educational market at a point of potential inflection. It considers the changing nature of that market and those individuals, and especially their interaction with the market during a critical decision-making period. In examining participants' interactions with the market, this chapter seeks to fully account for the theoretical mechanisms underlying decision-making. As Glaesser and Cooper (2014) observe, in seeking to go beyond description to explain relationships between social class and educational choice, theories are essential for the explanation of phenomena (pp.464-5).

The outcomes of the case study interviews were considered in the previous chapter, which highlighted three areas for consideration. Jointly and severally they illustrate mechanisms underlying decision-making particularly worthy of analysis when assessing the appropriateness of the theoretical underpinnings posited in relation to higher education decision-making.

The first area for consideration is socio-economic status. The case study interviews were consistent with the literature on higher education choice, in as much as participants were predominately from lower-SES backgrounds and not at ease with the process of HE choice in the way that would be expected of more middle-class students. Participants did not fully appreciate the complexities of the stratified higher education field, nor were they aware of maintenance grants and institutional bursaries. Being without all the relevant

facts they were less likely to make fully rational decisions. Second, it was apparent that participants sought to make explicitly rational decisions in ways very similar to those in Glaesser and Cooper's study (2014). Third, it is evident that participants' ability to make rational choices was constrained by their limited knowledge of the higher education field and other factors such as family influence. Additionally, it seemed that students were making satisficing decisions, with their level of satisfaction being influenced by their social capital. The ability of existing theoretical models to account for these three aspects of choice will be analysed.

The theoretical underpinnings of higher education choice should not only explain class-based differentials in access and the nature of participation at a macro level but also account for the mechanisms underlying individual student choice. Consequently, a convincing theory should be capable of addressing the findings noted above, which merit careful consideration of the applicability of the existing models regarding higher education choice, and their adequacy. Whilst much of the literature is persuasive in terms of macro-level influences which may explain the distribution of students across the sector in terms of probabilities, I believe it fails adequately to describe choice at the micro-level. Conversely whilst theories such as bounded rationality, considered in Chapter 4, may explain individual choice processes, I do not believe they have been extended in order to explain the broader social influences upon individual choice decisions. This will be considered more fully later in this chapter.

Evaluation of Competing Theories

Glaesser and Cooper found persuasive evidence of rational decision making, as this case study has done. Whilst they suggest this reasoning is mediated by actors' class habitus,

I feel that a question remains as to whether their proposed theoretical model is the best means of explaining actors' choices.

Glaesser and Cooper (2014) note that researchers seeking to go beyond description to explain phenomena must rely on theories addressing underlying mechanisms (pp.2-3). Hammersley (1987a, p.285) sets out the stages of theory development, the first two being:

- a) addition of new concepts/variables and relations (or elimination of unnecessary ones); and
- b) clarification and development of concepts/variables and their relations.

I have suggested theory development by the addition of new concepts – the combination of Simon's notion of boundedly rational decision-making with Bourdieu and Boudon's theories of cultural reproduction and relative risk aversion. In order to assess the validity of this proposed development of theory I suggest that the competing claims of existing perspectives – Bourdieu, Boudon, Goldthorpe, Hodgkinson, Simon – should be assessed in the light of the case study evidence.

As noted at the start of this chapter, the case study data suggests three key findings that ideally should all be adequately explained by theories addressing the underlying mechanisms. Existing theories should be evaluated by assessing their ability to address convincingly these features of higher education choice:

- i. the influences of socio-economic status on educational choice which generate inequalities in educational opportunity;
- ii. the attempt by students to make rational decisions; and

- iii. the constraints operating on decision-making that generate apparently sub-optimal choices by students.

The manner in which existing theories address these key features of higher education choice is now considered.

Influences of socio-economic status

Bourdieu and Boudon's theories both address the influences of socio-economic status on educational choice, as considered extensively in Chapter 4 and elsewhere in this thesis. Their theories are capable of reconciliation insofar as Bourdieu's theories may be considered analogous to Boudon's primary factors which affect actors prior to reaching branching points.

Hodkinson and Sparkes (1997) seek to avoid structurally-deterministic approaches that understate "...the contested nature of social reproduction and the degree of choice that faces many individuals" (p.30). They contend that Bourdieu's work can be used to develop a sociological theory about how career decisions are made, and discuss Bourdieu's failure to "...incorporate a theory of learning that can provide a mechanism for the change of habitus, which can be seen as the invisible hand which controls the actions of an individual" (p.34). They argue that a person's habitus can change "...at what we call a turning-point" (p.34). Without citing Boudon, it seems that in effect Hodkinson and Sparkes argue for a combination of Boudon and Bourdieu's approaches.

Simon is silent in relation to the influence of socio-economic status, but I suggest that socio-economic factors are relevant when considering constraints on actors' decision-making in Simon's model of bounded rationality.

Rational decision-making

The nature of actors' decision-making envisaged by Bourdieu is somewhat opaque.

Bourdieu (1990) uses a gaming analogy:

“...people take part in a rate-bounding activity...which, without necessarily being the product of obedience to rules, obeys certain regularities...Should one talk of a rule? Yes and no. you can do so on condition that you distinguish clearly between rule and regularity.” (p.64)

Bourdieu considered how behaviour may be regulated without being the product of obedience to rules as the starting point for his thinking (1994, p.65). Elsewhere Bourdieu speaks of a “*predisposition, tendency, propensity or inclination*” (1977, p.214) and of a relationship between habitus and field (Bourdieu and Wacquant, (1992, p.127). Maton (2008) argues that the alignment (or not) of habitus with field is central to the decision-making process (pp.57-59). Bourdieu (1990) has acknowledged that the process is “relatively unpredictable” (p.87). Thomson (2008) notes that for Bourdieu there is still individual agency, and actors make choices. They are:

“...not particles subject to mechanical forces, and acting under the constraint of causes: nor are they conscious and knowing objects acting with full knowledge of the facts, as champions of rational action theory believe...(they are) active and knowing agents endowed with a practical sense of action.” (1988, p.25)

This is similar to the approach set out by Hodkinson (2008). In contrast, Boudon (1974) effectively assumes rational choice at decision points but bases this on actors' varying perceptions of the costs and benefits of different choices, with both costs and benefits being mediated by socio-economic status. Boudon actually speaks of probabilities of different choices, and therefore there is some similarity between Boudon and Bourdieu – although Bourdieu is relatively opaque when considering the actual decision-making

mechanism of actors, the interaction of habitus and field makes some choices more likely than others.

In later writing Boudon does consider the issue of subjective rationality, and as noted elsewhere in this chapter there are similarities with Simon's approach. Simon considers that actors make boundedly-rational decisions based upon satisficing, with the boundaries of choice limited by "scissors" with "blades" comprising the structure of task environments and the computational capabilities of the actor (1990, p.7). I suggest that this analogy might itself be aligned to Bourdieu's concepts of (respectively) field and habitus. This is considered in more detail later in this chapter.

The process of pragmatically rational decision-making (Hodkinson, 1995) or "careership" (Hodkinson and Sparkes, 1997) was considered in detail by Hodkinson (2008). I find much to agree with in Hodkinson's exposition of young people's decision-making, but my view diverges from Hodkinson's in considering the theoretical underpinnings of the observed phenomena. Hodkinson (2008) characterises pragmatically-rational decisions as:

"...more than cognitive and discursive: they were embodied. They involved the physical, practical emotional and the affective, as well as the cognitive...they were partly tacit. That is, the young people could not completely articulate some of their likes and dislikes." (p.6)

He notes that all the decisions were based on partial information, frequently taken from what Ball et al (2002) subsequently termed 'hot' sources – people who could be trusted, rather than from official materials. Additionally, many considered one opportunity only, with consideration rarely entailing comparison of opportunities, instead deciding whether or not this opportunity was what they wanted to do. Furthermore, decisions often involved several people. Crucially, the extent to which a person could influence

their own future was strongly affected by their position in the field and the resources at their disposal. Hodkinson considers the possibility that his small sample of working-class subjects may behave differently from the more educated and middle-class, who might make decisions “...much closer to the technical rational ideals” and “that there might be more restricted and enhanced versions of pragmatic rationality” (p.7). However, he subsequently concludes that he “...cannot find any way” in which other studies demonstrate behaviour which “...fails to be pragmatically rational” (p.10). I suggest that Simon’s concept of bounded rationality provides a more elegant and complete model of decision-making that allows a theoretical basis for variability in the decision-making approaches of the subjects in this case study

Constraints upon decision-making

Maton (2008) argues that possible choices depend upon the actor’s current context and at the same time which choices are visible and which are not seen as possible as a result of habitus (p.52). This interpretation of Bourdieu’s theories seems consistent with Boudon’s concept of primary factors influencing social positioning and therefore choice. For Bourdieu, choice is constrained in that the interaction of habitus and field means that for some actors choices may not be apparent or perceived as feasible. Hodkinson, whose analysis is rooted in a Bourdieusian perspective, describes constraints upon decision-making in a similar manner, referring to “horizons for action” (1995, p.6). He suggests that habitus and the “opportunity structures” of the market are influencers of horizons for action and are interrelated “...for perceptions of what might be available and what might be appropriate affect decisions, and...opportunities are simultaneously subjective and objective” (p.6). Hodkinson notes that within their horizons for action many young people make rational decisions.

Classically Boudon (1974) assumes rational choice, with no express constraints. Actors may perceive a full range of choices, but their social positioning means that some choices are much less likely to be made. In later writing Boudon accepts the possibility of subjective rationality, essentially relaxing the requirement for economically-rational decisions without going so far as Simon in identifying constraints. As noted, Simon's constraints relate to both the task environment and the computational capabilities of the actor.

Summary

Bourdieu, Hodkinson and Boudon's theories consider the influence of socio-economic status on the actor, whilst Simon does not do so explicitly. In terms of the nature of actors' decision-making Hodkinson, Boudon and Simon clearly articulate theories whereas Bourdieu's theory is vague. All acknowledge constraints upon choice in varying degrees, with Simon being most explicit. Of these theories only Hodkinson's concept of careership accounts, to some degree, for all three findings identified in the case study. It will therefore be examined in more detail.

Careership Explored

Hodkinson's early criticism of models of decision-making is that they failed explicitly to examine the manner in which decisions are made (1995, p.3). I have sympathy with this view, and made a similar point earlier. Subsequently Hodkinson and Sparkes (1997) argue that sociological literature emphasises socially-structured pathways whilst policy-making assumes individual freedom of choice, with little focus in either on the ways in which 'customers' of education make decisions. They are critical of literature which concentrates on patterned life chances and educational trajectories that are seen as both the result of actual decision-making and social/structural determinants of it (1997, p.29).

Hodkinson and Sparkes seek to use Bourdieu's extensive body of work to create a "necessary third position" (p.30) by developing a sociological theory about how career decisions are made. In doing so they seek to avoid "...a structurally determinist viewpoint that...understates the contested nature of social reproduction and the degree of choice that faces...individuals" (p.30).

Hodkinson and Sparkes could find no existing theory to adequately explain the structural and individual aspects of choice, observing only those that worked at the micro-level of the individual or at the macro-level of society and social structures. Hodkinson notes that:

"We could clearly see the all-perspective influences of social...structures, even at the micro-level of the individual. Our subjects were making gendered and classed decisions...occupational and social structures were part of the individual and the decision-making processes, not simply the external context within which such decisions were made. None of the existing theories we examined dealt with this..." (2008, p.4)

In developing their theory of careership, Hodkinson and Sparkes argue that decision-making takes place in the interactions between the person and the fields they inhabit. Crucially, they argue that decision-making is bounded by a person's *horizons for action*, which has similarities with Simon's conceptualisation of bounded rationality. Hodkinson expands on this:

"What we can see is limited by the position we stand in, and the horizons that are visible from that position. Those horizons enable us to see anything within them, but prevent us from seeing what lies beyond them...Some people can see more than others...horizons for action are influenced by a person's position, by the nature of the field or fields within which they are positioned, and the embodied dispositions of the person him/herself." (2008, p.4)

In considering the detail of the decision-making process, Hodkinson and Sparkes argue that just as interactions between the individual's dispositions and the field establish individual horizons for action, the same kind of interaction also influences decision-

making within those horizons. Hodkinson (2008) notes that “...interactions between position, field, dispositions and actions strongly influenced all decision-making but were not deterministic” (p.6). Thus without explicitly making reference to Boudon’s concept of decision-making at branching points, the careership model is broadly consistent with a conjoined approach seeking to combine Bourdieu and Boudon’s theories, as espoused by Glaesser and Cooper (2014) . Hodkinson (2008) clarifies his thinking on ‘turning points’. Whilst Hodkinson and Sparkes (1997) argue that a person’s habitus could change radically at a turning point (p.34), Hodkinson later suggests that this change takes place over a longer time frame, with an 18-month timescale being referred to as “short” (p.11). Hodkinson and Sparkes (1997) argue that turning points are...”inseparable from the routines that follow and precede them” (p.40) noting that:

“As a decision is made within a turning-point, the habitus of the person is changed. Sometimes the change resembles an incremental development...On other occasions, a turning-points results in a much more dramatic transformation...Such transformations can be comfortable or traumatic...” (p.39)

In practice the careership model combines concepts set out by Boudon as well as Bourdieu in seeking to develop a theoretical mechanism for decision-making. In the concept of horizons for action, careership effectively borrows heavily from Simon’s work on bounded rationality. Aside from the failure to acknowledge the relevance of earlier work by Boudon and Simon, I have much sympathy with the careership model. There are parallels with the findings of this case study in the original work by Hodkinson and Sparkes and in Hodkinson’s reflections on their work. A key point of agreement is that “...decisions are always positioned, and the position always matters” (Hodkinson, 2008, p.8). In a refinement of the original proposition, Hodkinson also noted that position in a field and position within social structures may reinforce each other and though often

interrelated, are not identical. Hodkinson emphasises that decision-making entails interactions in a field, and is always part of “unequal and complex relational interactions” which are never exclusively individual acts, because the actions of others (such as family and friends) have significant influence. Importantly, Hodkinson argues that an individual’s ability to progress is strongly influenced by the resources (economic, cultural and social) at their disposal, such that any theory that does not take account of such unequal and complex power relations is deficient, as is any which assumes exclusively individual decision-making.

Hodkinson approves of the development by Ball et al (2002) of a means of understanding position in a field. In choosing undergraduate courses some were ‘embedded’ in the HE field – ‘fish in water’ – with an understanding of the ways of the field, whereas others lacked cultural and social capital, did not understand much about how HE worked and made simple choices based on limited information. Consequently they often chose the university nearest home, with little awareness of the relative status of institutions in the complex and highly-stratified system of HE. This is very much consistent with the findings of this case study.

Hodkinson (2008) argues that neither positional factors nor the forces interacting in the field are deterministic, and that individual agency exerts significant influence. He also suggests that decision-making is not purely cognitive:

“There are always tacit dimensions, most obviously in the way that people subconsciously rule out many possible...options and never consider them...it is not often possible to separate out practical, physical, emotional and affective aspects.” (p.9)

Again, this is consistent with case study experience.

Hodkinson identifies differences in decision-making styles, and suggests that there are unexplored links between decision-making styles and positions in fields, but asserts that pragmatic rationality is not a decision-making style, but a consistent aspect of how decisions are always made. This is a key point of difference. By considering Simon's theory of bounded rationality, positions in fields may be related to constraints on actors and, importantly, to their level of satisficing. This is considered more fully later in this chapter.

Whilst much in the careership model is consistent with the findings of this case study, to the extent that there are no significant points of difference in terms of the approach to decision-making by subjects, there are aspects of the model which raise concerns and leave questions unanswered. First, the model fails to acknowledge the earlier work of Boudon (1974), both in considering key decision points – “branching points” for Boudon, “turning points” for Hodkinson – and the parallels in seeking to make rational decisions at a point where positional factors are relevant. Second, the concept of “horizons for action”, key to careership, has parallels in Simon's much earlier conceptualisation of bounded rationality. Bounded rationality provides a theoretical framework for the exploration of links – unexplored by Hodkinson – between decision-making styles and positions in fields. A key difficulty with careership, then, is that it fails to acknowledge and address pre-existing theories. Whilst the experiences of participants in this case study were consistent with those described in the careership literature, the question remains whether the careership model fully explains the phenomena described.

[An Alternative Model](#)

I believe that a better case can be made for a theoretical model which has Simon's bounded rationality at its core, mediated by the influences of Bourdieu's theories of cultural capital, and more specifically habitus. I believe that such a model would have

greater explanatory power than those proposed by Glaesser and Cooper (2014) or Hodkinson, and that this is supported substantially by the findings of this case study.

Model Description

Having argued that a “conditioned bounded rationality” model provides greater explanatory power in considering the process of higher education decision-making, it is necessary to set out the operation of such a model. In doing so I propose an alternative formulation of Boudon’s ‘simple theoretical scheme’ (1974, pp.29-30). The original is set out at Appendix B. In modifying Boudon’s model I take the view promulgated by Glaesser and Cooper (2014), Nash (2006) and Vester (2006) that there is scope for reconciling Boudon’s two-component process with Bourdieu’s theories of social reproduction. As noted earlier, I believe this approach is implicit in Hodkinson’s careership model. I share Vester’s view, endorsed by Glaesser and Cooper, that primary effects have some affinity with Bourdieu’s concept of habitus, and agree with Nash’s conclusion that primary and secondary effects:

“...might, more often than Boudon thought, prove to have the same causes, and if the relative importance of [secondary effects] proves to be less important, these facts will not negate the validity of the conceptual distinction.” (p.171)

In re-considering and modifying Boudon’s ‘simple theoretical scheme’ I believe it is possible to consider the applicability of theories set out by Boudon, Bourdieu and Simon in the context of higher education decision-making. The scheme is set out as follows:

- i. It is assumed that stratification generates and describes differences between people. Consequently the lower the socio-economic status (SES) of a person it is more likely that they will have a “poorer” cultural background and lower academic

achievement. These effects are Boudon's "primary effects"; for Bourdieu they are driven by habitus.

- ii. The primary effects of stratification/habitus may be represented in a Cartesian space. Modifying Boudon's assumptions, let us assume that one dimension of this space is predicted academic achievement expressed in UCAS points. Another might be individuals' level of commitment to further study, and as for Boudon the list could be continued. Let us also assume – which Boudon does not, explicitly at least – that our two individuals are of equal intellectual capability. Given primary effects, lower-SES individuals are less likely to achieve in GCSE examinations and less likely to choose further study at age 16. They are therefore most unlikely to achieve high UCAS points at age 18 or be committed to undergraduate study. Conversely, high-SES individuals are much more likely to obtain high UCAS points and to be committed to going to university.
- iii. As for Boudon, let us nevertheless assume that two individuals – one middle class, one working class – are located at the same point in our Cartesian space. We acknowledge that middle- and working-class individuals are not as a whole distributed in the same way, and therefore that our two individuals have different probabilities of being at the same point. They have therefore arrived at the same point despite the primary effects of stratification/habitus.

As Ball et al (2005) observe, working-class students are:

“...distinctly atypical in relation to their class peers. They are, as Bourdieu terms them, ‘lucky survivors’ from social categories ‘improbable’ for the

position they have achieved. In terms of educational trajectories and aspirations, they are already exceptions...” (pp.53-4)

- iv. Let us now assume that in the approach to the university application deadline our two individuals have to choose between studying for a degree by leaving home to study at a Russell Group university (*choice a*) or by staying at home to attend a local FE college (*choice b*). As for Boudon, let us assume that their decision will be affected by their social background, and that for the middle-class individual to choose to study at the FE college would mean a high probability of social demotion, whereas the working-class individual might have good reason to expect advancement through studying for a degree, even in FE. Cristofoli and Watts (2007) suggest that for many students choosing HE in FE, the alternative would be not to enter HE at all, and that for these students FE colleges are “not a last resort but a first choice” (p.62).
- v. As for Boudon, let us suppose that the effect will probably be reinforced if the individuals’ families are included in the decision process. The expected benefit which is perceived as attached to a given cause will probably be differently evaluated by the families, just as it is likely to be differently evaluated by the youngsters. There is support from this from a Bourdieusian perspective in the literature; see Moore’s shopping analogy (Chapter 4, pp.156-7). We can perhaps modify Boudon’s assumptions in respect of the social status implications of alternatives *a* and *b*. Alternative *a* is likely to lead to a greater increase in social status for the working-class individual. However, alternative *a* might merely maintain the middle-class individual’s social status whilst alternative *b* would probably result in a reduction.

- vi. The *costs* associated with choosing *a* rather than *b* may be assessed as by Boudon. These may be monetary – for example increased living costs – but can also be social. Thus *not* choosing a Russell Group university may represent a high social cost for a middle-class individual if most friends attend such institutions. Similarly, choosing such an institution may represent a high cost for a working-class individual in terms of social adjustment; the field of HE is likely to be unfamiliar, and this will be compounded at a Russell Group university when compared with an FE college. Again, as Boudon observes, the decision may have different returns from the viewpoint of family solidarity; attending a Russell Group university may reinforce family solidarity for a middle-class individual but weaken it for someone of working-class origin, who may be seen as working against family interests (Thomas and Quinn, 2007, p.53).
- vii. Boudon progresses his theoretical scheme by noting that there is considerable empirical evidence to suggest that given the two choices *a* and *b* (where *a* is associated with higher social expectations) the anticipated cost of *a* generally will be greater the lower the social status of the family – “...we can reasonably assume that the cost of choosing *a* over *b* will be a decreasing function of family status” (1974, p.30). I agree with his conclusion.
- viii. Boudon proceeds to argue that the utility of choosing *a* rather than *b* is greater with lower costs and higher benefits, and will be an increasing function of family social status. If it is also assumed that the probability that an individual will choose *a* rather than *b*, then the probability that an individual will choose *a* rather than *b* becomes an increasing function of family social status. Thus the higher the status, the greater the probability that an individual will choose *a* over *b*. From my

perspective, this is valid insofar as it goes – it assumes a rational decision, but also an equal ability of the individuals to assess the range of options available and the costs and benefits of each choice. Bourdieusian analysis would suggest otherwise. As noted in Chapter 4 when considering the nature of habitus, Maton (2008) observes that:

“Where we are in life...is the result of ...events...that have shaped our path. We are faced with a variety of possible forks in the path...this range of choices depends on our current context (the position we occupy in a particular social field) but at the same time which of these choices are visible to us... are the result of our past journey...” (p.52)

Such analysis is consistent with Simon’s exposition of bounded rationality, specifically his contention that rational behaviour is shaped or constrained by the computational capabilities of the actor (1990, p.7). In the case study, participants’ ‘computational abilities’ were constrained because some choices were not visible to them. I suggest that this is a result of their relatively low levels of social capital: they were unaware of bursaries that might make study at more prestigious institutions feasible, and of the differential outcomes of studying at such universities (that is, much better career earnings and employability).

- ix. Boudon concludes that even if individuals are at the same point in Cartesian space described earlier, the primary effects of stratification cause individuals to be “differently distributed as a function of their family status in the Cartesian space” and the secondary effects of stratification “have the result that the probabilities of choosing *a* rather than *b* will be greater, the higher the social status” (p.30).

It is significant that at the point of decision-making Boudon considers choices in terms of probabilities. The decision-making mechanism operating at the point of potential higher

education choice is central to this thesis. Boudon considers the question in more detail, in the context of inequality of educational opportunity (IEO):

“...IEO is generated by a two-component process. One component is related mainly to the cultural effects of the stratification system. The other introduces the assumption that even with other factors being equal, people will make different choices according to their position in the stratification system. In other words, it is assumed (1) that people behave rationally in the economic sense of this concept (i.e., they attempt to maximise the utility of their decisions), but that (2) they also behave within decision fields whose parameters are a function of their position in the stratification system.” (1974, p.36)

It is important to consider what Boudon means when considering “decision fields whose parameters are a function of their position in the stratification system.” In essence he refers to the different likely assessment by actors of the costs and benefits of a particular choice, rather than any differentiated ability to *perceive* or *assess* these factors moderated by social status. I therefore do not believe that Boudon’s rational judgements are constrained by their individuality variable perception of the task (in Bourdieu’s terms this is dependent on the field/habitus interchange) and their variable computational ability (dependent upon habitus). In addition, the level of satisficing in decision-making will also be conditioned by the actor’s habitus.

[Arguments for an alternative](#)

The central point of my argument for an alternative model rests on key differences between the rational choice models espoused by Boudon and Goldthorpe and Simon’s concept of bounded rationality. The essence of my argument is as follows. Simon’s model of bounded rationality includes three key features. First, one of the key boundaries of choice is essentially one of environment or – in Gigerenzer and Goldstein’s terms – ‘ecology’ (1992, p.2). That is, one boundary, or arm of the ‘scissors’ to use Simon’s metaphor, concerns the structure of the task or issue. This has parallels with Boudon’s

model, and more 'relaxed' versions of Goldthorpe's RAT theories. The other key boundary of choice is the actor's ability to choose. For Simon this is an issue of 'computation', for Gigerenzer and Goldstein it is a cognitive issue. Crucially, this is not expressed in either Boudon or Goldthorpe's models. Lastly, when these two boundaries come together, there is the issue of the level of outcome required by the actor for satisficing. I contend that each of these features is moderated or conditioned by the actor's habitus. Furthermore this case study provides some evidence of habitus acting on these three key features of bounded rationality.

To expand these arguments, first in terms of actors' understanding and appreciation of the task or issue I believe it is relatively uncontroversial to suggest that this element of bounded rationality is moderated by the actor's habitus. There is, for example, evidence both from the literature and from this case study that those with no familial experience of HE perceive themselves to be, and are, less aware of issues relating to the higher education market than those with siblings or parents who were undergraduates. In Bourdieusian terms, they are less familiar with the field. As one participant commented on parental assistance:

"...they don't know anything about uni so they kind of can't help." Subject G4, Interview 2, p.2.

Second, I believe that the actor's ability to choose is also moderated by habitus. An illustration of this is the ability of students from lower socio-economic backgrounds to fully account for financial benefits that might be available to them. Again, this is supported by both the literature and this case study:

"I get very confused like what I could be entitled to and what I can't...I just think a lot of information...shot out...I couldn't take it all in..." Subject T6, Interview1, p.3.

Other examples are relevant when considering 'computational ability'. For instance, most participants viewed a degree instrumentally, as in the Glaesser and Cooper study. That is, it was seen as leading to more money and/or better jobs. There was no evidence of participants considering information in respect of the rate of graduate employment or salary levels from any of the courses being contemplated, as this comment demonstrates:

"I think if you end up goin' to uni it's better...you like end up getting a better job. Or better prospects." Subject T3, Interview 2, p.2.

It is debatable whether this is an environmental boundary – participants were unaware that this data was available – or a cognitive/computational boundary – participants would have been unable to deal with the information effectively in reaching a decision. In any event, participants' ability to make informed decisions was compromised by a lack of information or understanding, probably the result of lower levels of social capital. There are other examples from the literature on higher education decision-making (and the case study) which illustrate differences between actors in computational/cognitive ability, probably rooted in habitus, which affect decision-making at – in Boudon's terms – "branching points" that may be explained by a bounded rational conceptualisation of actor's choices. However, these issues are not adequately addressed by either Boudon or Goldthorpe's conceptualisations of rational choice.

Lastly, I argue that the level of outcome necessary for satisficing is moderated by habitus. Most participants were 'liminal' students who perceived their choice options as being between some form of relatively local HE or non-participation. The majority would be the first in their family to study for a degree. There was evidence that studying as an undergraduate – anywhere – was sufficient for many participants:

“Mam and Dad have just said ‘go for it’ really. Like I’m the first one going on to uni from like the family...no matter what the outcome they’ll be proud of me for going anywhere...” Subject T2, Interview 2, p.5.

In this respect I believe that Glaesser and Cooper’s contention that “the lower and upper boundaries within which this reasoning occurs strongly reflects their class habitus” (p.477) correctly identifies the impact of habitus on only one of the participants’ choice boundaries. That is, their argument refers only to the level at which satisficing occurs in the choice process, rather than also to each of the two arms of Simon’s ‘scissors’. Case study evidence suggested that some participants had chosen an option at the lower end of their aspirations:

“...I think I’ll be going to (college HE) because it’s probably the cheapest and easiest option...Which probably isn’t, like, the best way to look at it... I don’t know if I’m doing it for the right reasons.” Subject G2, Interview 1, p.2.

Similarly, there was evidence that participants had scaled back the upper end of their aspirations, as these options were seen as being out of reach:

“...St. Martin’s was me favourite one. And it was one of me choices I was gunna put, and then I thought about it, and then I thought ‘I dunno’. If I was a rich kid I would go there.” Subject T8, Interview 2, p.8.

I have no evidence from the case study in respect of the choice options that would be sufficient for a student from a higher socio-economic status background. The literature would suggest that higher aspirations would be expected of someone educated at an independent school for instance. As noted in Chapter 5, Furlong and Cartmel (2009) described both an institutional hierarchy with Russell Group institutions at the top and a relationship between the social class of students, and the institutions that they attend. Data published by the Department of Education (2015) supports this, indicating that independent school pupils are over twice as likely as those from the state sector to attend a Russell Group university.

In considering the theoretical underpinnings of educational choice in Chapter 4, I noted some key criticisms of rational choice models from a sociological perspective. Rawls (1992) was critical of theories which assume the characteristics of the social individual. Similarly Wrong (1994) is critical of purely pragmatic theories:

“Are we likely to rest content with a theory that makes a purely pragmatic case for itself...Are we not likely at some point to be driven to ask: ‘but what are human beings really like and how do they get that way?’ ” (pp.200-1)

I contend that a combination of Bourdieu’s theory of habitus with Simon’s notion of bounded rationality provides a theoretical basis for establishing the key characteristics of actors whilst also providing a pragmatic model of how choices are made by those actors at a point in time. Such a model, I argue, addresses the criticisms of rational choice approaches noted above, and is supported by the data in this case study.

Participants in this case study came to be faced with a decision point in their educational careers with their views of the environment and their ability to choose shaped by their habitus. The range of choices open to them was not as extensive as that normally available to, for example, a pupil at an independent school. Similarly, participants’ ability to assess their options was not as great as that of such a hypothetical privately-educated individual. Thus in these respects, for case study participants, each arm of Simon’s ‘scissors’ was conditioned by the participants’ habitus. Equally, the level of outcome that they regarded (at the lower end) as satisfactory or (at the higher end) possible was also shaped by their habitus. However, procedurally they employed a rational choice mechanism at the point of decision-making. Outcomes were not predetermined; there was a range of choices, from non-participation to attending a prestigious London-based institution. Although people’s experiences of class are mediated by deep-rooted

structural inequalities...“there is room for fluidity and difference within socially prescribed boundaries” (Patiniotis and Holdsworth, 2005, p.92).

Conclusion

I believe that from this case study I have demonstrated, as for Glaesser and Cooper’s 2014 study, that participants have sought to act rationally in making their educational choices. Furthermore, I believe that, again as for Glaesser and Cooper’s study, I have demonstrated the validity of an approach which allows for the key moderating influence of Bourdieu’s theory of habitus on rational choice. Importantly, however, I believe that my research provides persuasive evidence that actors’ rational choices are aligned with Herbert Simon’s concept of bounded rationality. I suggest that I have demonstrated the impact of the actor’s habitus on the two key boundaries of choice – the ecological and the cognitive – and also the level of outcome necessary for satisficing. I believe that the actor’s decisions in each of these three aspects of bounded rationality can be demonstrated to have been conditioned to a significant extent by the actor’s habitus – they are positioned in the field. I endorse Patiniotis and Holdsworth’s comment on the possibility of “fluidity and difference”, but contend that, from the evidence of this case study, higher education choice might best be characterised as ‘conditioned bounded rationality’.

This conclusion has emerged as a key finding of my research. The study was not designed to test this theory, and more work is needed to explore the implications and possibilities of the idea of higher education decision-making as conditioned bounded rationality. Further studies should be undertaken to examine the applicability of this conceptual model. A weakness of this case study, shared with Hodkinson’s work on careership, is that whilst the relatively small group of lower-SES students in this research may well

have made their decisions in the ways described, others – more solidly middle-class, for instance – might well make choices in different ways. However, I believe that this case study provides strong initial evidence in support of this novel theoretical model of higher education choice.

APPENDIX A: UK STUDENT DATA

	Full-time students at English universities as published by UGC: Shinn (1985)	Students in Full-Time Education Great Britain: Robbins (1963)	Full-Time university students (Great Britain): Salter and Tapper (1994)	Numbers of University Students in the UK Post-War: Tight (2009)		Full-time students at English universities as published by UGC: Shinn (1985)	Students in Full-Time Education Great Britain: Robbins (1963)	Full-Time university students (Great Britain): Salter and Tapper (1994)	Numbers of University Students in the UK Post-War: Tight (2009)
Year		University	Teacher Training	Further Education	Year		University	Teacher Training	Further Education
1900/01		20,000	5,000		25,000				
1913/14	10,808								
1919/20	20,486								
1920/21	22,214								
1921/22	22,170								
1922/23	21,500					36,404			
1923/24	29,767								
1924/25	29,381	42,000	16,000	3,000	61,000				
1925/26	29,275								
1926/27	29,526								
1927/28	29,830								
1928/29	30,698								
1929/30	31,651								
1930/31	33,569								
1931/32	34,316								
1932/33	35,813								
1933/34	36,562								
1934/35	36,892								

	Full-time students at English universities as published by UGC: Shinn (1985)	Students in Full-Time Education Great Britain: Robbins (1963)	Full-Time university students (Great Britain): Salter and Tapper (1994)	Numbers of University Students in the UK Post-War: Tight (2009)		Full-time students at English universities as published by UGC: Shinn (1985)	Students in Full-Time Education Great Britain: Robbins (1963)	Full-Time university students (Great Britain): Salter and Tapper (1994)	Numbers of University Students in the UK Post-War: Tight (2009)
Year		University	Teacher Training	Further Education	Year		University	Teacher Training	Further Education
1935/36	37,048								
1936/37	36,612								
1937/38	36,378								
1938/39	37,189	50,000	13,000	6,000	69,000	42,323			
1935/36	37,048								
1936/37	36,612								
1937/38	36,378								
1938/39	37,189	50,000	13,000	6,000	69,000	42,323			
1945/46	28,535						36,837	1,002	37,839
1946/47	51,233								
1949/50						85,421	78,064	7,357	85,421
1954/55		82,000	28,000	12,000	122,000		71,591	12,312	83,903
1959/60						104,009	90,200	16,800	107,000
1962/63		118,000	55,000	43,000	216,000				
1965							131,796	25,966	157,762
1969/70						219,308	186,217	39,852	226,069
1975							209,078	48,606	257,684
1979/80						292,738	251,990	48,536	300,526
1985							254,819	50,189	305,008
1989/90						334,479	290,285	60,696	350,981

	Full-time students at English universities as published by UGC: Shinn (1985)	Students in Full-Time Education Great Britain: Robbins (1963)	Full-Time university students (Great Britain): Salter and Tapper (1994)	Numbers of University Students in the UK Post-War: Tight (2009)		Full-time students at English universities as published by UGC: Shinn (1985)	Students in Full-Time Education Great Britain: Robbins (1963)	Full-Time university students (Great Britain): Salter and Tapper (1994)	Numbers of University Students in the UK Post-War: Tight (2009)
Year		University	Teacher Training	Further Education	Year		University	Teacher Training	Further Education
1995							817,788	128,894	946,682
2000							902,750	150,700	1,053,450
2005							1,165,445	226,060	1,391,505

APPENDIX B: BOUDON'S SIMPLE THEORETICAL SCHEME

I now propose a very simple theoretical scheme to account for the findings....

1. We assume that stratification generates and actually describes a number of differences between people. The lower the social status, the poorer the cultural background – hence the lower the school achievement, and so on. These are what we have called the primary effects of stratification.
2. The primary effects of stratification may be represented in a Cartesian space. Indeed, let us assume that one of the dimensions of this space is achievement at the elementary school level and that a second is age upon reaching high school. The list could be continued. We can visualise the primary effects of stratification by noting that two subpopulations of, say, higher and lower-class children sampled at the end of elementary school are distributed quite differently. Lower-class children tend to be located in one “corner” of the Cartesian space (low school achievement, older age at the end of elementary school, etc.). Conversely, upper-class children are more likely to be located at the opposite “corner” (high achievement, etc.).
3. Let us now assume that two children, one from a middle-class and one from a lower-class family, are located at the same point of the Cartesian space. In other words, although middle and lower-class children are not as a whole distributed in the Cartesian space in the same way, we are assuming that our two children are located at the same point. Thus we assume that for one reason or another the primary effects of stratification have not played any role in the case of these two children.
4. Let us further suppose that at some stage these children have to choose between, say, a general and a vocational course or between staying in school and leaving school.

Was can assume that their decision will be affected by their social background. For the upper-class child to choose the vocational curriculum would mean exposure to a high probability of social demotion, whereas the lower-class child might have good reason to expect promotion even if he chooses the vocational course.

5. This effect will probably be reinforced if not only the youngsters but also the family take part in the decision process. The expected benefit which is perceived as attached to a given course will probably be differently evaluated by the families, exactly as the issue is likely to be differently evaluated by the youngsters. Generally, let us assume that youngsters and families must at some time choose between alternative *a* and alternative *b* – *a* being more likely to lead to higher social status. Then we may say that the expected *benefit* of choosing *a* rather than *b* is an increasing function of the family's status. The higher the social status, the higher the anticipated benefit associated with *a*.
6. Let us now consider the *costs* associated with choosing *a* rather than *b*. These costs may be monetary, but they can also be social. This not choosing a prestigious curriculum may represent a high social cost for a youngster from a middle-class family if most of his friends have chosen it; by choosing the same course may represent a high cost for a lower-class youngster if most of his friends have not. Also, a given decision may have different returns from the viewpoint of the family solidarity for a middle-class youngster and to weaken it for a lower-class youth.
7. In summary, there is considerable empirical evidence to suggest that given two possible educational alternatives *a* and *b* (where *a* is associated with higher social expectations), the anticipated cost of *a* generally will be greater the lower the social status of the family. In short, we can reasonably assume that the cost of choosing *a* over *b* will be a decreasing function of family status.

8. Let us now acknowledge that the *utility* of choosing *a* rather than *b* is greater, the lower the cost and the greater the benefit. It then follows that the utility of choosing *a* rather than *b* will be an increasing function of family social status. If we assume that the probability that an individual will choose *a* rather than *b* the probability that an individual will choose *a* rather *b* becomes an increasing function of his family's social status. The higher this status the greater the probability that a youngster will choose *a* over *b*.
9. Therefore, even if two youngsters are located at the same point of the Cartesian space described earlier, the probabilities that they will choose *a* rather than *b* are likely to differ. Inasmuch as the youngsters are by assumption located at the same point of the Cartesian space, they do not differ with respect to the primary effects of stratification, but they do differ with respect to its secondary effects.
10. In the first stage of the two-stage process just described, the primary effects of stratification cause the youngsters to be differently distributed as a function of their family status in the Cartesian space, which includes such dimensions as school achievement and age at a given school grade. Then the secondary effects of stratification have the result that the probabilities of choosing *a* rather than *b*, which are associated with each point in this space, will be greater, the higher the social status.

This theoretical scheme may be considered to be somewhat trivial. The formalisation it introduces, moreover, is rather crude. Finally, although an attempt is made to introduce precise concepts such as *benefit*, *cost*, and *utility*, it is unlikely that we will be able to associate quantitative measures with these concepts. Nevertheless, it seems to me that our scheme may have two kinds of uses, namely:

1. Even if we are able to associate empirical quantitative measures with the concepts it introduces, we may derive from it...a useful simulation model whose consequences can be confronted with a number of data.
2. From a theoretical standpoint, it shows that the “cultural theory” accounts for only a particular source of inequality of educational opportunity (IEO). The model developed in the following chapters tells us which of the primary (cultural) and secondary effects of the stratification system should be considered to be the most important with respect to IEO.

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