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# MATURE STUDENTS, RESISTANCE, AND HIGHER VOCATIONAL EDUCATION: A MULTIPLE CASE STUDY

# KATHRYN LAVENDER

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

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Copyright statement

# Abstract

The expansion of higher education (HE) in England has seen the rise of alternative higher level qualifications and pathways such as the sub-degree qualification - the foundation degree, which are commonly delivered in further education colleges, also known as Higher Vocational Education (HIVE). These developments are part of the widening participation agenda to increase participation in HE of traditionally underrepresented groups. Higher Vocational Education is often seen as a viable alternative to university HE and typically attracts students with vocational and non-traditional entry qualifications, such as mature students. Mature students as participants of HIVE is a relatively under researched area therefore this thesis sought to understand why mature students participate in HIVE in FE colleges. In addition, the thesis also aimed to understand how mature students understood and experienced HE and FE practices in institutions that are predominantly concerned with delivering FE provision. Relatedly, understandings of the effect of participation in HE on the identity of mature students in the context of an FE college were explored.

In order to do this, an inductive approach to data generation was taken. A multiple case study was conducted of seven mature students studying HIVE at a medium sized further education college in the north of England. Informal interviews and participant observation field notes of eight mature students were conducted. Documents of focus groups that were held with their cohorts throughout the academic year 2013-14 were also used to construct the case studies. Cross-case analyses were conducted thematically using a priori themes of HE and FE practices such as independent learning, critical thinking and collective learning. However, during the analysis more nuanced and complex themes of resistance emerged such as self-exclusion and 'othering' of FE culture. Using theories of resistance (Giroux, 1983/2001), these different understandings were explored by capturing the ways in which the students resisted practices at the HIVE/FE interface.

The thesis argues that in terms of participation, mature students are somewhat (self) diverted to this particular type of HE in spite of their understanding of its relative position in the HE sector. However, rather than blindly accepting this position, the mature students exercised agency during their experience with a view to creating parity of esteem with more traditional types of HE. Unlike studies that problematize transitions for certain types of students, it appears that the struggles these students faced were trying to engage in HE practices against the backdrop of an FE culture. The development of a distinctly 'HE' identity by the mature students can therefore be seen to constitute a HE counter culture to the predominantly FE culture of the College which goes some way towards shaping the (often competing) HE and FE cultures within the College. However, in some cases this HE counter culture within the dominant FE culture served to reinforce the disparity of esteem between HE and FE from within. Whilst embracing a HE culture may have transformative effects for the individuals, the footprint they leave behind drives a further wedge between HE and FE as equally valuable forms of lifelong learning.

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# Dedications and Acknowledgements

The development of this thesis has, in many ways, been a team effort. I would like to acknowledge the support of family, friends and colleagues who have celebrated my successes with me and who have picked me up when the task seemed thankless. They are too numerous to name all of them, but special mention goes to my Mum and Dad, who have been my biggest supporters. I am also grateful to the School of Education and Professional Development at the University of Huddersfield for granting me a fee waiver scholarship, which enabled me to undertake this PhD full-time. I would like to thank Dr. Denise Robinson, my former main supervisor, who guided me through the initial stages of my PhD journey until her retirement in May 2014. I would also like to thank Professor Helen Colley, who adopted me and my thesis as our supervisor until she also retired. Her unwavering encouragement and her belief in me throughout my studies, as both director of graduate education and her brief time as my supervisor, has been instrumental to my development as a researcher and writer. At this point I must also acknowledge and send my gratitude to Dr. Lisa Russell, who has been my co-supervisor throughout my studies and became my main supervisor in December 2014. Whilst I imagine it must be a daunting task to inherit a student in the final throes of putting the thesis together, she consistently made time to get to know my thesis and to provide me with the best support I could have asked for. Special thanks must go to Professor Kevin Orr who offered me his support as a critical friend and whose door was always open. Finally, I would like to thank my lovely Tom, who has kept me sane (and fed).

This thesis is dedicated to my participants, who gave me the pleasure of allowing me to delve into their lives, so that we can know a little bit more about the world we live in.

# 1  Introduction

*I'm sat at the back of the classroom. The room is divided. On the right hand side are young students of 18 years old, disinterested and playing on smart phones. On the left, are some older, mature students sharing their experiences with each other. Mandy, the tutor, is trying to engage the room in a discussion about legislation and practice. Suddenly, she is interrupted by a woman from the left side of the room. "Mandy, we know this; we do it every day at work! Can't you just tell us what we need to do for the assignment?" [Fieldnotes 11/11/2013]*

My interest in adult learning in higher education first came about as I was working as an academic skills tutor for higher education (HE) students at an FE college. My work involved supporting students in groups and on a one-to-one basis to develop a range of academic skills, most of whom were mature students. As a 22 year old with little experience of the labour market and fresh from studying a degree in Sociology at a Russell Group university, I had very little in common with the students I supported. On my job search after university (before I came to work at the college) I was told countlessly that I did not have enough 'experience' for the job. I worried that the students I supported would view me in that way, yet these mature students were always very respectful and appreciative of what I could offer to their learning. I became interested in the way in which students with different experiences were able to harness those experiences in some way that benefited their studies, and their peers. I decided to undertake an MSc in Social Research and Evaluation, as a mature student myself this time. My own experience of studying as a mature student in a post-1992 university was starkly different from my experience as a younger student in a Russell Group, because it was more enjoyable and rewarding. I had always had my own ideas about the mature students I worked with, but the experience of being a mature student and undertaking research for my master's dissertation with mature women studying HIVE challenged this and prompted me to consider adult learning in a sociological way, which in turn led to the development of this thesis.

The contribution mature students make to higher education and university life has long been recognised. They bring life experience and a perspective that engages and enriches the experience of their younger peers (Else, 2014). Yet mature student participation in higher education is declining. Between 2008/9-2012/13 there was a 37% decrease in mature entrants to HE (Higher Education Statistics Agency, 2014). Mature students are broadly defined by HESA as entrants that are 21 years old or older upon entry to their

qualification (Higher Education Statistics Agency, 2014). Since this current definition of a mature student is very broad, their engagement in HE, as well as the problems that are posed by their decline in participation, demand an improved understanding able to acknowledge the complexities facing this particular group of students.

It has been observed across the sector that the rise in tuition fees has led to declines in mature and part-time higher education, which has in turn led to a decline in social mobility and economic competitiveness (Okolosie, 2015). Thus far, the debate has been centred on a decline in general across the HE sector with less attention paid to mature student participation in different types of higher education; such as higher vocational education (HIVE). Similarly, in the FE sector, concerns are voiced about the fate of adult education, given a 40% reduction in funding for adult skills and vocational education since 2010. Instead, funding has been prioritised for providing apprenticeships as a main form of vocational education. The drive for apprenticeships both devalues the significant work of the FE sector in delivering vocational education, as it also decreases access to lifelong learning opportunities for older people. Yet adults are continuing to work beyond the state pension age; and apprenticeships alone cannot cater for their diverse, lifelong learning needs. Whether it is due to increased fees in HE, or reduced funding in FE, access to education and lifelong learning for those classed as mature students is increasingly restricted. Therefore, more needs to be known about the diverse forms of education accessed and valued by mature students, such as HIVE. In addition further analysis needs to be undertaken on: mature students as a complex and diverse social group; their lifelong learning needs and ambitions; and the factors that enable or constrain those ambitions in a given context.

It is not within the scope of one thesis to explore all the forms of diverse education adults or mature students may access, or for what reasons, and includes the complex and diverse social group of mature students in their entirety. Hence, the thesis seeks to generate heightened understandings of a specific subsection of the mature student population in lifelong learning. That is, those that are studying higher vocational education in an FE college, and more specifically - the purpose of this study is to answer the following three main research questions:

1.      Why do mature students participate in higher vocational education?
2.      How do mature students experience HE learning practices in an FE context?
3.      How does the experience of HIVE in an FE context shape mature student identities?

Debates of mature student participation in HIVE are complex and thus understandings and discussions are not contained within one discrete field of enquiry. They are of interest to those concerned with the landscape of both further and higher education, academic and vocational knowledge, widening participation and access, and mature students as a distinct social group. Chapter two, in which I discuss the existing literature, gives an overview of these debates in relation to mature student participation, whilst also critically reviewing approaches to research used in these types of enquiry. The chapter argues that approaches to studying mature student participation often draw upon deficit models of non-traditional student participation in traditional HE. In addition, that sometimes research methods used to generate these understandings (such as surveys and questionnaires) are not adequate for capturing the complexity of mature student participation in HIVE. It is through this chapter that it becomes possible to reconsider the common approaches to that research concerned with mature student participation in HE and the most suitable means of generating adequate understandings of the complexities within the particular context of HIVE.

Chapter three outlines the philosophy and research paradigm in which the study is broadly situated – the critical tradition. It explains that situating the research in this way has the potential to uncover and challenge 'taken for granted assumptions' about mature student participation in HIVE, as outlined in the literature. It details the philosophy of the critical tradition, and how it has influenced the research design by arguing for a dialogic, data-led inductive approach to methodology and data generation. Following this, a discussion of how a multiple case study design was developed (and is appropriate for an exploration of the research questions) is presented. The chapter argues that focusing on individuals as cases allows for the unique experiences and circumstances surrounding participation in HIVE by mature students to be revealed. The next section provides details of the processes of fieldwork and constructing the cases, including ethical issues for the position of the researcher and indeed, the potential limitations of the research. This section also outlines the criteria in which the research can be evaluated and for which it should be judged, alongside how it is that the research design and methodology meet those criteria. Finally, the chapter discusses how the cases were constructed using a narrative approach to analysis. In turn, that an additional thematic cross-case synthesis enabled a richer analysis with further explanatory potential.

Chapter four of the thesis, '*The cases – we're valued as individuals*' is a presentation of the individual cases in narrative form. The purpose of this is to demonstrate the diverse range of experiences amongst mature students in this context. As the title suggests (and in line

with the critical tradition) the focus here is on highlighting and acknowledging the unique nature of these experiences, whilst also demonstrating the diversity of the broadly defined 'mature student' population in HE. It is thought that presenting these cases in narrative form, prior to a presentation of theory or interpretation, will enable them to stand up on their own as rich descriptions. These descriptions are integral to the thesis as they demonstrate the dialogic, data-led and inductive line of thinking that has been taken through the process of the research in hand. Having acknowledged the problematic way in which mature students are broadly defined, the chapter concludes by drawing out themes and alternative ways of conceptualising mature student participation in HIVE. This serves as a precursor to a discussion of the ways in which those themes can be theorised that are provided in the next chapter.

Chapter five gives an overview of theoretical frameworks able to provide explanatory potential for the study of mature student participation in HE generally, and HIVE more specifically. It shows that theories of social reproduction are appropriate when considering why mature students may access a particular type of higher education, as well as how they respond to the context in which they occur. The chapter uses Giroux's 'new sociology of education' as a guide through the theoretical terrain of social reproduction, in order to consider the strengths and weaknesses of different types of social reproduction theories in the context of this research. It considers how these theories have influenced and contributed to the particular strand of social reproduction theory used in this research of resistance theory. It highlights the ways in which using a theory that is commonly associated with explanations of school aged participants of education in this context is unusual and provides the potential for an original contribution to knowledge in the field of higher vocational education when used with this data.

In chapter six, a cross-case synthesis of the data is presented, based on the analysis of key themes from the data. It presents the analysis constructed using a priori themes of *HE and FE practices and the development of academic capital* and emergent overarching themes of *Individuation – resistance that confirms the dominating social order* and *Lifelong Learning in HIVE – resistance that challenges the dominating social order*. The overarching theme of *HE in FE practices and the development of academic capital* consists of subthemes of:

- Independent Learning
- Collective Learning
- Critical thinking
- Differences between HE and FE practices

*Individuation – resistance that confirms the dominating social order* as an overarching theme consists of subthemes:

- Class and age based assumptions
- The Other
- The Positioned Self

Finally, the overarching theme of *Lifelong Learning in HIVE – resistance that challenges the dominating social order* consists of the subthemes:

- Lifelong Learning
- Employability

In presenting these themes and the subthemes of which they consist, the relationships between resistance and practice are elaborated. The ways in which practice and agency in HIVE interrelate is also demonstrated.

The seventh chapter, '*Mature students as counter-cultures in HIVE' addresses* the original research questions through discussions of the analysis presented in the previous chapter. It is theorised using theories of resistance. Literature from the fields of further and higher education are drawn upon in order to position the relevance of these findings within those fields, and to highlight their significance and underline the original contribution to knowledge. The chapter is structured using each of the themes displayed in the cross-case synthesis chapter to address an individual research question. Why mature students participate in HIVE is addressed through discussions of the theme *Lifelong Learning in HIVE.* How mature students experience HE learning practices in an FE context is approached through discussions of the theme *HE in FE practices;* and the experience of HIVE in an FE context shaping mature student identities is explored through discussions of the theme *Individuation*.

The final chapter provides the overall conclusions, as it clarifies the original contribution to knowledge made in the thesis. These are:

- The innovative use of resistance theory to provide alternative understandings of mature student participation, practice and identity in HIVE
- The theoretical and analytical development of resistance theory to include 'academic capital' and 'life experience' as conceptual tools for understanding adult learning in different contexts

- The thesis addresses a gap in the current literature regarding HIVE that is yet to fully consider the way in which particular groups of students experience practice in these contexts.

Finally, this chapter outlines the implications these contributions have for further research, policy and practice. Let us turn first, then, to the issues identified in the literature regarding mature student participation in HIVE and some of the explanations that have been provided for them.

# 2 Mature Students: Participation, Practice and Identity

The chapter examines what is already known about mature student participation in different forms of higher education, and HIVE in particular. It starts by positioning higher education within a wider context of lifelong learning to show how discourses of lifelong learning may affect adult re-engagement with education. In order to understand why mature students participate in higher education, however, it is necessary to look at issues of the widening participation of underrepresented groups, to which mature students belong. It is known that a stratified system of HE does not constitute a field of equal players (Ball, Davies, David, & Reay, 2002), and this leads to questions about why certain groups of students participate in certain types of HE. Policy discourses of lifelong learning, rational choice and a consumerist turn in HE are, typically, offered as explanations for this. Yet it is argued that these factors are inadequate for explaining mature student participation in HIVE specifically. Instead, there needs to be a focus on HE and FE practices in HIVE that may be attractive to such students. The minimal focus on the way in which such practices are experienced by mature students, relative to other research about practice in HIVE that is focused on lecturers' experiences, is a gap in understanding to which this study contributes. Issues of HIVE practice raised in the existing literature point to differences in sectoral cultures and approaches to knowledge; this is further explored in this chapter. However, the exploration of issues of practice and how it is experienced in HIVE leads to further questions of staff and student identity. Further, arguing that student identity, and mature student identity in particular, have received little research attention until this point. It is this gap in knowledge to which this thesis responds. The next section is a starting point for understanding these issues, and explores what can be understood about adult participation in education, and lifelong learning in the literature.

## *Lifelong Learning*

One way of understanding mature student participation in different forms of HE is through the discourses of lifelong learning. Yet, this remains problematic; since multiple interpretations of the concept of lifelong learning exist. The development of a concept of the 'learning society' is used in debates about how to define lifelong learning. Economic prosperity is supposedly dependent on a highly educated and skilled workforce through the development of a 'learning society', which is one that promotes the values of lifelong learning and a commitment to education and training for all (Leicester & Field, 2000). In

relation to mature student participation in formal learning, the notion of a 'learning society' that features heavily in policy rhetoric purports a highly instrumental view of lifelong learning, which leads to a particular understanding of the term – lifelong learning for employability and economic growth (Leicester & Field, 2000).

The Cambridge dictionary defines lifelong learning quite crudely as "the process of gaining knowledge and skills throughout your life, often to help you do your job properly" (Cambridge Dictionary, 2015). The Collins dictionary goes a step further to define it as both 'provision' and as 'opportunities' for learning.

> the provision or use of both formal and informal learning opportunities throughout people's lives in order to foster the continuous development and improvement of the knowledge and skills needed for employment and personal fulfilment (Collins Dictionary, 2015)

Even in the simplest form, the multiplicity of meanings of the signifier demonstrates that the very nature of lifelong learning is a contested one. Coffield (1999) argues that lifelong learning is a concept that has been mobilized for the purposes of social control, framing social problems as private problems by perpetuating the myth of a true meritocracy in order to serve the interests of employers and the state. Problematically, human capital theory has been appropriated in order to position lifelong learning as a responsibility of the individual to participate in potential learning activities.

> Because the theory was used to explain that individuals, communities and whole nations were poor because their human capital had not been developed, it diverted attention away from structural failures and injustices and blamed victims for their poverty. (Coffield, 1999, p. 482)

The implications this definition of lifelong learning have for human capital, and for poverty, are that 'public issues' become positioned as 'personal troubles' (Mills, 1959, p. 248). There are several problems with this account of lifelong learning. One is that it downplays the context of opportunities for adult learning and the structural barriers that those contexts create in an increasingly competitive and individualised society (Schuller & Burns, 1999). In addition to this, evidence to suggest a connection between educational attainment and increased earnings or productivity is disputed. The notion that increased earnings for certain individuals is a product of them having outperformed their peers on educational tests is said

to be "naive and hardly supported by the overall empirical data" (Levin & Kelley, 1997, p. 241).

As such, this account also legitimizes the increasing gap between the poorest and the richest of society, resulting in what Walden describes as an 'educational apartheid' (Walden, 1996). This is because a focus on education in relation to its potential contribution to the economy justifies the desirability - from a human capital perspective - of some people more than others (Ball, Macrae, & Maguire, 1999), in spite of the structural inequalities that prevent some people from becoming 'desirable' in this way. That perspective is, however, attractive to policy makers who seek simplistic solutions to complex economic problems (Hodkinson, Sparkes, & Hodkinson, 1996). Investment in education for lifelong learning and the creation of a 'learning society' can be therefore seen as quick fix to deep-rooted economic ills (Coffield, 1999). It is this discourse of lifelong learning that emphasises individual responsibility in relation to economic and societal contributions that could account for mature students' participation in forms of HE, particularly in relation to a knowledge economy and a learning society.

A 'learning society', in relation to lifelong learning, can be conceptualised in three distinct ways: the skills growth model; the personal development model; and the social learning model (Rees & Bartlett, 1999). The first model represents the simplistic relationship between up-skilling and economic gains discussed previously. The second – a personal development model - sees the development of individual capacities for learning for both economic and social benefits in the mobilization of a learning society. A social learning model, by contrast, responds to those who are sceptical that development of individuals can do this alone. It asserts that institutional responsibility is also pivotal, combining both human and social capital (Rees & Bartlett, 1999). Hence, using a social learning model, a 'learning society' within a knowledge economy would enable opportunities for learning for all its members through the life course. In reality, however, some members' opportunities for learning are enabled more than others' and this is based on factors such as class, gender, and age.

Whilst lifelong learning discourses encompass all types of learning as opportunities, in a knowledge economy not all types of learning are equal, and this is the case for higher education. Learning in higher education has traditionally prepared students for the type of knowledge work valued in a knowledge economy. Whilst the move from an industrial to a knowledge economy has been accompanied by the move from an elite to a mass system of higher education, participation is still unequal (Gallacher, 2006). The key debate

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surrounding the expansion of HE continues to be whether it has reduced inequality by providing opportunities for those from disadvantaged backgrounds, or, whether the available opportunities have been disproportionately expanded in favour of the already privileged (Yossi, Arum, Gamoran, & Menachem, 2007). A key initiative in addressing the gap in opportunities is the widening participation agenda.

## *Widening Participation*

Gaining an HE qualification in the UK is seen as having many benefits to the individual, in particular, the education policy highlights the financial benefits graduates can enjoy. It can therefore be argued that:

> Higher education . . . transforms the lives of individuals. On graduating, graduates are more likely to be employed, more likely to enjoy higher wages and better job satisfaction, and more likely to find it easier to move from one job to the next' (Browne, 2010, p. 14)

Another element of the widening participation agenda was to act as a tool for the UK to compete in the ever increasing 'knowledge economy' (Hoskins, 2012), which can be defined as,

> the economic structure emerging in the global information society in which economic success increasingly depends on the effective utilisation of intangible assets such as knowledge, skills and innovative potential                (Roberts, 2009, p. 285)

The promise of a high skilled, high waged economy for economic prosperity, social cohesion and reduced inequality in income (Brown, Lauder, & Ashton, 2008) goes hand in hand with the expansion of the higher education sector.

The rationale for these claims, however, seems to be based on a homogenous approach to higher education, an approach that is at odds with the diversity of HE that the expansion has created. This is of particular concern given the evidence that the creation of middle class jobs are not increasing at the same rate as the HE sector is expanding (Brown et al., 2008; Erikson & Goldthorpe, 2010). Furthermore, the globalisation of the employment market has additional implications for mature students and opportunities for mobility within that market. Mature students are more likely to have family responsibilities and ties to a particular area and are therefore less likely to be able to move to other locations where

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enhanced employment opportunities may be available (Moreau & Leathwood, 2006). These are just some of the ways in which learning opportunities for adults are not experienced as equal and may therefore have unequal outcomes and individual benefits.

It seems then, that in spite of sociological propositions to the contrary, policy and current educational discourses are firmly rooted in the promise that participation in higher education enables social mobility through increased economic prosperity (Stevenson & Clegg, 2012). Credential inflation is one way of understanding how this may not be the case, because greater participation in higher education does not necessarily contribute to social mobility (Coffield, 1999). As previously noted, not all learning opportunities, and therefore skills or qualifications are of equal value, and nor are they utilised or experienced in the same way. The concept of credential inflation explains that: increased uptake of a particular skill or qualification, when the corresponding employment opportunities that require those skills or qualification do not also increase; contributes to its decline in value in the labour market (Coffield, 1999). Therefore, in a mass system of higher education, a degree does not have the same value as it did in an elite system, and particularly in a labour market where there are not as many employment opportunities for graduates.

The relationship between education and the economy in a learning or knowledge society, then, is problematic. It could be said that the removal of teaching grants, resulting in an increase in student fees, has further reinforced a commercialisation of higher education and narrow and economic interpretations of higher education adopted by government. Such commercialisation and commodification of knowledge also calls into question government policy on widening participation, and the move to a 'universal' higher education system (Young, 2006). With policies that aim to develop a universal higher education system with no additional resources, it appears that widening participation strategies have aimed to increase, rather than actually *widen* participation, by educating more people to a lesser standard (McArthur, 2011). This means that more people are entering higher education which has less value and is depreciating beyond its "utilitarian application and exchange value" (Ainley, 2003, p. 403).

Still, widening participation policy states that higher education should be available to anyone who can benefit from it regardless of background and socio-economic status. The government wants to see more participation of young people from disadvantaged background to higher education and in particular to the most prestigious universities (Browne, 2010). However, credential inflation and the subsequent stratification that has occurred leads to an increasingly diverse but unequal education system. That is, the same

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students attend the same types of institutions, just on a larger scale. The system continues to "sort 'the best' from 'the rest'" (Bathmaker, 2005, p. 98). The differences in experiences and outcomes for students attending different types of institutions still point to questions of participation and the reasons that students choose particular forms of HE that are potentially less beneficial.

One perspective on these questions focuses on consumer discourses arising from raised HE fees. The political rationale for this move is that is oriented to the creation of a consumer-driven market in HE. With regard to student choice, the rationale assumes that students can and do act as 'technically rational' customers. It positions the student as an empowered actor able to exercise their individual rights through choosing to consume a preferred product (McCulloch, 2009). Rational choice therefore entails making decisions based on the benefits of a particular action outweighing the costs of that action. Using the metaphor of students as consumers may be appealing to policy makers and HE institutions alike in a marketised context, but the metaphor is also problematic. The diversity of the target population does not constitute a field of equal players who might all act as free, active, rational consumers. The concept of 'rational choice' therefore neglects the role of social structures in the actions of individuals, and may be better viewed as a question of decision-making (Ball, Davies, David, & Reay, 2002). It is therefore imperative that we understand the factors that may affect such decision making amongst students.

The consumer driven market has called for greater comparable information to be available for students to make informed choices about institutions and programmes via such mechanisms as the key information set (KIS) data. However, there is evidence to suggest that some programme and institution information is exclusionary in nature: "There are indicators that some courses are rendered inaccessible through the use of oblique and highly specialised language" (Naidoo, Shankar, & Veer, 2011, p. 1149). The application process itself is therefore one of the ways in which the stratification of HE is enacted and inequalities in admissions are reproduced (Bathmaker & Thomas, 2009). This demonstrates that a consumerist perspective on participation in HE is at odds with the recruitment and admissions practices of a diverse HE sector. It also legitimizes the practices that exclude different groups of students. The stratification of higher education in this way can have harmful effects on the opportunities available for potential students, particularly those from under-represented groups.

Further concerns about the uptake of higher education by under-represented groups since the rise in tuition fees in the UK have largely focused on issues of financial affordability and

accumulation of student debt. Whilst there is some evidence that the introduction of variable fees in 2005 (capped then at £3,000) did not deter under-represented groups from applying to HEI's (Brownless & Thompson, 2007; Harrison & Cuthbert, 2011), nonetheless, participation by some of these groups has declined, particularly mature students (Independent Commission on Fees, 2013). The argument of financial constraint may well hold much truth (Pat Davies & Williams, 2001; Peter Davies, Mangan, & Hughes, 2008). However, it can be argued that participation in HE is a more complex issue, and a more in-depth and sociological understanding of how different students do come to participate in HE is needed. Moreover, given the increasing stratification of HE (Gallacher, 2006), we also need to understand what types of HE are entered, and why.

One might also question whether the differentiation of institutions in a consumerist fashion celebrates diversity or reinforces and legitimises long standing hierarchies of institutional status and the position of the students that are admitted to them. One example of this is the relative position of HIVE delivered in FE colleges. Whilst the widening participation agenda has generated a greater diversity of students in HE as a whole, there tends to be a concentration of 'non-traditional' students in HE delivered in FE colleges (Bathmaker, 2011). Ironically, these 'non-traditional' students are largely drawn from the traditional cohort of FE itself. Indeed, HE-in-FE has positioned itself in the HE market as better suited to these students' needs, labelling FE colleges as widening participation providers by definition (Jones, 2010). However, flexible delivery and less rigorous academic admissions procedure at these sites of HE (and not others) can be viewed as limiting the student choice to the lower end of the HE hierarchy (Naidoo et al., 2011). There is a further issue limiting student choice in these institutions, which is that FE colleges have a relatively small range on offer of programmes and qualifications, most of which are at sub-degree level.

Vocational higher education qualifications delivered by FE colleges are designed to meet the needs of local industry and workforce requirements in specific communities, supporting the move into a 'universal' higher education system (Wheelahan, 2013). Whilst the rationale for a vocational or 'applied' higher education is that it prepares graduates more readily for work, it can be argued that the types of work and professions this provision prepares students for is comparatively lower in economic status and narrower in choice than in universities (Bathmaker, 2013). This suggests that HE in FE seems to serve the industry needs of the local community better than the individual. Certainly, many vocations did not require the foundation degree qualification before its introduction, and the requirement was introduced to up-skill the workforce as a whole in order for the UK to complete in the global market. This reframes the role of the foundation degree and HE in FE in the widening

participation agenda as one of up-skilling the workforce as a whole, rather than in the pursuit of greater social justice through enabling social mobility.

Although further education colleges have been delivering higher education in the form of higher national qualifications since the 1950s (Parry & Thompson, 2002), the introduction of the 'foundation degree' gave a central role to FE colleges to meet the Labour government's target of 50% of 18-30 year olds to be in some form of higher education by 2010. This role is largely in the delivery of sub-degree levels of HE through franchising arrangements with higher education institutions. Whilst these arrangements have provided more opportunities for non-traditional students to enter higher education, opportunities for progression are often limited (Gallacher, 2006). Up-skilling through the development of, and participation in, foundations degrees in these cases benefits the employer, then, but not necessarily the employee. Many students entering FE colleges on these programmes do so with the intention of progressing to university to complete their degree. However, opportunities to progress to degree level study tend to be concentrated in HEIs where one year 'top-up' degrees are offered, most commonly post-92 universities rather than elite universities. Identifying universities as either 'selecting' or 'recruiting' institutions is a useful way of understanding the difference in offer (Gallacher, 2006). Universities that continue to attract well qualified and socially advantaged applicants can be seen as selecting institutions. They do not need to compete so much in the HE market for student numbers and efforts to stay in this position include maintaining a high research profile. Recruiter institutions, on the other hand, may be less research intensive but strategies to strengthen their profile centre on recruiting non-traditional students and strengthening links with FE colleges (Gallacher, 2006). In these selecting institutions, students have access to dominant and prestigious forms of knowledge, but focussing on which types of students access which forms of higher education proportionately, can only offer a limited view of parity or equity in higher education.

> While university student recruitment departments focus on 'bums on seats', equity advocates draw attention to which bums, in what proportions and, more to the point, which seats, where. But if the counting of 'bums' is crude, so is the differentiation of seats. Just distinguishing between courses and universities and scrutinizing the distribution of groups is a limited view of equity. (Gale, 2012, p. 138)

Here, Gale (2012) argues that in order to provide a more useful explanation of equity in higher education, an understanding of what those students in different forms of higher education embody is needed. Within this view of equity, a better understanding of the

nature and experiences of different social groups is needed, in order to understand what their participation in higher education means for both themselves and the institutions they attend. From the overview of lifelong learning and widening participation highlighted so far, the complexity of inequalities related to the stratification of higher education and the position of higher vocational education have been revealed. However, there are still questions to be answered about why particular students participate in HIVE in spite of the limitations of this form of HE for its participants and what their participation embodies.

## Students and Consumers

One explanation could be that consumer discourses associated with the expansion of HE have shifted student perceptions of the purpose and value of HE to employability. Policy makers have increasingly framed higher education in terms of the benefit to the individual (Browne, 2010). Positioned in this way, student contributions to their tuition could be justified (Callender, 2003; Hoelscher, Hayward, Ertl, & Dunbar-Goddet, 2008). Additionally, this move may have caused a shift in the relationship between the student and the HEI to one of provider and consumer.

Thinking about students as consumers is problematic in several ways; as previously discussed, it assumes the idea of a rationally acting customer on a level playing field choosing between products of equal value. Not only does this downplay the privilege structures in HE which determine who goes where, but it has increasingly promoted in students more consumer-like behaviours and attitudes towards their education. Woodall, Hiller, & Resnick (2012) studied student experience and, in particular, value from a consumer perspective. They found that the students in their study perceived value in relation to sacrifice and benefit; where there was greater sacrifice by the student they had higher expectations of benefit. Although the study had a large sample involving 320 students, the research was based in one school in one UK University; therefore the findings have limited generalizability to other forms of student experience in different contexts. However, they do point to one way in which students may be looking to their education more instrumentally in terms of its exchange value in the labour market, reflecting a human capital approach to lifelong learning discussed previously. Their findings are also important in light of raised tuition fees where students are being asked to make bigger financial sacrifices for their undergraduate education. Furthermore, policy that emphasises the employability of graduates and challenges universities and other providers of higher education to meet this demand reinforces this cost-benefit attitude. And whilst it is not unreasonable to expect that universities and providers of higher education have a responsibility to ensure graduates have capabilities that will extend to the workplace, there

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has been considerable debate as to at what cost to the employability agenda has had on the nature of academic study in HE (McArthur, 2011).

Higher education is situated by government in terms of its contribution to the economic growth of the country, a trend that 'appears to strip higher education of its wider social purposes' (McArthur, 2011, p. 301). Employability is high on the government agenda and is a concept commonly used in debates about the nature of higher education, thus reinforcing political ideology surrounding the purpose of higher education. However, all too often, a simplistic view of the concept of employability is adopted, detached from social factors that are central to the purpose of higher education (McArthur, 2011). Rolfe (2002) studied the effects of the introduction of tuition fees in 1998 from the perceptions of four English Universities. Based on interviews with 70 lecturers and a survey of 782 students across the four universities, she found that, more than before, the students were now attending for career reasons; they were more interested in the vocational aspects of their study; they expected more contact time and guidance from lecturers; and were less willing to undertake independent study. As there is no demographic information available for the students that participated in the study, it is unclear whether these students represented the typical younger student, or mature aged students. It is a significant omission, however, as how employability and cost-benefit as perceived by older or younger students may differ based on older students having more working knowledge of the economy than their younger peers.

Mclean (2006) argues that the commercialisation of higher education has reduced higher education to 'subjects' in which to train in employment related skills. Therefore, instead of widening participation initiatives contributing to a greater social justice, as claimed by The government, they are reduced to a 'mere cog in a narrow economic regime' (McArthur, 2011, p. 311). The assumptions that underlie such a 'narrow economic regime' are therefore based on oversimplified notions of education whose purpose is to solely serve the industrial and employment needs of the economy. This interpretation of higher education reduces its participants to 'economic objects' whose societal value becomes measured in economic terms (Brookfield, 2002). This suggests that one of the outcomes of the present policy has been to reproduce social inequalities, instead of regarding education and learning as a social activity related to broader socio-economic virtues. Parker (2002) reinforces this notion by suggesting that traditional academic 'disciplines' are being replaced by 'subjects' that redefine knowledge as something that can be acquired as 'knowledge assets' to be exchanged by way of the economy, and thus negating ideas of critique and evaluation. Therefore, if knowledge is to be reduced to an economic exchange, there is a risk of losing

key characteristics of higher education, such as the critical thinking and evaluations that underpin social justice and change.

> students as the consumers of this commercialised knowledge really only need study what they choose: knowledge with which they disagree or which makes them uncomfortable can be avoided or rejected without the need for any form of critical enquiry        (Giroux, 2006, p. 24)

This idea is further reinforced by (King & Widdowson, 2012) within the context of HE within FE. In a study undertaken as part of a HE academy project looking to explore if a distinct HE in FE pedagogy was emerging, 559 students across 39 mixed economy group (MEG) colleges were surveyed using closed questions. They found that a shift towards students as consumers has permeated student expectations in that students see a degree qualification instrumentally in terms of the extent it provides students with the skills for employment. As there is limited methodological detail, and as closed questions were developed in consultation with HE in FE lecturers, it is difficult to assert the extent to which this may have affected the responses. Nevertheless, they reported that students were dissatisfied with the theory elements of their course, thus reducing the potential of the transformative nature of education to a set of skills for employment. Acknowledging the student as a customer of higher education transforms the tutor/student relationship of collaboration to one of provider and client (King & Widdowson, 2012). In doing this, the autonomous nature of higher education that stimulates academic enterprise is compromised. In an attempt to sell education, academic content is devalued as lecturers may feel they have to succumb to customer demand. These points are illustrated by the fact that many university courses drop the theoretical themes from their courses (Hayes & Wynyard, 2002).

The rise in tuition fees and the stride towards a consumer-driven market in HE has further reinforced tendencies to construe the purpose of higher education as mainly economical. The introduction of mandatory public information documents such as the 'Key Information Set' that aim to render 'subjects' comparable in terms of employment prospects, course delivery and associated skills, suggests a confirmation of this role of higher education and encourages students to buy into the commercialisation of knowledge. Knight & Yorke, (2004) suggest that isolating 'employability' from a part of what makes us who we are (thus our identity) promotes values of employability as intrinsically separate from wider socio-economic implications. Furthermore, as students position themselves in the HE market as consumers, this may mask some of the structural issues related to student 'choice' of HE, particularly in relation to differences in institutional status, student outcomes and

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progression. Given the shift in student expectations and attitudes towards HE and employability highlighted by the literature, it is clear that a vocational HE would be appealing to younger students. However, there are still questions to be answered about why mature students participate in HIVE, as they often already have significant experience of the labour market and the vocational areas in which they work.

Alternative explanations are that HIVE, with its emphasis on vocational rather than academic education, caters for students who consider themselves 'practical' and not academic, those who have been out of education for some time and those that have had negative experiences of education, characteristics typically associated with a mature student profile (Weick, 1995). The mature student experience of HE can be understood as one that involves overcoming a series of individual barriers; success or failure for the mature student is a product of the individual being able, or not, to overcome the barriers they face, adopting a deficit model (Leese, 2010). Leese (2010) conducted a case study of non-traditional students in a post-92 university using a questionnaire with 180 students, and then a focus group of 25 students who had also completed the questionnaire. The intention was to provide a snap shot of student transitions within the first six weeks of the course. The sample consisted of students from an early childhood studies degree reflecting a predominantly female, mixed age cohort; however, 34% of the sample considered themselves a mature student. Whilst focus groups are not ideal to capture the unique aspects of individualised experience due to the influence of other members of the group, they do provide a platform for in-depth group discussion of a particular topic. Furthermore, the 'snapshot' approach to data collection means that changes in the perceptions and experiences of students cannot be identified, as is the case in a study more longitudinal in nature. The study showed that students had certain expectations about HE study, including an emphasis on independent learning and a higher workload, although each student's experience was very individual. Leese (2010) argued that, rather than expecting students to 'adapt' to fit the requirements of the university, institutions should do more to adapt to the requirements of a more diverse body of higher education students.

This diverse body of students has been referred to in the literature concerning the changing nature of higher education as the 'new student' (Leathwood & O'Connell, 2003). The literature highlights several mature student attributes that are seen as a barrier to success in higher education. For many mature students, studying is not their only responsibility, and it is not the main priority in their lives. Family and work commitments mean that students have less time to devote to their studies and this is often seen by students and staff alike as a barrier (Leathwood & O'Connell, 2003). From this perspective, key barriers to learning can

be summarised in distinct categories which relate to personal and family barriers, previous educational experiences, geographical and institutional barriers (McGivney, 1990, 1996). Burton, Lloyd, & Griffiths (2011) conducted a small case study of mature students of HIVE within an FE college to see whether these barriers were relevant to them in this context. A questionnaire consisting of closed questions was constructed and administered to 101 mature students (both male and female, although approx. 95% female) and 30% were randomly selected to take part in semi structured interviews. They found that recognised barriers to study in HE such as financial, geographical, confidence and dispositional issues were minimized due to the particular FE approach to study. Burton et al's (2011) study is useful for understanding the barriers that certain mature students face, and ways in which to minimize them. However, due to the predominantly female sample, it may be the case that these understandings of, and approaches to minimizing, barriers were more relevant for mature female students than male mature students.

Furthermore, what is often neglected in the literature is the way in which family and work commitments of mature students can contribute to student success in HE. Skills that are developed during adults' lives can often be transferred to academia: organisation, prioritisation, patience and determination can all contribute to success; similarly, skills gained through experience of employment can also be transferred. A lack of confidence stemming from previous educational experiences or a significant gap in formal education is often perceived as an initial constraint on success. However, what is often overlooked is that some mature students may be more secure and confident in their choice and reasoning for studying a particular vocation/subject, and have high levels of motivation to succeed. Assuming this lack of confidence in formal education on the part of the student implies that this is a characteristic of that person rather than the product of differing educational experiences and interactions (Leathwood & O'Connell, 2003).

There is also evidence that non-traditional students (including mature students) encounter additional barriers as they do not have the necessary understanding of working at HE level (Haggis & Pouget, 2002; Ozga & Sukhnandan, 1998), and non-traditional students require individual learning support in order to achieve in higher education (Blythman & Orr, 2002). The notion that the lack of understanding of learning in HE acts as a barrier for non-traditional students can be critiqued by evidence that suggests all students approach HE with certain dispositions towards learning (Power, Edwards, Whitty, & Wigfall, 2003). A number of different student expectations about learning in HE compared to previous educational experiences have been identified. These are: higher expectation of quality of work; increased work load; and less support due to the expectation of students being

'independent learners' (Leese, 2010). The idea of independent learning is cause for concern for many students, especially non-traditional students. This is because the assumption is that independent learning involves little or no contact with HE staff outside of teaching hours (Smith, 2007). Independent learning can be seen as a central feature of HE practice; however, the concept is problematic as it is open to interpretation across individual persons and even sectors (Broad, 2006). Furthermore, independent learning becomes even more ambiguous in HE in FE as interpretations and perceptions differ between the two sectors and conflicting definitions prevent active participation in this practice.

> With such conflicts on the notion of what is independent learning, the positive aspects of such learning are sometimes overshadowed by power struggles to control the learning context and environment                           (Broad, 2006, p. 141)

This means that characteristics of HE such as independent learning can be hampered by the institutions that need to tightly control the learning context for the purposes of retention and success. For example, in the further education sector, developing a culture of independent learning may be difficult where there is an existing culture of additional learning support and interventions aimed at ensuring an individual completes at the first sign of risk. Therefore, rather than locating the problem with the individual student, the environment and institutional practices that prevent learning must be questioned (Haggis, 2006). Concerns about institutional practices such as independent learning can be reflected in mature students' choice of institution when considering HE. Rather than being based on league tables or reputation, many mature students base their decision on an environment that seems more supportive and less alienating (Leathwood & O'Connell, 2003). In turn, this suggests that mature students already have perceptions of HE practices before they enrol, and seek to minimize the risk of failure by choosing institutions that they feel will support them to overcome their perceived individual and cognitive barriers. This reflects the individual and technical conceptions of teaching and learning in FE, whereby retention and success can be achieved through additional learning support on an individual needs basis. If we are to suggest that the barriers that mature students face are alleviated by the FE environment and practices, and this is the main reason for mature student participation in this type of HE, then more needs to be known specifically about HIVE practices at the site of the HE/FE interface. What is already known about practice in HE and FE is that there may be considerable differences between the two based on: approaches to knowledge; institutional cultures; differing systems of quality; and approaches to scholarly activity. Let us first, then, turn to questions of approaches to knowledge in further and higher education.

## *Approaches to Knowledge*

In dominant discourse, knowledge in FE is characterised as conveying 'what is', or practical knowledge, whilst knowledge in HE is characterised as understanding 'what might be', or theoretical knowledge (Lea & Simmons, 2012, p. 183). Such perspectives position practical knowledge as separate from and inferior to theoretical knowledge; the former is seen as lacking the theoretical rigour that underpins disciplinary knowledge in traditional HE (Wheelahan, 2013). However, as Bernstein (2000) suggests, not only does theoretical knowledge enable persons to question taken-for-granted assumptions that dominate in society, but it is also the means by which professional practice - and change therein - can be underpinned. In this respect, it is as important to applied or vocational subjects as to more abstractly academic disciplines.

The emphasis on the transmission of applied or vocational knowledge in the FE sector over the construction of theoretical knowledge and scholarship in the HE sector resembles the concept of 'technical rationality' (Schon, 1983). This may be a useful way to contrast the construction and purpose of knowledge in both sectors. A technical-rational approach to practice aims to align practice to a set of processes and procedures that can be measured quantitatively and managed easily. Professional schools that taught the fundamental skills for work in particular professions were used for "the transmission to its students of the generalised and systematic knowledge that is the basis for professional performance" (Hughes, 1973, p. 660). Under this epistemology it is the role of the universities to produce the theory which informs the practice of professionals training in the professional schools. This reinforces hierarchical notions of who has access to what kind of knowledge, and the division of research and practice.

The expansion of higher education has seen the growth of a 'vocational' higher education, commonly delivered in further education colleges. Constructions of vocational knowledge and education, therefore, can be seen as practice-based and preparing students for a career in industry. However, vocational higher education is not a new concept. Some have argued that preparing for some vocations requires more higher level learning (for example, medicine) than others (for example, childcare) and that higher level learning invokes a higher status (Stevenson, 2001, p. 650). This has been blamed on a post-industrial elitist culture that equates knowledge to status rather than transformation and emancipation (Weiner, 1981). Higher education institutions delivering courses linked directly to vocational areas such as medicine, law and engineering appear to have responsibility for this 'higher level' vocational learning. Typically, FE colleges have been responsible for

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delivering vocational courses regarded as lower level. If vocational knowledge is present in both higher education and further education, what distinguishes it from academic knowledge?

The value of academic knowledge appears to be placed on the symbolic and theoretical, rather than that associated with the tacit, practical and vocational (Stevenson, 2001, p. 665). This distinction is further developed by Gibbons et al. (1994) in response to the changing nature of knowledge use and production in a knowledge economy or learning society. Whilst academic knowledge was typically produced in the academic sphere and learned in the vocational and technical sphere, 'non-academic' knowledge is now being produced in organisations and across the workplace. Gibbons et al. (1994) distinguish between these two types of knowledge using the terms 'mode one' and 'mode two' knowledge. Mode 1 knowledge refers to knowledge produced in the interests of and by an academic community, which is often disciplinary in nature. Mode 2 knowledge's importance lies in its context transferability and application. Gibbons et al. (1994, p. 3) characterise mode 1 and mode 2 as:

> In Mode 1, problems are set and solved in a context governed by the, largely academic, interests of a specific community. By contrast, Mode 2 knowledge is carried out in a context of application. Mode 1 is disciplinary while Mode 2 is trans-disciplinary. Mode 1 is characterised by homogeneity, Mode 2 by heterogeneity. Organisationally, Mode 1 is hierarchical and tends to preserve its form, while Mode 2 is more heterarchical and transient ... In comparison with Mode 1, Mode 2 is more socially accountable and reflexive. It includes a wider, more temporary and heterogeneous set of practitioners, collaborating on a problem defined in a specific and localised context.

Based on those characteristics, it can be argued that both modes of knowledge are required of graduates of higher education, although Mode 2 is more representative of vocational aspects of learning. With elements of both vocational and academic modes of knowledge present in higher education curricula, one could question what makes higher education distinctively 'higher'. Vocational learning can be seen as problematic in the extent to which the socialisation involved in the vocational area is such that participants learn to be 'good workers', and it therefore produces compliant subjects in the labour market. That is, those who accept their reality without the capacity to challenge and effect change. Whilst this type of learning provides accreditation for skills learned and used in the work place, it does little to empower its recipients to challenge the conditions of their labour (Avis, 2014). However, Brennan & Little (2006) address the differences between work based learning in higher

education and work based and vocational learning in further education. They distinguish between the development of workplace skills in further education, to the development of understandings of conceptual and social relationships in the workplace - for the capacity for change in higher education. An interpretation of this could be a move from workplace competence to workplace understanding. The shift from understandings that, in vocational curricula competence means knowledge and understanding, however, is not unique to higher education teaching (Young, 2006). It has long been recognised in vocational education that there is workplace knowledge needed that cannot always be learned, or assessed by observation, in the workplace (Young, 2006). It is the connections, then, that are made in vocational education between mode 1 and mode 2 types of knowledge which make it distinctly 'vocational'.

Without a common understanding that distinguishes vocational education and concepts of employability in higher education, it is understandable that the concept of a vocational higher education may also be confusing. There are questions about how a solely vocational knowledge base adequately prepares students for participation in an unstable and changing labour market when rapidly changing technological advances and globalised economies require resilience and adaptability for modern day employment (Glover, Sue Law, & Youngman, 2002). They also require a lifelong learning approach from employees simply in order to keep up. As Glover et al. (2002) and Rolfe (2002) found, students of both further and higher education have become more concerned with the vocational aspects of their courses. Glover et al. (2002) surveyed over 400 students in both their first year and final year of university to explore the distinctions between employability and other attributes associated with being a graduate of higher education. They followed up this survey of closed ended questions with 16 interviews where they found that variable interpretations of employability and 'graduateness' were adopted, making it difficult to draw a distinction between the two. Similarly to Rolfe (2002), there was little demographic information available about the students who participated, other than that they came from a range of disciplines, therefore differences in interpretations of the concepts of different groups of students are not identified. An analysis of the differences between interpretations would have been a useful means to explore other factors that may affect students' interpretations of employability and 'graduateness', such as age and experience of the labour market, as in the case of mature students. However, their findings do point to the ways in which concepts related to employability and vocationalism can be conflated. This conflation may also be extended to policy and individual institutions' conceptions of the role and purpose of higher education in a mass or universal system.

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Another problem with the idea of vocational knowledge as employability skills in the pursuit of social justice can be seen as the distinct lack of connections with disciplinary knowledge. Wheelahan (2010) describes how access to disciplinary knowledge is essential for a person to participate in the democratic relations of society. This is further supported by those who reject employability discourses in higher education and consider higher education as not solely for the purpose of securing employment. There is some concern amongst academic/vocational debates that the focus of lifelong learning as concentrated on employment-related education and training, may exclude older learners (Leicester & Field, 2000). For many mature students, aspects of employability that are embedded within the formal curriculum have already been developed by them outside of that curriculum (Yorke, 2004). This may be because, as we have already noted, mature students are more likely to be in paid employment, have more labour market experience and greater access to workplace education and training opportunities. They are therefore looking for something different in their choices of formal lifelong learning.

In recent years, although mature student numbers appear to have been in decline, students aged 21 and over still make up 28.6% of the UK undergraduate population for 2013/2014. However, debates and research regarding students in relation to hierarchies and perceptions of academic and vocational knowledge have generally studied students in the broader sense of the term. As mature students continue to make up a significant proportion of the undergraduate population, this research considers them as a distinct social group (and a unit of analysis) in order to contribute to the sophisticated understandings that are needed. The next section considers the institutional cultures and practices particular groups of students in further and higher education may experience.

## Institutional Cultures and Practice

The dichotomy of academic and vocational knowledge is problematic in terms of the compatibility of common practices that ought to facilitate learning and assessing both types. It has been argued that vocational knowledge and representations of expertise of such knowledge are often demonstrated in ways other than verbal or textual language. In further education cultures these types of knowledge are therefore assessed in ways other than through verbal and textual language. For example, through the observation of skills and competencies (Stevenson, 2001, p. 655). Academic knowledge, on the other hand, is demonstrated through the use of written language in the form of essays, research reports, books and journal articles. The practices associated with the representations of each type of knowledge are strongly determined by an institutional valorisation of one particular type of

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knowledge over another, more specifically in the HE and FE sectors. However, whilst in HE there are longstanding traditions of what constitutes academic teaching and learning practice, there is variable agreement on what constitutes vocational teaching and learning practices in FE (Mulder, 2012). This can be in some ways explained by the shifting and fluid landscape of further education and has often been the centre of a debate on professionalism in the sector (Gleeson & James, 2007). In turn, this sits within a wider debate of the 'culturally oriented nature of FE practice, as it mediates contradictory policy agendas, at college level' (Gleeson & James, 2007, p. 451). The following section will discuss some of the ways in which the paradoxical and sometimes contradictory practices and culture in HE, FE, and HE in FE can be understood. However, it must be noted that in a discussion of HE as primarily a provider of academic education, and FE as primarily a provider of vocational education, referring back to hierarchies of academic and vocational knowledge is inevitable.

## HE and FE practices

The further education/higher education dualism is complex and open to multiple interpretations. In its simplest form, higher and further education are understood in terms of where they take place (i.e. in a college or a university), in spite of the fact that around one in twelve of all higher education students currently study in further education colleges (Parry, Callender, Scott, & Temple, 2012, p. 12). The process of 'academic drift' also makes the distinction between further and higher multifaceted.

> A large number of professional subjects (for example, nursing education) have migrated across the divide between further and higher as part of an ongoing process by which 'higher education' both renews and re-defines itself by reference to emerging areas of knowledge and shifting conceptions of the relative status of disciplinary knowledge. (Macfarlane, 2014, p. 113)

Academic drift and questions of academic and vocational knowledge raise epistemological questions about what higher education is that appear to be left relatively unanswered in the literature (Macfarlane, 2014). In order to shed more light on these questions, this section discusses the ways in which HE and FE can be clearly conceptualised.

Similarly to workplace learning, learning in FE can be conceptualised using a 'communities of practice' or situated learning framework (Lave & Wenger, 1991). These constructions of FE learning emphasise collective or situated learning as a distinctive feature of FE practice. Brown & Lauder (2000) use the term 'collective intelligence' to explain the importance of

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social relations and dialogue to the process of learning. What can also be identified as common practice in FE is the heightened support available for students to enable them to succeed. Collective learning may be one way in which practice is engaged with on a peer to peer level, whereas on a student-teacher level it involves increased one-to-one support to fulfil the requirements of assessment (Avis, Bathmaker, & Parsons, 2001). Increased individual support is often the result of a desire by lecturers in FE to transform a person's orientation to learning, rather than allowing them to manage their own learning. There are also other issues at stake in the social relations of teaching and learning. Colley & Jarvis (2007) found in a case study of the formal and informal learning of motor vehicle apprentices that assessors often played multiple roles in the learning and assessment of those apprentices. Furthermore, as the assessors worked for organisations such as FE colleges that depend on retention and success for funding, there were added pressures to make sure all apprentices achieved. The extra support the assessors were willing to provide was also seen to be part of a sense of loyalty they had towards the apprentices in helping them succeed in life and work. They found that this loyalty was heightened for apprentices that showed a certain commitment and attitude to work that was seen as desirable.

Similarly, the collective nature of learning in further education has also been conceptualised as a process of 'becoming' (Colley, James, Diment, & Tedder, 2003). Colley et al. (2003) studied four sites of vocational education and training using longitudinal, multidimensional methods. They conceptualised the collective nature of vocational learning as part of the social and cultural process of 'becoming' in a particular occupation field. Becoming in this sense means developing a suitable 'habitus' that includes specific emotional as well as intellectual and practical capabilities required for work within that occupational field. Whilst these conceptualisations are useful for understanding younger learners' experiences of the vocational curriculum in further education colleges, they are not necessarily appropriate to understanding the experience of older learners who may already 'be' in occupational sectors. Furthermore, the complex interaction of higher vocational education, which navigates practices that are engaged with in both FE and HE, cannot be readily understood in this way.

Conversely, common practice in higher education is centred on independent learning. Often, the idea of larger cohorts of students and demands other than teaching (mainly research) see that HE lecturers are perceived as less available for student support. Whilst this may not be the whole truth, this culture invites varying interpretations of what the practice of independent learning is (Broad, 2006). Gow & Kember (1990) describe independent learning as an increased capacity to learn, increased analytical skills and an ability to draw

independent conclusions. The problem with this definition is that it seems to focus on the outcome rather than the process of this practice. Race (2000), on the other hand, emphasises the process of 'becoming' in independent learning, and the empowerment of individuals to learn themselves. This process of becoming in independent learning differs from the notion offered by Colley et al. (2003) in VET as it requires the student to identify as an individual autonomous learner, rather than part of a collective body of learning. Studies of independent learning appear to be limited to interpretations of the concept from within the field of higher education, perhaps as it is the feature most commonly associated with higher levels of learning (Chan, 2001; Jones & Jones, 1996; Rogers, 1969). Broad (2006), however, studied interpretations of students' concepts of independent learning within the further education sector. He used a case study method of questionnaires with 181 students aged 16-19 studying A-levels or vocational qualifications in a college of further education. He found that generally, independent learning was recognised as taking responsibility for one's own learning. Further to this, the practice was more readily developed in students by advice, guidance and support from tutors. Although the generalizability of the findings is limited here due to the lack of representativeness of the sample for the FE student population as a whole, they do suggest that interpretations of the practice of independent learning for younger students in FE may not be so far removed from that in HE. That being said, the interpretations of the practice for older students, who may have developed a sense of responsibility for learning in ways outside of the formal curriculum, are not considered. In 2013/14 there were 2,929,600 adult learners participating in government funded further education (Department for Business Innovation and Skills, 2014). Therefore, given the number of mature students who make up the FE student population, this study aims to fill a gap in understanding of how adults experience HE and FE practices at the micro level. In order to do this, the cultures that may shape the practices that mature students may experience in HIVE are considered in the next section.


## Culture in HE and FE

The practices associated with HE or FE cultures have also been of significant debate as contributing factors to 'HEness' or HE cultures in an FE context (Lea & Simmons, 2012). Whilst developing a HE culture has been recognised as important to the student experience in FE contexts, the term is still under-conceptualised. A HE culture can relate to organisational and managerial practices, quality and audit cultures, or pedagogy. Literature concerning culture in 'dual sector' (Garrod & Macfarlane, 2007) or 'hybrid' (Smith, Bathmaker, & Parry, 2007) institutions have highlighted the contradictions and tensions

related to the process of institutional 'positioning' in an increasingly competitive HE landscape.

One of the constraints involved in this process of 'positioning' for dual sector institutions is a lack of clarity and confusion amongst HE in FE professionals over pedagogical styles and practices. The student experience of teaching and learning in HE in FE is often conceptualised as catering for individual needs. Small cohorts in HE in FE offer a personalised experience. Studies that have focussed on the learning experience in HIVE have found that lecturers may individually offer a different experience and teaching environment, based on their preconceived ideas and personal experiences of what constitutes HE (Burkill, Dyer, & Stone, 2008). Furthermore, lecturers may therefore be inconsistent in their approaches to teaching and learning in HE, and this is reflected in the diverse teaching and learning experiences of students (Greenbank , 2007). It suggests that there is not a universal understanding of the nature of teaching, learning, and knowledge amongst colleagues in HE in FE. These studies have largely taken a quantitative approach to data generation, using questionnaires with large samples of students and lecturers. Whilst these approaches are useful for understanding the general picture of the student experience of HIVE, they cannot generate understandings of unique and individual conceptions of different social groups, for example, of mature students. Nonetheless, these studies do suggest that without a universal understanding of HE in FE practices, common individual and predominantly technical conceptions of teaching and learning in FE can undermine ideas that centre around teaching and learning as primarily social and cultural (Colley et al., 2003). This may also be compounded by the different systems of quality used in the FE and HE sectors that may affect how these practices are interpreted in this context. The effects of those differences in systems of quality for HE and FE is the focus of the next section.

## Systems of Quality in HE and FE

Different ideas about what constitutes knowledge and learning in both sectors delivering HE brings about the question of what is 'higher' about higher education practice. The UK Quality Code for Higher Education and the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications (FHEQ) states that HE qualifications under the framework should "develop graduates with high level analytical skills and a broad range of competences, and are therefore distinct from training or solely the acquisition of higher level skills" (The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, 2008, pp. 2–3). Therefore, the framework makes a distinction between higher education and 'higher level skills' or training by suggesting that HE involves developing a range of graduate attributes unique to this sector. The National Qualifications

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Framework (NQF), however, divides HE and FE qualifications solely by level. HE is a qualification at level 4 or above, which is potentially problematic, as labelling qualifications in order of level is too simplistic (Creasy, 2012). Distinction by level implies a seamless transition in and between, and fails to take into account the nature of knowledge and different types of learning taking place within each level. With reference to the FHEQ criteria, progression through the levels requires more than just the acquisition of more complex or 'higher level skills', but a whole new range of competencies altogether. Furthermore, the way in which these criteria are interpreted may be qualitatively different in and between sectors, based on different institutional values, cultures and practices. Therefore, what is perceived as quality may differ considerably between institutions, which will undoubtedly impact on the experience of students. Whilst the framework is designed to maintain academic standards, level descriptors are not a measure of quality (Denman, 2005). They cannot take into account the situated and contextual aspects of learning that are informed by sectoral differences in approaches to knowledge and institutional cultures.

Differences in approaches to knowledge may also be synonymous with differences in approaches to quality assurance between the sectors. Although institutions in both sectors are subject to scrutiny by external agencies and professional bodies, HEIs hold a level of autonomy that FECs do not (Lea & Simmons, 2012). Traditionally, FE colleges deliver external awarding bodies' qualifications and HEIs award their own. From this, FE colleges are subject to a range of different quality assurance regimes that HEIs are not. Whereas HEIs traditionally operate under a system of peer review of individual HEIs' aims and objectives, FECs operate under a system of externally set criteria provided by the Office for Standards in Education (OFSTED) (Lea & Simmons, 2012). Although all HE is subject to review by the QAA regardless of the type of institution, differences in quality assurance regimes produce different approaches to quality in each sector (Creasy, 2012). Approaches in FE can be attributed to what is known as a managerialist approach to education management in further education based on targets and performativity (Gleeson & Shain, 1999; Randle & Brady, 1997). Performativity is seen as a measurement of quality based on performance or output, which is then translated into quality or value of the organisation (Ball, 2003). Performativity in FE is measured on student outcomes, and performativity in HEIs is measured using student outcomes and research outputs. These differences between how the quality and value of an organisation delivering HE are measured, may affect cultures and practice. To understand these affects and how it is experienced in HIVE, the next section considers how research and scholarly activity differ between the sectors.

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## Research and Scholarly activity in HE and FE

The emphasis on FE colleges as businesses that are driven by targets related to student outcomes through intensive teaching and learning activities creates a culture based on efficiency and productivity. This has many implications for the delivery of HE in FECs with regards to scholarly activity and research. Harwood & Harwood (2004) conducted a study of six colleges of further education that delivered higher education in the South West of England. They used a mainly quantitative approach to the research, with 262 questionnaires, subsidised by a series of semi structured interviews with HE teaching staff and management. They found that a culture of accountability and efficiency leaves HE in FE practitioners with very little time to engage in research and scholarly activity due to heavy teaching loads (Harwood & Harwood, 2004). Furthermore, Feather's (2010) research on the academic identity of HE Business lecturers teaching in FECs found that cultures within the FE college environment are difficult to negotiate and translate into a HE lecturer's role (Feather, 2010). In particular, negative attitudes from FE-only teaching staff towards the need for research and scholarship, or indeed HE in general, may make HE identities more conflicted. These attitudes from FE lecturers could be considered predictable, given their vocational backgrounds, and indicate a lack of understanding as to why an institution predominantly tasked with delivering further education should be concerned with higher education (Robson, 1998). This suggests that the HE/FE divide is not a one way process: some of those working in FE may not want to be associated with scholarship, and may support the distinction of further education from higher education.

The distinctive differences in attitudes to research and scholarship in FE and HE and the dual roles of HE in FE lecturers mean that the link between research and teaching may be lost in these institutions. A core value in the HE community is the development of knowledge (Creasy, 2012). However, as highlighted before, it is not always possible for HE lecturers in FE to contribute to this value. The issues HE lecturers in FECs face, especially in relation to identity, call into question what the incentives are for teaching HE in FECs. The lack of incentives to do so could be connected with the problems FECs have in recruiting qualified staff (Leathwood & O'Connell, 2003). Inevitably, the difficulty in recruiting highly qualified staff has an effect on the quality of the course and the student experience of HE in FE.  Most HE in FE lecturers would disagree with this assumption, arguing that the experience of HE in FECs is different to that in universities, but is of equal or even higher quality (Feather, 2010). Given the seemingly complicated relationship between the two sectors, to really understand why mature students participate in HIVE it is important to understand whether they experience these practices as enabling, a position supported in the

literature. Or, if they are experienced in other ways, for example; literature has shown that the complex and contradictory nature of the two sectors for those lecturers involved in the delivery of HIVE has had a confusing and fragmenting effect on practice and therefore identities of professionals. However, whilst questions of practice in HIVE have been studied in relation to the professional identities of HE lecturers in this context, less is known about how this affects the identities of the students. The next section therefore, explores how the construction of student identities in HIVE, with a focus on mature student identities.

## Student Identities in HIVE

Widening participation discourses often construct mature student identities in a HIVE context as 'non-traditional'. However, these identities may not be self-prescribed and they therefore render the non-traditional student identity as relatively fixed. In doing so, these imposed identities are seen as unproblematic, except in relation to the transitions between education and/or work. Once these transitions are thought to have been successfully made, student identity arising from practice is again given less attention. Mature student identity has commonly been considered from the perspective of those in university settings (Askham, 2008; Baxter & Britton, 2001; Britton & Baxter, 1999; Johnson & Watson, 2012; Leathwood & O'Connell, 2003). These studies have revealed the multi-faceted nature of mature student identities in these settings, particularly in relation to 'fit' between the student and the institution. However, as Waller (2006) suggests, mature students are a heterogeneous group, and the reality of their experience, and thus of their identities are too individualised and context-dependent to be generalised across higher education in general. Questions of mature student identity in HIVE need to be approached as distinct from those constructions in university settings, especially given the range of competing influences that make FE colleges delivering HIVE unique cultural sites.

Fenge (2011, p. 375), in a small scale study of one cohort of mature HE students in a further education college, found that the students made sense of themselves as 'second chance learners' which was related to their experience being 'not quite higher education'. Other accounts of mature student identity in HIVE suggest that the cultures and practices of colleges play a part in the construction and shaping of mature student identities, particularly in relation to the boundaries between further and higher education in these contexts (Esmond, 2012). However, the power that individual and collective identities have in shaping institutional practices during participation is rarely considered. Considering the way in which mature students construct identities in HIVE as a two-way process has the

potential to generate understandings of the interaction between structure and agency at these unique cultural sites.

## *Conclusions*

The purpose of the chapter was to explore what is understood about mature student participation and experience in HIVE delivered by FE colleges. In order to do this, understandings of why mature students participate in HE were considered, and although valuable insights have already been provided in the literature regarding HE more generally, these explanations seem to prove inadequate in the context of HIVE more specifically. Questions left unanswered about mature student's participation in HIVE justify the need for further exploration of the question: Why do mature students participate in HIVE? The literature also points to the way in which questions of mature student participation may be related to questions of HE and FE practice in the particular context of further education. However, whilst HE in FE practice has been the focus of concern in relation to professional identity, I have shown that questions of HIVE practices have been underexplored from the perspective of the student, and of mature students in particular. This provides a warrant for closer examination of these issues, leading to the research question: how do mature students experience HE learning practices in an FE context? The insights provided by literature concerning professional identity and HIVE practice have, however, highlighted the way in which issues of practice are related to issues of identity. Whilst issues of mature student identity have been addressed in the literature concerning university participation to some extent, it has been less so in the context of HIVE. Therefore, this research aims to contribute to this gap by addressing a third research question: how does the experience of HIVE in an FE context shape mature student identities? Overall, it appears that a consideration of context is central to providing insights for the knowledge gaps identified in relation to mature students and HIVE. This argument has been made on evaluation of the methodologies used to generate the literature that has been reviewed in this chapter. The way in which the literature has contributed to shaping the methodology in order to adequately address the research questions will be discussed in more detail in the following chapter.

# 3  Philosophy and Methodology

This chapter will outline the critical paradigm in which this research is located. In doing so, it will also demonstrate how, along with the review of the literature, the research questions for the study were developed. It will describe how ontological and epistemological concerns of this paradigm have influenced a critical methodology and how that was interpreted in the development of this multiple case study design to address the research questions. It will then discuss the process of data generation and what data were yielded from these efforts. Issues of ethics will be discussed in terms of guidelines, but also in terms of personal and professional ethics that arose during the research process. The final section of this chapter will discuss how the data was treated in order to provide descriptive, thematic and interpretive analyses. The first section of this chapter will provide an overview and justification for positioning this study within the critical paradigm.

## *The Critical Tradition*

Ontologically, critical theorists believe there is a reality that is understandable to human comprehension. It is created and shaped by social, political and cultural factors that have, over time, become taken as 'reality' itself (Morrow & Brown, 1994). Epistemologically, this means that what we know cannot be separate from the individual, and this ultimately influences enquiry. What we can know is therefore tied up in relationships between the researched phenomena and the researcher. One of the epistemological assumptions of critical research is about language and its role in what we can and do know. The linguistic turn in critical research marked the period whereby the role of language in the construction of reality was acknowledged (Angus, 1986). How realities are defined and conceptualised is constructed through language – and this makes the development of concepts in social life complex. This is because concepts and ways of thinking and talking about certain phenomena (i.e. discourse) are also subject to social, political and cultural influences (Morrow & Brown, 1994). It is therefore the role of critical research to uncover the ways in which these taken for granted concepts and discourses are socially, politically and culturally influenced in their development. It is only by doing this that change can be effected. Social reality is affected by power relations, research must therefore ask how, and why, in order to effect change. Another assumption is that meaning making is always tied up in relations of power (Crotty, 1998).

These epistemological assumptions are the starting point for considering the mature student experience of higher vocational education in a further education college. Firstly, these assumptions acknowledge the researcher as a central influence on the enquiry, and therefore allow for a greater understanding of the importance of people in what we do and what we can know. That constructed realities are defined and conceptualised through language has particular significance in this study, where the researcher has an in-depth knowledge of, and access to, the language of a social phenomenon. Hence, these assumptions allow for the researcher's position as an insider to be of considerable advantage in the research process. In considering the concepts and discourses constructed through the language of both HE and FE in the study of practices and experience, it is those that are taken for granted - though nonetheless socially, politically and culturally influenced - that become the focus of enquiry. In turn, this enables the power relations involved in making meaning through the experience of higher vocational education for mature students in a further education context to be uncovered. There are, however, some disadvantages to being an 'insider' in the field of enquiry, such as 'blind spots' created by familiarity. These limitations and how they were overcome will be discussed later on in the chapter.

The critical tradition has been the epistemological foundation for much research in the field of education and sociology. The focus of enquiries of this kind are on a social reality that recognises the peculiarities of social life (Crotty, 1998). In this way, a critical approach offers a dialectical understanding of truth that is particularly important for this study, where the peculiarities of social life in the context of HE in FE may be influenced by the presence of competing educational cultures and their languages. A dialectical understanding in this study is one that considers contradiction as a starting point for investigating social phenomena. In this way, approaches to truth and understanding must also be concerned with historical groundings, as the cultures drawn upon, and the languages used to make meaning, have been constructed over time in changing forms of society and the specific mode of production in each era. It is appropriate in a study of mature students to consider the historical development of their understandings that contribute to making meaning of experience as generational and age related.

All paradigms have certain concerns with knowledge interests. Positivist frameworks are concerned with cause, correlations and observing a truth that is objective. Interpretivist frameworks look to understand how social reality is constructed by the subjective and understanding the multiple reality of social experience. A critical approach, on the other hand, is concerned with social emancipation and change at the root of its intentions (Sparkes, 1992). A critical framework assumes that knowledge and ideas are mediated by

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power relations. Because of this, certain groups in society are oppressed by others who have privileges over them. Domination and oppression are acts of social beings, and what is presented as fact cannot be separated from the ideological constraints that assume certain knowledge interests of dominant groups. Therefore mainstream research traditions whether knowingly or not, are involved in the reproduction of knowledge systems that represent those dominant and specific interests (Gray, 2014). The notion that knowledge and ideas are mediated by power relations is of particular importance to this study as it seeks to explore how these power-mediated relations are experienced by mature students at the HE FE interface. With this is mind, the study also seeks to challenge power relations and their associated knowledge interests with a view to emancipatory change.

Methodologically, the critical tradition advocates methods of enquiry that are dialogic in nature, such as interview and observation, whereby conversation and reflection can be encouraged (Morrow & Brown, 1994). This is in order to question concepts in our reality that may be taken for granted as 'truth'. This in turn helps to expose and challenge concepts and discourses as mechanisms for the maintenance of order. These guiding assumptions are often linguistically constructed and can be articulated and questioned through dialogic methods of enquiry. Often critical research when taken as a starting point asks what it is that is perceived as 'good' or believed to be true, and thus asks persons to reflect from their experiences in order to uncover whether this is actually the case (Crotty, 1998). It is through these dialogic methods that critical research does not just seek to describe social situations from a specific standpoint, but to challenge and change the nature of that social situation to uncover aspects of it that may be implicated in the reproduction of oppression and domination (Sparkes, 1992).

Often what is privileged in natural research traditions is what can be described as certain 'systems of enquiry' based on those assumptions that dominate that tradition (Morrow & Brown, 1994). Assumptions, however, are not universal; they are contested. One example of a contested assumption that forms the basis for the most notable debate in social research is the quantitative and qualitative divide. In the strive to achieve parity with the natural sciences, social researchers adopt the naturalistic approaches to research methodology and criteria for rigour and the quality of such sciences (Crotty, 1998). What grew from this were frustrations with the treatment of social issues in the same way as natural phenomena. Qualitative researchers argued that this was ill fitting for the purpose (Sparkes, 1992).

From a critical perspective, social research and its competing paradigms are problematic, particularly in relation to the objective/subjective divide (Angus, 1986). Consistent with the assumption that realities are conceptualised through language, the critical tradition does not accept this divide as fact, but as socially constructed. The objective and subjective divide can therefore be seen as a result of a system (socially, politically and culturally constructed) that privileges the objective 'label' or conception. Yet, according to a critical epistemology, this is actually a linguistic construction (Morrow & Brown, 1994). The linguistically constructed higher status of the objective label has afforded some paradigms, and thus their ways of knowing and researching the world, privilege over others. This is the basis for beliefs held about the relationship between quantitative and qualitative methods of enquiry. The critical research tradition seeks to reimagine these beliefs by explicating how the objects of both qualitative and quantitative approaches to research are socially shared, historically produced and general to social groups (Morrow & Brown, 1994). In doing this, it is perhaps better to thus consider the two approaches as extremes on a spectrum, rather than mutually exclusive concepts.

This debate has received much attention in the literature, and critical theorists have sought to redress the gulf between social researchers and their methods or 'systems of enquiry' by introducing the notions of 'intensive' and 'extensive' research designs instead (Morrow & Brown, 1994).  Extensive research designs are associated with large scale studies, using large samples designed to research and measure causal factors of society. Morrow & Brown (1994) refer to these as aggregates. That is, findings of this type can be generalised to the wider population with confidence due to the large sample size. Aggregates can be seen as variables; however, large scale quantitative studies can only ever measure and compare a few variables at once and cannot account for the variety of factors implicated in social reality. For this purpose, 'intensive' research designs provide a more holistic way of exploring phenomena in depth, but with fewer cases (Morrow & Brown, 1994). Intensive research designs also account for material and historical influences on social phenomena. A critical approach emphasises that social reality does not occur in a vacuum, and extensive research designs, because of their size, cannot account for historical and material conditions affecting phenomena (Sparkes, 1992). However, extensive research designs do not intend or try to account for these aspects; they instead privilege other aspects of social reality than intensive research designs.  This is one way of illustrating that assumptions  cannot be universal in social research, and that systems of enquiry that privilege different aspects of reality therefore privilege different strategies to research those specific aspects (Morrow & Brown, 1994).

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Trying to account for all aspects is where critical theorists argue that research loses rigour and is what can be termed as 'trying to do it all' (Morrow & Brown, 1994). Therefore, a critical research project that tries to encompass all aspects of social reality will dilute the very nature of an intensive research design (Morrow & Brown, 1994). Systems of enquiry, in this sense, also meet the dualism of the macro and micro level of analysis. In the spirit of 'not trying to do it all' focusing on either the micro or the macro becomes a concern of practicality (doing one thing well rather than many things badly). Something that holds, of course, as long as the mutually constitutive nature of both is not kept in mind. For research that is concerned with the study of a particular social group whose experience may be context dependent, as in this case, the critical approach has contributed to the development of an intensive research design. Furthermore, this approach has influenced the development of research questions that focus on particular aspects of the phenomenon that are related to power in meaning making. As well as the peculiarities of social reality and the emancipatory potential of participation. In order to understand how social situations and certain phenomena may be implicated in the reproduction of domination and oppression, questions that can be posed include how and why things are as they are, and how people make meaning from their social realities. In this research, therefore, it is important to ask why mature students participate in HIVE. In order to attend to the peculiarities of social reality, it is also important to ask how mature students experience the HE learning practices they participate in, in the particular context of an FE college. In order to explore the emancipatory potential of this participation, we must also pose a question about how the experience of HIVE in an FE context shapes mature students' identity, if at all.

## Research Questions

The research questions posed in this study are therefore:

1. Why do mature students participate in higher vocational education?
2. How do mature students experience HE learning practices in an FE context?
3. How does the experience of HIVE in an FE context shape mature student identities?

## Multiple Case Study Design

A research design consists of the logical steps to conducting research that links the research questions through to the conclusions drawn by the study. One way of doing this, as discussed previously, is by focusing on the micro aspects of social reality for a particular

group or phenomenon. An intensive case study approach to enquiry would enable these aspects to be considered (Yin, 2014). Implicated in the objective and subjective, qualitative and quantitative divide is the place of case study research (Morrow & Brown, 1994). Commonly held views about the role and purpose of case study research are that it is a method to supplement other forms of enquiry, such as an experiment. These views reflect the idea that in depth descriptive and interpretive studies should only ever be a small part of a larger statistical study (Flyvbjerg, 2006). Case studies are therefore often mistaken as not a methodology, but a method to be used in conjunction with other more 'rigorous' and scientific ways of knowing (Yin, 2014). Contrary to this belief, case study has increasingly become more widely accepted as the main methodology associated with an intensive research design of the critical tradition (Ragin & Becker, 1992). This dialogic, intensive research design enables the use of multiple methods that can take account of and uncover peculiarities and nuances in a context that is socially situated and historically constitutive. Morrow & Brown (1994) offer a clear cut distinction between extensive designs, as the analysis of variables in a given population, and intensive designs as case study analyses.

Due to the in-depth exploration of a particular case in intensive designs, it has been commonly assumed that case studies cannot be generalised and are mere descriptions of events or persons, with little explanatory power beyond that of the case (Merriam, 1988). On the contrary, however, an intensive research design enables explications of that individual case, but also, limited generalizations to cases that are similar in type, or relatability (Morrow & Brown, 1994). It is also the case that, in reimagining the qualitative/quantitative divide, case studies need not be based completely on non-statistical data, and "a largely quantitative archival analysis may be the base of a case study" (Morrow & Brown, 1994, p. 252). The literature review revealed that most case studies in this area of concern did use largely quantitative methods to construct cases of institutions or cohorts with supplementary or complementary qualitative aspects (Broad, 2006; Burkill et al., 2008; Burton, Lloyd, & Griffiths, 2011; Pat Davies & Williams, 2001; Harwood & Harwood, 2004; Leese, 2010; Ozga & Sukhnandan, 1998). That being said, comparative case studies that have dominated the critical tradition have tended to prefer intensive, small and rich comparisons over broad comparison by way of statistical analysis of data sets.

Whilst case studies are not unique to the critical tradition, they are one intensive research design that is deemed appropriate in answering research questions framed by the tradition when access to contemporary phenomena is available. The assertion is that they are more compatible with researching problems of dominance and oppression posed by the critical tradition (Morrow & Brown, 1994). As opposed to historical designs whereby observation

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and interviewing methods cannot be used. Case study designs are considered to offer more explanatory powers than those designs that advocate a particular method of data generation over others, as the flexibility of case studies allows for multiple methods of data generation that are equally important to the design (Yin, 2014).

A case study methodology is appropriate when the research questions seek to explore an issue, problem or phenomenon using a case as a specific example. It involves conducting research of a real-life case within its contemporary context (or a particular context). There has been some debate, as noted above, about the conception of case studies as a collection of methods or a methodology in itself (Creswell, 2013). As with Creswell, this study considers case studies to be a methodology; the case is the object of enquiry, as well as the product of it. The approach advocates the exploration of a case that is contained within a bounded system over some length of time, using multiple methods of data generation (Creswell, 2013).

Debates on the generalizability of case study research that stem from the objective-subjective divide have outlined potential issues with regards to the usefulness and validity of such a methodology to research social problems. One example is that case studies are too subjective and give too much scope for the researcher's personal perceptions and interpretations (Flyvbjerg, 2006). This leads to concerns relating directly to the quantitative-qualitative dualism that critical research finds problematic. It has been argued that case study research cannot provide abstract theorisations of phenomenon. This reflects the problems associated with hierarchical constructions of knowledge, which are central to the empirical and theoretical concerns of this thesis. The issue of case study research's inability to provide theorisations of problems taken from their context rather than within their context resembles a construction of knowledge that values abstract theoretical knowledge over practical context dependent knowledge (Flyvbjerg, 2006). The importance placed on generalising studies can be seen by (Giddens, 1984), who states how case studies on their own offer little by way of generalisation, but when carried out in numbers can be compared and generalisation can be made. Flyvbjerg (2006), however, considers this to be misguided, and offers other ways in which case studies can be generalizable, depending on the case itself and how it is chosen. He also rejects the perceived problem of generalizability as based on case or sample size as only common in social science. He uses specific examples of studies in the natural sciences that have been used to refute theoretical claims based on observations of a large scale. One such example is Galileo's rejection of Aristotle's theory of gravity by way of a single experiment. The theory was able to be refuted by Galileo's choice of one case using an extreme variable to illustrate his point. This shows that

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choice of case may be pertinent to the claims that can be made about that case, but if chosen and constructed carefully, they can powerfully illustrate or develop a theory. Therefore, the choice of case should be clearly rooted in the issue or problem under exploration and its context.

> One can often generalize on the basis of a single case, and the case study may be central to scientific development via generalization as supplement or alternative to other methods. But formal generalization is overvalued as a source of scientific development, whereas "the force of example" is underestimated. (Flyvbjerg, 2006, p. 228).

The problem with the perception of a case study's inability to provide abstract theoretical knowledge stems from its perceived inability to be generalised beyond the single case. A different but related concern in the debate about case study research as a method and/or methodology is the extent to which it can be a stand-alone method or methodology in providing the base for developing theory, or whether it is only useful in conjunction with other methods for this purpose (Flyvbjerg, 2006). This concern is directly related to case selection; it can be argued that unique or critical cases are more appropriate and illuminating of the intricacies of phenomena - due to the variation that the depth of case study design can reveal. For this purpose, a representative or random sample of cases, or case would not be the most appropriate. A purposive selection of case or cases, based on their relevance to the questions being posed by the particular study, would be more appropriate in this situation. Often it is useful to select cases based on their likeliness to the design of the study, in order for case studies to be effective for this purpose.

Due to the close relationship between the researcher and the case[s] in case study research, the methodology has often been criticised for being too subjective and having too much room for the researchers' own biases to permeate the research (Diamond, 1996). Diamond made such a critique by suggesting that without the use of proper 'scientific' methods which distance the researcher from the research[ed], preconceived ideas will inevitably be realised in the findings. This criticism could be made of any research design that involves interaction between the researcher and the object of research, but is often more so in intensive research designs where participant observation and interviewing, or dialogic methods are required. This leads to an important point about the relationship between the quantitative and qualitative divide and how it operates to judge the quality of research. Campbell (1975) argued against judging qualitative designs by criteria used to judge the rigour of research based on scientific or quantitative designs. He purports that

case study and other qualitative research can be judged using different but equally as rigorous criteria. One advantage of case study and other qualitative designs is that they allow for the testing of preconceptions in a real life situation that enables those preconceptions to be challenged. Often the depth and variety of data generated during single or multiple cases force the researcher to revise their original assertions (Stake, 1995). This is largely different from the view that the nature of qualitative research enables the researcher to find what they want to find, particularly when operating under the assumptions of the critical tradition that seeks to challenge taken for granted assumptions. In this sense, case study research is more likely to open up possibilities of falsification than verification in its findings (Flyvbjerg, 2006). The way in which this happened during the research process for this study, and how it was managed, will be discussed in the ethics and limitations section.

It is important to note that subjective bias is likely to occur in all sorts of research designs. For example, the selection and choice of variables to be considered for statistical analysis in intensive research designs are ultimately based on what the researcher thinks is important, or what they are likely to find statistical significance of (Morrow & Brown, 1994). Furthermore, the disconnection between the researcher and the researched is in fact a disadvantage of extensive designs, as the researcher is never likely to have their biases challenged through interaction and dialogue with the participants, and thus these biases stay with the research through to interpretation (Flyvbjerg, 2006). The closeness to the case study in hand and the ability for the preconceived ideas and notions of the researcher to be challenged is, thus, a strength in the trustworthiness of the data generated as well as subsequent interpretations.

> The case study contains no greater bias toward verification of the researcher's preconceived notions than other methods of inquiry. On the contrary, experience indicates that the case study contains a greater bias toward falsification of preconceived notions than toward verification. (Flyvbjerg, 2006, p. 237)

The depth of understanding generated and its attention to detail has also come under methodological debate in the ability of this type of research to be theorised. But it is precisely the depth of understanding that can be created by this type of research that makes it unique in understanding and uncovering the ambiguities of the reality of a case.

Although the above critiques tend to be applied for all case study research, there are also different variations of case studies for different purposes. Three common types of case

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study can be described as intrinsic to case study; instrumental case study and collective case study (Creswell, 2013, p. 99). Selecting the appropriate type of case study depends on the questions or problems it seeks to address, or its intention. An intrinsic case is often used to illustrate and explore a case that is unusual, or unique in some way. The purpose of this type of case study is often to explore and describe the case as has not previously been done before. An instrumental case study is often used to explore a specific issue or problem, and a case will be chosen on the basis of its strength for understanding that issue or problem. A collective case study is also focussed on a single problem or issue, but multiple case studies are chosen to illustrate the diversity of perspectives around the problem or issue. Often, collective or multiple case studies build on one another, replicating the same methods of data collection to ensure comparability across cases. A collective or multiple case study also offers an alternative to the argument that case studies cannot be generalised because the context of cases, even similar ones, are different. A multiple or collective case study can also offer an explanation of cases within the same context and therefore generalizability between cases.

The decision to use a multiple case study methodology can be justified by paying attention to its characteristics and resonance with the aims and paradigm from which the study belongs. It is a suitable methodology when the focus is on developing in-depth understandings, descriptions and analyses of a case(s). The purpose of this study is to understand in depth the experience and perceptions of mature students studying HIVE in a particular FE context. The problem that the study aims to address is the limited understandings in research thus far of a particular group of students that fall under the general label of 'non-traditional students' of higher education. There is a common homogenous assumption about the type of student represented in this category. Whilst the diversity of the HE sector and the variety of institutions that provide HE are not treated or viewed homogenously, there is an assumption about the type of students who attend those institutions. The institutions that are seemingly aimed at widening participation groups, such as FE colleges, also come with some common assumptions about the nature of their students. It is for these reasons that a multiple case study is an appropriate methodology to provide the means with which to generate the in-depth understandings needed to expose peculiarity and diversity of a particular group of students, within a particular context (Morrow & Brown, 1994). Multiple case study research is also considered most appropriate when research questions ask how and why, and the focus is on contemporary rather than historical events (Yin, 2014). It is also considered appropriate when the researcher does not have control of behavioural events, as is the case here in a study of mature student participation in HIVE.

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Yin (2014) suggests that if time and resources are available, it is always preferable to do a multiple case study as the potential analytical benefits are more substantial. The analytic conclusions derived from multiple cases have more room for comparison and thus strengthen the findings. Due to the diversity of modes of study of mature students participating in HE at the college, a multiple case study approach was used here. The focus of the case study could have been the setting as the unit of analysis. However, it was decided that given the diversity of mature students' modes and types of study, a single case study would not encapsulate the variety of individual perspectives and the diversity that they would bring to the study. In addition to this, defining the boundaries of the case would have been difficult, due to the dispersed nature of its participants and the setting.

Multiple case studies within a particular context allow for a variety of perspectives and positions to be considered that can aid understanding of the phenomenon (Stake, 1995). They can also highlight the way different meanings are made dependent on social, political and cultural factors of the complexity of the setting. The rationale for a multiple case study in my research lay with the desire to explore the fullest possible range of positions and perspectives available on the mature student experience of HIVE in the setting. Given the importance of the historical in the creation of meaning, I hoped that this design would allow enough attention to be paid to those factors that are individual to each case.

## The Site of the Multiple Case Studies

The case studies were set in a general sized further education college in the north of England; it is the only provider of higher education in its borough. The college is situated within commuting distance of several universities, one of which is a Russell Group member. It is also one of the largest boroughs in England. Because of this, the College serves a diverse local community. 50% of the borough's inhabitants reside in the town centre, with the majority of the remainder residing in towns in the nearby valley and numerous other smaller rural settlements. By measures of multiple deprivation indices, widening participation, unemployment, average earnings, etc. there are significant areas of severe deprivation within the borough. 11% of residents live within areas identified as the most deprived nationally. The take-up of incapacity benefit is more than double the regional average, and 25% of households claim council tax benefit. Therefore, the College has the potential to make a great difference to the lives of its residents and communities. Despite this, the borough has a sustained history of low attainment of higher level skills and low progression rates into HE.

There are three Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) near to the College, the closest being within six miles, giving relatively easy access to HE. However, it is possible that the size of the area and limited transport options do not easily support travel-to-study for many residents, especially those living in rural and remote areas. Over a period of ten years, higher education at the College has evolved from mainly BTEC Higher Nationals and Teacher Training provision into a much broader provision, including Foundation Degrees and Bachelor of Arts Top Up awards. In addition, the College also delivers a small range of professional vocational qualifications classed as non-prescribed HE.

Due to its offering of further and higher education, the College can be described as a 'dual sector' or 'hybrid' institution (Garrod & Macfarlane, 2007). Bathmaker, Brooks, Parry, & Smith, (2008, p. 131) identified four types of hybrid institutions: HEIs offering small amounts of FE that have merged with colleges offering both FE and a large provision of HE; specialist colleges moving from the further education sector to the higher education sector; further education colleges supporting a small provision of higher education and maintaining a predominant focus on further education; and an FE institution offering a large provision of higher education and separating its organisation of further and higher education. The site of these particular case studies is the third type – a further education college that supports a small provision of HE whilst maintaining a predominant focus on FE.

## Access to the site

Access to the setting was gained through my position as an employee at the College. This had its advantages, such as instant access and an already existing professional relationship with potential gatekeepers. However, it was not without its difficulties, discussions with the gatekeepers included; whether the college had any rights to the research, and potential ethical problems of whether they would be allowed to 'verify' the research once it was written and before it was submitted. The issues that relate more directly to ethics than to access will be discussed in more detail later in the chapter. An agreement was reached and consent was gained from the College as the site for a multiple case study (see appendices 1 and 2). Ethical approval was also received from the School of Education and Professional Development's ethics committee for research.

## Individual Case Selection

A purposive approach to multiple case study selection within the setting was used, with the unit of analysis being an individual mature student. It was purposive because there were theoretical reasons for the selection of cases.  It was important that the diversity of the mature student population in the College in terms of a range of ages was reflected. However, for the purposes of this study a mature student is defined as being aged 21 or older at the commencement of the course, and this is in line with the sector definition of a mature student. The strategy for selecting cases is considered to be necessary for replication reasons. Yin  (2014) describes two types of replication that would be considered appropriate for selecting cases for multiple case studies. The first is literal replication; this is whereby cases are selected for their likeness and therefore their ability to predict similar results. On the other hand, he also suggests that theoretical replication would be an appropriate strategy. Theoretical replication involves selecting cases that will provide contrasting findings but for anticipated reasons based on epistemological assumptions. In this sense it was hoped that theoretical replication as a strategy for selecting cases would reflect the diverse, rather than the homogenous nature of the mature student population in the context of HE generally and HIVE more specifically. This position also echoes the nature of knowledge in the critical tradition. It is for this reason that it was also important that the cases considered or 'constructed' themselves as mature students, rather than have that label given to them by virtue of age.

For this reason, the selection of individual cases for the multiple case study started by asking all students who identified themselves as a mature student to contact me if they would be interested in contributing to the study. Member-identified categories can be defined as categories that are encapsulated in the 'situated vocabularies' of the culture (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). Indeed, this is consistent with the importance of language - as associated with the epistemological assumptions of the critical tradition. It was felt that this was the most appropriate selection strategy to understand the experiences of mature students who identify themselves as part of this group. This decision was also informed by problems identified in the literature with the definition of a mature student tending to be an all-encompassing term.  This method of selection may also reduce biases by letting the students determine the definition of mature student, and therefore the criteria for selection, themselves.

An email was sent out to all HE students in the College with details of the study and asking those who identified as mature students if they would be willing to participate. Several

replies came back from those who could potentially be included in the study. Those who replied were asked if they would be willing to attend an information event at which the nature of the study could be explained to them further, and include what it would mean for them in terms of time and commitment. A range of people attended, from older and younger mature students, as well as full and part time. The other commitments these students would have in their wider lives became apparent, and the impact the research would have on their already busy schedules was of concern to me.

Once the research had been explained fully, there were 10 potential individuals as cases that were willing to be part of the research. Therefore all of those who volunteered to attend the information session agreed to participate in the study. Their circumstances reflected a range of ages, type of HE course undertaken and modes of study (both full and part time) of mature HIVE students at the College. However, of the original 10, two of the cases declined to participate after initially agreeing and after a period of non-contact. This meant that selecting two alternative cases to participate at this point would have been problematic, as time would have prevented me from conducting the same data generation methods as for the other cases. Another person was willing to participate fully until January 2014, when they were involved in a case of academic misconduct with the College, and were concerned that their participation would compromise their case. They asked to withdraw and wanted the data generated so far to be destroyed. This meant that only 7 case studies were conducted as part of the final design. Fig 1 shows details of the individuals that became the individual cases; however, a more detailed account of the cases will be discussed in the next chapter. The data generation for the multiple case studies was conducted over the course of the academic year from September 2013 to July 2014. The methods chosen to construct the case study were informal interviews, document analysis of student feedback documents and participant observation.

Fig.1 Participants

| Name | Gender | Age | Course | Year of Study | Mode of Study |
|------|--------|-----|--------|---------------|---------------|
| Matt | Male | 22 | HND Business | 1 | Full-time |
| Carolyn | Female | 45 | Foundation Degree Early Years | 1 | Part-time |
| Donna | Female | 38 | BA(Hons) Acting Performance – Top-up | 1 | Full-time |
| Nathan | Male | 26 | HNC Construction Management | 2 | Part-time |

| John | Male | 51 | Foundation Degree Health and Social Care | 3 | Part-time |
|------|------|-----|------|---|---|
| Clare | Female | 48 | Foundation Degree Interior and Architectural Design | 2 | Full-time |
| Jonathan | Male | 42 | Foundation Degree Music Technology | 1 | Full-time |

## Informal interviews

Interviews are one of the preferred methods of collecting data in case study research, but consideration of appropriateness of method must be related to the nature of the research questions. Since the questions posed were about why and how mature students experience HE in an FE context, interview seemed the most appropriate method to gather information about the lives and experiences of each case.

Two in-depth informal interviews were conducted for each case study, one in the first semester of the academic year (November – December 2012) and one in the second semester (April – June 2013) (see fig. 2). One of the reasons for conducting informal interviews in this way was that the themes of the first interview were revisited thus gave the participants an opportunity to validate or invalidate our previous conversations. As such, it also opened a window for participants to reflect on why some of their previous thoughts and experiences may have changed. It added another layer of depth to the cases. Interviews were informal and unstructured in nature; themes of HE and FE practices for learning were developed a priori and guided some of the conversation. It was important that the research did not impose itself too much on the participants' lives. For this reason, they were conducted in the College, often between classes and in mutually convenient places. In the spirit of dialogic methods the informality of the interview meant it was conversation-like, often interviews in case studies resemble 'guided conversations' (Yin, 2014, p. 110). The advantage of this style in case study research is that it is able to capture a range of conditions and variables of the case that may have been missed in more structured approaches to interviews. One of the difficulties of conducting such informal interviews is to strike a balance between guiding the interviews enough to cover the initial line of enquiry, but not to the extent that the interview becomes biased (Yin, 2014). As I was already a participant in the setting, I was able to participate and empathise with what the mature

students said. Although it could be argued that my position as a member of staff may have had an effect on the validity of interviews, it contributed to the rapport between myself and the participants. I was able to guide the conversation so that it covered aspects of the line of enquiry whilst not being threatening. Interviews as a method of data generation in case studies commonly serve two purposes. One is to establish and corroborate findings that have already emerged. The purpose of interviews in this case study was the alternative to this. Interviews in this case study were intended to help capture each case's unique rendition of the experience of studying HIVE in an FE College. I was also interested in the complexity of their individual life histories and how they came to study HIVE as a mature student. In this sense, I wanted to capture the participants' 'own sense of reality' (Yin, 2014, p. 111), as it would contribute to answering the third research question, if and how the HIVE experience shapes identities.

Due to the informality and dialogic nature of the interviews, they lasted from between 30 minutes to an hour. An ideal length for an interview that is not assumed to be prolonged is an hour; anything under half an hour is unlikely to yield any data that is of depth enough to be useful; one longer than two hours can become repetitive and deviate too far from the original line of enquiry (Creswell, 2013). Aside from this, interviews longer than an hour were deemed problematic in ensuring that the research did not take up too much of the participants' time.  They were also considered unnecessary, particularly as the design of the multiple case study included using multiple methods to generate data. Further to this, when a case generates large amounts of data, the process of transforming the data may become unmanageable (Merriam, 1988). The strengths of interview methods in case study research are that they are targeted and can focus directly on generating data that will address the research questions. The method also generates data that can account for perceptions, attitudes and meanings, and thus enables explanations to be provided as well as views (Yin, 2014).

The advantage of informal interviews is that they offer a way to understand behaviour, feelings or interpretations of social reality that either cannot be observed, or are more likely to be articulated by persons instead (Merriam, 1988). This is often the case when the case study is focussed on events or contexts that may have occurred in the past and are unlikely to be replicable, as may be the case when exploring why the mature students participated in HIVE (Merriam, 1988). In this sense, interviews give access to a unique perspective of the individual participant (Patton, 1980, p. 196). They are also more likely to be preferable when the case study seeks to explore the individual perceptions of multiple participants (Stake, 1995).

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It is also important to consider the truth status of data generated through interviews in relation to the phenomena being explored. The position this study takes on the truth status of this data is that a person's 'truth' will always be partial and dependent of the situation and context in which it is told (Press, 2005). Given the unstructured nature of the interviews, the conversations were often more like stories, these are also taken to be partial whilst giving an idea of the most important elements of that story to that person. It may also be the case that a person can hold multiple and conflicting "truths' on the same subject. These are not taken to be accurate accounts of reality, but the representations are important to understand how meaning is made (Crotty, 1998).

Fig.2 Informal Interview Record

| Date | Time | Who | Where | Duration (mins) |
|------|------|-----|-------|-----------------|
| 04/11/2013 | 1.30pm | Carolyn | Tutorial Room | 47.00 |
| 07/11/2013 | 11.00am | Clare | Classroom | 52.00 |
| 12/11/2013 | 7.30pm | Nathan | Office | 39.00 |
| 21/11/2013 | 1.30pm | Jonathan | Tutorial Room | 42.00 |
| 21/11/2013 | 3.30pm | John | Classroom | 59.00 |
| 06/12/2013 | 9.30am | Matt | Tutorial Room | 55.00 |
| 08/12/2013 | 10.00am | Donna | Classroom | 49.00 |
| 22/04/2014 | 7.30pm | Nathan | Office | 36.00 |
| 30/04/2014 | 1.30pm | Jonathan | Classroom | 32.00 |
| 16/05/2014 | 3.00pm | Clare | Classroom | 37.00 |
| 23/05/2014 | 9.30am | Matt | Tutorial Room | 42.00 |
| 05/06/2014 | 1.30pm | Carolyn | Classroom | 30.00 |
| 12/06/2014 | 10.00am | Donna | Tutorial Room | 57.00 |
| 19/06/2014 | 3.30pm | John | Classroom | 54.00 |

## Participant Observation

In addition to informal interviews, participant observation was carried out as part of the data yielded to generate the individual case studies. The role of participant observation was to enable reality to be perceived from inside the experience of the cases, rather than just external to them. Yin (2014) describes how the strength of participant observation is that it

enables the researcher to perceive reality as part of the case, instead of external to it, as would be the case of a case study based solely on interview data. There are other ways in which participant observation is preferable to, or can be used in addition to other methods. Often, case study researchers use participant observation informally on occasions when other methods are also carried out, for example alongside an interview. It is for this reason that the method is useful for providing additional information about individual cases (Yin, 2014). For the purposes of this case study, participant observation as a method enabled the observation of the students negotiating HE practices in the context of FE, rather than simply hearing about how the mature students perceived them through the interviews. It also provides examples of the enactment of some of the views the participants expressed. Robson (2002) discusses how participant observation enables the user to gain entry to participants' 'social and symbolic life worlds' (p. 314) and allows the researcher to develop an understanding of social conventions, habits and uses of language. This is particularly useful when studying practices enacted in a particular context, such as HE learning practices. Whilst the study was interested in how the mature students made meaning and understood the practices they were engaged with, I was also concerned with how this looked in reality. Some of the ways in which the experience of HE learning practices were constructed by participants can be better understood by experiencing first-hand the context in which it is lived. This added layers of depth to the case studies that would not have been possible using interview methods alone.

Participant observation is also deemed ideal when events central to the case are frequent or involve repetition of activities (Robson, 2002). The mature students attended the College for their studies on a frequent basis and were involved in scheduled learning activities, which made some participant observation feasible. However, it was due to the dispersed nature of the cases that participant observation was complementary to, rather than the primary method of data generation. Whilst the seven cases were part of one setting, their schedules were all different: some were part time and therefore only in one day a week; others were full time but spent a lot of time outside of the College; others spent a lot of time in the College. Logistically, participant observation as a main method would not have been suitable as it would not have been possible to spend equal amounts of time in the field with each case, rendering some cases as less complete than others (see fig. 3).

Fig. 3 Field work (Participant Observation) Record

| Date | Time | Who | Where | Duration (mins) |
|------|------|-----|-------|------------------|
| 11/11/2013 | 11.00am | Carolyn | In class | 60.00 |
| 19/11/2013 | 5.30pm | Nathan | In class | 30.00 |
| 28/11/2013 | 2.00pm | Jonathan | HE study room | 40.00 |
| 06/11/2013 | 10.00am | Clare | HE study room | 24.00 |
| 23/01/2014 | 9.00am | Donna | HE Study room | 37.00 |
| 05/02/2014 | 2.30pm | Matt | In class | 19.00 |
| 20/03/2014 | 1.30pm | John | In class | 45.00 |

In addition to time spent in the field as an observer, it is also important to consider the role of the observer and the impact that they have on the social situation being observed. Robson (2002) highlights several roles or types of observer the researcher can take. The first is a complete participant, where the researcher does not reveal his identity to those being observed, and this can also be known as covert enquiry. Whilst covert observation may protect against issues of the effect of the observer on the behaviour in a natural setting, this way of conducting observation carries with it significant ethical issues that would also be inconsistent with the nature of critical research. As the nature of critical research requires an emancipatory element, deception on the part of the researcher is deeply problematic. This method creates a power imbalance between the researcher and the researched, as the researcher holds the knowledge of the purpose of their presence and the researched do not.

In contrast to a complete participant, is the participant as observer (Robson, 2002). The participant as observer is more focused on the role of participant than of observer, and their intentions and identity are revealed to participants in the setting from the outset of the time spent in the field. This way of conducting observation is much more dialogic in nature; it enables power to be somewhat balanced between the researcher and researched and is based on mutual honesty. The role of observer as participant also redresses power imbalances, as it restores a degree of agency to participants; they can decide to take part or not. Whilst participant as observer seems preferable to a complete or covert observer, there is also a third role that the observer can take – the marginal participant (Robson, 2002). The role of the researcher in this type of observation is more passive than those previously discussed, but not a complete observer. Due to my role as a member of staff in

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the College, it was necessary to have a lower degree of participation during observations. This was for two reasons. One was to help the participants to distinguish between my roles as a researcher and as a member of staff, and this was to ensure that my presence did not disrupt the teaching and learning activities the mature students were engaged in at the sites of observation. Another reason was the familiarity I already had with the setting (and how it worked) meant that I need not immerse myself fully as a participant to gain that insight.

One participant observation was carried out for each case, equalling a total of seven. The sites of observations differed for each case, based on convenience and mode of study (see fig. 3). It was important that the observations were held in the setting of the College, but whilst it was appropriate for observations to be carried out during teaching and learning activities for some, it was not for others. An example of this was the case of Jonathan who was studying for a foundation degree in Music Technology. A lot of Jonathan's teaching and learning activities in the College were spent in the studio where there needed to be complete silence for recording and concentration purposes, and it was decided that my role as participant observer would have been disruptive to teaching and learning in these situations. The situation was similar for Donna, who was completing a BA(Hons) in Acting. She spent a lot of her time in College rehearsing for productions with her peers, whilst this was interesting to watch it did not tell me much about the HE practices she was engaged with. It became apparent when trying to identify opportunities for participant observations with the mature students that many of what the students considered to be HE practices were practised at home in isolation. This was an important finding in itself, but also highlighted the potential problems with using participant observation as a method of data generation for the purposes of this study.

Cases that were identified as being appropriate to observe during teaching and learning activities were those that spent a lot of time in classroom-based learning. These were business studies, early years education and health and social care. An observation was carried out for each case in this setting. The length of participant observation varied (usually one teaching session). Small class sizes meant that teaching sessions were often informal and discursive, providing ideal opportunities for participant observation of perceived HE practices revealed in interview data. Whilst it was hoped that my role as a member of staff and my role of a researcher would not merge, I was often naturally invited into conversations with the cases as a member of the discussion because of this. An advantage of my position as an academic skills tutor rather than a subject tutor for these

particular students was that I was not considered an expert on the subject matter and was invited into discussions more readily as an equal in the learning process.

In cases where participant observation of scheduled teaching activities was not appropriate, the observations were set in the College's HE study room. This was a dedicated space for HE students to use for study in between scheduled teaching and learning activities. Participant observation in these cases was ad hoc and opportunistic in nature. The purpose of the HE study room was to give HE students a quiet space to work so there was often less interaction occurring in this space. Therefore field notes were taken of naturally occurring discussions between me and the participants about what they were doing and how they were feeling at the time. As the participants had usually come into the study room to engage in some the practices that would often occur in private to the participant i.e. assignment writing, this was considered a good compromise to gain access to observe and discuss them. The time spent in the study room for participant observation varied from between 24-40 minutes.

## Documentation

Yin (2014) considers the gathering of documentary data related to cases relevant to most case studies. Documents related to cases can take many forms; these may be but are not limited to administrative documents and minutes of meetings concerning the case(s). Whilst documents are considered useful, the selection and interpretation of them requires careful consideration. Documents not produced by the researcher may not be accurate or may be edited to reflect a particular agenda (Yin, 2014). This may be the case in minutes of meetings where the document produced is not a verbatim account of the discussion, rather, the chair will decide what aspects of the meeting conversation will be recorded for the purpose of the item being discussed. Often in case study research documents are used to complement or supplement data from other sources (Yin, 2014). They can be used, for example, to verify accounts of an event described in an interview or they can provide complementary detail to add to the richness of a case.

The strengths of using documents as part of a case study are: documents are stable; they can be reviewed frequently; and they do not depend on the availability of human subjects. They are also unobtrusive (Yin, 2014), an issue that was of repeated concern to me in this specific teaching and learning context, as they are not generated as part of the study itself. Because a document used in case study research is produced independently of the research, it often requires the process of 'data mining', that is, extracting data from the document

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that may be relevant to the case or cases. Documents may also provide some background context to the case that would be unobtainable using other methods because they can be broad and span over many different events and settings related to the case (Yin, 2014). A consequence of this function is that they can often serve as a substitute for records of events or settings that researchers were unable to carry out observations of themselves (Stake, 1995).

The weakness of using documents is that there are often instances of reporting bias, similar to that of meeting minutes: the person producing the document will often have done so with a particular agenda in mind, and the document may therefore be a partial record. For these reasons, there has been scepticism about the overuse of documents in case study research for data generation (Yin, 2014). This has emerged from debates about the accuracy of documents relied on to give true accounts. For this reason, it is important to pay considerable attention to the specific purpose the document was produced for and the context in which it was produced. It is important, then, to approach the documents in case study research with a view to uncovering the objectives the documents were intended to meet (Yin, 2014). This means the content of documents must be interpreted with a critical eye in order to avoid being misled by content pertaining to be 'truths'. Vast amounts of data in the form of documents can be found related to cases, as technology and the internet have made these documents more readily accessible. The selection and use of documents must therefore be focussed specifically on the centrality of the aims of the study and research questions (Yin, 2014). Stake (1995) suggests that once documents are identified as relevant to the case, they must be approached with caution, with a focus on the purpose of the study, but not closed off to uncovering unexpected leads. "They are, in fact, a ready-made source of data easily accessible to the imaginative and resourceful investigator" (Merriam, 1988, p. 104).

The types of documents used in the construction of the case studies were those that captured feedback from students about their courses and the College as part of the College's quality process, or 'student focus groups'. Student focus groups and the corresponding documents are conducted twice every academic year, once a semester. Therefore, a total of 14 documents were included as part of the multiple case study. The student focus groups were student led, with the course representative responsible for chairing the meeting by following an agenda (see appendix 6). It must be acknowledged that the agenda was assembled by those members of staff in the College responsible for ensuring that there was sufficient opportunity for the student voice to be heard. This was particularly important to the College for its HE population as 'fee paying customers'. The

function of the process is to allow students on all HE courses a mechanism for giving feedback, and the intention of the meetings is for issues to be identified and resolved before they escalated. Whilst the process did do what it said, another agenda was to ensure issues were addressed and resolved before students participated in the National Students Survey (NSS). It must be noted that due to the small size of the HE student population, low satisfaction scores from just a few students participating in the NSS could bring the College satisfaction scores down significantly. For this reason, often the content of the meetings, and thus the documents produced from them, are focused on areas for improvement. However, part of the student representative's role as chair was to ask students to also reflect on areas of good practice.

Whilst the documents collated feedback from the entire course that the case participant belonged to, elements of concerns relating to aspects of the mature student experience were often identified. These particular documents were deemed suitable for inclusion in the construction of the case study for several reasons. Firstly, the nature of the correspondences on which the documents are based are student led. They are not documents constructed by staff about the students; but documents constructed *by* the students with a member of administrative staff to minute the meetings. Secondly, there were no management members present to respond to the correspondence because the focus groups were designed to be a safe forum for students to give honest feedback. However, because the feedback would be passed to management to respond to, the minutes had to be accurate and truly reflect the range of feedback from the group. In this sense, the documents were judged as a fairly accurate account of events in the focus group. Thirdly, they add depth to the case by providing additional information that contributes to understanding the context of the cases' experience. Access to these documents offered an alternative lens through which to explore why mature students were studying HIVE in an FE College and how they experience HE learning practices in this context.

The corpus of data generated to construct the multiple case study was therefore, 14 in-depth informal interviews, 14 student focus group minute documents and seven sets of field notes from participant observation. Hence, each case study is comprised of 2 in-depth informal interviews, one for each semester, 2 sets of student focus group minute documents and one set of participant observation field notes. The approach to data collection was specifically inductive, therefore the sufficiency of the data was deemed appropriate when data saturation was reached during on-going analysis. This point was reached when the data generated did not appear to be revealing anything new (Strauss & Corbin, 1998); the

extended period of time spent in the field and the staged approach to analysis taken helped to identify this point.

## Criteria for quality in multiple case study research

Criteria for judging the quality of social research can be based on the concepts of validity and reliability. Although common concepts used for judging the quality of qualitative research are trustworthiness and credibility, validity and reliability are often used in case study designs, as they are part of a larger body of thought broadly categorised as social research (Yin, 2014). Because of the all-encompassing nature of the term 'social research', there are different and competing perspectives on the validation of rigorous research (Creswell, 2013). Interpretive researchers have tended to reject the use of positivist criteria for judging the quality of research by suggesting that positivist concepts of validity, reliability and objectivity do not adequately cover and are not congruent with the nature of qualitative research (Creswell, 2013). Instead, they advocate the alternative concepts related to trustworthiness, such as credibility and authenticity (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Such criteria for quality can be fulfilled through extended periods of time spent in the field and multiple data sources (Creswell, 2013), both of which this study satisfies. From the perspective of the critical tradition, the focus is on complementary rather than competing designs that serve different purposes. It would seem appropriate therefore, that research designs use the concepts that reflect the nature of the work they are trying to do. For example, extensive research designs may well use criteria associated with positivist perspectives due to the similarity of methods used. For intensive research designs, on the other hand, it is more appropriate to use concepts associated with interpretive research. Furthermore, some criteria are related to the ways in which the data is generated and some are related to how the data is treated. In this section I will focus on criteria for the way the data is generated.

Credibility is often measured depending on length of time spent in the field and using a variety of methods or sources (Creswell, 2013). The multiple data sources used, and the prolonged period in the field that was spent generating them, satisfies those criteria for credibility. Credibility is established through multiple data sources as they allow for interpretations arrived at about the research to be validated or contradicted (Eisner, 1991).

> We seek a confluence of evidence that breeds credibility that allows us to feel confident about our observations, interpretations and conclusions (Eisner, 1991, p. 110)

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These criteria for credibility can also be satisfied through the corroboration of others, also known as consensual validation (Eisner, 1991). The design of the informal interview components of these case studies (so that conversations were revisited in a further interview) acted as an opportunity for respondent validation of my interpretation of the previous interviews. Other ways of ensuring credibility throughout the research process are related to issues of ethics and these are discussed in more detail in the next section.

## Ethics and limitations

One of the main criteria for the quality of research in the critical paradigm is the extent to which reflexivity is ensured throughout the research process. The concept of reflexivity can be described as a process of becoming 'conscious of the biases, values, and experiences that she or he brings to a qualitative research study' (Creswell, 2013, p. 216). Reflexivity requires the researcher to consider their position as researcher in order to uncover blank and blind spots and articulate the limitations of the research. According to Hammersley & Atkinson (2007), one of the characteristics of quality in qualitative research is that the researcher has considered their position and made this explicit. Issues of reflexivity can be identified through the data generation aspects of the research, through analysis and treatment of the data, to the writing and representation of the data. This section will discuss issues of reflexivity related to the generation of the data detailed previously, with particular attention to the ethics that have been considered as part of the reflexive process.

My position as an academic skills tutor at the setting of the case studies was a constant source of concern during this study as the 'hidden ethical and methodological dilemmas of insiderness' were addressed (Labaree, 2002, p. 109). Whilst this position had been advantageous in accessing the setting and selecting cases to study, from then on I had concerns about my dual role as both researcher and member of staff. Researchers' positions in relation to the phenomena they study have been critiqued "in response to a greater consciousness of situational identities and to the perception of relative power" (Angrosino, 2005, p. 734). This response has led to conversations amongst research communities known as insider/outsider debates. Central to these debates are questions of how the insider researcher can ever really make the familiar strange and how the outsider researcher can ever really understand the world as experienced from within (Bridges, 2001).

Part of the rationale for a flexible design to this research was that it required an on-going reflexivity that would hopefully contribute to making the familiar strange. Methods that would require too much prescription based on assumptions, such as the writing of questionnaire questions, were deliberately not used. The research questions were used to guide the informal interviews conducted and this enabled the participants to lead on them. It was whilst conducting the interviews that an awareness of my own preconceptions of the participants as a social group, and the context in which they inhabited, were heightened. Things I thought I knew about the participants and their experiences, based on my experience of interacting in the same setting, were contradicted and challenged during the research process.

Acknowledging my role in the setting and the potential power imbalances that may have occurred as a result of this was also a source of reflexivity throughout. A limitation of this research is that some of those who agreed to be part of the research may have been those that I was known to, and therefore they may have felt comfortable or inclined to take part, thus limiting the range of perspectives to draw upon. Although, whilst I was known to a few of the participants, three of them I had not come into contact with before the research process, so perhaps this is not the case. My position as a 'social insider' meant I was equipped with prior knowledge of the social setting and the activities that occurred there in order to build rapport and ask relevant questions in order to build meaning. Shah (2004, p. 556) argues that "a social insider is better positioned as a researcher because of his/her knowledge of the relevant patterns of social interaction required for gaining access and making meaning".

My role as both a member of staff and a researcher also became problematic whilst conducting participant observation. The blurring of these boundaries was often an ethical concern of mine. Ideal opportunities for participant observation arose during my role as an academic skills tutor, when I could not readily become 'the researcher'. As an insider, I had 'a privileged access to particular kinds of knowledge' (Merton, 1972, p. 11). But it was for this reason that I was concerned about taking advantage of those situations where a privileged position afforded access to opportunities for data generation. This was a problem where opportunities for data generation occurred during normal duties and not in the time set aside to do field work. In these situations I was concerned that recording those interactions would exploit the participants, as the primary reason for interacting with them in the first place was to help them learn – not to generate data. Another issue that arose from my position as a member of staff in facilitating participant observation in the class room was the effect of my presence on the teaching environment. I was aware that

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colleagues may not fully appreciate or understand the research being undertaken, or the nature of participation in their classes. Particular sensitivity was paid to my concern that in the context of an FE College, an environment where observation is greeted with suspicion due to due to the association they have with OFSTED inspections, the same may be felt from my involvement through participant observation. I was also aware that because of this, my presence in the room may cause teaching staff to alter their normal practice and I would not be observing the case in their natural state. This, and the logistical struggles that I had in negotiating participant observation in such a flexible and varied learning environment meant that participant observation could not be used as a main method for generating data, in spite of the fact that my role put me in the ideal position to do so.

My role as an insider in the setting during data generation had advantages, such as ease in gaining access, and being able to 'speak the language', which helped to build rapport with the participants. My position as an insider may have also lessened the 'OFSTED effect' of observation, compared to that of a stranger with the same research intentions. However, there were also limitations associated with an insider status during this part of the research process. Being able to negotiate data generation opportunities whilst occupying two purposes within the setting was difficult and it limited the methods and type of data that could be used. There were also limitations related to the extent to which my position may have affected the responses and behaviours of participants. However, the effect of this on the credibility of the data generated is thought to be lessened by using multiple methods (Creswell, 2013). In addition to considering criteria for quality during the process of data generation in social research, attention must also be paid to how the data is treated once generated. The next section discusses how the data was analysed and interpreted, and how this process ensured the credibility of the findings.

## Description, Analysis, and Interpretation

There are a variety of ways in which case study research can be analysed, depending on the nature of the research design and the purpose of the study. It can be assumed, though, that most approaches involve breaking down the data and putting it together in ways that more meaningful interpretations can be made (Stake, 1995). As the field work for the case studies were prolonged over the period of the academic year, it was important that some data analysis occurred on an on-going basis in order to focus the case studies and to easily identify data saturation (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). This process was assisted initially by the research questions, and subsequently by the lines of enquiry that emerged throughout.

Stake (1995, p. 124) supports this approach to analysis by suggesting "data that have been analysed while being collected are both parsimonious and illuminating".

The process of analysis of the multiple case studies began with a narrative description of each individual case. These include contextual and historical information generated during informal interviews, and are presented in the next chapter. To do this, relevant events and people pertinent to the cases were highlighted in order to provide an in-depth picture of each case (Creswell, 2013). It was this rich description of each case that allowed for the exploration of why the mature students participate in HIVE. Questions of what ought to be included in a narrative account point to the nature and purpose of a qualitative social research study. Given the amount of data generated, it was neither possible nor appropriate to describe every aspect in detail, and it is for this reason that even descriptive accounts go through some process of analysis (Wolcott, 1994). The purpose of the study was to find out why the mature students participated in HIVE and how they experienced this in terms of practice and identity. These themes therefore influenced the construction and presentation of the narratives. This approach is most reminiscent of what Wolcott (1994, p. 19) frames as a 'critical or key event' way of organising and presenting description. In this sense the focus of the descriptions is the accounts surrounding and leading up to participation in HIVE, and those accounts of events during participation identified by the students as important to their experience. Narrative accounts can reveal inconsistencies between dominant discourses and lived reality. Because of this, it is an ideal approach for attempting to restore agency to social group and context that are often problematized as socially and economically determined (Bathmaker & Harnett, 2010). It was during the construction and writing of these narrative accounts that the inconsistencies referred to were realised, and it was decided that they warranted further attention that would generate meaning in a wider social and historical context. In order to do this, it was necessary to move beyond description to a further layer of analysis; and identify central features or themes and the interrelationships amongst them that may generate new understandings of this phenomenon (Wolcott, 1994).

To do this, a cross-case synthesis was then conducted that was thematic in nature, in order to reveal similarities and differences in themes amongst cases (Creswell, 2013). Furthermore, cross- case synthesis is often a desirable method of analysis when there are more than two cases in a multiple case study. For example, Yin (2014) suggests that cross case syntheses of multiple cases are likely to provide findings that are more robust than a single case study, and having more than two cases strengthens this further. The cross-case synthesis was conducted by coding each case according to a priori themes. The a priori

themes were developed according to the research questions; these were HE learning practices, issues of identity, and reasons for participation. This enabled the comparison of cases for similarities and differences in the way that the mature students understood the practices and made sense of this in relation to their identity. In addition to the a priori themes, emerging themes were coded across and within cases.

The a priori themes were useful in establishing how HE learning practices were interpreted (within and across cases). However, it was through the cross-case synthesis that more nuanced themes of resistance emerged. These emergent themes are more illuminating, and challenge not only my own assumptions about the mature student experience of HIVE and why students participated in it, but also those highlighted in the literature. It was here that theories of resistance were identified as a useful framework for identifying essential themes in the data and understanding the relationships amongst them. As a framework, the theory provided conceptual ideas that had interpretive potential for making connections between the descriptive, narrative accounts and wider social structures (see appendix 3) and linking the case studies to larger issues (Wolcott, 1994). As well as providing a conceptual framework from which to analyse the data, resistance theory in this thesis has also guided the interpretive work of the discussion chapter 'Mature students as counter-cultures in HIVE'.

In summary, this chapter has explained the philosophical and epistemological foundations on which the study is based. By positioning this work within the critical tradition, it has allowed questions of 'how' and 'why' to be asked as well as challenged. Within this tradition, multiple case study research appeared to be the most appropriate for yielding data with this purpose in mind. However, issues of reflexivity and 'insiderness' have also informed the process of data generation and the construction of the cases. The structure of the rest of the thesis is directly related to the approaches to description, analysis and interpretation used. Whilst some may argue that these three components in the research process cannot be separated, there is a place for the emphasis of one over the others that fulfil different writing and reporting purposes (Wolcott, 1994). Separating the description from analysis and interpretation in the presentation of findings in this way is not uncommon, as can be seen in the work of Loïc Wacquant in his study, 'Body and Soul' (Wacquant, 2006). The emphasis on description with limited analysis and interpretation in the next chapter (Chapter Four - 'The cases') serves to demonstrate the diversity of mature students and their pathways to HIVE. As part of the interpretive process the reader also forms their own constructions of the text being presented (Bathmaker & Harnett, 2010), and as Hodkinson and Hodkinson suggest '[individual cases] retain more of the 'noise' of real life than many

other types of research' (2001 p. 4 cited in Bathmaker & Harnett, 2010, p. 2). In presenting the data in this way, the intention is that the lines of thinking taken during the interpretive parts of the thesis are demonstrated. Reporting the individual narratives of cases in this way also provides context and aids understandings of the relationships between themes and the supporting data presented in the later cross-case synthesis chapter. An explanation and justification of the theoretical framework that has shaped the rest of the cross-case synthesis is presented in chapter five, with a further presentation of the resultant themes and analysis in chapter six. As the penultimate chapter (chapter six) provides an interpretation and theorisation of the data, and positions the work and its contribution within the literature previously discussed, followed by the final conclusions and implications of the study.

# 4 The Cases – "We're valued as individuals, there's mutual respect"

The chapter presents an individual narrative of each case. The cases were chosen for the ways in which they illustrate the diverse range of pathways, experiences, and trajectories of mature students in HIVE. The chapter begins with Matt, a Joiner turned business administration worker undertaking a HND in Business Studies, with a passion for writing. We then turn to Carolyn, a teaching assistant in a secondary school who's Foundation Degree in early years education was a potential route into teaching. The next narrative is Donna, who had grown up as a military child and had various jobs throughout her life until she decided to follow her passion for performing arts with a BA (Hons) in Acting. The fourth narrative is Nathan's; an electrician by trade who's affinity with the design side of building services led him to study a HNC in Construction Management. John who was studying a Foundation Degree in Health and Social Care is the fifth narrative; his story is one of a banker who had taken voluntary redundancy to pursue a more meaningful life in adult social care. The penultimate narrative is Clare, widowed and severely dyslexic; she was studying a Foundation Degree in Architectural and Interior design with a view to becoming more independent. Finally, Jonathan's narrative is presented, an engraver, who at a certain age had decided that if he did not follow his passion for music by studying for a degree in the subject, he never would.

## *Matt*

Matt was 22 years old at the time of his participation and enrolled on a HND in Business at the College. He was polite, committed to his studies, and his tutors viewed him as a 'good' student. I first started talking to Matt in the HE study room, where he tended to do his independent study. He would spend a lot of time in there and we became quite familiar because of this. When I asked him if he would be willing to take part in my research, he agreed without hesitation.

Matt finished his GCSE's in 2007 and went on to do A-levels in English Language, Literature, Media Studies and Photography. Despite doing well in his GCSE's and being expected to do well in his A-Levels, Matt dropped out after his first year. After completing one year of his A-levels (AS levels), Matt said that he felt that he had had enough of formal schooling and did not want to be in a classroom studying anymore. Although he describes himself as having the potential to continue, and expectations from his teachers were high, his

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motivation to continue was lacking as he 'coasted by' and 'did the bare minimum' to get through.

As Matt's family had always held jobs in trades, he spoke of how he felt this was the best path for him to take also. Therefore, he enrolled on a joinery course at a local further education college. However, by the time he had finished this course and was qualified to pursue a career in joinery, the recession hit. This was a difficult time; Matt had pursued a vocation that he thought would provide him with an income for life, but by the time he had finished his qualification this was no longer a viable path for him. Struggling with what to do next and via a process of self-reflection, Matt decided that whilst he had not flourished in formal education towards the end of that time, he had always enjoyed – and been good at, writing. Since leaving school, Matt had continued to write for various purposes at his leisure and described how he felt this experience was a good starting point for a change of direction in his career.

Due to his experience of writing and communications, Matt was able to secure fixed term employment at a local NHS district care trust in the communications team. His writing skills were put into good use there too, writing press releases and articles for the staff magazine, amongst other administrative duties. Knowing that his employment was fixed term for a year, when the opportunity arose for him to undertake training in business administration, he took it. Although not exactly planned, Matt spoke of how the opportunity to do NVQs level 1 and 2 in Business Administration seemed appealing in order to position himself well on a different vocational path to that of joinery previously. He had also built a positive relationship with his NVQ tutor, who worked for a private training provider in a different town to where Matt lived. It was by chance that when his contract with the NHS came to an end, his NVQ tutor directed him towards a current vacancy at the training provider, and he was hired there to do administration work.

After spending a year at the training provider, Matt realised that the progression opportunities in his current role were limited, and whilst he said he was pleased with the work he was doing, he wanted to 'move further on up'. In this time Matt had also moved from his home town and family to the town where he was employed, in order to live with his girlfriend. It was at this time of reflection that Matt started to consider his options. The first option was university; however, as Matt had dropped out of his A-levels, he was not sure whether he would meet the entry criteria for UCAS with his vocational qualifications. He told me that even after negotiating the UCAS application form, he was still unsure about what the values of his vocational qualifications was in the eyes of a university.

Although not ruling out HE as an option, Matt had come to the conclusion that he had missed his chance to go to university when he had dropped out of his A-levels. Metaphorically, the path that he had taken had given him euros, and to his knowledge universities only accepted pounds. Matt had decided that an FE course would be the way to go. It was by chance then, that during this time of contemplation, a prospectus for the local FE College was posted through his letterbox. After flicking through the pages, Matt spotted the HND in Business and due to his background and qualifications in business administration, he spoke of how it presented an appealing option.

He told me of how he had 'natural' concerns after his turbulent experience of education and the job market so far, so he wanted to ensure that he would see some return in any investment into his further education, and as he had not heard of a HND qualification he decided to do some research.  Matt said that it was only then that he realised that a HND was a HE course and the equivalent of the first two years at university. Furthermore, he explained that the prospect of being able to 'top-up' his qualification to a full degree by doing an extra year's study at a university was something that was very appealing. The risk on his return was minimal; on the one hand if he only completed a year's worth of study, he would still gain a HNC, and on the other, if he enjoyed and excelled at the course it would only be a short leap to gaining a degree from it, something that he said until this point was unattainable for him. And this was important for Matt; one of his concerns about university was the commitment for a three year period of time. In what could be described as a 'hangover' from his A-level experience, he had concerns about dropping out if it was not right for him.

At this point, Matt spoke of how he had felt he was ready to commit to going back to formal education, although he did not know much about HE and what it entailed, particularly in the context of an FE College. He said that he knew and understood what he terms 'higher level learning' meant through his social circles. He had a lot of friends that had been to university and his girlfriend had also been through the experience. However, for Matt the most important aspect was the subject. He had done his business administration NVQs and a GCSE in business studies and felt he was ready to take this subject to a higher level.

Although still unsure about the entry requirements for the course, Matt applied anyway. The application form asked for the traditional GCSE and A-level qualifications, but Matt decided to declare his other qualifications as well. When he was invited to an interview he was informed about what the equivalents were and that a lot of the time applicants are assessed

on the suitability for the course on experience as well. Matt accepted his offer and started the course in September 2013.

Although not really knowing what to expect in terms of course structure and the nature of the work he would be required to do, Matt felt that the College would be somewhere where he could ease himself back into formal education without too much effect on the life he had already built in this town. Matt started the course, but he was still unsure about the differences between a HE course and the studying he had done up until this point. In finding out that the course was the equivalent to the first two years at university, he had some very clear ideas about what the experience would be like. He said how he had expected formal lectures, where the lecturer delivered for a period of time and he would take notes and go away and study. He soon found out this was not the case and the delivery of content was more relaxed and informal. He describes this as somewhere between HE and FE 'style'.

Matt drew upon the differences between HE level and FE level quite a lot to explain his position in the College. He knew the extra support and help was there from an FE perspective, but wanted the independence and autonomy from a HE perspective. He also positioned himself in relation to those on his course that had progressed internally in the College by saying that they work at an 'FE level' or a 'College level'. He was able to come to this conclusion by reflecting on his own experience of FE level education, saying it was all about 'facts', writing down 'facts' that could be mapped against the knowledge criteria of the course. The distinction he made between FE level and HE level was that at HE level you were expected to know the facts but go beyond that, to use the knowledge. This was something he felt was easier to do having been out of education for a period of time. He suggested the reasons for this were that the different life experiences that mature students brought did not leave him 'closed to one way of seeing things', the diversity of learning experiences brought by mature students was something of value.

The transition to this type of learning was something that Matt felt was easy for him, and his suitability to the type of learning was more natural to him, but he had not been given the opportunity to work in this way during his previous education. Contrary to the clear value placed on the diversity that mature students bring to the learning experience for Matt, he felt his natural orientation to learning in this way was not something he shared with his fellow mature students.

But in spite of Matt's perceived disposition to HE learning, he spoke of how his identity as a HE student was misunderstood within his social circles, due to the social space in which his

learning took place. He told me that when he went to the pub with friends he would often tell them he was doing a business degree when they enquired, because it was hard to explain what doing a HND at the local College was, and what value the qualification held. The lack of understanding amongst peers was often demonstrated to Matt by friends who would ask if he was 'just going back to College to do another course, then?' Matt understood why his friends might not recognise the extent of his endeavour, but still wanted the recognition for the 'higher level learning' in which he was engaged.

Perhaps it was for those reasons that Matt clearly positioned himself as separate from the FE part of the College. The year prior to Matt's enrolment on the course, the College had tried to create a 'HE identity' for students by dedicating half a floor for HE lectures to be delivered. This had not gone to plan as there were not enough rooms or resources on half a floor to accommodate all the HE courses. However Matt's particular course had been timetabled there. Furthermore, a classroom at the end of the dedicated 'half a floor' had been turned into a HE study room, a quiet room for HE students to do their independent work. For this reason, Matt felt he had no need to leave the 'HE floor' during his time in College. The separation of HE and FE was important to Matt's experience and he went further than this, suggesting HE should be housed in a separate venue altogether.

His identity seemed to be something that was important to Matt, but that he also struggled with. At the beginning of his time at the College, he had classed himself as a 'business student'. However, as he realised the College's efforts to create a HE identity, this was mirrored by himself through the embodiment of perceived HE practices. As he got more involved in 'HE' College life, the more a sense of community he felt. Getting involved was something that was important to Matt in order to develop his thinking as a HE student. It seemed that Matt's relationship with the College as an FE institution delivering HE and his understanding of how it was positioned within the broader HE sector was something he was still trying to understand. He explained how, in spite of his position as a student in an FE college, he wanted to behave in the way in which thought he was supposed to as a HE student regardless.

He felt that although HE was a small part of the College, there was more of a sense of community and a common sense of purpose for HE. The practices and procedures were not always obvious or transparent for Matt, but it seemed that working out the rules of the game was part of the experience. It was at this point in Matt's experience that he started to consider himself a 'mature student', although not in the traditional sense of age. Matt told me that felt he was mature in that he was more mature in his approach to learning.

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Although he felt he had always had a disposition towards an independent learning style, he was now able to articulate it well. He explained how he had learned that in order to be successful he needed to be passionate about his subject, and passionate about writing about it. Although it had taken him a year, Matt had also realised that to be truly independent he needed to organise himself properly and motivate himself to complete tasks that were not overly comfortable to him, such as presentations. For him, this had been more difficult than the content of the course itself.

Later on in the second semester, he felt that he was also at a point where he could see how far he had come from the beginning. Matt explained that he had taught himself the academic skills he needed to be successful by researching and emulating the scholarly writing he had come across in academic journals. He attributed this to his extensive reading in the area, and he could see how this had paid off by the difference between his work at the beginning of the year and now.

As Matt's confidence increased, so did his expectations of himself. Although many people on his course were happy with getting pass grades, he spoke of how he felt disappointed if he did not get a distinction. Instead, he explained how he challenged himself by approaching his studies differently to other students on the course. On the HND, students were able to hand in work and get feedback several times until they achieved the grade they wanted, although Matt did not like this approach to study. He felt that some people abused the system by handing in sub-par work because they knew they would be able to get feedback and resubmit. For Matt, this approach hindered the process of independent learning that he held central to higher level learning.

Matt would not hand anything in until he thought it was at a high standard; he said that this was made easier for him as he had now worked out how the work was marked and what he needed to do to get a certain grade. One way to get a higher grade was to submit a reflective piece with each unit, which Matt did, begrudgingly. Although Matt acknowledged that reflection was part of everyday life and was something he engaged in regularly, he told me that could not see the point in this context; but he had a strategy to ensure his lack of enthusiasm for this aspect of his work did not affect his marks. Whilst the HND units were split into four separate tasks, Matt did not always follow the convention of submitting a reflective piece at the end of each unit, and would submit a reflective piece at the end of each task, with a view that he knew he would have covered the criteria to get the distinction marks. Matt felt that reflection could be useful for those who were working in business whilst doing the course, but for him he spoke of how it was too reminiscent of his

NVQ work, which he described as just writing down what you do and what you already know about things. For Matt, higher education was about learning new things, not confirming what he already knew. The way in which Matt dismissed reflection in this way rather than perhaps using it in a more critical or exploratory way, showed how he focused on theoretical work, rather than its application to practice. By the end of his first year, he was firmly of the view that during his studies all that mattered was developing his academic abilities as it was what he enjoyed about the course. He told me that employment after the course and his future in business were not a priority at that time.

Now that Matt was nearing the end of his first year of his HND at the College, he was able identify the changes in himself. Firstly, he said he was a lot calmer; he attributed this to understanding the rules of the game, knowing how to do well on his course, and the discipline involved in independent learning. Secondly, he felt he was more organised, and this was something that had transcended to other areas of his life also. By the end of the first year of the course, Matt felt he had constructed a strong HE identity. He spoke firmly about how he considered the College to be a College of higher education and distanced himself from any FE associations. Instead, he said he had learned to work in such a way that he did not feel he needed to associate with what he deemed 'FE characteristics' of the HE community, such as the high level of extra support available. For now at least, Matt's experience at the College was a HE one in his view. Matt's journey from A-level student, to joiner, to administration worker and finally to HE student is an example of the complex pathways that are undertaken by mature students entering HIVE. The next narrative, Carolyn's, is equally as illuminating.

## Carolyn

Carolyn was 45 years old when field work commenced and was in the first year of a part-time Foundation Degree in Early Years. In her previous education Carolyn had attended a 'secondary modern' where she took her O-Levels; she gained one O-Level in English at grade C. She admits to 'messing about' and she described herself as 'not the best at school'. She spoke of how continuing in education at that time was not an option; this was not only because of her lack of interest and perceived ability, but also because of family pressures. She described how the general ethos in her family was that when you reached the end of compulsory schooling, it was time to get a job. This was not only so that Carolyn could fund her own social life, but because she had a large family and she explained how it was seen as the proper thing to do to support the family. From a social life perspective, Carolyn also

said she enjoyed the independence of a working wage and suggested that she was having 'far too much of a good time' to consider further or higher education.

On leaving school, Carolyn took up a position at the local council, although she never divulged what that position was. Having moved around and taken up different positions in the council, Carolyn finally settled in a job as a teaching assistant in a secondary school for pupils aged 11-19 with special educational needs. Carolyn explained how she had 'fallen into it', and that it was not something she had planned; but she had found that she really loved it. The opportunity became available for Carolyn to undertake study in the form of a vocational NVQ, supported by her employer. When deciding what level to undertake, she described considering the level two, but eventually settled on level three. Once that was completed, Carolyn missed studying, and when her children had become a bit more independent, she took up an offer to undertake another NVQ level three.

Carolyn suggested that she did not have much confidence in education until she had undertaken the NVQs. Having completed them, she wondered about taking her education further, but was not sure what route she would have to go down. As she had already completed two level three vocational qualifications, she was not sure what her options were. As her educational background had involved mainly vocational qualifications, she thought she did not have the traditional qualifications associated with entry to higher education and discounted that as an option. A friend of Carolyn's had started a Foundation Degree in Early Years at a different provider than the site of enquiry in this study and Carolyn thought it sounded interesting.

Carolyn had mistakenly thought the course was only available in at the nearest HEI, which had put her off for convenience reasons. She recalled the day she found out that the same course was available at the College and had considered applying. It was after a bottle of wine and a year's worth of 'um-ing and ah-ing' that she went for it. She was called to a group interview and remembered being scared and excited. She spoke of how she did not consider what she was embarking on to be a degree qualification, but rather the next level up from her level three vocational qualifications. That was important to Carolyn's journey because she explained that if she had known fully that it was a degree qualification she would not have considered applying.

Carolyn's expectations of HE learning, once she had applied, were mostly similar to traditional (and perhaps out dated) notions of university lectures. She described an event during which these notions were supported by her prospective tutor. During the group

interview she was invited to, her tutors kept referring to 'delivery', which for Carolyn summed up images of sitting, listening and taking notes. Whilst she held these images of HE learning in general, she explained that at this point she was unsure of the content that would be covered as part of her foundation degree. In spite of this, she told me that she did have an idea of how it would differ from the content and delivery of the NVQs she had previously undertaken. She articulated this by suggesting that the NVQ was about qualifying her existing competencies by documenting what she already did at work, it was 'boring' and was a 'tick the box' exercise. For Carolyn, the foundation degree, on the other hand, was about developing new knowledge that could be used to enhance practice and her general personal development.

Once enrolled and at the College, Carolyn felt that her experience was different to what she had expected. There was some 'delivery', but there was also group work, small tasks, scenarios, and role plays. She explained that there was also an element of the social about her experience too, which was far removed from her expectations of study as an isolated practice. Whilst there were other mature students in her group, there were also younger students that had progressed directly from further education too. The social interaction that occurred as part of her learning was really important to Carolyn, as she did not work in the early years sector herself. She said that this provided her with insight into the experiences of those that did, and in turn broadened her thinking. Carolyn valued the broad range of perspectives the diversity of her cohort brought to her learning; this differed from her previous educational experiences, which she thought had been quite black and white: knowledge and understanding had been viewed as either right or wrong.

Contrary to this black and white view of knowledge, Carolyn said she was excited by the degree of autonomy she had in her learning experience. She spoke of how it gave her an opportunity to explore different fields of study as part of her learning and have an opinion in her work. Whilst she described this as exciting, she also described how it raised problems with becoming distracted and 'going off on one'. Carolyn referred to this autonomy as 'finding an opinion' and said how it had opened up her thinking in all aspects of her life. Carolyn attributed 'finding her opinions' through a combination of research, reading and reflecting on her own experiences.

Carolyn also valued the confidence that finding an opinion had given her and described how the notion of independent learning had facilitated this. She suggested this time that she put aside to read and write gave her a place to take charge of her own learning. She suggested that being in college five days a week to do a course would not have suited her, but with so

much emphasis on independent learning she was able to tailor her experience to suit her lifestyle. She also described how the independent learning she undertook at home gave her a space to concentrate on herself, rather than her family or job. She referred to this as 'me-time' and 'her thing' and this time she spent on herself was legitimated as it was an essential part of her studies.

Overall, Carolyn described her experience as comfortable, and the flexibility of part time study and a close location allowed her to have more control over her studies (part of which was her independent study time). She said that the tutors made her feel valued as an expert in her own field and likewise, she had respect for them as teaching professionals. She described how the prospect of going to university with 'professors and researchers' would have been daunting, but the College's familiarity made it easy for her to access HE. What is distinctive about Carolyn's story is that as a mature student, she had to take an alternative, and possibly longer route to reach her goal of becoming a secondary school teacher, based on what the college could offer her at that time. In the next narrative, we see that Donna is more fortunate, as the college offered both a foundation degree and a BA (Hons) top-up in her chosen subject of acting.

## *Donna*

Donna was 38 years old during field work and was studying for a full time BA(hons) top-up in Acting Performance at the College. She had progressed to the top-up from the foundation degree in acting at the same College. She had three grown up children and explained that she became pregnant with her first daughter 'really young' at aged 18. She described herself as not academically bright and left school wondering what to do with herself before she fell pregnant and became a full time mother.

Donna describes her schooling as fragmented and interrupted. As the daughter of someone who worked in the army, she had a very strict and regimented upbringing, and travelled around a lot for her father's job. Growing up she lived in Northern Ireland, on the south coast of the UK, and eventually settled in Germany. Donna explained how her schooling in Germany was 'in every way superior' to the schooling she received in the UK and described herself as being 'advanced'. However, when Donna was 13 her mother made the decision to move back to her home town in the north of England and took the family with her. This transition was difficult for Donna; she explained how she had lived in an army 'bubble' in Germany and now was leading a very different life on what she referred to as 'civvy street'.

Donna's sister was older than her and was due to take her O-levels exams at the time of the move. She recalled how her parents spent a lot of time focussing on her sister's education and did not really bother with her. She found this move frustrating and describes herself as a 'lost little soul' on her return to the UK. Donna felt that the focus on her sister's development continued through her time in schooling. She suggested she was not encouraged to consider a career and therefore only scraped by academically in school and thoroughly hated the experience.

The only saving grace for Donna was when a teacher approached her in school and suggested she take part in the school's drama productions. Donna described this as being the only part of school she enjoyed and it started her passion for drama. Looking back, Donna believed she did not receive the necessary support to develop her strengths in school. She described how she shone at oral exams and other verbal exams but struggled with the written aspects of schooling. The perceived lack of support Donna received in school from her parents and teachers made her feel alienated and when she could finally leave she said she was made to find a job in retail. She explained how that was something a young girl could do without many qualifications. She described feeling lost and confused about her life when she became pregnant shortly after leaving school. Once pregnant, she said she focussed on being a mother and trying to make her relationship with her child's father work to keep the family together.

Unfortunately, six months after her first daughter was born, Donna and her partner broke up. Donna was subsequently married and had two further children, before that marriage also broke down. In order to support her family as a single parent, Donna started doing shift work with the NHS as an auxiliary nurse. She described the convenience of being able to do night shifts so she could take the children to school, sleep and then pick them up and cook dinner before going back out to work. Donna said she worked her way up to become the ward clerk on the oncology unit of the hospital that she worked in. She continued to fulfil this role for three years before she became 'restless' and wanted to progress, but then she found she could not because she 'didn't have any academic qualifications to back up her skills and experience'. Instead, Donna moved to a different unit, but spoke of how two years down the line she was stressed and restless once again and wondering what more to life there could be.

It was at this point that Donna explained how she turned to education; she tried a few night classes in aromatherapy, but felt the level was too low and she was not challenged enough so became 'disinterested'. Donna described this lack of challenge when she turned to further

education as her real barrier; she felt that because the levels were too low, she was unable to see it through to completion.

Donna then became involved in another relationship that lasted seven years. She said that she did not think about further education again until that relationship broke down too. Donna explained how she experienced an 'epiphany moment' at that point and decided she had to pursue something she 'loved'. She described thinking long and hard, before coming back to her love of performing arts at school and considering that as an option. However, her friends and family had told her that she should do something that she was good at instead; due to her army upbringing, Donna felt she was very good at cleaning. She therefore set up her own cleaning business and started looking for performing arts courses at the College. Donna said that she only considered the one college and that was because her children studied here too. Donna filled in an application and came for an interview and audition for the foundation degree. She said that she had not even considered that it was a HE course and because she did not recognise the name, it was not obvious. She spoke of how she had applied for the course that she felt was most suited to her in terms of content.

As the only mature student in her group, Donna felt that she experienced some discrimination based on her age from her younger peers. One young lady had told her she should have progressed through the traditional route and she would not be up for the challenge having not previously studied performing arts at a lower level. However, whilst confidence had always been an issue for Donna, she felt that her life experience sufficiently qualified her entry onto the course.

Donne spoke of how the age difference between herself and her peers became a significant part of her experience. She described how in some ways she was looked up to as a mother figure and in others she felt inferior in terms of fitness and ability on such a physically demanding course. Feeling inferior was not helped by the fact that she began menopause during her studies and the side effects had taken their toll on her physical health.

In spite of this, Donna explained how her experience of HIVE at the College was one of transformation; she had gained confidence and thrived in a challenging learning environment. She told me that once she realised that the course was a HE one, she was scared but determined. She said the thought of gaining a degree in the subject that she loved drove her to push herself to make the most of the experience. Donna felt she had underestimated how academically demanding the course might be, but felt that the small group sizes and flexibility had enabled her to thrive. She also felt that the academic nature

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of the course had enabled her to personally develop in other areas of the life. She described how she was able to hold an argument and have a critical discussion that was well articulated, with authority.

Whilst for the most part Donna enjoyed her HE experience, she also felt that some aspects of her HIVE experience did not resonate with her. One of these involved the personal and professional development modules and the employability ones. Donna felt that these modules did not hold any value to her as a mature student, and were 'geared' towards her younger peers who were less experienced in the labour market. In order to make these modules more relevant to her, Donna said that she sought out opportunities to engage with academics in the local HEI's and used those experiences to shape her personal and professional development instead. She seemed to have a very clear idea that she wanted the degree to lead her into some kind of drama therapy role and felt that the aforementioned modules were aimed at younger students who did not know what they wanted to do at all. Donna expressed the view that whilst a career stemming from her studies would be an added benefit, she had wanted to experience the course and achieve for the sake of learning and studying something she loved.

Donna described her greatest achievement and sense of joy on the course as coming from writing her final dissertation. She said the process of getting to grips with writing such a theoretical piece of work involved having 'ups and downs', but it made her realise how 'academic' she really was. Because she enjoyed the experience so much, by the end of the course she was seriously considering continuing her work for masters or PhD study, instead of re-entering the labour market. She felt that 'at her age' it was something she just had to pursue as she wanted to enjoy doing something for herself in this chapter of her life. Donna's story of engaging in education for enjoyment and personal fulfilment, rather than for instrumental reasons, highlights the different perceptions individuals have about the value and purpose of different forms of education. In the next narrative, the ways in which these perceptions may change with age are highlighted by Nathan. Nathan's insight was unique, as he had attended the college for training for over 10 years, starting from the age of 16 when he trained as an apprentice electrician.

## Nathan

Nathan was 26 years old at the time of his participation and was studying for a part-time HNC in construction management, which was run as an evening course. He first came to the College at the age of 16 from school - he said he had been told by teachers at the school

that he was not academic and would do better for himself if he became qualified in a trade. Nathan described himself as not being very good at reading or writing at school, so much so that he was not allowed to sit his GCSE English exam. He also suggested that he contributed to his lack of success in school by not doing homework and messing around. For Nathan, this was because he did not want to learn what he was being made to learn, rather than because he was not able to achieve.

In spite of this, Nathan had considered higher education when he was younger. He explained how he was interested in art, design and architecture but committing to two or three years was too risky. He said that if he was not good enough or did not like it then he would have failed and would leave without any recognition – and with a debt. For Nathan, further education provided shorter courses that seemed more manageable, and he could 'dip in and out' if he required. Nathan explained that he did not want to narrow down his opportunities by investing and specialising in one niche area, which was something he thought he would have to do if he went to university.

As the College was his local provider of further education, it seemed like the logical place for him to become qualified. He had a choice between plumbing and electrical courses so after finding a job as an electrical apprentice for a one-man company he worked there for 3 years whilst studying to become qualified. Once qualified, Nathan began working for himself and frequently came back to the College to update skills and to complete courses that would enable him to progress in his business. He progressed through levels two and three at the College and then took further electrical short courses on and off, frequenting the College for a number of years. However, after ten years of returning to do short courses, he described how he felt stuck. For this reason he said that he briefly moved to Sweden to 'try and get away from it a bit'.

Nathan returned to the College to embark on the HNC in construction management after one of his previous College lecturers contacted him about the new course they were running. Nathan stated that whilst he was an electrician by trade, he had always been interested in design work. He said that he had even returned to the College to try a design course before he had moved to Sweden, but it did not work out. After he had been contacted by his previous lecturer about this new opportunity, he went to speak to the course leader and decided that it sounded like something he might be interested in. He explained that he had been looking around for courses that would interest him in the local area when the call came. The only one that seemed suitable to Nathan was at a College in a city nearby. However Nathan had explained that, as he was self-employed, he would lose

money on travelling and having to take a day off work to go. The process was to apply through UCAS too, and he 'wasn't quite sure where he stood with that'.

Nathan explained that because he did not understand the 'whole UCAS thingy' he was not quite sure of the HE status of this qualification, for him this was just natural progression. Nathan said that he did, however, find that this course of study was different to anything else he had previously undertaken at the College. He explained that it was more theory driven and that he had to research and write as part of the course, rather than 'just learn how to do something and then go out and do it'. Because of this aspect of the course, Nathan felt that he was able to progress and make links with what he was learning to other areas of his life. He said that he found that this approach enabled him to make course content relevant to him as an electrician, but he was also able to explore and gain knowledge in a diverse range of areas and become 'more rounded'. He felt the written aspects of the course had greatly impacted upon his communication skills and the different perspectives he had encountered in his research and writing had given him greater understanding when working with other people.

The different perspectives offered by studying the HNC were another aspect of the diversity of his fellow peers on the course. Nathan valued this diversity and said that the different experiences that each person brought helped developed the others. He felt his peers were also different to those he had encountered in previous study, as they 'all wanted to be there'. Nathan put this down to age, and the fact that all of his peers were mature students. Nathan said that mature students had paid their money and wanted to be there, unlike the 'kids' he had been on previous courses with. The collective enthusiasm seemed important to the learning process for Nathan and his peers. The rich life experiences that contributed to attitudes to learning in his group were welcomed by Nathan.

He also valued the diverse backgrounds of his tutors; one was an architect by trade and one was a 'bricky'. He felt that this gave the course a rigorous design aspect and real life application and business knowledge of the trade too. Nathan felt that his tutors' specialisms were strengths of the teaching in the College, although the approaches had changed upon entry to a HE course. He suggested that in FE he had not had strict deadlines and was often chased for work. In HE, he was expected to be much more independent and responsible for his own learning. This was part of how Nathan described his experience of independent learning; for him it was putting in the hours outside of class time, doing research and expanding the parameters of his knowledge in an unassisted way. The small class sizes in FE were also strengths of the College's approach to HE, in Nathan's opinion. Based on his

friends' and family's experiences of HE, Nathan held the opinion that university HE would have over 300 people being taught in one lecture theatre at a time. Because of this, Nathan valued the one-to-one time he was able to spend with his tutors and the interaction small class sizes facilitated.

Nathan's career trajectories were complex and not necessarily directly related to the HNC he was undertaking. He still wanted to go into some kind of design work eventually, but he felt that the course was a step in the right direction due to its transferability. He also felt that by completing a HE qualification he was able to show high levels of analytical thinking, problem solving and commitment, which were beneficial to further learning.

Unfortunately, near the end of Nathan's studies, opportunities for progression were limited. Coming back to the College to continue onto a HND was not an option as there were not enough students interested to make running the course worthwhile for the College. Therefore, nearing the end of the academic year, he was looking for opportunities elsewhere, but location was the biggest barrier. Nathan said he also wanted to find work doing what he loved, the design aspect of building services, but he did not think the HNC qualified him to do that. Nathan thought that was OK though, because undertaking the HNC had been for personal achievement purposes, rather than employment prospects. He also felt that in a volatile employment market the general attributes he had developed would be valuable to any potential employment. The value Nathan placed on the diverse experiences of his peers in helping to develop higher level skills and attributes, which were viewed as distinctive to HE learning, were mirrored in several of these cases. This was particularly important for John, who in the next narrative shows how these diverse experiences enabled him question taken for granted assumptions in his area of study and practice.

## John

John was 51 years old during the field work for this research, and was studying for a part-time foundation degree in Health and Social Care. John said that he had always enjoyed learning, but when in school he was more focussed on sports and wanted to pursue a career as a professional footballer. Whilst he was more interested in sports than academic studies, he described himself as academic, as he was always in the 'top sets'. However, he explained that he did just enough to keep himself in that position, which he found regrettable as he stated that he probably could have excelled if he had put his mind to it. Unfortunately, John was unable to continue down the professional football route due to an injury to his leg after he had left school, and so he took up a position at a bank nearby. John described his career

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in banking as accidental, saying that he 'fell into it', but he knew he was always capable of doing a degree.

John worked for the bank for over 30 years and made his way up to a senior position in that time. This work also offered him the 'perk' of being able to move from his home town in the North West to a small town near the College with his family. However, he spoke of how a few years ago he was offered redundancy and took the opportunity to explore other career and education options that were 'meaningful', and not 'just a means to an end'. As he had always enjoyed learning, John's first thought was adult education, but he said he was also interested in social care as he is a 'people person'. Initially, John embarked on a preparatory initial teacher training course at another local College. This allowed him to teach and train adults over 16 years old, which he did on a zero hours contract for six months. John said he became frustrated with the company he was working for, saying that they 'they were more about numbers than people'. Consequently, John secured employment in a centre caring for adults with learning disabilities. Whilst doing this, John spoke of how he became increasingly aware of his lack of formal qualifications in this sector and felt he needed to gain more credibility and knowledge in the area of social care in order to make a difference.

John explained that he had lots of life experience but no formal qualifications. He had been offered the opportunity to study for a degree whilst working in the financial industry, which would have been supported financially by his employer. However, John did not want to do a degree in his area of employment as he felt that doing a degree should be about studying something you 'really care about' and are interested in – he did not feel this way about his banking work. He described how he was there because it was good money so he could afford a nice lifestyle, and the people he worked with were nice, but he did not 'love it'. He also said he wanted the challenge of learning something new. Without traditional qualifications for entry to HE, John embarked on a level three access to HE course in health sciences at another College in the neighbouring borough, with a view to studying adult nursing. He completed the course and was accepted to study adult nursing at a nearby HEI. However, the bursary John had been offered to support him on this course was not enough to support his entire family, and he chose to turn down the offer and start looking for alternatives. He described how he came across the foundation degree at the College and became interested as it was part-time and offered him the flexibility to continue working whilst studying.

John explained that his expectations of HE were that his studies would just be an extension of his level three learning. He was one of two mature students in this study that had taken

the access to HE route, and felt this had prepared him well for a degree course. He said that he expected it to be more difficult initially, explaining that he found the range of knowledge he was expected to engage with was more difficult than the depth of that knowledge. This was one of the frustrations John had with studying part-time. He described how he wanted to 'just get on with it' and found the pace slower than he would have liked, particularly because he had found the access course he had taken previously was quite intense by having to cover a range of units in a short time frame. Over time, John explained how he started to use this time to his advantage and engaged with the course material in more depth, spending more time on reading and researching.

John always talked about his studies in a collegial manner, explaining that whilst the part-time mode of study was frustrating for him, he recognised that others in the group needed that time to 'get to grips' with higher level study. He perceived there to be a range of abilities and confidence levels in the group and suggested that others did not necessarily have the academic background he had, and they struggled with concepts and ideas that he found easy. He also spoke of how he recognised the differences in HE experiences of older mature aged students, of whom made up the majority of his cohort. John described how everyone had different paths, goals and expectations of HE and how he had come to realise that not everyone was the same as him. He explained how the diversity of the group had served as a reminder in his work and social life not to make assumptions about people and to accept people's strengths and weaknesses. He said he also recognised the advantages of studying for a degree as a mature student, saying that he would have approached it differently as a younger student, by prioritising the social dimensions of university study, and that would have been a waste of such an opportunity.

John felt that studying as a mature student in this particular environment had been far more appropriate for him. He spoke of how he valued the small class sizes, enabling debate and discussion to facilitate learning. This is something he felt he would not have benefitted from at a university where 'there are 180 people in a lecture theatre'. He described the small classes as a 'safe place' which enabled him and his peers to explore topics and develop their criticality and understandings without fear of judgement. This was useful as he felt the depth of learning in HE, compared to that in FE, was far greater. John explained how in HE, analysis and debate was far more important when writing essays than re-presenting the course material. For him, it was not just about learning facts, but about applying and questioning knowledge. The small class sizes also facilitated this. John explained that he could not learn just from being 'talked at', but rather he learned by doing as well. The independent study expectations of the course were more useful in developing that

understanding for him, by reading, researching, applying and writing about his topics. This helped John to engage with a range of literature on any given topic, developing understanding of different and often competing perspectives that he perceived to not be required of him at FE level.

John explained that developing an understanding of knowledge that was not fixed or 'right and wrong' but fluid and ever changing was one of the main lessons he applied to his work with adults with learning difficulties. He felt he used this understanding to question and critique his own practice. For John, this had made him a far more effective and valuable employee. It was through this that he also began to question common practice in social care and the way things were done in his sector. He suggested he was recognising areas of bad practice and wanted to challenge and change them, in order to 'make a difference to the lives of the people he was working with'. In this respect, John felt he had changed as a result of his studies, but he still felt uncomfortable in being defined by his work and studies as he was 'still me'.

When John had started the course he had maintained that his reasons for participation in HE were intrinsic, for sense of self satisfaction and to learn more about something he felt passionate about. He maintained the view that he was not looking for enhanced employment opportunities throughout; he did not want a promotion or extra responsibilities as a result of achieving the degree. John had had a career in banking and due to his knowledge and experience of the labour market he purported not to need another one! However, towards the end of his studies he began to consider pursuing a more senior role in social care, as he felt this was the only way in which he could affect change to the issues of practice that had been uncovered through his critical engagement with the course material. To do this, John felt it necessary to continue and gain a full degree via a top-up. For this reason his future plans were to do a top-up (preferably full time so he could achieve this is one year) and to continue to use his learning experience to shape his work and wider life. John's story is one of wanting to pursue HE study for personal achievement and satisfaction. What is distinctive about this is the way in which he did not identify as a second chance learner, but as someone who was entering HE at the most appropriate and beneficial time for him. Similarly, Clare, in the next narrative, entered HE at a time in her life where she could significantly benefit from it – when she needed to develop independence after becoming a widow.

## *Clare*

Clare was 48 years old at the time of her studies, with two teenage children and was studying for a foundation degree in 3D interior and architectural design. She was severely dyslexic and had found all forms of learning difficult growing up and then into her adulthood. She described how she could not engage in learning and did not achieve any qualifications; she also held a very negative view of education throughout her life because of her initial experience. She remembered feeling 'hopeless' and dismissed any thoughts of continuing education after her compulsory schooling ended. She described how the only viable option for her was to go out and get a job, which she did, in retail, and stayed in that type of employment throughout her adulthood.

Clare became a mother and wife in her early twenties, and felt that she had never really needed to learn anything as her husband had a good job, giving her and her family financial security. He also was responsible for paying bills and organising their assets. Sadly, Clare's husband passed away a few years before she came to the College and she said that it had made her realise that she needed to learn to regain independence. She described how she was concerned because she had a rented property that her husband had managed and she now needed to understand how to manage it. She also needed to know how to pay the bills and run the household finances. Whilst she did not need to get a job for financial reasons, she felt that she should do something worthwhile with her time, particularly as her children were getting older.

Clare explained that she had always been interested in art and design, saying she had a 'natural eye' for it, and it was probably the only subject she was good at during school. Interior design was something she felt she had an 'eye for' as she had designed various rooms in properties she and her husband had owned. She explained that she wanted to return to education and study it further, but friends and family tried to dissuade her by suggesting that qualifications were not necessary in that field and that she was good enough without them. In spite of this, she spoke of how she began researching courses that might be suitable for her at her local College. She came across the foundation degree and described how she was unsure as to what type of qualification it was, but deemed the course content to be most appropriate for what she wanted to do. When Clare applied she said she was told that because she had no qualifications and very little formal experience in the industry she would have to enrol on an access to HE course in art and design first.

Clare enrolled and attended the access to HE course that was delivered by the College, but was taught at a community centre in a town away from the main campus. It was small and intimate, and Clare felt that her aversions to formal learning were alleviated here. However, she did struggle with the written side of the course; she recalled an event where she was driving home from the community centre and rang her mum to tell her she could not do it. Clare admitted that her confidence in her own ability and education in general was low. It was during the access to HE course that Clare had a full dyslexia assessment, and study support was then put into place to help her achieve. In some ways the additional study support that was put into place was a hindrance to Clare's development. She had someone to type all of her assignments and to operate the computer when conducting research. This meant that Clare was not developing the ability to do these things on her own, and she suggested that this was a problem when she completed and went on to enrol on the foundation degree at the main College campus.

Clare described how she experienced bouts of anxiety and low confidence when she progressed to the main College to start her degree. She was supported to apply for the disabled students' allowance in order to access resources that were supposed to enable her to achieve on the course. However, Clare felt that the support that was available to HE students was different to the support she had experienced on her FE course. The ethos of HE support was to support students in developing strategies and skills in order to become independent learners capable of analytical and critical thought. There were also only two academic skills tutors that were available to support HE students; this meant that Clare could not have the intensive support she had received on her access to HE course. However, her DSA needs assessment recommendations had provided her with technologies and software that were designed to alleviate the problems associated with her dyslexia and gain independence. Clare was given training to use these and accessed specialist dyslexia tuition designed to provide students with strategies to manage their dyslexia, and she described beginning to feel more confident because of this.

Clare felt that developing strategies to manage her dyslexia was one of the most important and emancipating parts of her participation in HE study. Clare had explained how she used to hide her dyslexia, saying she did not have her glasses or making other excuses when she was asked to read or write something in public. Gaining strategies to cope with her difficulty had given her confidence in herself, but also in asking for help when she needed it, she described not 'shying away' from her dyslexia now.

Clare felt that her lack of confidence had stemmed from her dyslexia and her expectations of studying at HE level. She expected it to involve a lot of reading and writing as well as practical design work. This was a challenge for Clare, but she felt it was alleviated by the small class sizes and increased support available because of this. She described being put off studying at a university because she thought that the support would not be available. It appears that Clare's experience at the College was a stepping stone, a place where she could engage in higher level work at her own pace and with support for managing her dyslexia. She had also felt that due to her age she was not as technologically savvy as her younger peers. By self-admission, learning to become proficient in the use of IT was one of Clare's biggest achievements on the course. She felt the benefits in her wider working and social life too. As Clare developed these attributes, she relied less and less on the support and technology available to her and felt confident that she had the necessary skills to continue learning in any field of study. She spoke of how the diversity of her peers' backgrounds and skills had supported her, she was able to rely on support from them for IT problems and in return she would support them with oral communication skills and other aspects they were less confident in.

As Clare grew as a learner, so did her aspirations. She had set out to gain some skills and study something she loved, but was beginning to consider continuing her education. She would not even consider topping up her foundation degree at a university when she first started, but was now looking into options at local HEIs. As a more independent learner, Clare explained how she felt more confident to cope within a university environment. She had concerns that if she stopped engaging in education she would 'lose' the skills and attributes she had developed and was keen to continue learning, even if it was 'just a night course' continuing to develop her IT skills. She described this new found interest in learning as a 'bug' and could not imagine her life without it. The challenge of critically engaging with her field of study with the push from her tutors had 'opened her eyes' to the benefits of HE study. She spoke of how previously she had encouraged her son, who was also dyslexic, to pursue a career once he left school. She was now helping him find opportunities for HE study under similar circumstances to her own. Clare also explained that her son, having seen her grow in confidence and ability as a result of studying the course, had new aspirations, stating 'if you can do it mum, anyone can!'. Clare's story demonstrates some of the wider benefits HE study can have to an individual that may not be directly related to employment. The way in which her friends and family viewed a degree in the arts as having no value, reflects the dominant discourse which positions the purpose of HE for employment, which was at odds with Clare's own views and experience. The inconsistency

between dominant discourses of HE and employability, with the lived experiences of individuals, can also be seen in the final narrative – Jonathan's.

## *Jonathan*

Jonathan was 42 years old during my fieldwork. He was single with no children and was studying for a foundation degree in music technology. He described 'not being clever enough' and being too lazy to even consider university upon leaving school, and went straight to work as an engraver in the local town at aged 18. Jonathan said he had been doing this job for 20 years before work started to slow down. He described how he was getting frustrated and fed up, having not had a pay rise in five years. He was also worried that if he did not pursue something he was really passionate about at that point, he would be too old to do so in the future. The College was Jonathan's local provider of further and higher education, so he said that he began to look at courses that might be suitable for him to study there.

Jonathan explained that he was attracted to HE rather than FE at the College because the funding available for full time students through student finance would enable him to leave his current employment at the engravers. He said he was not sure what provision was available to him, as he did not have the standard entry requirements for university such as A-levels. However, he came to an open day at the College and spoke to tutors who said they would accept him due to his enthusiasm for music and life experience. Jonathan spoke about how he had also been undertaking short courses in music technology online and via distance learning for some time, as a hobby. Having attended the open day and speaking to his potential tutors, he described thinking that 'it was just for him'.

Jonathan's first impressions of the foundation degree were that it was not as intense and challenging as he had expected. As a full time course, he had likened the hours to a full time job; however, he was only required to come to the College for two and a half days a week. He was expected to use the rest of his time for independent study. He did find the amount of written work involved to be more than he had expected for a 'practical music course'. Jonathan explained that he had not written anything formally for over 20 years, but he surprised himself with how naturally it came to him after a while, and he attributed this to his life experience. He was also surprised at the amount of independent study that was involved, saying that he had to do a lot of research for his assignments, whereas in the studying he had been involved in before, the content of assignments had been delivered

directly to him by his tutors. However, he explained that on this course, there was 'no hand holding involved'.

In spite of the independence required, studying for the foundation degree was also a very collaborative experience for Jonathan. He and his peers were encouraged to work together to support each other in their individual projects. They were expected to have debates and discussion. Jonathan described this as 'bouncing ideas off one another'. He said that this helped them to explore different perspectives on styles of music and techniques that were out of their comfort zone. Working collaboratively also developed other skills that Jonathan found useful in his wider life; he had respect for differing perspectives by listening to the way in which they had developed via arguments based on theory and research. He explained how he was able to appreciate this and it opened his outlook on the diverse field of music. Working collaboratively had not come without its frustrations for Jonathan, however. He was the oldest member of his course group, and the only student who had not progressed internally through FE. Often he described finding a few of his fellow peers annoying and childish, which distracted him from his work, although ultimately, Jonathan appreciated that he had developed a lot more patience in life. Furthermore, in spite of these frustrations, he described how the diverse backgrounds and interests of the group were an overall an advantage to his learning.

Having not found the foundation degree as challenging as he had expected, Jonathan had begun to consider continuing in education in spite of his family's and friends' opinions about the value of the degree. He explained that whilst they had maintained that a degree was not needed for a career in the music industry, Jonathan felt that it had helped him to develop his passion further by keeping his options open. He described how often tutors would encourage him and his peers to develop an area of specialism, as this would make him more unique and employable in the labour market. Because of Jonathan's prior experience of the unpredictability of the labour market, he rejected this view and felt that it was being open to opportunity and not closing off other avenues that would bring him more success. This success would also be achieved through the relaxed and enjoyable learning environment that studying HIVE in a College provided him.

## *Conclusions*

These individual cases show the diversity of mature students as a social group, but also the diversity of the mature student experience of HE within a particular context. In spite of this diversity, what their individual stories reveal is certain key themes or concepts that may be

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useful when exploring the mature student experience of HIVE in an FE college. The fact that each mature student's 'pathway' and thus 'transitions' are so complex is worthy of more attention, in the sense that this complexity may contribute to the production and reproduction of inequalities in HE participation. For example, Carolyn's need to study close to home meant that opportunities for studying for a degree more directly related to her goals were limited as she settled for HIVE. Nathan's need to fit study around his business meant the College was his only option, and like Carolyn, he settled for the course that was the closest fit to what he really wanted to study. Matt's reluctance to engage in the application of knowledge to practice that is central to HIVE, suggests that he may have benefited from a more theoretical HE, but the ambiguity surrounding university admissions prevented him from considering this as an option. Donna and Clare did not consider any other HE options that could have potentially been more beneficial to them, as they were of the opinion that university HE was not for them.

The diversion/diversity debate, as discussed in Chapter two, considers on the one hand, inequality of mass HE participation as certain students may be diverted to certain types of HE that are of less value. On the other hand, the debate considers the way in which a growing and diverse student body brings significant benefits to students and institutions. The unique pathways that brought these mature students to participate in this type of HE shows that diversion and diversity are not mutually exclusive concepts.  Pathways and subsequent transitions also seem to be connected to certain types of 'capital', acquired and developed to support them. For example, the value and use of 'life experience' as capital appears important in constructing the mature student experience of HIVE. However, the value, acquisition and development of different types of capital are not straightforward from case to case, and are underpinned by struggle and conflict. Related to this, the concept of 'identity' appears as significant as the mature students position themselves within the HE landscape. Therefore, what the individual cases also show is that there is a certain level of agency involved in negotiating pathways, transitions, capital and identity. For example, John used the academic resource or capital he had acquired during his studies, and the authority having a HE student identity gave him, to challenge practice with authority at his workplace. Similarly, Jonathan used his life experience capital and his identity as a mature student, to challenge ideas of employability taught on the course that were at odds with his own experience. The next chapter outlines the ways in which these ideas can be theorised using different strands of theories of social reproduction in education, before discussing why resistance theory was used to inform a thematic cross case synthesis and consequent interpretations and theorisations of the data.

# 5 Theoretical Framework

The purpose of this chapter is to outline the theoretical framework that has informed the following cross-case synthesis. As discussed in Chapter 2, previous theorisations of mature student participation in HE, and of non-traditional student participation in HIVE, have focussed largely on pessimistic or deterministic explanations for access and participation. Furthermore, most of these analyses have been based at the macro-structural level. Those that have focussed on the micro-level analysis of the student have often produced accounts of 'struggling against the odds'. Conflict and struggle are largely seen as a natural part of the transition to higher education for particular social groups, and as a response to these determining structures. Admittedly, these theorisations had been drawn upon when constructing my own initial perceptions of particular groups of students prior to undertaking this research. It was during the process of field work for this study that these assumptions were challenged by the revelations of the data generated. Macro-structural analyses were only of partial use in explaining what was observed. The process of data generation required the role of agency, struggle and conflict in the experiences of these mature students to be reconsidered. This realisation led me to consider Henry Giroux's critical theory of Education. Giroux's critical theory of education is concerned with the way in which schools and other educational establishments function as more than instructional sites, but "represent arenas of contestation and struggle among differently empowered cultural and economic groups" (Giroux, 2001, p.74).

The work of Giroux is grounded in the Critical Theory of the Frankfurt School. Whilst the Frankfurt School does not represent an entirely unified body of thought, a common goal was to develop social theories committed to the emancipation of society from harmful social structures associated with capitalism. One of the ways in which this could be achieved is through a commitment to uncovering the changing notions of domination that accompanied new forms of capitalism and what that meant for human emancipation (Giroux, 2001).

These responses are in part due to a critique of the dominant positivist position of social sciences at that time. The rejection of positivist thought as an adequate logic for analyses of society was due to its grounding of reason in fact that strips subjectivity and criticality from reason.

> Facts become separated from values, objectivity undermines critique, and the notion that essence and appearance may not coincide is lost in the positivist view of the world (Giroux, 1997, p.40)

Within the positivist logic of reason history; subjectivity and human consciousness are ignored. For Giroux (1997), responding to this theoretical challenge was central to the development of his critical theory of education, he understands that the logic of positivism leaves no room for human agency in the analysis of society. The Frankfurt School argued that sociological analyses need to look more closely at culture, and the particular notion that culture is given meaning through historical and societal contexts. It is therefore, not neutral, as mainstream sociological thought presupposed at the time (Giroux, 1997). One school of thought that did consider culture to exist in relationships with historical and societal contexts was Marxism.

Different interpretations of Marxism existed within the Frankfurt School, but because of this, the forms of enquiry supported by the Frankfurt school can be seen as both a development of western Marxism, and a critique of it (Giroux, 1997). The critical theory in the Frankfurt School opposed the Marxist assumptions of historical inevitability, because the revolutionary rise of the working classes in contesting modes of capitalist domination was yet to be seen. They also rejected the idea that the central element in shaping history and culture was the modes of production, and therefore the orthodox Marxist assumptions that class struggle, domination and oppression are solely located within the labour process (Giroux, 1997). In response to this, the Frankfurt school argued for a move away from sociological analyses of domination located primarily in the economic sphere, to a sociological analysis located in the public, cultural sphere (Giroux, 1997). Similarly, Giroux responds to these theorisations in the critique of the Marxist emphasis on the economic sphere in producing and reproducing modes of domination. For Giroux, a Marxist method of analysis rooted in economic determinants does not adequately address new forms of domination associated with contemporary capitalist societies. As such, Marxists can view a role of education in society as transmitting the ruling class ideologies (such as the idea that capitalism is fair and necessary) and to produce compliant workers.

Theories of reproduction in education have largely not put notions of conflict and struggle amongst people at the centre of their theses, or if conflict is discussed, then it is in terms of its contribution to reproduction, rather than its emancipatory possibilities. Instead, what have commonly taken priority are the culturally reproductive effects of education in a more macro approach to theorising. For example, Durkheim (1956) argued that education's reproductive influence lies in its ability to imitate dominant societal relations. Similarly, Parsons (1959) argues that schools and other educational establishments provide specific knowledge and skills for certain groups of people in order to take their determined place in

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wider society. However, social and cultural life is too complex to rely on overly deterministic explanations, and as Russell (2011) argues "elements of resistance, struggle and contradiction are present in any given situation".

Further to this, it can be argued that the main role of educational establishments is to reproduce the dominant ideology and its forms of knowledge by means of controlling the distribution of skills needed to reproduce the social division of labour (Giroux, 1983b). More specifically, theories of reproduction suggest that there are existing relationships between social groups and thus inequalities are reproduced via education by maintaining the status quo of the dominant social order. They argue that these issues then can only be explored through the consideration of how these establishments function to legitimate capitalist rationality through associated educational practices. Therefore, the focus of these theories has been on how power is used to mediate educational establishments in the interests of capital (Russell, 2011). Rather than understanding the products of education (skills and qualifications) as a fair way to distribute labour relations, reproductions theorists maintain that capitalist production requires certain educational outcomes for different social groups (Giroux, 1983b).

Based on this premise there are three ways in which educational establishments' reproductive functions are exercised: by providing different social groups with the means with which to occupy their determined place in the labour market; by legitimating hierarchies of knowledge and skills in the interests of the dominant culture; and by legitimating dominant ideologies that underpin the organisation of labour and related social divisions (Giroux, 1983b). Reproductive ideas have therefore based educational research on the analyses of the relationship between education, the workplace and life outcomes. Giroux (1983b) highlights the main concerns that have arisen from these enquiries as those of class-based experiences of education and the labour market, cultures of both educational establishments and their students, and the repressive functions of the state in affecting educational policies and subsequent practices.

These theories have provided great insights into challenging ideological assumptions and processes that underpin common notions of a neutral education system and its function as a vehicle for social mobility. For that reason, better understandings have been generated of the structural elements of educational institutions in society. However, they do not account for how participants of the educational system may also uncover and challenge those assumptions and structural elements in a given context, or how actors exercise agency within such relations.

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Without a central focus on human agency there is little room for the determination of differences between structural modes of domination and how these are enacted in social realities. "There are complex and creative fields of resistance through which class, race and gender mediated practices often refuse, reject and dismiss the central message of schools" (Giroux, 1983b, p. 260).

Instead, Giroux positions educational establishments as relatively autonomous places where oppositional behaviours are a source of conflict with the interests of dominant society, existing to a certain extent, as independent to capitalist relations. In taking this position, however, Giroux's theory is implicated in reproducing the dualism of structure and agency and the inability to examine structures and institutions (Giroux, 1983b).

According to Giroux (1983b) one approach to recovering these problems is to recognise and appropriate the emancipatory insights of reproductions theories, whilst critically examining assumptions from the resistance perspective (Giroux, 1983b). Giroux (1983b) emphasises three important theoretical models of reproduction that provide insights for, and that can contribute to, a critical theory of education. The first is the economic-reproduction model, seen in the work of Bowles and Gintis' correspondence theory (Bowles & Gintis, 1976). The second is the cultural-reproduction model commonly attributed to the work of Pierre Bourdieu, and finally the hegemonic-state reproduction model (Gramsci, 1971). I continue this chapter by considering each of these in more detail.

## *Economic-reproduction model*

Economic reproductive accounts focus on the relationship between the economy and education. Power, in this sense, can be viewed in relation to the economic sphere in terms of how dominance is practised, mediated and legitimated within it (Bowles & Gintis, 1976).

> Correspondence theory posits that the hierarchically structured patterns of values, norms and skills that characterise the workplace and the dynamics of class interaction under capitalism are mirrored in the social dynamics of the daily classroom encounter (Giroux, 1983b, p. 262)

Thus, relations of education are determined by the power of capital to provide different social groups with different skills, attitudes and values of different classes, races and genders. Similarly, Althusser's (1971) notion of ideology in the reproduction of the

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conditions of production points to the role of education in the process of socialisation into the logic of domination without an account of struggle and contestation (Giroux, 1983b). Furthermore, whilst the economic reproductive model must be recognised for the insights it has provided into the structural basis of inequality, it does not account for instances of post-compulsory education and why mature students may return to education after they have already been through the socialising process of schooling. It cannot account for the diverse and unique pathways of individual students in post-compulsory education or how these contribute towards challenging or confirming, and thus shaping, the dominant social order. Neither does such theory consider the way in which individual identity, resources, and cultures may be implicated in this shaping.

## *Cultural-reproduction model*

The cultural reproduction model seeks to implicate aspects of culture, commonly ignored by the economic-reproductive models, with domination. Most commonly this model has been attributed to the work of Bourdieu (1977), who rejected functionalist ideas of domination, in favour of a framework that could dialectically link institutions, as sites of dominant structural representations, to human agents (Grenfell, 2008). Central to this model is the idea that human agents contribute to ideas and practices of domination and oppression. The concept of relative autonomy is crucial to this tenet; educational establishments do not simply mirror dominant societal relations, but are indirectly influenced by institutions such as the state, that hold more power (Giroux, 1983b). Therefore educational establishments are part of larger structural arrangements whereby reproduction of the interests of dominant relations occur through the reproduction and distribution of cultures.

Central to Bourdieu's thesis is the concept of 'symbolic violence'. Symbolic violence is committed in educational establishments by the subtle appearance of neutrality and promotion of the benefits of a valued culture, whereby inequalities can be reproduced in the name of meritocracy (Giroux, 1983b). The concept of cultural capital is therefore also important to a model of cultural reproduction, as the acquisition of capital associated with the dominant social class as part of the education system systematically disadvantages those of different social classes. Cultural capital legitimates forms of knowledge and ways of being that are often culturally derived through family background, thus disadvantaging those with backgrounds that are unlikely to hand down these forms of capital (Giroux, 1983b). It is therefore of greater effort for those who are not handed down this capital to acquire the benefits of it afforded by the dominant classes. An example of this could be that kinds of knowledge more commonly associated with the capital of working classes is seen as

inferior in the education system as a means for entry to higher education. Working class students who would like to access higher education have to work harder than their middle class counter-parts to acquire the capital that will give them access as graduates of HE to employment in higher status and professional occupations. "Schools legitimise the dominant cultural capital through the hierarchically arranged bodies of knowledge in the hegemonic curriculum" (Giroux, 1983b, p. 269)

Whilst the concepts of symbolic violence and cultural capital highlight the medium of culture in the reproduction of domination, on their own they can be overly deterministic accounts of reproduction. However, the addition of Bourdieu's concepts of habitus and disposition enables understandings that take into account agency and structure. Habitus is the product of socialisation and individual history, and therefore acts in organising individual's experiences within different social groups (Grenfell, 2008).

> [Habitus is] the way society becomes deposited in persons in the form of lasting dispositions, or trained capacities and structured propensities to think, feel and act in determinant ways, which then guide them (Wacquant, 2005, p. 316, cited in Navarro, 2006, p. 16).

The cultural-reproduction model has merit in making available analyses that incorporate power, knowledge and culture. However, the concepts of habitus and dispositions leave little room for analyses of agency other than as a response to incompatible social structures i.e. the historical structure of dispositions and the habitus of the institution interacted with (Giroux, 1983b).

Another critique of the cultural-reproduction model is its insensitivity to domination in relation to 'the materiality of economic forces' (Giroux, 1983b, p. 273). Giroux (1983b) argues that domination as an objective, concrete instance cannot be ignored in enquiries of education. As considered in the economic-reproduction model, the economic dimensions of who has access to what type of higher education maybe equally as important as the cultural dimensions. For example, wealthier working class parents may have the economic resources to support their children in moving away from home and therefore have access to opportunities of attending elite universities that children with less wealthy parents would not.

> What we are left with is a theory of reproduction that displays little faith in subordinate classes and groups and little hope in their ability or willingness to

reconstruct the conditions under which they live, work and learn (Giroux, 1983b, p. 274).

Often studies of mature students and students of HIVE have used a cultural-reproduction framework in order to analyse the tensions between dispositions and the fields of further and higher education (Fenge, 2011; Leese, 2010). The use of this framework has contributed to understandings that highlight struggles (commonly referred to as transitions or barriers) of non-traditional students as a response to the incompatibilities between individual or collective dispositions and the habitus of the field of HE. They have also highlighted in the case of HIVE delivered in Colleges, struggles at the HE FE interface arising from the competing habitus' of the two fields (Colley, Chadderton, & Nixon, 2014). What these models have not highlighted are the ways in which resistance, struggle and contestation amongst students challenges and contributes to the changing nature of HE and FE and their own experiences of it.

## *Hegemonic-state reproduction model*

The final model of reproduction theories to contribute towards an understanding of resistance is the hegemonic-state reproduction that focuses on the role of the state in processes of domination (Giroux, 1983b). These models take into account how state intervention policies or political factors contribute to the reproduction of structures of inequalities.

Hegemony in these accounts represents ideology that is used to reproduce relations between dominant and subordinate groups. Similar to a cultural reproduction model, hegemonic ideology shapes common sense ideas surrounding the interests of subordinate groups and their consciousness. Unlike cultural-reproduction, these ideas are transmitted not through cultural reproduction but through the state, and hence consciousness is constantly restructured in the quest for control of it. Gramsci, (1971) defined the state in two ways: as political society and civil society. Political society refers to the state's primary function of social control by force (i.e. through institutions of law and administration). Civil society refers to the overlapping institutions of indirect social control exercised through reproducing and the universalising effects of dominant ideologies minimizing conflicting discourses (Gramsci, 1971). Gramsci's definitions of the state recognise the dominance of some features of the state over others. These definitions also recognise that hegemony is constantly fought for in any given time (Giroux, 1983b). Incorporated into this view is the idea that the state can act both positively and negatively in terms of power. It negatively

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reproduces relations of domination as an ideological apparatus, and positively as the platform on which actors actively oppose, struggle against and question the dominant social order.

It is because of these features, and the way in which the state gives rise to these struggles, that such relations are "thought of as lived and natural" (Corrigan, Harvie, & Sayer, 1980, p. 10). In this way, some societal relations are challenged (for example, in opposition to budget cuts to public services), but not the underlying structures of a capitalist society (Giroux, 1983b).

Education in a hegemonic-state reproduction model is a feature of the civil society and is therefore only indirectly implicated in the reproduction of dominant ideologies. However, one way in which the state operates to intervene in education is by legitimating what is seen as high status (intellectual or mental) knowledge, and what is seen as low status (vocational, practical or manual) knowledge (Heywood, 1994, p. 101). The division between mental and manual labour and its respective types of knowledge underlie educational establishments' purposes whereby different social groups are prepared for their place in the labour market.

State-hegemonic reproduction models provide valuable insights into how reproduction operates in the political sphere. The focus, however, has mainly been on structural issues of reproduction. Whilst this model points to contestation and struggle, particularly in relation to the fight for hegemony, it does not provide insights as to how these struggles are played out at the level of the individual or different social groups. In a study of mature student participation in an institution that is at the interface of the mental and manual knowledge divide, the absence of these insights is a significant theoretical flaw.

Giroux (1983b) responds to reproductive theorisations by suggesting that ideology underpinning class domination is not imposed on individuals but is mediated through a range of practices and meanings used to negotiate educational experiences. Giroux thus responds to these class-based theorisations by introducing what he describes as resistance theories; those which move beyond purely reproductive accounts to provide analyses of how people, through their own sense of agency, come to resist or accommodate those ideologies - "by recognizing that reproduction is a complex phenomenon that not only serves the interest of domination but also contains the seeds of conflict and transformation." (Giroux, 1981, p. 109). Therefore agency and experience are assigned key

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roles in mediating links between structural determinants and how that is experienced by individuals.

## Resistance Theories

Resistance theories can be viewed as a development beyond the limitations of purely reproductive accounts of education. In contrast with reproduction theories, studies of resistance point to social sites in which dominant ideology and culture are encountered and challenged (Giroux, 1983b).  Resistance is complex and contradictory (Willis, 1977). Resistance theories offer frameworks for exploring the possibility of education producing active agents capable of manipulating social structures (Willis, 1977). They contribute to understandings of oppositional behaviour, not as deviancy, but as a form of 'cultural weaponry' (Davies, 1994, p. 333). Collectively amongst groups, this 'cultural weaponry' can be described as counter-cultures that are derived from shared cultural understandings that undermine the dominant discourses prevalent in a given context. For example, the rejection of 'mental labour' and its associated practices that dominate the school culture by the lads in Willis' (1977) *Learning to Labour*, are derived from a working class counter-culture that undermines the ideological processes underpinning the dominance of mental labour in schools (Walker, 1988, p. 5). In the context of this research, those counter-cultures should be recognised as part of a wider educational system that provides further educational opportunities for those involved in the rejection of 'mental labour' via the further education Colleges as specific sites of cultural dominance and practices.

Because theories of resistance have been used widely in the critical research tradition, there has been some debate concerning the ways in which they have been used and interpreted. As the plurality of the 'theories of resistance' suggests, multiple variations may exist (McGrew, 2011, p. 253). McGrew suggests three versions of resistance theory are visible that fall under the paradigm of the critical tradition. They concern: conscious resistance; unconscious resistance; and relative autonomy. Conscious resistance refers to resistant behaviours that are performed with some degree of intentionality, that is to say that individuals are aware of and respond to perceived public problems (Abowitz, 2000). Unconscious resistance, on the other hand, are acts of oppositional behaviour that are not consciously articulated, and may occur in a state of 'almost unconsciousness' (Apple, 1980, p. 67; Willis, 1977). Somewhere between this binary of resistance is the notion of relative autonomy, that posits resistance as both conscious and unconscious at the individual level, but is also the collective cultural logic of groups of individuals that 'engage in cost-benefit analysis for them' (McGrew, 2011, p. 254).

What is showed, maintained, reproduced and generated by the social group, as distinct from the free floating individual consciousness is the crucial focus in my notion of subjectivity. The group is the smallest unit of cultural existence (Willis, 1978, pp. 193–194)

It is the relative autonomy of groups from the state and spheres of production that give rise to possibilities of resistance and change (Hargreaves, 1982). The relative autonomy from those spheres gives capacity to challenge, as well as support, social relations (McLaren, 1985). The theoretical position of this thesis is a relative autonomous approach to resistance; it is for this reason that a cross-case analysis has also been conducted as part of the research. A focus on resistance at the individual, conscious or unconscious level is important to understand the ideological or political underpinnings of such resistance. However, a cross examination of the cases also provides an understanding of the collective cultural logic of mature students as active agents of a social group.

A flaw highlighted by Giroux (1983b) of his original theory is that little consideration was given to the range of behaviours that may constitute resistance or not, and how person may embody a range of both reactionary and progressive and thus contradictory behaviours. However, in consideration of this flaw the thesis attempts to use the framework to identify and analyse elements of resistance amongst mature students that constitute those contradictions.

Giroux has moved on from his original framework of resistance through a reconsideration of this theoretical flaw. Because of this, I will also respond to these criticisms in the context of the thesis and introduce additional theoretical concepts that move beyond the original framework to provide a more comprehensive account of the power relations of mature students in HIVE.  Firstly, a weakness of traditional theories of resistance highlighted by Giroux (1983b) is that resistance has often been defined as rebellious student behaviour rather than more subtle acts, and in doing so the political value of resistance has the potential to be misconstrued. Mature students in post-compulsory education are likely to approach participation with a repertoire of life experience and experience of 'cost benefit analysis' and could therefore be more likely to display more subtle acts of resistance. Because of this, resistance in adults is positioned as articulable. Individual articulable resistance may have few progressive features, but collectively the articulation of this resistance may have the capacity to effect change. This notion of resistance effecting

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change is particularly appealing for research positioned within the critical tradition, where concern with critical consciousness and emancipatory change is central.

Another oversight of theories of resistance is that they have tended to focus on class, whilst underplaying resistance related to race and gender (Giroux, 1983b). In a similar vein, it can be argued that they have often overlooked issues of age, which is particularly important in the context of post-compulsory education, and mature students as a social group. Theories of resistance in education have largely focussed their attention on schools as sites of struggle and contradiction, rather than other educational establishments such as those in post-compulsory education. Whilst the study of resistance in compulsory schooling has provided valuable understandings of educational inequality, the ways in which the theory can be drawn upon to provide insight into participation of education at points beyond compulsory schooling are less commonly acknowledged. In redefining oppositional behaviour in these contexts, acts of resistance that move beyond deviance and learned helplessness (such as transitions and barriers) can be accounted for.

The theoretical work of Giroux is important to this thesis as his focus on understanding how power is mediated, resisted and reproduced in daily life enables an exploration of the college as a social site that structures the experience of mature students. This theoretical approach enables an analysis of the college, through the experiences of the mature students, as a site of contestation between the fields of further and higher education. Using this framework has enabled a shift in focus from understandings of educational inequality as structures that maintain the status quo, to understanding how individuals and their agency may be implicated in this process too. The structures in which cultural dominance and practices are situated impinge on the actions of individuals; however, individuals also have the power to influence these structures. The contextual influence of this framework is useful for analyses of societal conditions (Russell, 2011). Of particular use is how it enables an analysis of the way in which societal conditions affect resistance and accommodation of educational practices, whilst also acknowledging the power individuals' responses have in transforming those conditions (Giroux, 1983b). In this sense it is a useful framework for illuminating the ways in which the changing processes of domination as mediated by class and age are understood and negotiated by mature students in a particular context.

The thesis uses Giroux's concept of resistance as a tool to examine the experiences of mature students in higher vocational education and to reveal reactionary and progressive behaviours that both reproduce dominant class relations, as well as contains pockets of emancipatory possibilities. In doing so, the discourses underpinning the positions and

perceptions of HE study, HIVE study and relations with FE institutions and FE students of the mature students can be revealed. However, the thesis also moves beyond Giroux's (1983b) theory by introducing the idea of capitals as an important resource for the facilitation of resistance in this context. Bourdieu's notion of 'academic capital', and a concept developed as part of this thesis - 'life experience' capital - are tools to explore how class and aged based resources are mobilized by mature students to shape resistance and their experience of higher vocational education. These particular concepts also enable one of the flaws of Giroux's original resistance theory to be addressed – that of an overemphasis on class domination and a limited consideration of other variables that may be of equal importance to social dynamics. Life experience capital as a concept enables a consideration of the influence of age-specific resources on the experiences of mature students in higher vocational education.

The theoretical framework has been used throughout the analysis to show where practices and cultures of the College, as a social site, are resisted or accommodated by the mature students in reproducing class structures. The use of resistance as a concept for analysing these structures is useful in understanding how students use agency within the determining structures of class and age. The concepts of life experience capital and academic capital are additionally used to analyse the meanings underlying mature students agency and the resources at their disposal that give rise to that agency.

Academic capital as a concept refers to the way in which a person can use qualifications or other educational experiences in becoming more mobile. However, there is some debate to the definition of Bourdieu's concept of academic capital, although one way in which Bourdieu operationalises the concept is by length time spent in education (Bourdieu, 1984) or perceived quality of that education (i.e. attending a prestigious school or university) (Bourdieu, 1988). According to Bourdieu (1984) academic capital can also be seen as converted from other forms of capital, such as cultural capital.

> Academic capital is in fact the guaranteed product of the combined effects of cultural transmission by the family and cultural transmission by the school (the efficiency of which depends on the amount of cultural capital directly inherited from the family) (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 23).

Similarly, others have conceptualised academic capital as based on institutionalised types of cultural capital important in the field of higher education (Naidoo, 2004). Therefore the concept of academic capital does not just refer to the exchange value of one's qualifications

in the quest to become mobile, but includes dispositions and competencies seen as 'academic' or distinctive to the field of higher education participants. Academic capital can be seen as primarily intellectual and cultural, rather than economical (Canaan and Shumar 2008). Therefore practices associated with the acquisition of academic capital are informed by values and rules of the HE sector. "According to Bourdieu, acts of cognition are implemented to select  and consecrate what is classified as 'academic' and therefore what counts as valid criteria for entry and success in higher education." (Naidoo 2010 p. 73). If conceptions of academic capital are to be taken as time spent in education, or quality of that education, then it would appear that the mature, working class students in this study would lack such capital. However, if academic capital is conceptualised as an institutionalised form of higher education cultural capital (Naidoo, 2004), it can be seen how this capital may be developed during the process of participation in higher education and used for a resource to within that experience.

The concept of life experience capital has been developed as a theoretical construct in this thesis that refers to cognitive and emotional capabilities or resources accumulated through a range of life experiences.  It is therefore specific to age. These experiences amongst mature students range from parenting and divorce, to professional and vocational experience. Life experience capital encompasses a range of cognitive and emotional resources, such as flexibility, empathy, resilience, and adaptability. The accumulation of life experience capital potentially brings with it a deeper or wider understanding of society and 'the bigger picture'. That is not to say that all mature students possess high levels of life experience capital or the capabilities associated with it, nor do mature students use life experience capital in the same way. It is, however, a concept that can be operationalised to explore the ways in which mature students may draw upon alternative localised resources, that influence their positions and perceptions of HE study, HIVE study and relations with FE and FE students.

Using a class based theoretical framework is important to this thesis for a number of reasons. Firstly, class pervades everyday life, and persists in reproducing inequalities in access to and participation in HE. However, students from different class backgrounds also operate within other social structures such as gender, ethnicity and age. Therefore whilst questions of class are important, how those structures intersect with other important structures of age is particularly relevant to understanding mature student participation and experience in different forms of HE. Many working class students enter HE on the premise that degree level education facilitates social mobility and increased earning power. However, issues of class, although not directly referred to by the mature students are

inherent in any discussion about social mobility. Class relations and oppression can be hidden in ideologies of lifelong learning. Yet mature students can, and do, use class and age based resources to exercise agency and respond to class structures that position them at a disadvantage in the field of HE. This thesis is therefore about classed mature students in HIVE who may wish to be socially mobile, and how it is that they might exercise agency in relation to their relative position in the HE sector through conflict and struggle.

Thinking of conflict and struggle within a resistance theory framework has informed the analysis presented in the next chapter in a number of ways. Firstly, the mature students' stories highlighted conflict and struggle with regards to the purpose of lifelong learning and higher education, and how it differed both from common policy conceptions, and also from the distinct cultural perspectives of an FE college. This resulted in analytical themes of 'lifelong learning', 'employability' and 'time and age' being developed. Secondly, whilst HE and FE practices were a focus of enquiry from the start of the study, they are also important within a framework of resistance, as the object of challenge or accommodation in this context. For this reason, themes of 'independent learning', 'collective learning' and 'critical thinking' were developed. The mature students also revealed a conscious acknowledgement of practices related to HE and FE, and resulted in the emerging theme of 'differences between HE and FE'. Finally, related to the theme of differences in HE and FE practices, the overarching theme of 'individuation' was developed. Within this, themes of 'assumptions', 'the other', and 'the positioned self' emerged in relation to conflict and struggle regarding the students' relative position in the HE sector as HIVE students in an FE college. The next chapter presents this analysis with supporting data, starting with HE in FE practices.

# 6  Cross Case Synthesis

This chapter presents a cross-case synthesis of themes generated during the analysis. I will first present the themes of *HE in FE practices*, which explore how HE and FE learning practices were interpreted and enacted by the mature students. I then move on to the overarching theme of *Individuation – Resistance that confirms the dominating social order*, which explores the way in which assumptions about HE and practices discussed in the previous theme enabled the students to position themselves as mature HE students in the context of a further education college. Finally, I present the overarching theme of *Lifelong Learning in HIVE - Resistance that challenges the dominating social order*, which explores inconsistencies between a dominant employability discourse in HIVE and the lived realities of the mature students.

## HE in FE practices and the development of academic capital

Giroux (1983a) argues that in order to understand educational establishments as social sites containing both socially reproductive elements and pockets of emancipatory possibilities that shape students' experience of education, an analysis of the social practices and values embedded in those experiences is important. In doing so, the classed and age based interests, positions and perceptions of HE study that underpin the behaviour of mature students and shapes their experience of HIVE, can be illuminated. This overarching theme explores how HE practices in an FE environment are experienced by mature students as both emancipating *and* in some cases - repressive. The analysis focuses on how specific accounts of practices are constructed by mature students and what shapes them. It is important to grasp what can be understood by HE, and how it differs from other forms of education in order to understand the translation of the mature students' experience in this particular context. The additional theoretical concepts of academic capital and life experience capital are used to show how class and age based resources and structures enable the mature students to exercise agency in relation to their experience of HIVE and the HIVE curriculum. Although each individual utilises their specific structures that they work within in differently, there are clear patterns related to how age and class manifest themselves and operate within HIVE. Mature students may not be able to articulate their behaviours directly in terms of class. They do 'explain' age more directly than class so this suggests 'class' is hidden to a degree; still there in operation but manifesting itself in more covert ways. Arguably this makes class potentially less emancipatory than the influence of 'age', however, together 'class' is more so recognised and therefore more likely to be

operationalized in terms of positive resistance within the HIVE context. In this case, the interest underlying such behaviour may be illuminated against the backdrop of social practices and values from which that behaviour emerges. Knowledge in working-class culture is often constructed on the principles of solidarity and sharing, whereas within middle-class culture, knowledge is forged in individual competition and is seen as a badge of separateness.  Therefore 'class', at least on its own, holds less emancipatory power than 'age' might.

## Independent learning

Independent learning can be seen as a central feature of HE learning. However, there appears to be little consensus on how the concept is understood. Independent learning can mean different things to different people in different contexts. It is important to therefore understand what this concept means to mature students in this particular context. The most common way this concept seems to be understood is as a departure from 'hand holding' or 'spoon feeding' as experienced in previous learning. For Jonathan, this was surprising as he equated difficulty with intensity of the course and intensity was measured by time spent in the classroom.

> Jonathan: Yeh I mean like you're expected to find out your own rather than being hand led sort of thing, yeh I think so, I think I expected a bit more tuition to be honest, to be told how to do something rather than saying go away and research this, do you know what I mean?
>
> Kate: Is it different from previous courses and learning you've done before?
>
> Jonathan: well there's not as much to be honest, if I'm being honest erm... I mean we come in like 2 days a week and if we're in groups then it's like one and a half day and a lot of that time is just getting on with your own work, just getting on with stuff erm... so I think, I expected a bit more work to be honest, it's not as intense as I thought it was going to be because, well I'm so used to doing 5 days, I suppose when you're working. [Jonathan Interview 2: 30/04/2014]

Jonathan's interpretation of this practice is grounded in the specific academic capital he had acquired during the previous further education he had undertaken. His initial interpretation of full time study as equated with a normal working week also shows how his perceptions of the intensity of HE study was informed by his life experience capital that is in some ways influenced by his experience of the labour market. His life experience capital has clearly shaped his expectations and his way of managing the work load, in a way that may be beneficial to him as successful in HE. However this is one of the ways consumerist

perspectives to higher education are at odds with HE practices that promote self-direction and responsibility for one's own study.

> So it's basically coming in using all the facilities, the computers, whatever, laser cutter printers, whatever and you're working for yourself, and you're doing it yourself, you've not got a tutor there constantly. [Clare Interview 2: 16/05/2014]

For these mature students, this meant a shift in responsibility for managing the learning process from tutor to student – something they had previously not experienced in their formal education. Time management was a central feature of their HE experience and their conception of independent learning, because being able to structure one's own time in order to meet deadlines was important. This practice therefore facilitated a strong sense of agency amongst the mature students. Time management as a feature of independent learning was essential to success in HE because as Nathan describes "the onus is on you, won't be chased for work".

> It's just like, if you miss a deadline, you miss your deadline, it's tough luck, you just have to catch up really, the onus is on you now really, but we know that really. [Nathan Interview 2: 22/04/2014]

Independent learning for these mature students was associated with understanding what was now required of them. A shift in responsibility from tutor to student often meant mature students being exposed to new pedagogy that facilitated this. For both Matt and John, those pedagogies were about developing an awareness of how to learn and get the most out of their studies.

> Yes, yes, I mean from what I remember at FE level, yeh, you were sort of getting, every step of the way sort of, not someone holding your hand as such but 'how you doing with this, what you doing with that, how have you done this? When's it going to get to me?' sort of thing, but you know, 'do this now for this time' sort of thing…. Whereas now it's erm, it is more, there is more independence, it's all about how you manage your own time sort of thing and finding your best way of learning and then doing your work. [Matt Interview 1: 06/12/2013]

> Our tutors, they've got a slightly different role to play, but yeh, their job is to try and get the student find the best way for them to study and to give them different options and opportunities, it's still for the students to take that on and actually do it, they can't spoon feed you, but I guess at foundation degree level there's got to be an element of personal motivation and personal contribution cause without that it doesn't matter how good your teaching is you're never going to do the best you can do. [John Interview 2: 19/06/2014]

This highlights the way the role of a tutor changes as the students practised independent learning. The mature student's understanding of the role of tutor in developing independent

learning was to guide them to find the best way of working for them. Being pushed and challenged by tutors was frequently observed, as well as not being told what to write but *how* to write. An important role of the tutor in developing the practice of independent learning was not necessarily engaging students with subject matter, but guiding them through academic conventions. This process was part of developing specific academic capital associated with HE study.

> They are now asking about the assignment again, the subject knowledge seems to be OK but they want guidance for meeting the requirements on the assignment, the session seems to have been about how to go about the process of producing that academic document. I am surprised at how much critical thinking is going on in the group around the subject matter and vocational practice but how they are expecting strict guidelines on writing and academic skills, they don't question those practices. [Carolyn Fieldwork: 11/11/2013]

The emancipatory potential of the practice in this context is facilitated by different power dynamics in the student-tutor relationship. As Carolyn demonstrates, there is a sense of mutual respect and reduced power relations between tutors and the mature students that facilitates this process.

> It's a lovely balance of you know, 'listen and learn' but we'll have a bit of a giggle along the way and there is definitely respect there, from them for what we do as well which is just... unusual isn't it when you're in a place of learning? I certainly can't compare it to being at school. [Carolyn Interview 1: 04/11/2013]

It appears that mutual respect involves a rebalancing of the tutor-student relationship as it has been experienced in other forms of formal education. The ability to learn independently involves a move away from the tutor as the holder of all knowledge, and student as passive recipient. The redressing of power is demonstrated by Matt's resistance to rely too much on his tutors.

> Kate: OK, so does the feedback facilitate independent learning?
>
> Matt: So for me, I feel it hinders it…. In a way erm… I mean I always try to get my assignments in so that I don't really need any feedback, but that's just me being how I am…[Matt Interview 2: 23/05/2014]

Matt also discussed at length the need to have self-awareness that it was important not to have a tutor there all the time, in order that he could work out how he best learned on his own. Conversations of these kinds occurred with all the mature students, independent learning was also about the practices students engaged with outside of the classroom – without the help of tutors or other college staff. Carolyn had also seen how this practice had

permeated her personal life. Independent learning was 'her time' and ensured she had more control over how she learns.

> That independent learning, that's my time ... Yeh, it's my thing, yeh I go to work and I love my job and I'm dealing with the kids but that's my time, that's my thing, and it's nice to be able to say 'not now, I'm doing this'. [Carolyn Interview 1: 04/11/2013]

Clare's experience of engaging in the practice of independent learning had had similarly 'freeing' effects in her personal life. Due to Clare's dyslexia, she had never had to do anything on her own, and when her husband tragically passed away she was overwhelmed by all the things that she had to now take responsibility for. Applying this practice had had a remarkable transformation on her personal and social life.

> I struggled through life with dyslexia and you find, I found a learning mechanism, of how I can get through life. [Clare Interview 2: 16/05/2014]

The structure and skills that Clare developed by engaging in this practice, such as time management and organisational skills and confidence, had been reflected in all aspects of her life. By choosing to practise independent learning, Clare was able to reap the benefits of HE and lifelong learning that had she would not have had, had she chosen to rely heavily on the increased support available for dyslexic learners in an FE college.

> I'm certainly not shy about attempting things now, I'm sending emails regularly, I used to fear to death of the computer, wouldn't ever go on it, I'm reading more, which I know if I get it wrong it doesn't matter, you know I'll find a way of getting about life..... It's a lot easier, I'm coping a lot more, and I think it's to do with structure and erm... how can I describe it? Well it's helping me in my home life as well... just sorting out my bills and stuff and erm... organised, I am a lot more, I'm getting there! [Clare Interview 2: 16/05/2014]

Clare and Carolyn's experiences show how the development of academic capital through engaging with the practice of independent learning can be used as a resource that contains emancipatory potential in their wider lives. This is a departure from the notion of academic capital as a resource to be exchanged in the labour market or for further study.

For Donna, engaging with this practice took on a completely different meaning: exercising initiative. Donna took the opportunity to make contacts that helped her with different aspects of her study. As part of her acting degree she had written a children's book and she had contacted a publisher and famous illustrator to see if he would illustrate her book. She had also been in touch with academic figures in the field of drama and drama therapy to

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help her with her dissertation. Using her initiative to practise independent learning as something to be engaged with outside of the classroom, she had enriched her HE in FE experience.

> I had a personal invite from a lady called Dr Jane Smith to attend one of her workshops which I knew would assist me hugely for both my theoretical study and my performance project and also I attended a lecture again, same kind of thing, more for my PDP was the other lecture though that sort of like assisted me really well on the PDP ... Yeh, you have to do, it just sort of like contributes to your achievements, you can't just float on by in the hope that... so I was fortunate really that I did get those invites. [Donna Interview 2: 12/06/2014]

Whilst developing academic capital through an engagement with independent learning contained emancipatory possibilities, perceptions of  independent learning in HE as a solitary act rooted in middle class constructions of knowledge appropriation may have limiting affects.  Therefore, sometimes the perception of independent learning as the expectation to learn on your own was quite detrimental to learning; it stopped some of the mature students from seeking support when necessary. Donna experienced this at various points throughout her studies.

> Erm... and its only sort of like the last, the back end of last year that I kind of like realised that you know, you do need to ask for help, you have to do it or else you're just going to get swept along, all this hard work and it's not going to pay off, I'm just going to fail, so I needed to get that in my head, there's nothing wrong with asking for help, there's nothing wrong with that, so now I do. [Donna Interview 2: 12/06/2014]

Whilst it was difficult to define exactly what independent learning meant to the mature students, they knew it was something that was significant to HE learning, and something they must engage with in order to do well. As can be seen in Donna's interpretation, most of the mature students interpreted independent learning quite literally, as solitary activity with individual benefits extending little beyond the self. This particular perception of the practice of independent learning in HE demonstrates how perceptions of HE study are grounded in middle class cultural constructions of knowledge. The next section shows how this construction of knowledge was at odds with the mature students own working class cultural constructions of knowledge, based on the principles of sharing and solidarity (Giroux, 1983a). Contrary to the middle class construction of independent learning in HE, the mature students used 'life experience capital' in order to counter these HE perceptions by engaging in the practice of collaborative or collective learning rooted in working class values.

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# Collective learning

For the mature students, experience played a big part in their learning. One thing they felt the College did very well was to promote and value diversity. As mature students, they felt they had a greater diversity of life experiences to draw upon in order to support their learning. The concept of life experience capital, a resource associated with age and maturity was intersected with working class values of sharing and solidarity to influence the mature students' experience and perception of HIVE study. A conversation with John about how mature students differed from young students sums this idea up,

> It sounds daft but they've [mature students] lived through a lot of things that young people physically can't have done because they haven't been around long enough! [laughs] you know? And that's not their fault, it's just a sheer fact of life. [John Interview 2: 16/06/2014]

John valued this diversity; the course was not just about him, it was important to him to think about everyone else too, and to think about their different abilities. John cared about his classmates' experience of the course. A number of conversations highlighted this. For example, when we were talking about the length of the course, and again when we were talking about preferred assessment style,

> Kate: So do you think that was easier than if you had done it full time over 2 years?
>
> John: erm... from my personal perspective I'd rather have done it in one year, personally, because I would much rather have just gone through and done it but then again some of the people on the course would have struggled with that, they would have really struggled with it cause they're only really just getting to grips with the academic side of it erm... whereas those of us who had done a level 3 were reasonably comfortable with themselves, so from a group perspective it's ideal. [John Interview 1: 21/11/2013]
>
> I quite like exams so, whereas I know some of the other people in the group, we did an exam for health and safety, no, ethical practice and they just didn't like the exams, they don't enjoy that kind of sitting down ... exams are better for me personally, as I group I think.... I don't think it is, but I'll go with whatever's there! [John Interview 2: 19/06/2014]

John's accounts demonstrate the struggle and conflict that arose from competing cultural forms in HE. One the one hand, John drew upon the logic of collective learning for the benefit of all, whilst simultaneously drawing upon a middle class cultural logic in HE of competition and separateness. A tension that was also demonstrated through the perception of collective learning as shared sense of experience, which also meant a sense of accountability. Small class sizes enabled a lot of class discussion. For those that may not

have done this in larger class sizes, it forced them to participate.  John compared this to how he imagined university: impersonal, with the ability to shrink into the background.

> I mean I guess because we are so few, you are exposed more and you have to contribute, whereas with a 180 people you could just sit there with your head down. [John Interview 1: 21/11/2013]

Jonathan had similar thoughts on his experience of collective learning or collaborative learning. For Jonathan, though, when working together there was far more pressure to make sure you pulled your weight as your performance would potentially affect someone else's work.

> Jonathan: Erm... you can feel a bit more pressured, because you have to get something done for somebody else it's not like you're just 'oh I've got this to do and I can hand it to the teacher', it's like somebody's waiting for it and if you've got an essay to write or something, I feel a bit pressured that way I must admit, 'cause you're trying to, you know you're doing it for someone else, it's not like you're just doing it for yourself if you don't do it then, you know it falls on you,
>
> Kate: Yeh so I suppose if you don't do it then....
>
> Jonathan: Yeh, it affects the group then. [Jonathan Interview 2: 30/04/2014]

It was acknowledged, however, that whilst this exposure and sense of responsibility to their peers could be quite daunting, it was far less daunting because of the FE surroundings. Engaging with discussion and debate in class in this way was also perceived as a definite advantage over study at a university.

> Here, it's relatively safe... and even here they're still a little bit constrained but nowhere near as much as they would be... in that environment. [John Interview 2: 19/06/2014]
>
> The tutors here, we all know them personally, the lectures can turn a lot more into a discussion, and then when you can discuss your ideas with a lecturer then that lecturer can put you in the right direction ... I like the fact that it can turn into a bit of a discussion and a bit of a joke sometimes, not in a bad way but you can sit and laugh about it and stuff. [Matt Interview 2: 23/05/2014]

These quotations demonstrate the importance of the particular social site of the college in which the mature students were participating in HE for the development of academic capital in a way that was consistent with the shared cultural logic of the mature students. Due to the FE environment, the practice of collective learning could be fostered and used for the benefit of its participants, in a way that they perceived impossible in a university setting. The informality of class practices and a greater emphasis on peer support for learning

demonstrates a move away from the view of tutor as expert. This rebalancing of power in the classroom shows how the role of tutor in HE in FE differs from what the students perceived this relationship to be in traditional HE, but also the emancipatory potential it can unfold for students that subscribe to this ideal. Furthermore, collective learning in this way was often one of the best ways for mature students to develop a greater understanding of course material. Group work, tasks and role play featured quite heavily in most students' experience. This shared sense of responsibility for learning was received well, and exposed students to new styles, techniques and ways of learning. Collaborative learning and shared responsibility for assessment allowed students to build up supportive networks with their peers. They encouraged each other, looked at each other's work and surprisingly there was no sense of protectiveness over work or ideas. In fact, rather than trying to master all elements of the course equally, they resourcefully drew upon each other's strengths. This was one of the ways that life experience capital, influenced by class and age based relations was mobilised to shape their experience. The working class cultural logic of shared and collective learning was reinforced by the benefits of this approach to learning experienced in the development of life experience capital throughout the life course. Both Matt and Clare spoke positively about how students traded each other's strengths to their advantage.

> Some of the maths side of stuff on the finance units, and maths has never been my strong suit, yeh, I had a lot of help from one of the guys, but he's not as comfortable with the sort of writing, so I've helped him a bit there, so I think that's been one of the most important things. [Matt Interview 2: 23/05/2014]

> Yeh I'm always asking because there is two younger lads on our course and they're an absolute whizz on the internet and doing all the computer generated CAD work, whereas I've never touched it before, and I always get help off them, so if I'm ever stuck and they're like, 'oh yeh, this is what you need to do' so it is, it is quite useful. [Clare Interview 1: 07/11/2013]

This sense of community was also advantageous as it provided much needed motivation for one another. This was important because of the dispersed nature of the mature student's participation in HIVE at the College. Matt described how the HE study room (the only dedicated HE space in the College, home to 10 computers) allowed him to experience a sense of community outside his course group.

> Matt: I think as well it seems like more of a little sort of community than the FE, you know FE in this College is like 5 floors or whatever, all doing FE, and it seems like they're just a bit sort of scattered everywhere, whereas the HE thing is a bit more like we're all part of one little group where we can all sort of get help from each other and I think when you're sat in the little study room round the corner, we can all sort of talk together about what courses we're doing…

> Kate: So you talk to other HE students?

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M:Yeh, yeh if we're all in there, there's been a lot of 2nd years doing what I'm doing, and they're sat in there, that I've spoke to, some sports tech ones that I've spoke to as well, but it seems a little bit more, you can just talk to people and yeh, everyone is a bit nicer about it sort of thing.

However, it was the collective sharing of different life experiences or the exchange of life experience capital, and application to the classroom that really made a difference in supporting learning at HE level. Nathan particularly valued the coming together of different trades (within the construction industry) to identify different angles on a particular problem or issue.

Nathan: Everyone in the class is from different backgrounds so we all put us heads together and talk about experiences ... we're all very enthusiastic which has helped with the learning process.

Kate: So you all bring different experiences and perspectives?

Nathan: Well that's what's good now 'cause, like in the past, other courses it's been primarily electricians, whereas this course, there's a sparky, joiner, you know, designer, so we've all got different viewpoints, and we do have some discussions about who's right and who's wrong on certain areas. [Nathan Interview 2: 22/04/2014]

The diversity of HE students in the College meant that individual's life experience capital could be exchanged and used in the development of academic capital through the process of collective learning. As can be seen by the way in which collective learning and the diversity of life experiences prompted the students to challenge taken for granted assumptions, and in doing so, enabled them to develop academic capital in the form of critical thinking skills.

When people chip in and bring a point up and I think 'oh yeh yeh, that's a good point' because we don't do that in my setting. I hadn't thought that you might have to do that and it's nice to see the differences.... yeh, definitely learning from each other. [Carolyn Interview 1: 04/11/2014]

Challenging those assumptions in the classroom led to an increased awareness of taken for granted assumptions in everyday life. For John, it was in his practice at work.

I think I'm more thoughtful about what I do, I spend a bit more time when I do have time in work to stop and think 'oh yeh, I should do that' or 'I could have done that' or 'I should have done that different' and also when you're talking to other people in the group you get input from them as well, which is nice.... and also give yours as well... which is nice. [John Interview 2: 19/06/2014]

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Exchanging life experience capital to challenge assumptions and initiate debate through collective learning was one of the ways that supported the practice associated most commonly with HE – critical thinking.

## Critical Thinking

Critical thinking can be defined in many ways; this is because critical thinking means different things in different contexts. For Clare critical thinking was concerned with the problems associated with the transference of practical skills to real life contexts. This involved a certain degree of empathy, which is rooted in a working class construction of education and practice underpinned by values of solidarity and sharing, rather than a middle class construction underpinned by values of individual competition.

> An interesting comment Clare made was about her father trying to 'help' with some of her design work. He had amended a piece by adding flowers and fruits to it. Clare was rather upset by this and was saying 'he just doesn't get it, you can't just do that because you think it looks nice?! It's got to follow the brief! It's not about what you like, it's about what the client likes! What was interesting about what she was saying is that when Clare first started she found the idea of designing something to someone else's requirements unfathomable, especially if it conflicted with her ideas of what 'looked nice'. [Clare Fieldwork: 06/11/2013]

The transferral of critical thinking skills to practice and wider lives could be seen in other mature students' accounts too. Donna felt like she was able to put together an argument now and this was useful for her cleaning business. She could successfully argue the terms of a contract in order to make sure that she was not taken advantage of. This demonstrates the emancipatory potential of mobilizing critical thinking and academic capital outside of the educational site.

> I can sort of like argue the point with somebody in a proper manner, you know if someone disagrees with whatever and I can say 'well you know, it's X,Y and Z and this is why I feel like it's X,Y and Z' it's sort of like given me that extra boost, whereas I would have just at one time said 'oh right if that's how you feel then that's fine'. [Donna Interview 2: 12/06/2014]

The practice of critical thinking in this context often resulted in a questioning of not just vocational practices but the nature of knowledge itself. In particular, Nathan demonstrated how he had come to see knowledge as something that was fluid, and in many ways fallible.

> Kate: Is discussion important?

Nathan: I think so, yeh, cause you get a better understanding, you can see other people's points of view, there's no right or wrong way, I mean there's right ways but people have got different ideas and there's many different ways to do certain things you know, if one person was just telling you, this is how you do it, you know? This is the way to do it, what if they're slightly wrong? You know, they don't know everything. [Nathan Interview 2: 22/04/2014]

Developing critical thinking in practice involved a move away from seeing the breadth of knowledge as the focus and towards a focus on depth instead. John had similar notions of knowledge to Jonathan, who equated intensity of the learning with the amount of contact time and work to do. However, when John accepted that this might not be the case in this context, he was able to start engaging with knowledge in a way that would be more beneficial to him.

I mean now I've accepted the part time notion and the fact I can only go at the pace of the course, it's actually allowed me more time to go and delve into things a bit more so I guess on that basis I'm actually learning more because I'm actually able to read more and spend more time on it, which is helpful. [John Interview 1: 21/11/2013]

Similarly, although Donna appeared to engage in critical thinking regularly, she still perceived breadth of knowledge as a potential barrier to her learning. She demonstrated this during conversations about her progression. She now had her sights on a Masters or PhD when she finished, and she believed that it would be easier, as she would only focus on one topic.

Donna told me that she had been thinking about her progression and that she wanted to do a Master's degree or PhD. She explained how this would be easier than the foundation degree and the top-up because she would only be required to study one aspect of drama in depth, so she could be more 'critical'. As she was explaining, Tom the acting tutor joined in the conversation, who confirmed her ideas about this - although Tom does not have a Masters degree or PhD himself. [Donna Fieldwork: 23/01/2014]

The construction of critical thinking for the mature students also involved analysis and debate, as well as being able to use and work with knowledge, and not just report it. Some described it as exposure to a bigger picture and an opening up of thinking. For others, there was a more personal element to it; making arguments, using opinions and 'adding your own ideas' were common descriptions of what critical thinking involved. Being allowed to have your own interpretation and opinions about something was quite liberating, as was challenging the taken for granted. Matt found this approach to knowledge refreshing, it suited his style of learning and legitimated the agency he exercised in his learning.

It's come quite naturally because I've always preferred that sort of style anyway, and I always like to sort of, not argue things, but question things, and then I like to

you know? I never go and find something and then take that as pure fact, I'm like, 'well what if we could do this?' or 'what if we use that and did this?' So I've always liked to sort of put my own ideas into things, I never sort of take anything at first glance, yeh, face value, I never like to take things like that. I like to delve deeper into it and add my own ideas. [Matt Interview 2: 23/05/2014]

John felt that this approach to knowledge was supported quite naturally by the diversity of backgrounds in the classroom.

I mean because of the people that I work with, and go to College with, it's almost like a constant reminder that you know? People aren't the same as you, and people don't have the same ideas and stuff. So it's a good reminder to, you know? Don't judge it by the cover I think. [John Interview 2: 19/06/2014]

Although in practice John found challenging his own assumptions, particularly at work, a lot harder than he had imagined.

You go into work and I just do it... it's making me stop and... Have to stop and actively think about 'Why did I do that?' 'What was my rationale?' 'What was the driver behind?' I actually brought it up at work actually, yeh it is, it's harder. [John Interview 2: 19/06/2014]

John told me another account when he was challenged to question something at work. One of the women that John worked with was in respite, and she came back with blisters and burns on her arms. It made him question whether he should file a report or not, and to consider what the conditions were that led the woman to sustain the injuries. Being able to think in this way was one of the most transferable and empowering practices he had engaged with. John had also always maintained that he was doing a degree for himself and not to improve his job prospects or get a promotion to manager. After engaging with critical thinking at work, he wanted to be in a position where he could influence and challenge some of the practices at his place of work that he did not feel were appropriate.

Kate: OK, so can you see a difference in yourself from when you first started?

John: Yeh, both in terms of knowledge, but also in terms of ambition. I like to use what I've got. I don't want to be a central manager or anything, but I'd like to be in a position where I can have more direct influence on what goes on 'cause I don't think we do things particularly well....

Kate: Is that a result of....

John: Partly it's a result of the course, and actually I can critique in what I see more, whereas I wouldn't have it done before, I would have thought, 'I've got two and a half years to go, just forget it!' But now I'm thinking, 'I've only got two and a half years, that's crap!' But the way we do things is poor. [John Interview 2: 19/06/2014]

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As with John, the mature students' experience of engaging with forms of critical thinking was refreshing, if not emancipating or transformational. However, often the mature students were able to think critically about the reality of others – but not themselves. A very superficial engagement with self-awareness through reflective practice often stopped the mature students from seeing the injustices of their own realities. Perhaps this is one of the ways in which a counter-hegemonic element of HIVE practice, reflective practice, is incorporated into the formal curriculum and loses its emancipatory possibilities (Giroux, 1983a).

> I don't know if that's just because I don't know why we're doing it. A lot of the time when I'm sort of writing a reflective review, it seems like I'm just bambling on and that sort of thing, so I don't feel it's that useful. It's useful to get my grade up obviously but… the actual reflecting on…. I've never been one for reflection. [Matt Interview 2: 23/05/2014]

This is not surprising, however, given that reflective practice had never formally featured in their previous educational experiences in FE. Therefore, academic capital developed in previous educational experiences undermined this practice, stripping it of any counter-hegemonic qualities (Giroux, 1983a). And even though it was introduced as an essential skill in vocational HE, it was often treated, as Matt demonstrates, as an 'add on' and not embedded within other practices. Matt's interpretation of reflective practice in this way, may also suggest a perceived binary separation between theory and practice in HE and FE. Because the binary is hierarchical, the application of theory to practice is somehow tainted in Matt's mind, as can be seen in his narrative in chapter 4. This example leads to questions about how the mature students defined and interpreted the differences between other HE and FE practices, which is the theme of the next section.

## Differences between HE and FE

To describe the mature students' experiences of higher education, most of the mature students had to compare their experiences of vocational education to what they currently did. This section used the concepts of academic, and life experience capital to analyse how class intersects with age to influence the mature students' perceptions of HE study, and their relations with FE study. It outlines some of the ways that their HE learning differed from the mainly vocational (FE) courses they had undertaken up until this point.

In terms of the content, the mature students felt that they learned a lot more during their HE experience, particularly when compared to work based and on the job qualifications such as NVQs. Both Matt and Carolyn had experiences of these types; they felt that these
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qualifications did not challenge them, but confirmed that what they had been doing in practice at their places of work was indeed, good practice.

> I think the difference is that with the NVQ I didn't actually learn anything, whereas I do actually feel like I'm learning now, looking deeper into things. NVQ3, it's just about your experience 'I did this at work, I looked at this policy, and this is why we do it this way' - now I'm actually learning.  [Carolyn Interview 1: 04/11/2013]

As a mature student with a significant amount of life experience capital related to the labour market, vocational education and qualifications held fewer developmental possibilities for Carolyn which affected her perceptions of the value of FE in relation to HE.

One reason for this could be the increased focus on theory, reading, research and writing required at HE level. Nathan felt this difference too, and emphasised that he wasn't just training to do a particular job on the course, it was about more than that.

> It's much more theory based I suppose, 'cause all my other training has been - you learn something and then you go and do it straight away. Whereas this is more of the theory side of it, like I've got to research things and write about it, as opposed to actually going and building a house and stuff. [Nathan Interview 2: 22/04/2014]

Nathan also felt that because everyone on his course was older and they had all already trained in industry and had chosen to pay their fees, they all wanted to be there, which made a difference to the outlook of the group.

> I think one of the key changes between this course and previous courses is that we're all older and we've all chose to pay our money, and come and do this, and we all want to be here. Whereas in the past, some kids didn't want to be there completely, and were doing it cause they had to do it. Whereas this one, we all want to be there and we're all very enthusiastic, which has helped with the learning process. [Nathan Interview 1: 12/11/2013]

The difference in depth and application of knowledge can also be seen in approaches to research and writing. John explained that he could 'get away with' just using websites when he was doing his access course, but he could not now.

> It's like again, the kind of depth you can get away with. I don't know? Researching all the websites on my access course? That sounds a bit like a generalisation, but now you've actually got to have like books, articles, and journals, there's a lot more expected of you in that sense. You need to be a bit more rounded than in FE. [John Interview 1: 21/11/2013]

A sense of challenge was observed throughout the mature students' experiences of HE in FE. During one conversation, Donna recalled how, when she first started the course she was

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challenged by a young member of the group as to why she had not taken the traditional route onto the degree and had skipped the L3 diploma. However, when asked to reflect on this conversation, Donna had no regret for not doing a L3 first, as she enjoyed the challenge and the 'push' from tutors.

Clare also felt that she had benefited from being pushed by tutors, and from having increased support. The experience of increased support was attributed to the 'nice mix of HE and FE'. The environment was seen as more relaxed, they were treated with more respect and they had more autonomy and control over their learning than they had previously experienced in FE. Matt explained that whilst this autonomy challenged him, it also made it more interesting and gave him a sense of being an individual rather than a number.

> I think the work in general, the way that you write your essays, is more individual rather than at an FE level. All the essays would be pretty much the same, you know? 'There is the facts about this' and 'there are the facts about that', whereas at HE level we're all putting our own ideas and individuality into it. So I imagine for a tutor it's more fun to read, but yeh I think it's definitely more individualized like that, in that sort of sense. [Matt Interview 1: 06/12/2013]

An exploration of HIVE practices has enabled the underlying discourse of the HE curriculum, with its emphasis on individual rather than collective appropriation of knowledge, to be exposed. The next section presents an analysis of how the mature student perception of this discourse may drive a wedge between students from different social classes (Giroux, 1983b).  However, for now, it is clear that the practices that define HE in FE for mature students all contribute to a sense of individuality. Independent learning was concerned with moving away from previously experienced tutor/student relationships and balancing relations of power through mutual respect. In many cases this was experienced as empowering, but in some it could be alienating and intimidating. This could be countered, however, by the practice of collective learning, which enriched the experience of HE in FE. The practice of collective learning was important for the mature students as it enabled them to legitimately use their life experience capital as a resource for HE study. It was enriching because mature students were exposed to the diversity of other students' lives, which broadened their thinking and opened them up to alternative realities. This helped stimulate an engagement with critical thinking, a practice that often transcends the classroom and assignments to affect personal and working lives. However, a repressive limitation of critical thinking in this context is that it was often removed from those ideas of the self and critical reflection that would enable students to question their own reality and position. Exactly *how*

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the mature students positioned themselves and constructed 'others' through the process of individuation is discussed in the next section.

## *Individuation – Resistance that confirms the dominating social order*

Individuation is the process by which social individuals become differentiated from one another (Seidman & Gruber, 1977). This theme illustrates how the process manifests among mature students in HE in FE. It also points to how the cumulative effects of individuation and everyday practices reinforces the HE/FE divide and thus the reproduction of hierarchical differences in knowledge to be discussed further in the discussion chapter. Three interrelated themes make up this section; they are 'the self', 'the other' and 'class and age based assumptions'. Individuation is inextricably linked to practice and it is therefore shaped by – and shapes- the practices highlighted in the previous section. Using Giroux's framework of resistance in education, this section presents an analysis of the process of individuation as oppositional behaviour to establish whether the positioning of the mature students in relation to their FE peers constitutes resistance. It explores the extent to which this resistance is an expression of the dominant ideology with regards to the hierarchical relationship between HE and FE. Giroux (1983b) argues that, rather than a reaction to limited power and oppression by dominant social forces, oppositional behaviour may be an expression of individual power informed by a dominating logic and hierarchical structures. In this case, educational establishments become the sites where the dominating logic of power is reinforced. Collectively, the development of academic capital by mature students and associated practices reveals the underlying interests of that resistance as an expression of power informed by a dominating logic. Individual resistance, however, may represent a form of resistance that is grounded in individual emancipatory interests. That is, the desire to become more mobile.

## Class and age based Assumptions

In order to understand the process of individuation and resistance as 'othering', it is important to understand the class and age based assumptions that inform the underlying interests of this oppositional behaviour. Collectively, assumptions amongst the mature students about further and higher education contribute to the formation of a hybrid counter-culture that shapes, and is shaped by HE in FE learning practices explored in the previous chapter. Many of the mature students had not known that the local College offered HE qualifications, as they assumed that degree qualifications were only available at a

university. This is one of the ways in which class and age intersect to influence mature student understandings of the relationship between HE and FE. Many of the mature students were from a generation that associated the further education college with training in working class vocations and therefore did not associate the college with degree education. Most of the mature students had come to the College to participate in further education because they did not think they had the right entry requirements to participate in HE, they did not have the right academic capital.

> Clare: I just thought a degree, gosh that was way.... I could not even achieve that with not having any qualifications at school. I thought there's just no way could I be able to get on, and obviously being dyslexic it made it even harder for me.
>
> Kate: So did you realise you could do a sort of degree at the College, or did you think you'd have to do it.....?
>
> Clare: No! I just thought university, straight away, definitely.
>
> Kate: So were you surprised when your friend told you?
>
> Clare: Yeh, I was shocked, very shocked. Obviously well, that's when I looked into it further. [Clare Interview 1: 07/11/2013]

What was also interesting was the commonly held assumption that once a person had committed to either a vocational or an academic pathway, there was little opportunity to change this. Many of the mature student's understandings of entry to university reflected a system whereby there were few vocational pathways to HE. This age informed assumption may have also been reinforced by classed understandings of the division between mental and manual labour (Giroux, 1983b). As discussed in his individual case, Matt had tried A-Levels and decided they were not for him, and instead chose to go into joinery. However, when the recession hit Matt had to reconsider his career options; making the distinctions between peers that had gone straight into work and those that had continued to university.

> To be honest, I didn't really know much about HE. I only sort of knew about the traditional route of A-Levels, university, 'cause that was what most people who hadn't gone straight into work had taken that sort of route, and I felt like maybe I've missed my opportunity to sort of do that. [Matt Interview 1: 06/12/2013]

These class and age based assumptions are grounded in views about the value and compatibility of academic and vocational knowledge, which are common among the mature students' accounts.  John, who studied an Access to HE course before coming to study a foundation degree at the College, assumed that his class's struggles were due to the incompatibility between the two.

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> I think [sighs] some have really struggled with it, the academic side of it 'cause they've not had that kind of background in academic study, or erm... the ability to understand some of the concepts, even some of the words! Words I find relatively straight forward, people are sort of, looking at for the first time. [John Interview 2: 19/06/2014]

Assumptions about HE practices were also to some extent informed by family and friends' experiences of university. However, as older students, often family and friends' experiences of university cultures had taken place in a time of a more elite - rather than mass system of HE. This meant that mature students' assumptions about HE often reflected some of the more, and perhaps out-dated, practices of that time.

> I know the sort of lecturing style is going in with a group of, could be hundreds of people, and sit there and listen and walk out, and you never have any sort of one to one aspect with that lecturer. Whereas here, the groups are small a lot of the time. Lecturers, you know? A lecturer in a university won't know the sort of 50-60 people sat around in front of him. He wouldn't know any of them. [Matt Interview 1: 06/12/2013]

All of the mature students expressed very similar assumptions about the way the HE practices they participated in differed in a university setting. Classed understandings of HE study, with a focus on the individual rather than collective appropriation of knowledge were displayed as horror stories about the impersonal and unsupportive practices of the ivory tower. These were told amongst the students, and this assumption was somewhat confirmed by exasperated tutors telling them 'they wouldn't get this level of support at a university'.

> Just knowing that I've got that help if I need it and struggle, it's a nice thought. But at uni you're on your own, really. This is just like, I know there is help and support if I need it, which is more comforting for me, knowing that it's there, and that's the scary bit. When you go to uni, there probably will be help and support but not as frequent maybe? Yeh, well it's the independent learning that they like. [Clare Interview 2: 16/05/2014]

Confirmation of these assumptions by tutors and those in positions of authority could be seen as leverage to stop students from questioning the parity of esteem between traditional university HE and vocational HE. The idea of the unsupportive university was also capitalized on in the College marketing materials, with many of its higher education campaigns reinforcing the notion of increased support 'compared to university'. For some of the mature students, it is for these reasons that they did not consider university as an option to them.

> I don't think I would have survived at [university]. No way, and I wouldn't have done it. I know I wouldn't have done it, because you don't get that one to one tuition in

the bigger organisations, I know you don't, I've even been told. [Donna Interview 1: 08/12/2013]

The mature students spoke similarly about their assumptions of the impersonal and inflexible nature of university HE. Both Matt and Nathan's accounts of College HE highlight the risks for working class students participating in university HE due to the perceived inflexibility of university degree programmes.

> I'd started looking into what a HND was and what am I gonna get out of this sort of thing, but then I found out you can go on and do your top up in a 3rd year if that's what you wanna do so. So I thought well that's really good. I mean 'cause if I did go on to a university course, then it would be 3 years, and if it's not right for you and you drop out or whatever, then you don't really leave… then you don't really come out with anything. But if I do this then, in two years, do my HND, see how I feel, then and if I want to top it up then you know? I'll get my BA, I have that option if I like. [Matt Interview 1: 06/12/2013]

> I was interested in doing architecture, but I didn't want to commit to the two or three years, and I didn't want to drop out. I mean if you do a year or two at university, if you drop out then you've got nothing have you? [Nathan Interview 2: 22/04/2014]

Whilst increased support may have been one of the reasons mature students decided to study HE in a College, most of the mature students rejected the notion of this additional support in the name of independent learning. Matt explained how he thought that his experience should be as similar to a university experience as possible, to create a sense of parity for himself.

> Personally, I like the idea of the whole scholarly research sort of thing. That's sort of like how I like to do my work. But I also know that the support isn't as much as it should or could be sometimes, depending on what I'm saying I'm doing, 'cause i'm sort of pretty independent about it. I kind of feel like if that is how I should be doing it there, then that is how I should be doing it here. [Matt Interview 2: 23/05/2014]

Resistance to approaches or practices that were seen as 'FE' in the search for parity of esteem between College HE and university HE, meant the mature students often reinforced the perceived hierarchy of knowledge between FE and HE. For Matt, the common practice amongst BTEC qualifications to submit multiple drafts of the same piece of coursework went against his assumptions of what HE should be.

> I mean I always try to get my assignments in so that I don't really need any feedback, but that's just me being how I am. I mean, I always try to put, you know? All the effort I can into a particular assignment, and I don't hand it in until I'm perfectly happy that it is to a high standard and because I've learned how everything is marked now and what you need to do to hit certain grades. I've got a good idea of

what I'm going to get before I hand it in. So I think for me, the feedback is only useful if I have just missed something or done something a little bit wrong. I don't like the idea of, which obviously it's good for some people when they're saying how you could get it up to the next level sort of thing, but I'd like to think that I can do that without the feedback. And then maybe you know, 'maybe this could be better next time' but not this time. [Matt Interview 2: 23/05/2014]

Whilst many of the mature students dismissed a conscious acknowledgement of the HE/FE divide, their class and aged based assumptions reinforced their accounts of how they constructed their experience, and often suggested otherwise. Matt rejected the idea of his qualification being 'vocational', and due to lack of recognition of its value in relation to a traditional degree, he would often gloss over the detail when explaining it to friends. The qualification's roots in, and association with, further education caused it to depreciate somewhat for him.

Sometimes, it's a lot easier if you're sat at the pub with a few people and that, and they're like 'what are you doing?' and I'm like 'I'm just doing a business degree' and just leave it at that because I can't be bothered explaining. So, yeh, it's harder to explain what you do when you're at a college, but you're doing a higher level course. I mean I'm quite secure about it, I don't know how the other people in the class feel about it, but I do know when I have mentioned it to like friends and they're like 'oh, are you just going back to College again, then?' and I'm like well no, not exactly, you know? There can be that view of it. [Matt Interview 1: 06/12/2013]

As can be seen by Matt's account, most of the students displayed a resistance to their experience being labelled vocational, even though this was the official label of a foundation degree or HND/C. For them, there was no difference between what they were doing and what they assumed to be done at a university, and their resistance to practices that undermined the esteem of what they were undertaking demonstrates an agency in shaping how this type of higher education is experienced. One of the ways they resisted this was by using their previous experience of FE to undermine vocational or lower level learning.   In addition to this, assumptions they made about FE and what it was worth also reflected these ideas. Conversations with Donna during fieldwork led to further conversations of her perceived value of higher education over further education.

You know? A BA looks better on your CV than a diploma or whatever, [laughs] do you know what I mean? [Donna Fieldwork: 23/01/2014]

It appears then that this oppositional behaviour represents an expression of power by the mature students that supports the dominant ideology that positions higher education as superior to further education. However, in order to justify their own participation in higher education as older working class students without traditional entry requirements, the

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mature students used 'life experience' as capital, and did so under the assumption that it had the same exchange value as the traditional entry qualifications. In an interview with Donna, she told a story about her first day on the course when she was getting to know the other students. As the only mature student of the group, she was confronted by a rather blunt question.

> Because Lydia actually said to me, 'don't you think you should have done a diploma level or something first?' And I thought, and it was then, that I knew. No, I've got my lifetime's skills behind me, that'll see me through. Do you know what I mean? And as difficult as it's been, and it has been, that was my, that was how I could get it clear in my head. When Lydia said that, well 'what are you doing here?' 'You should have gone and done a diploma level first, blah blah blah', I just thought NO. [Donna Interview 1: 08/12/2013]

## The Other

The mature students identified themselves differently in two ways, as mature, and as HE students. As HE students they identified themselves as consumers, through a sense of entitlement attached to their fee paying status and in recognition of undertaking an academic qualification as opposed to 'others' doing vocational FE courses. However, as mature students they identified as lifelong learners, something that differentiated them from younger learners and made their experience unique.

> I think, 'cause kids, you're at school for such a long time, from 4-16... then you go on to your 6th form. Then you do your College for another 2 years, and I think kids today just get, or they think 'I've had enough' of learning, and they want to experience and earn the money. [Clare Interview 1: 07/11/2013]

In some ways being 'young' and 'not HE' was one and the same thing. As younger students, the mature students often felt they were not able to truly appreciate the potential of their experience. However, the life experience capital the mature students possessed was a greater advantage and preparation for HE than the qualifications the younger students had.

> I mean on the course that I'm on, there's only one person on our course who's actually come straight up through College level. Oh no, there's two actually. And I think they seem to work a lot more like they would at FE level, at College level. Whereas the rest of us, we all have different life experiences, and different ways we want to do things. So I think we've all got our own different learning views and learning styles, and I think we can sort of, it is catered for, all of them. But yeh, I think there's definitely a difference between people who have come straight up, and then people who have come from work. [Matt Interview 2: 23/05/2014]

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The use of 'life experience capital' as a vehicle for mobilization in HE reflects an alternative logic to accepted class based forms of capital for success in HE, such as cultural and academic capital. Therefore, to some extent, 'age' or life experience capital was able to counter effect the negative structure of 'class' in successful participation in HE. One of the difficulties Matt found with the younger students was that he felt they were often unable to think outside the box. He attributed this to the FE style of learning they had been engaged in up until now, for example 'just having to write down facts' and other practices the mature students identified as being 'FE'.

> I think some people are struggling more than others to go onto that next level of, having their own interpretations of things. They just sort of, you know? Find a thing, and then write about the topic that we're writing about. I think a few of us, 'cause we've been sort of, we have had lectures in sort of how we should be doing it, but I think people are finding it more difficult to put their own ideas into it. [Matt Interview 2: 23/05/2014]

Whilst the mature students had a strong sense of how they identified as different from younger students, they often sympathised with them too. John often reflected on how hard it was for young people to enter the labour market now, particularly those that had trained in FE for occupations they could not get employment in. However, John felt that the younger students benefited from the diversity of life experiences that the mature students brought – particularly in relation to developing 'life skills'.

> Kate: Yeh, I suppose in your group, some of the younger ones might be developing those skills from interacting with people and…
>
> John: You'd like to think so, because again, I think they're being forced to, forced to study and forced to actually deliver on time. And with feedback from the older members of the cohort, they'll learn how they should behave you know? With like work ethics and stuff, hopefully it does, some of it does get absorbed.
>
> Kate: So you pass on your experience in a way?
>
> John: Expectations and things, of what it's going to be like when they do have to work in the real world. Things like that mentoring scheme, where they have people come in and actually mentor some of the students. I think that's a really good idea, because again, people have got different experiences and just to give someone a different way of thinking about something might help them to suddenly realise, a light bulb moment. [John Interview 2: 19/06/2014]

In most of the mature students' opinions, the younger students who had progressed internally (with a lack of 'life experience') also lacked skills and attitudes such as punctuality and respect. As someone who had trained with the College and has subsequently returned for various other courses, Nathan reflected on his own experience to try to explain the reasons for those differences between them and younger students.

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It's like I'm an older student I suppose. It's hard to explain but you've already got more, I mean you don't have loads, but you've got more life experiences than you had when you were younger. And you've got other stuff going on, like I say, I run my own business so I've got that to deal with, which I might not have had in the past. So you've got to find time to do it, I mean you've already got more responsibility. I mean people have got kids and stuff, I don't have that, so they've got responsibilities elsewhere, whereas in the past we didn't. [Nathan Interview 2: 22/04/2014]

A lack of 'life experience' and understanding of the labour market could account for the differences in attitude towards study between younger and older students. Again, Nathan uses his own experience of being a younger student in this setting to articulate this; a conversation we had about his experience of the labour market had changed his attitude towards study as a mature HE student.

Kate: So have you seen a change in yourself over the last couple of years?

Nathan: Well yeh, again, the sitting down and actually working, as opposed to just not, you know on the weekend? more determination maybe?

Kate: Is that something that's different with age?

Nathan: Possibly yes, I think the course and that have coincided quite nicely.

Kate: Could you have seen yourself doing that when you were 16?

Nathan: No, well I did work hard when I was 16 really, but I was doing it at work so I suppose I was getting paid for it so it's slightly different. But when I was 16 there is no way I would have just sat doing work on a Saturday afternoon, no way.

Kate: Being a mature student now…. Has your outlook changed?

Nathan: Yeh, you realize it's more important to get the qualifications. Yeh you do realize it's more important. I wouldn't say I look back and wish I had done it when I was younger because…. Erm but now that I'm older I do realize that I have to do it now.

Kate: Why do you have to do it?

Nathan: 'Cause you need the paperwork to get a job and money, experience doesn't really count. You need experience, but you need the qualification as well to get your foot in the door. [Nathan Interview 2: 22/04/2014]

The mature students unanimously felt that due to their life experiences they were getting more out of their HE experience than the younger students. They had no way of knowing this for sure, but this was one of the ways they justified the exchange value of their 'life experience capital'. The mobilization of life experience capital constructs their perceptions of

HE study and therefore their relations with FE, and FE students, and as such informed the resistance displayed. In our conversations, Donna often expressed frustration at younger people in education and how they, in her opinion, take the experience for granted. She described a workshop she had attended at a university, where she had taken the initiative and contacted the organiser to see if she could attend as a guest.

> She's just brilliant, so obviously all what she's learnt and techniques and everything, that's what she held her workshop on it was amazing. Absolutely amazing. But I felt again, like a mature student. I felt there were so many younger people who were wanting to be like, therapy play workers and everything. They were there, and they were fortunate to have that time with her. I felt like erm... like I could identify, half of them didn't want to be there, and it was such a shame they couldn't realise the essence and the value from her it was just.... and I thought 'I can't believe it! I can't believe it!', and there were times she'd just glare at them, and just had this look, you know? And they kind of like knew then, like crikey, 'embrace what you've got here!' But that's the younger generation for you I suppose! [Donna Interview 2: 12/06/2014]

Whilst Clare had often talked about the value of a mix of ages in her group, and the support she had received from younger students with aspects of the course such as operating design computer software, she also strongly identified a difference in attitude to younger students. Towards the end of her studies, we talked at length about what she would do when she graduated and what she had gained from the course, and she would compare herself to younger students to demonstrate this.

> Kate: That's a really good way to look at it! So has everyone in the group had a similar experience to you?
>
> Clare: Oh yeh, most definitely 'cause we got together last week, a few of us met up, not all the group. For me I've learned a lot, and I'm going to put what I've learnt into practice. But there's some other students on the course that I feel that it's just been, they're not going to do anything with it, and it's a shame because they're very talented, but I suppose it's not worked for them what it has for myself. But they're a lot younger, and I do believe being a more mature student, I wanted to get what I've got badly and some, you know? [Clare Interview 2: 16/05/2014]

The process of 'othering' younger or more traditional 'FE' students and identifying as mature students was one way of resisting the vocational or what is described in this thesis as 'FE-ness' of their HE experience. Age intersected with class here, as the mature students mobilized life experience capital associated with age, to resist working class associations of FE with their HE experience. However, in resisting FE-ness and subscribing to a HE 'ethos', the mature students alienated themselves from FE 'others' and collectively contributed to the reproduction of the HE/FE divide.

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Sometimes, the way and extent to which the mature students expressed dissatisfaction with not being distinguished from their FE colleagues by the institution could be interpreted as consumerist. However, it appears that exercising their rights as consumers through the College feedback and quality processes was an act of resistance to being labelled as vocational learners along with the FE students. In this way, students had chosen to use consumerist ideas as a vehicle for effectively exercising their agency in a way that may effect change. Student focus group documents often reflected the students' sense of entitlement, as 'paying customers', particularly in relation to non-paying FE students.

> The group are unhappy that previously their room had a water cooler, a fridge and a kettle. The group felt that they were not treated like adults and that they would like the food in classrooms policy to be reviewed for HE learners. [Design Practice focus group document: 20/11/2013]

As can be seen by these senses of entitlement, the boundaries were blurred between being a mature learner (being treated like an 'adult') and a HE student. In some ways this view point reflects the societal inequalities in participation in education. HE students were mature and working with theoretical and abstract forms of knowledge, and therefore felt like they deserved privilege over the young FE students that were training with practical types of knowledge.

> One student suggested that a HE student handbook should be distributed at the beginning of the year to inform students of the different services and privileges they can access from the College as a HE student.[Health and Social Care focus group document: 14/11/2013]

Ironically, in spite of the lengths the students would go to in order to disassociate themselves from the FE community, part of the search for a distinct HE ethos was to build a community, as HE students often felt they were marginalised as minorities in the College.

> Students commented that they would really like a social/common room for HE students. They see that there could be opportunities for students to network and collaborate if they can share a social space. For example, Acting Performance students working with Sound and Music on performances. [Sound and Music focus group document: 22/05/2014]

But this often played out as resentment at the perception that the privilege they deserved was not being met by the College. The students often complained that their needs were not met, that FE students were valued over HE students and the value of the type of education they were undertaking was not recognised by the College.

> The group commented on the studio space:

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- At induction they were informed that they would have priority to use the space between 16.00 – 20.00
- In practice they have been turned away a lot, while level 2 and 3 learners have been using the space [Sound and Music focus group document: 22/05/2014]

The underlying interests that inform this resistance could therefore be seen as rooted in an expression of power by the mature students that subscribes to and reinforces the dominant ideology that positions HE as superior to FE, rather than challenges it. It may have been because of this that some of the mature students resisted association with the FE community by alienating themselves from the rest of College. Matt was the most extreme example of this type of resistance.

When I was coming to a college rather than a university, I think one of the main things for me was 'oh, there's going to be loads of kids around' sort of thing, and it's all gonna be sort of catered to that, that sort of way. I mean obviously we do have the HE department up here that separates us from the rest. [Matt Interview 2: 23/05/2014]

Matt's resistance was really interesting; he rejected anything that was vocationally orientated. He often expressed how it was only the academic side of 'things' he was concentrating on; research and writing were really important to him because of this. He also felt that employment got in the way of studies and suggested that vocational knowledge was 'teaching people things they already are doing in work', he was interested in the theoretical aspects of the course and closed himself off from 'the rest'.

Kate: So do you think it's important that HE is separate from the FE side in the College, or should it be integrated as a whole?

Matt:  For me I like that it's separate. I mean, I think if I had my own way, my ideas for it would be a totally separate venue. Again, I guess it depends on where you're coming from. I mean, if you've come up through, especially if you've come up through this College, then it's a nice little, say you've done two years on a course yeh, it's familiar sort of things. But I think for me, coming from away from it, whilst I've been here there's been really no need for me to be sort of integrate with the rest of the College. I sort of spend most of my time in the HE department, or up in the library, so I don't think there's a real need for the integration for me personally. [Matt Interview 2: 23/05/2014]

The process of 'othering' and assumptions made about what HE is, or should be about, enabled the mature students to position themselves in a space that resisted the vocational or FE label. This position may have also been influenced by the social practices and values embedded in the development of academic capital over a period of time.

## The Positioned Self

One of the most common ways that mature students positioned themselves is as someone, who for a range of factors was unable to participate in higher education when they were younger, but was benefitting from the academic experience now. Many had exhausted what FE and primarily vocational courses could offer them. Donna in particular, who had 'dabbled' in further education throughout her life, had found it difficult to engage in further education at all.

> But still, academically what have I done? I've tried to do an aromatherapy course at a College on nights, night school, but it was here [hand gestures low bar], it's not there [hand gestures high bar] and I struggled. I never had the confidence to see it through, so a year in I never completed the second year, and I always had that barrier. I couldn't get over it. [Donna Interview 2: 12/06/2014]

Donna's perceptions of her barriers as being due to the lack of challenge involved in her previous attempts at further education contradict the deficit model underpinning some understandings of barriers amongst mature students. The positioned self was also someone that takes responsibility for their own learning to make things happen in their life.

> At first, it was a definite 'I cannot do this, I'm going to have to back out' and I was almost on the scrapheap in my life, and I thought I can't back out. I can't. This is me now, on my own, and I've got to go for it. [Donna Interview 1: 08/12/2013]

Further to this, John's opinion on how the course would affect his life and social position reflected an ideology of education as a solely private good.

> If I succeed in this, it's only going to affect one person and that's me. It's not going to affect my job, or my marriage, or my social life. It's for me, not for anybody else. [John Interview 1: 21/11/2013]

And, in spite of the individuality of their experience, a lot of the mature students' accounts of their educational lives was at odds with the mature student stereotype of 'second chance learner' who was labelled as practical in school.

> Kate: So you weren't classed as sort of, practical at school?
>
> John: No no, I was always in the academic sets. So you know, at school I did enough to get by without really excelling. Which I probably could have done, but I guess since I've been working, and started learning again, I do push myself to try and be the best I can be. So my aim on this course is to get a distinction, if I didn't get that you know, I'd be pleased with a pass, but I suppose I'll be disappointed in myself if I don't achieve what I'm capable of. So yeh, a lot of it is driven by my need or desire

to get a degree, even though I'm not going to use it [laughs]! For anything in particular erm... it's just to say I've done it, to myself. [John Interview 2: 19/06/2014]

Whilst a foundation degree and other higher vocational qualifications have a vocational focus, the mature students positioned themselves as undertaking an academic qualification. Their perceptions of HIVE study and their focus on academic rather than vocational orientations may have been influenced by their age and class. As can be seen by their assumptions, class based understandings of the incompatibility between academic and vocational knowledge may have underpinned these perceptions. Because of this, often the students resisted the vocational label by playing down the vocational aspects of the degree.

I think it's academic yeh, the foundation degree. Even though it's got the work bit in it, you're not assessing work as in like personal care. This is like, I know why we do it and what the sort of protocols should be, and the kind of theory around it, rather than the actual sort of activity itself. So for me it's academic in that sense. [John Interview 2: 19/06/2014]

Matt went so far as to deliberately mislead those in his social circles as to the vocational status of his study. In contradiction however, Matt also insisted that he felt the value of his qualification was the same as a degree, and that is how he justified misleading his friends, as we have seen above , by referring to 'just doing a business degree' (pg. 126).

But I think, yeh I know, from talking to friends and things, that they say 'oh, you're going to College' rather than university. It seems to be, not looked down on as such, but it doesn't seem to be taken as that sort of higher level. [Matt Interview 2: 23/05/2014]

Although the mature students positioned themselves as academic rather than vocational, it was often material conditions that stopped them from participating in more traditional types of HE. Their 'vocational' courses were often a stepping stone to gaining a full undergraduate qualification, in spite of the policy vision of the foundation degree being a recognised HE qualification in its own right.

Carolyn: It was nothing that I'd ever considered doing earlier in my life but something I've fell into, that I really, really, really love, and the plan with work is that I do the foundation degree, then the top-up and, and then possibly what was GTP.

Kate: So the FD isn't directly related to your job then?

Carolyn: No, but it is a route to teaching. [Carolyn Interview 1: 04/11/2013]

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This theme demonstrates that the oppositional behaviour of 'othering' their younger and FE peers represents an expression of power by the mature students that in turn supports the dominant ideology that positions higher education as superior to further education. The development of academic capital and associated practices informs resistance as an expression of power informed by a dominating logic. This theme also demonstrates how mature students resist certain features of vocational education to legitimate their educational goals. This represents a form of resistance that is grounded in individual emancipatory interests – the desire to become more mobile – rooted in middle class constructions of higher education. This enabled them to position themselves as 'others' away from traditional participants of FE through individuation. However, although in an elite HE sector undergraduate education was a traditional marker of social position, in a mass HE sector this may no longer be the case. The mature students therefore occupy a 'third space' that serves to maintain inequality of participation in HE by reproducing a false notion of meritocracy. The third space also reproduces inequalities between participants of HE and FE by reinforcing the disparity of esteem between and within the two sectors. Contrary to policy assumptions, what the process of individuation by these mature students shows is that HE in FE does not necessarily cater for students who want vocationally orientated HE, but that it may be a vehicle for placating those individuals who have been excluded from other, more traditional types of HE. The next theme of Lifelong Learning in HIVE explores these ideas further, by considering the mature students interpretation of the purpose of HE in general, and specifically in their experience of HIVE.

## Lifelong Learning – Resistance that challenges the dominating social order

This overarching theme demonstrates how mature students challenged discourses of employability and instead subscribed to values of lifelong learning. It explains how lifelong learning and employability are perceived and enacted by the mature students in contradiction to policy conceptions of the terms. This section presents an analysis of oppositional behaviours associated with discourses of employability and lifelong learning to establish whether the positioning of mature students constitutes resistance. Under Giroux's (1983b) framework of resistance it is important to understand how groups of students embody both reactionary and progressive behaviours in relation to education. The previous section highlights the way in which the mature students embodied reactionary behaviours through the development of academic capital that is informed by a dominating logic. This section thus analyses the progressive behaviours and attitudes of the mature students that are displayed in parallel to those discussed in the previous section. It explores how life

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experience capital, the interests of which lie in a liberating logic, informs resistance to oppressive structures. This represents a form of resistance that is grounded in collective emancipatory interests – the acknowledgement of alternative valuable forms of working class and age based capital for entry to, and success in HE. In doing so, it illuminates how students draw on the limited resources at their disposal, in order to reaffirm the positive dimensions of their own cultures and histories (Giroux, 1983b) – their histories and 'life experience' capital as an asset to HE study. In the previous section, the mature students understandings of HE, informed by class and age based assumptions, were explored in order to reveal how the development of academic capital resulted in resistant behaviour that confirmed the dominant social order. This section highlights how those same assumptions are implicated in a range of progressive behaviours associated with the mobilization of life experience capital that simultaneously challenges the dominant social order.

## Lifelong Learning 'Learning for Learning's sake'

The mature students in these cases held markedly different views about the role of HE in a lifelong learning agenda from those that are defined in policy and other neoliberal discourses. One of the main differences was a view of lifelong learning in HE for self-satisfaction and 'learning for learning's sake' rather than learning for a particular role or purpose. In particular, the consensus amongst the mature students was the need for HE study to, primarily, be the study of a subject they were interested in, rather than a subject that would get them a job. This is in contrast to middle class constructions of HE that position the appropriation of knowledge as underpinned by values of individual competitiveness, and increased employment prospects. John explained that during his career in banking, he had opportunities to undertake a degree in a related subject, but had decided not to.

> Yeh I'd sort of, again working in the bank there was opportunities to do like, financial related degrees and that kind of stuff, but I always shied away from them because I wasn't, I worked for a bank but I wasn't a banker. I was there because it was good money, and it was nice people, and I had a good lifestyle... as opposed to 'I loved it' which is different. [John Interview 1: 21/11/2013]

Jonathan had also come to a point in his life where education and the foundation degree he was undertaking were not necessarily part of strategic decisions for employment opportunities. In fact, Jonathan felt that in his industry, the music industry, a degree was

not particularly necessary, but his desire to study something that interested him greatly had encouraged him to do so nonetheless. He felt it had set him apart.

> In this kind of, I don't know, to be honest I don't know, how many opportunities there are realistically. I mean a lot of people say you don't really need a degree in this kind of industry, but I think it's helped me to be honest. [Jonathan Interview 1: 21/11/2013]

This view was reflected in Clare's accounts of her friends' and family's opinions of what she was undertaking and why. Her friends' views reflected dominant ideologies about the worth of higher level study in creative vocational subjects.

> I've always been, from leaving school, I knew I was good at putting things together and growing up all my friends said to me 'oh you don't need to go to College, you don't need to go and do that, you're good at what you do anyway', but I wanted it for me. I wanted that piece of paper and having that little cap and gown on, and thinking that I've started something and I can do it. [Clare Interview 2: 16/05/2014]

John, Jonathan and Clare's stories exemplify how a degree is more than just a vehicle for improved prospects in the labour market and that learning in HE should involve a passion for the subject and personal achievement. John also discussed how an intrinsic interest in the subject greatly improves the learning experience too.

> I've always known I was capable of doing a degree and when I was 17 or 18 but I wasn't ready for it. If I'd have gone then, I would have been a waste of space. When I got to 30, I should have done it then, but I was married, young family, I couldn't really afford to take time out and there was no opportunity to do what I wanted. It would have had to have been banking related, and I wasn't really interested in that. So now that I'm older I think, now's the time I can do it, prove to myself I can do it. But as I say, it's for myself, not really for anything, a career path or, but I think that's the best reason to do it. The best way for people to learn is 'cause you want to, not because they have to. [John Interview 1: 21/11/2013]

It is this intrinsic interest in the subject that was mirrored in the other mature students' experiences; this and the depth of learning they were engaging in promoted lifelong learning. Studying in HE gave them permission to engage in a form of learning that to some extent developed their interests, simply for the sake of being interested. Many of our discussions centred on the contagion of HE learning in this way. For Clare, who had only ever seen education as a chore and a means to an end, being allowed to explore something she had always been interested in had been 'life changing'. In our conversations, she often used metaphors of infection to describe the consequences of her experience.

> I did not think I would be able to achieve what I have actually achieved. Obviously having the dyslexia as well, erm... that's played a massive part. It's given me the confidence now to actually believe in myself, that maybe I could go on to uni, maybe

carry on. Well I've got the thirst for learning now, you know? It's a bit of a bug, yeh I think. [Clare Interview 2: 16/05/2014]

And I've just said now to Sheila, because all the other students now are all getting all the portfolios ready, one's going to Newtown one's going to Westfield, one's going to Hill College, and I'm thinking oh dear... what am I going to do? But you know, I want to go off now and set me own business up but who knows? The door's always open now, in my eyes, I've done it and I've got the basics, so what's stopping me? I might have a year out and carry on again. [Clare Fieldwork: 06/11/2013]

It just opened the gates really and I was just that eager to learn and I wanted to learn more and more and more so that's erm yeh.... [Clare Interview 1: 07/11/2013]

I am a bit addicted to learning now, I don't know what I'm gonna do. I'm gonna hopefully go to a night school, and keep up to date with the computer side of things, when I leave. [Clare Interview 2: 16/05/2014]

The conceptualisation of lifelong learning by mature students in this way operates as collective resistance, as it undermines the power structures that reduce a HE qualification to its exchange value in the labour market. This could be due to many mature students already being in employment or paraprofessional roles; such that the HE qualification they are undertaking may not be for entry into the labour market, but for advancement within it. However, for those who were starting afresh, they often also resisted the pressure from tutors to choose a specific vocation and work towards the skills needed for that vocation. Jonathan had become frustrated with the lack of progression in his 20 year engraving position and had decided to quit his job, putting his energy into studying for a music degree – something he had always had a passion for. Although he had really enjoyed his studies, he was uncomfortable with being asked to define himself in the labour market as part of his studies.

I'm just trying to keep my mind as open as possible at the moment, even though they're trying to focus me on certain things, 'cause he says you've got to try and focus if you wanna get in somewhere, rather than just saying I generally like doing it erm...[Jonathan Interview 2: 30/04/2014]

As well as learning for the sake of learning and with this, keeping an open mind, the mature students also shared the way they valued the collective and social nature of HE in lifelong learning. Political ideology that positions HE in terms of benefits to only the individual and the economy did not reflect the reality of the mature students' experiences. Lifelong learning involved mutual respect and communication between peers and tutors, gaining different perspectives through shared experiences and effort over ability. Life experience capitals, and working class values of sharing and solidarity, were drawn upon to construct their understanding of HE in lifelong learning. Due to this experience of lifelong learning, however, the mature students' conceptions of HE contradicted the academic/vocational divide. This is in direct conflict with the resistant behaviour engaged in through the process

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of 'othering', whereby academic capital was used to differentiate between those undertaking HE and those on FE programmes, and thus reinforced that divide.  Many of the mature students, towards the end of their experience, expressed that it was possible for anyone to do a degree, and it was all about effort, not so much about ability. When John and I talked about what it took to succeed in HE, he responded with a story about his sister's achievements.

> Kate: So is achieving those high grades for you, more down to determination and persistence maybe, than ability?
>
> John: A bit of both I think, the reason I say that is because my sister, she's got a degree in Russian and I think it's first class or what have you. She was never academically bright, but she worked incredibly hard at what she did, so I think you can, you can counter-balance a lack of ability with a bit of effort. [John Interview 1: 21/11/2013]

## Employability

This section discusses the ways in which the mature students understood and experienced 'employability' as a specific element of HE study and how they shaped this to suit their individual circumstances using life experience capital. The analysis shows how the notion of employability was a problematic one for most of the mature students. Discussions with Carolyn about the vocational and employability aspects of her course showed how problematic she had found it.

> I've been there for 11 years. I've actually done all that, from when I was new coming in. I might not have had that experience 'oh, I've never done that' 'I've never understood that policy' so then they'd be put into that situation, which for them [younger students] it would be learning, but for me it was just a case of saying 'oh, yeh, I did that then' ticking the box, so it was boring. [Carolyn Interview 1: 04/11/2013]

This is one example of how life experience capital was mobilized by the mature students to legitimately undermine the employability focus of their studies. Others also found the professional practice related aspects of their course to be problematic for them. During the semester 1 focus group, the mature students on the BA Acting Performance discussed the concept of personal and professional development as one that centred on young students with little experience of the labour market.

> PPD – We know the Uni do it, but what relevance does it have? It does feel like we're rehashing the same subject every year. And for older students, most of us have clear ideas of what we want to do – our ambitions haven't changed, so it doesn't feel relevant to us. [BA Acting Focus Group minutes: 07/11/2013]

Benefits of HE study to students in terms of employment often stemmed from the potential to open up a range of possibilities in diverse vocations, rather than the focussing and 'training' in one particular vocation.

> Kate: You mean to be a bit clearer about what you want to do?
>
> Jonathan: You know, giving me, open to new ideas and erm... and new possibilities like routes I could go down which I wouldn't have thought of. I think it's helped a lot that way. [Jonathan Interview 2:30/04/2014]

For most of the mature students, their experience of the labour market meant employability was framed differently in their eyes. Life experience capital was drawn upon to inform resistance to instrumental notions of employability. Due to knowledge and experience of the instability of the labour market, many of the mature students focussed on the value of the transferable practices they were engaging with that enhanced their professional practice or prospects. Nathan suggested that a lifelong learning outlook was essential due to the fluidity of a post-industrial labour market. It wasn't enough to train in a particular vocational area and be qualified to hold that employment for the rest of a person's life. People needed to learn how to adapt to the changing conditions and demands of employment.

> I often get asked to do jobs that I don't' fully understand, so I need to do something to learn about it. Like, even while I've been doing this course, I've been doing other electrical courses. I've been on day release to go look into different areas of what I do. [Nathan Interview 1: 12/11/2013]

When asked to define employability, all of the mature students pointed towards 'transferable skills' rather than vocational competencies. Furthermore, many of these skills were developed from academic practices that were commonly developed for successful study in HE, such as independence and criticality, collaboration and academic writing.

> Kate: So you mentioned working together some days, do you feel that the group learn from each other?
>
> Jonathan: Yeh you bounce ideas off each other you mean, like the interaction? Yeh, I'm picking new stuff up erm... styles of music and techniques and stuff, yeh definitely.
>
> Kate: OK, so do you think there's a little bit more emphasis on peer assessment and things like that?
>
> Jonathan: Yeh it's a lot more group focused to me. Yeh, cause we have to do a lot more collaboration and because, I think out in the real world that is what you do isn't it? So I think it's trying to focus it more like that. [Jonathan Interview 2: 30/04/2014]

Academic practices such as these also helped the mature students to be more actively involved in questioning practices and effecting change in the workplace. This could be seen as a result of the interaction between academic capital and life experience capital, in their experience of HIVE. Some of this stemmed from the confidence the qualification gave them in terms of status i.e. as someone undertaking a degree in this area, their opinions were underpinned by accepted theoretical ideas. For John, this had led to a rethink about his career opportunities and the contribution he might make to his field of employment.

> When I started this course I thought I was doing it just because, for myself, I've got no intentions of really using the foundation degree afterwards. I haven't got any career path plans. But I guess that I found as I've gone through it, I've noticed some short falls in some of the areas and I think 'I probably should apply for team leader roles'. I've got myself, I've realized now I'm too young to pack in completely, but my ambition is limited to almost getting to the step where I can have more of a material impact on what happens. [John Interview 2: 19/06/2014]

Matt's development of an academic writing style to communicate his ideas 'professionally' demonstrated the way that academic practices gave the mature students a sense of expertise through their HE qualification. Being able to communicate in a written style that conveyed authority gave him confidence in his abilities and gave weight to his ideas in the work place.

> My styles sort of changed a lot from first person stuff that I was doing back at the beginning. It's always, even when I'm trying to put my opinion in, it's like I try and put it in... in a third person sort of way. It's just the style I found that looks more professional or reads nicer. I don't like reading the 'I' and 'I believe this' and you know? I know you're meant to put your own opinions in, but I try and do it in a way that's not me going, 'I think this' and 'I think that' sort of thing. So it's just, that's what I was doing at the beginning, and as I've progressed I've sort of found new ways of being able to put my opinions in without with it reading, I think, with a higher level and I just think it reads nicer than what it would have done. [Matt Interview 2: 23/05/2014]

Another way in which the mature students considered employability was what the HE qualification represented, not in terms of vocational competency, but personal attributes that were desirable in an employee. For example, Nathan explained that the HNC he was undertaking represented determination and a sense of commitment to potential employers.

> Employability, I would class that as, I suppose it does [the HNC] make you more employable because you've done it at night school and you've got the qualification meaning you are determined in a way, and you know what you want to do so I suppose that make you more employable, yeh. [Nathan Interview 2: 22/04/2014]

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In many ways, the transferable skills for employment that were developed through HE academic practices by mature students were often a by-product of having to meet the requirements for their HE assessment, such as IT skills. This often involved developing basic IT skills (such as proficient use of word processing software and effective navigation of the internet) for written assignments. Further to this, whilst most mature students entered the course with effective time management skills, often the need to fine tune them in order to meet the demands of the different roles they occupied in different areas of their life was drawn upon in term of employability.

> I asked Nathan what about doing the course made him more employable, he responded with 'Time… management, that definitely erm… all the computer skills, writing skills, especially computer skills though' [Nathan Fieldwork: 19/11/2013]

It appears that experience of an ever changing labour market meant the mature students' conceptions of employability were more akin to the graduate attributes of traditional HE, than the vocational competencies of a vocational HE. However, it is through embracing those attributes, and in some cases resisting a vocational competencies model, that the mature students shaped their HE experience to reflect the type of HE they wished to undertake. In doing this, their experience was altogether more emancipatory as they became active critical citizens in the labour market, with the confidence to bring about change in the workplace. Students perceptions of employability as the graduate attributes that they will bring to employment, is conceptualised as 'academic capital', as distinguished from vocational competencies. Academic capital was often used as an indicator of esteem in the workplace that gave the mature students the authority to question practice and justify their position in employment. This is opposed to the 'life experience' capital used in their HE experience to question admissions practices and to justify their position as older HE student entrants.

The focus on traditional middle class graduate attributes and a resistance to identifying as vocational higher education students generates questions about why the mature students did not participate in traditional forms of HE that were more seemingly appropriate to their goals. The following discussion identifies the material constraints related to time and age that prevent access to the type of higher education that an individual can most benefit from. It also demonstrates a purpose of vocational higher education as 'a vocational higher education for vocational people' as inconsistent with the reality of its students.

The most common material constraint that the mature students identified was geographic location. This was identified in relation to strategic time decisions mature students made in relation to their studies. Time was often seen as a luxury commodity and therefore

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participation at the local College was strategic with the time it saved on travelling to study. Discussions with Carolyn demonstrated how location factored in her decision to enter higher education, and why she had not in previous years.

> It seems to be the only one that was suitable, and it's in [the borough]. I'm a bit limited to travelling to Hill College or Newtown because I need to get home to my children as well, and this just seemed to fit perfectly. I probably would have gone for it before, a few years ago if it had been in [the borough], but it was only in available in the next town. [Carolyn Interview 1: 04/11/2013]

Location was also important for Nathan; as someone with his own business, time was money. Metaphors used often positioned time as an investment; and further to this, its exchange value in relation to risk was a common constraint amongst the younger mature students. The youngest of the mature students, Nathan and Matt, both identified the risk of investing time inappropriately as constraints to participation in traditional forms of HE.

> Nathan: I mean I considered a degree when I was younger, cause I was interested in doing architecture, but I didn't want to commit to the two or three years, and I didn't want to drop out, I mean if you do a year or two at university, if you drop out then you've got nothing have you?
>
> Kate: What do you mean?
>
> Nathan: But if you do it this way then I suppose you've got stages, and you get a little bit of a reward as you're going, don't you? It's like going down a list and ticking it off, it's more of a reward isn't it? [Nathan Interview 2: 22/04/201]

In summary, this chapter has presented an analysis that shows how the mature students understood HE and how those understandings affected the practices they participated in, in the context of an FE college. It argues that that independent learning and critical thinking are central to these students HE experience, but their own interpretations of these practices were shaped by the context in which they experienced them, including structures of class and age. One way of developing these practices was through collective learning, but also by reference to what HE is not, which was understood as the difference between HE and FE learning. The analysis then went on to argue that drawing upon those differences resulted in a process of individuation by the mature students. During this process, most of the students differentiated themselves from their FE peers, but also their younger HE peers, by drawing upon their 'life experience' as a distinguishing feature of their 'HE mature student' identity. The theme of 'individuation - resistance that confirms the dominating social order' points to the ways in which this process may reinforce the divide between HE and FE and thus the reproduction of hierarchical differences in knowledge. This process was not without conflict and contradictions however, and the final theme 'Lifelong Learning in HIVE - resistance that challenges the dominating social order' demonstrates the way in which the students

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simultaneously challenged certain aspects of their experience that did not resonate with their own realities. This final theme suggests that ideas of employability in HE and how it translates into practice, are at odds with the realities of these mature students experience of employment. Instead it is argued that those practices that were most useful to the students, in terms of employability, are those that are central to HE anyway, such as independent learning and critical thinking. The next chapter discusses these ideas in more detail, and locates their place within the wider literature of mature student learning in HE and FE. It also discusses the theoretical ways in which this data can be understood, and suggests that using resistance theories to consider these mature students as a counter-culture of the dominant FE culture of the college, provides a fresh perspective for understanding this phenomenon.

# 7 Mature students as counter-cultures in HIVE

The role of this chapter is to address the original research questions through discussions of the analysis presented in the previous chapter and theorised using theories of resistance. Through reference to previous literature in the fields of higher vocational education and mature student learning, this chapter will show how this thesis is positioned in relation to existing research on HIVE. It will make explicit the original contribution this thesis makes to those fields of research. The original research questions are: why do mature students participate in HIVE? How do mature students experience HE learning practices in an FE context? And how does the experience of HIVE in an FE context shape mature student identities? The first research question, of why mature students participate in HIVE is answerable by discussions of the theme 'lifelong learning in HIVE - resistance that challenges the dominating social order' presented in the previous chapter. The analysis raises important issues in relation to class and age in pathways to HE, as the mature students experiences are qualitatively different from those of younger middle class entrants. It shows how issues related to class and age intersect to shape their experience of HIVE. Mature students operate within a set of micro and macro structures and their individual way of managing their identity and behaviour within a HIVE context reveals an expression of their agency.

## *Why mature students participate in HIVE*

The literatures on HIVE in FE Colleges have commonly pointed to the ways in which FE Colleges are better placed to meet the needs of non-traditional students (Jones, 2006). This is often cited as one of the main reasons why mature students choose to participate in HIVE. Those needs include increased flexibility to cater for mature student responsibilities and higher levels of support for those that may have been out of education for some time. Because of this, it has been argued that mature students choose to participate in HIVE in further education as it provides a less alienating environment in which to study (Leathwood & O'Connell, 2003). Similarly, another need is that those students come from traditionally vocational education pathways and as such desire and require a more vocationally orientated experience (Weick, 1995). This view has often been used as the rationale for the development of forms of HIVE such as the foundation degree delivered primarily in further education Colleges (Parry & Thompson, 2002). However, thinking about mature students in this way is problematic as it homogenises mature students, positions them as vocationally

orientated in terms of learning preferences, and presumes that the purpose of higher education to them is related directly to employment.

On the contrary, the mature students that participated in this study held a view of HE that was in contradiction with that homogenised position. They tended to view HE studies as a chance to study something that was of great interest to them, and although this may sometimes have been related to current or future employment opportunities, their reasons for studying were less instrumental than researchers and policy makers have assumed (Robinson, 2012). An ideology that narrowly frames HE in terms of the benefits to the individual and the economy only, does not reflect the reality of these mature students' experiences. These findings are consistent with other studies of mature student participation in HE that have found that mature students value the process of doing a degree over the 'instrumental goal orientations' of their younger counterparts (Reay, Ball and David, 2002 p.8).

> Although dominant discourses may eschew the value and benefits of education, these ideals are not passively adopted throughout society, but may generate resistance (Archer and Hutchings, 2000 p.557)

As such, the vocational aspects of the courses the mature students study for are often met with articulated resistance. Leicester & Field (2000) suggested that studies of lifelong learning that concentrate on employment-related education and training may exclude older learners. Some of the mature students' resistance to instrumental notions of vocational education demonstrates that whilst the mature students were not excluded, it was not so relevant to their reasons for participation in HIVE. This type of resistance can be seen as classed in nature, as the benefits and power of HE participation may be more pronounced amongst working class students (Ainley, 1994). The conceptualisation of higher education by mature students in this way operated as collective resistance, undermining the power structures that reduce a HE qualification to its exchange value in the labour market. This could be due to the fact many mature students are already in employment, including paraprofessional roles; therefore the HE qualification they are undertaking is not necessary for entry into the labour market. The resistant behaviour involved in this conceptualisation was enacted by mature students in de-prioritising employability modules and rehashing versions of previous work on similar modules for the purposes of assessment. Whilst this resistance was primarily age related, through the mobilization of life experience capital, there were also classed dimensions. This type of resistance could be associated with working class relationships to education that place importance on community and co-

operation rather than middle class values of competition in the labour market (Reay et al, 2002).

This points to the ways in which the resistant behaviour explained here is more than a reaction to a mismatch between the mature students' culture and the culture of the College. In theory, given their vocational backgrounds, the mature students could be easily assimilated into the vocational culture of the College. In fact, the very reasons why they were drawn to the College to study HE was a perceived compatibility between their own experiences of education and the flexibility it offered. This view is consistent with the domination of HE by middle class groups to which working class groups are marginal (Reay, 2001). For example, the College offered a less threatening experience, as the students would not have to, in Nathan's words, 'sit in a lecture theatre with 300 other students', and more accessibility, as the students did not have to go through the UCAS procedure. However, because the mature students drew on discourses of social mobility they expected their experience to be as academic as that in a university. When this was not the case, the mature students exercised their agency through resistance to those aspects not relevant to them. It must also be noted here that the resistance they displayed in terms of their reasons for participation was not disruptive. They resisted the College's vocational ideology in a way that 'gives them power to reject the system on a level that will not make them powerless to protest it in the future' (Giroux, 1983b, p. 288). In this sense, the mature students resisted those practices that weren't relevant to them, and the system that had diverted them to those practices, in a way that would not jeopardise them benefiting from a degree level education. This is in contrast to Willis's lad in *Learning to Labour*, who 'allowed middle class kids to get all the good jobs' and thus reproduce their own disadvantage through their resistance (Willis, 1977).

Mature student resistance in these cases can be explained as a counter-culture of the dominant vocational culture of the College, whereby the students oppose the vocational aspects of their course because their knowledge and experience of the labour market tells them that it holds less value; as informed by life experience capital. The interests that underlie this behaviour are found in the historical conditions of the social site of the workplace which gave them extensive insight into the labour market (Giroux, 1983b). This raises questions around the nature and appropriateness of 'employability' offered as part of the HIVE experience, as a reason for mature student participation. Studies on student perceptions of HIVE have shown that students make sense of their experience as 'not quite higher education' (Fenge, 2011) and have an increasing awareness of the limitations of their qualification in terms of potential employment (Robinson, 2012). Furthermore, the fact that

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the mature students already had vocational backgrounds contradicted the view that HIVE was for vocationally-oriented students. Most of the mature students, particularly John, Carolyn and Matt, had exhausted the vocational pathways they had experienced and were looking specifically for an academic education.

Many of the mature students expressed the view that the main feature of an academic education was studying something you enjoyed, or learning for learning's sake. Learning for learning's sake was a theme across all cases, and was related to notions of lifelong learning as a driver for participation in HIVE by mature students. Dominant policy discourses of lifelong learning treat the concept as economically instrumental, and it has been argued that this discourse produces lifelong learning policies that potentially excludes older learners (Leicester & Field, 2000). However, these students resisted this discourse and policy notions of lifelong learning, and drew on alternative discourse of lifelong learning instead to explain their participation in HIVE. For example, John noted that he 'only has two and a half years to go' in employment and therefore enhanced employment prospects were not the reason for undertaking his foundation degree. It was also the subscription to an alternative lifelong learning approach, rather than an employability one, that demonstrated that an orientation to a particular type of learning was not reason for participation in HIVE. They did not acknowledge that their courses, as HIVE courses, were any more vocational than any other HE course of the same subject in any other HEI. If reasons for mature student participation in HIVE are not necessarily attributed to a particular orientation to vocational education, then this raises further questions as to why the mature students came to study at the College rather than any other HEI, such as those of time and age.

The significance of time and age seemed to be a factor in the decision of the mature students to study HIVE. Age was important, as it shaped the mature students' conceptions of time. As older students, time was positioned as a luxury, and because of this, time invested was a risk. Ball et al (1995) have argued that working class students are 'time poor' and in these cases, the material constraints of being a mature student heightened the risks associated with being time poor. Working class notions of risk in relation to education are also important here, "Shame and the fear of shame haunt the working-class relationship to education" (Skeggs, 1997; Plummer, 2000 cited in Reay et al. 2002). The fear of embarking on a HE qualification and not being able to complete it were very real risks for these mature students. Both Nathan and Matt pointed to the way in which the staggered nature of HIVE minimized this risk, by providing many entry and exit points. This meant that students could progress through to an honours degree if they wanted to, but they could also withdraw at certain points with an accredited certificate if they needed to. Archer and

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Hutchings (2000) argue that the ability to complete in dominant discourses are conceptualised in terms of academic and meritocratic 'ability' whereas their working class students subscribed to an alternative discourse of ability related to economic and social risk. Furthermore, Beck (1992) suggests that consequences of situations that result in setbacks and failures are becoming an increasingly personal responsibility, and it is working class students who bear this responsibility the most in relation to their education. Therefore, the flexibility the College offered in its HE offer and the extent to which that minimized those risks can go some way to explaining why the mature students participated in HIVE rather than alternative forms of HE. However, there was a certain irony to their logic of the perception of time and risk. Due to inconsistencies in the perceived quality of HIVE qualifications and concerns of preparedness for academic study of HIVE students, many that have completed level 5 qualifications are still asked to enter degree programmes for top-up on the same level, rather than as a direct entrant at level 6 (Pike & Harrison, 2011). This may mean that a typical three year degree at a university could take four for HIVE students. Similarly, HIVE students progressing to honours degrees may also find that the support initiatives, such as bridging courses aimed at minimizing perceived difficulties of transitions between institutions, may extend the length of time spent gaining the qualification (Bathmaker et al., 2008).

Burton et al. (2011) suggested that the HE in FE approach to studying minimized barriers traditionally associated with mature student participation in HE such as financial and family commitments which led to barriers of accessibility and the need for increased flexibility. The costs associated with undertaking a HE qualification are shown to be considerably higher for working class students (Archer and Hutchings, 2000). Here working class notions of locality are important as they intersect with material constraints associated with age for the students. Whilst mature students are not a homogenous group and their lives and experiences differ greatly, the geographic location of the College was one of the main reasons for participation in HIVE amongst them. The locality of FE Colleges to a mature student's home, and thus the distance travelled by the student, has been seen to be important in balancing work, study and family commitment (Doyle & Taylor, 2003). Whilst this view holds true in this study too, locality was also perceived by many of the cases in a different way. Studies have shown that working class students tend to go to newer HE institutions where there is more open access and a higher proportion of socially diverse students (Crozier et al, 2008), or 'people like us' (Bourdieu, 1986). Similarly, locality was linked with familiarity of surroundings and community within the learning environment. Because of this, many of the mature students were willing to sacrifice an alternative, more traditional HE experience for a HIVE one. But given their resistance to vocational aspects of

their HIVE courses, an alternative HE experience may have been more suited to some of the mature students. Where this conscious decision was not present, the ambiguity surrounding HIVE and its position may have contributed to mature student participation in this type of HE.

Some of the mature students' reasons for participation in HIVE were rather more serendipitous and perhaps accidental. Burton et al. (2011) made similar assertions when they found that students of HE in FE often came to be there 'unwittingly' (p.30). Their interpretation of these occurrences was that students were looking for any qualification, rather than a HE one, that would enhance their employment prospects. Whilst this interpretation holds some truth, enhanced employment prospects was not the main reason the mature students in these cases were drawn to their studies. What these analyses do highlight though are the different perceptions and degrees of awareness of qualifications in both the FE and HE sector, particularly in relation to HIVE.

The concept of 'academic drift' may be a useful one in explaining some of the ambiguity surrounding HIVE. Academic drift is a concept that has been used and developed in higher education research and whose origins lay at the centre of the academic-vocational debate (Tight, 2015). It is part of the continuing debate regarding the nature and purpose of Higher Education. The concept has been used widely to generate understandings of the tendency of HE institutions over time to aspire to higher positions within the academic hierarchy. It can therefore also be described as a theory of institutional change. However, it must be acknowledged that change occurs over time and involves different levels with varying degrees of participation. It can therefore be applied at the institutional level, but also the group level, and the individual level (Tight, 2015).

Kyvik (2007, cited in Tight, 2014) goes further to suggest that there are six levels on which drift can occur. These are: student level; staff level; course or programme level; institutional level; sector level; and government level. What is commonly referred to as sector level has mostly been associated with the concept of academic drift. "That is, the tendency of entire levels of institutions within the higher education hierarchy to aspire towards upward movement" (Tight, 2015, p. 94).

However, the first of Kyvik's levels, student drift, recognises the way students themselves may wish to move towards more academic, or in the opposite drift, vocational studies. This concept may be useful in understanding students in institutions where drift of both academic and vocational tendencies collide, such as further education Colleges. This concept

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is useful as it acknowledges the competing interests of those institutions and students wishing to achieve higher academic status and those institutions and employers who seek vocational relevance and value for money in higher education.

Assumptions about the nature of HE made by the students when deciding to return to study show that a lack of awareness of academic drift at the policy (government) and sector levels, meant that the mature students contributed their own diversion from other forms of HE that would have been available to them. Other research has shown that mature students may not access similar programmes to HIVE at HEIs 'as a result of their own exclusionary beliefs' (Fenge, 2011, p. 386). This was true in particular for Matt who resigned himself to the fact that he would not have the entry requirements for study in HE, although he had made this decision based on an assumption that was related to an elite or traditional notion of HE. This brings to light the historically situated and contextual nature of mature student participation.

Studies have shown that prior learning experiences are a significant factor or barrier to the choices of mature and other non-traditional students with regard to HE participation (Burton et al., 2011). However, these prior experiences often point to a lack of understanding of HE in terms of preparedness once HE has been embarked upon by a student. Whilst this may be the case in some instances, it does not point to the way in which understandings of HE are historically and contextually situated by individuals and therefore may impact upon the choice to consider different forms of HE. Most of the mature students, as in Matt's case, had certain understandings of HE that diverted them from a more traditional university education to College based HIVE.

Often these understandings of HE held by mature students are positioned negatively in terms of barriers created by naivety and lack of awareness on the part of the student as determined by wider social structures (Ozga & Sukhnandan, 1998). However, if conceptions of HE are positioned as part of the historically situated nature of mature student cultures together with their resistance to the vocational culture of the College and the vocational drift of HE, their participation in alternative forms of HE can be viewed as a wider act of resistance which restores a degree of agency to understandings of mature student participation in HIVE (Giroux, 1983b). Agency is exercised through resistance at the local level – by challenging the FE culture that values 'vocational' over 'theoretical' knowledge, as well as at the structural level by challenging the traditional means by which theoretical knowledge is obtained, through traditional degree study. Whilst there are very real material barriers to participation in HE for some mature students, others (such as lack support at

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HEIs) appear to be socially constructed. However, having not experienced other forms of HE themselves, the mature students had no way of knowing whether they lacked support, and their understandings of HE (and thus, barriers) were socially constructed through discourses that are influenced by class and age. Therefore these socially constructed barriers based on discourses of university HE that those very students draw upon in order to inform their educational decisions, result in self-fulfilling prophecies. It may also be the case that the mature students drew upon these discourses specifically in order to rationalise their limited choice of HE. For example, some of the mature students chose their courses initially because they thought they were FE courses, and they did not think they could participate in HE without traditional entry qualifications. When those students realised that the courses they were looking to take were HE ones, life experience rather than previous education was mobilised as a resource for successful participation in HE. The use of life experience as a form of capital enabled them to reaffirm the positive aspects of their mature student status in a system that is primarily geared towards younger students with a different source of capital (academic qualifications) at their disposal (Giroux, 1983b). This brings into focus the perceived practices in the HE sector that disqualifies their 'life experience' as a form of knowledge. Using life experience rather than formal education as a means to obtain the theoretical knowledge valued as part of the HE experience will be discussed further in the section following on 'how mature students experience HIVE in an FE context'.

Unfortunately, not all acts of resistance result in emancipatory possibilities for those involved; in fact, what is central to theories of resistance is the contradictory nature of human experience and actions. In Willis' study of 'the lads' in *Learning to Labour,* the lads' resistance to engagement in practices related to theoretical knowledge closed off opportunities to benefit from the emancipatory potential of those practices.

> Willis's lads rejected the primacy of mental labour and its ethos of individual appropriation, but in doing so they closed off any possibility of pursuing an emancipatory relationship between knowledge and dissent. By rejecting intellectual labour, the lads discounted the power of critical thinking as a tool of social transformation. (Giroux, 1983, p. 283-284)

Similarly, in challenging the means by which theoretical knowledge is obtained, the students' resistance contributes to reproducing inequality in participation in elite, or more prestigious forms of HE which may hold more emancipatory potential. This is one way in which resistance is complex and contradictory (Willis, 1977).

This interpretation shows that mature student reasons for participation in HIVE was not necessarily because HIVE provides an alternative vocational pathway for 'vocational' students, but rather that financial constraints and constraints on flexibility, related to the structures of class and age,  had directed them towards this particular type of institution. Resistant behaviour amongst mature students and the concept of academic drift can be used to explain mature student participation in contribution to the diversion or diversity debate of a mass higher education system. The diversity aspect of this debate confers the logic that increased (and fair) participation in a diverse higher education sector provides a richness that contributes to success and increased opportunity for all (David, 2009). On the other hand, there is concern that a mass higher education system is increasingly stratified and therefore diverts particular groups' potential students (i.e. non-traditional) to forms of HE within systems that hold less value and therefore limits opportunities, whilst maintaining the long standing hierarchies within the HE sector (Bathmaker, 2015). Rigid admissions practices across the sector are one way in which this diversion has been shown to operate (Bathmaker, 2015). In this case, it was the ambiguity surrounding the nature of HIVE and classed understandings of HE pathways that may have diverted some mature students from traditional HE pathways more appropriate to their needs and expectations of HE. For example, it may be that experience of an ever changing labour market meant these mature students' conceptions of employability and vocational education were more akin to the graduate attributes of traditional HE, than the vocational competencies of a vocational HE. However, it is through embracing those attributes and in some cases resisting a vocational competencies model that the mature students shaped their HE experience to reflect the type of HE they wished to undertake.

On both sides of the diversity and diversion debate there has been a general oversight with regards to notions of conflict and struggle amongst the diverse and the diverted. Within diversity understandings of participation in HE, struggle and conflict are conceptualised as issues of transitions to a different way of learning in institutions that are not familiar. And in diverted understandings of participation in HE, non-traditional students accept their position as bounded by their horizons for action (Hodkinson et al., 1996). In these accounts, conflict and struggle emerge from a mismatch between an individual's habitus and the wider habitus of fields in which they inhabit - or institutional habitus (Reay, David, & Ball, 2001). Whilst this is a useful way of understanding instances of conflict and struggle in higher education choice and participation of different forms of HE, it can be built upon further to restore a degree of agency and consciousness amongst individuals by operationalizing theories of resistance and the concepts of life experience and academic capital. Conceptualising mature student participation as resistance at the structural level can be

demonstrated by articulated resistance related to the parity of esteem of HIVE with other forms of higher education. This is related to the research question of how mature students experience HE practices in an FE context. The theme generated in the cross case analysis best used to discuss this question is that of HE learning practices in FE.

## How mature students experience HE learning practices in an FE context

Whilst there are certain, distinct practices and pedagogies associated with vocational learning (Lucas, Spencer, & Claxton, 2012), there is little consensus on what practice in higher vocational education does, and should, look like. In the absence of established pedagogies for this type of learning, lecturers often draw upon their own experience or assumptions of higher education to construct a comparable experience for their students (Burkill et al., 2008). However, these experiences or assumptions most likely vary considerably, and are perhaps somewhat out-dated. It can be seen in this study that in an effort to maintain parity with other types of HE, several well-known practices were drawn upon in the HIVE experience of these students, although varying class and aged based interpretations of these practices exist. This section of the discussion details how mature students experienced HIVE in an FE context, and highlights the learning practices most commonly engaged in by mature students.

### Independent Learning

Views of HE learning practices amongst the mature students show how they operated agentically in shaping their experience in order to feel parity of esteem between their distinct experience in the context of FE and that of a HEI. One of the ways in which this happened was by drawing significantly on common practices associated with HE learning such as independent learning in the development of academic capital associated with HE study. Independent learning as a concept is not universally understood or defined. This is evident by the many others ways in which it is referred to, for example, independent study and self-directed study. Often independent learning is understood by educators as the ability to manage learning, deal with information and 'draw independent conclusions' from this information (Gow & Kember, 1990, p. 307). Race's (2002) interpretation goes further by adding a temporal dimension in acknowledging the term as a process, involving the empowerment of an individual to become independent. Independent learning is also commonly associated with the notion of the autonomous learner, who needs little input and direction outside of structured contact time (Moore, 1984).

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The practice of independent learning was interpreted by the mature students in these cases in two main ways: not being 'spoon fed', and taking responsibility for one's own learning. However, sometimes these interpretations neglected temporal notions of 'becoming' independent in favour of 'being' independent. Being independent was often closely associated with assumptions of the nature of higher education practice and therefore was more similar to Moore's (1984) interpretation. These assumptions can be traced back to an elite higher education system, whereby participants may have been expected to just 'be' independent learners. The way in which this practice was understood could therefore be related to shifting working class identities and transitions to HE whereby working class students undertake significant identity work. In this way assumptions about HE learning practices and independent learning in particular, can be seen as part of generational, or age based structures.

Generational structures impacted on how agency was exercised in facilitating an 'authentic' HE experience. Independent learning was interpreted by the mature students as working in a solitary way based on their generational and classed understandings of higher education. This is also one of the ways in which middle class values of competition in education are mediated through HE practices (Reay et al, 2001). Because of this, the mature students sometimes displayed resistance towards some of the features of their specific context, such as increased study support. They were often reluctant to access study support facilities as in doing so they thought they would not be participating in a central feature of HE learning that distinguishes their experience from an FE one. This resistance by some of the mature students echoes concerns by HE lecturers interviewed as part of the FurtherHigher Project, who felt that some FE practices were not appropriate for the purposes of HE (Smith et al., 2007). However, non-participation in academic support facilities through the class based dimensions of resistance may have potentially closed off avenues of support that may have enriched their experience and learning further (Giroux, 1983b).

For those who did engage in a process of becoming an independent learner, this had affected a profound impact on their wider lives. For Clare in particular, her engagement in support through her disabled students' allowance enabled her to exercise independence in her home and work life. The support had provided her with opportunities to develop strategies to minimize the effect of her dyslexia on her studies, and through becoming an independent learner she had been able to transfer those strategies to different situations. Although Clare accessed support, she was able to 'become' independent rather than just 'be' independent. Her experience of this practice reflects the way in which Little (1994, p. 4)

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describes the autonomous learner: 'the capacity for autonomy will be displayed in the way the learner learns and in the way he or she transfers what has been learned to wider contexts'.

Often, in practice, independent learning HE is conceptualised as part of the 'transition' students need to make in order to be successful learners, or learning how to learn (Wingate & London, 2007). These transitions are seen to be harder for 'non-traditional' students who have been 'spoon-fed' for longer and come from a learning environment that does not develop students capacity to learn autonomously (National Audit Office, 2002). Students are positioned as novices to higher learning that have a lack of understanding about what is expected of them as participants of HE (Drew, 2001; Ozga & Sukhnandan, 1998). Whilst this may be the case for younger students who have come to HIVE directly through vocational routes at school or college, the students in these cases had a very clear idea of what was thought to be involved in the practice of independent learning. Whilst classed understandings of HE practices are important here, the mobilization of life experience capital was more important than class in negotiating those practices. Middle class values of higher education influenced the way in which the mature students used resources specific to age (life experience capital) to exercise agency and shape those practices in their specific context. Conceptualising struggle and conflict by non-traditional students as 'transitions' underplays the role of agency in how these practices are approached by students from different backgrounds, engaging in different types of higher education. Assuming the unproblematic position that non-traditional students need, and will willingly accept support (Fenge, 2011) to make this transition fails to account for the ways in which this support may be resisted due to alternative, and in these cases generational, logics of HE learning influenced by age. The use of resistance theory in this way provides an alternative explanation of how mature students conceptualised independent learning in HIVE, enabling the complex and contradictory role of agency to be revealed.

**Collective Learning**

Another practice that was central to the mature student experience of HIVE was the notion of collective learning. This was surprising, given the ideology of independent, individual learning that underlies the hegemonic middle class HE curriculum, and that is also compounded by the competitive turn in the marketization of HE. However, these mature students embraced and valued such collective learning. The way in which the mature students actively and collectively resisted the individualism of the hegemonic HE curriculum undermined the individualistic middle class culture and increasingly competitive nature upon

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which HE is built (Giroux, 1983b). Student trajectories and institutions that value the individual, rather than the collective acquisition of knowledge in higher education, drive a wedge between its participants from different backgrounds (Giroux, 1983b).

> Regardless of what individual working-class males and females are able to negotiate and achieve for themselves within education, the collective patterns of working-class trajectories remain sharply different from those of the middle-classes (Reay, 2006, p. 294)

To this end, the significance of the role of HE classroom pedagogies in non-traditional student retention and success has been of recent concern in debates of widening participation (Roberts, 2011).

The term 'collective intelligence' has been used to explain the importance of social relations and dialogue to the process of learning, but is commonly associated with vocational learning in FE (Brown & Lauder, 2000). Collective learning contradicts ideas about the individualised nature and purpose of higher education, but also these mature students' own ideas of independent learning. It appears that, for them, independent learning is applied outside of the classroom. In the classroom however, collaborative, collective learning was much more effective in developing the graduate attributes the mature students desired and in facilitating the type of academic education they valued. Studies from America have shown that students with more diverse experiences, and experiences of diversity, are more likely to be predisposed to critical thinking (Laird, 2005). This is supported by the interpretations offered by the mature students in these cases of their classroom experiences. It was commonly found that the diversity of the contributions that each member of a group made to the overall learning enabled them to question taken for granted assumptions and explore competing perspectives. This in turn was advantageous in developing skills of critical thinking and thus possibilities for emancipatory outcomes. This was evident in the way in which John and Carolyn, in particular, saw the potential for them to lead positive change in the workplace.

The way in which mature students pooled skills and resources in order to enhance their learning also contradicted middle class notions of competition in higher education, highlighting the classed dimensions of resistance. Both Matt and Clare made direct reference to the way in which they shared skills to the benefit of all. They drew upon an alternative logic from their experience that told them sharing skills was a more effective way to achieve their goals than to compete with one another. This alternative logic was

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formed through their prior knowledge of the labour market, whereby sharing resources and skills is a valued attribute. This again brings into focus practices of the HE sector that disqualify some forms of knowledge as useful over others (Giroux, 1983b). It also shows how the mature students drew upon their life experience capital in order to resist those practices. These classed dimensions of resistance are unique to mature students as they mobilized life experience capital, in order to affect resistance. Archer and Hutchings (2000) argue that messages of the middle class education system may be resisted by working class students through an emotional attachment to working class identities rooted in solidarity and collective relations.

**Critical Thinking**

The ability to think critically is one of the most common attributes associated with graduates of higher education (Hussey & Smith, 2010). The mature students in these cases conceptualised critical thinking in a variety of ways that were connected by their ideas of knowledge. Firstly, the concept was interpreted as a move away from the requirement in learning to have a breadth of knowledge to one that prioritised having depth of knowledge. Secondly, it was interpreted as involving working with knowledge; debating, analysing, applying and interpreting knowledge were all ways in which critical thinking could be demonstrated. Critical thinking, therefore, can be interpreted as knowledge work. Literature about further and higher education points to the ways in which knowledge work, and the construction of knowledge is located within universities or other HEIs (Lea & Simmons, 2012; Stevenson, 2001). The distinction between knowledge work in the two sectors positions practical knowledge located in further education Colleges and other vocational providers as separate from and inferior to theoretical knowledge produced in universities (Wheelahan, 2013). However, the interpretation of knowledge work offered by these mature students in this particular context shows that critical thinking transcends the academic/vocational divide through its application (vocationally orientated work) and its theorisation (academically orientated work). One way in which critical thinking and knowledge work is implicated in vocational arenas is through reflective practice. This highlights the primary role of practice and experience in shaping knowledge and knowing (Arnseth, 2008).

Reflective practice was a problematic concept of critical thinking for many of the mature students in these cases. Many found the concept was positioned as an 'add-on' to their primary academic work and therefore could not see the relevance to their studies. Some mature students reflected this position on reflective practice through forms of articulated

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and behavioural resistance. For example, some voiced their concerns about the relevance of this practice to their learning in the student focus groups with a view to effect change through the student feedback process. Others deprioritised aspects of their learning involving reflective practice in favour of the more theoretical aspects. For those that did engage in reflective practice as a tool for critical thinking, most found it hard to challenge their own assumptions and practices.

For many of the mature students, critical thinking was mobilised through more traditional means. They engaged with literature and theory, and through collective learning, debated this in class with their peers. They demonstrated this kind of thinking in their writing, and valued the fact that they were allowed to have an opinion, so long as their arguments were substantiated by evidence from the literature they had read. For many, engaging in critical thinking had significant effects on their learning, work and wider lives. Some of the mature students gained confidence and used their skills in an augmentation of their wider lives. For others, it gave them an alternative perspective on their working practices, and the authority to challenge the status quo. Engaging in critical thinking through working with academic knowledge as a resource for the workplace and wider lives is part of the development of academic capital. However, in their resistance to other, perhaps more vocational tools for critical thinking (such as reflective practice), they were less able to question their own position, although this may have had greater emancipatory potential.

Resistance and conformity to practices associated with either academic or vocational knowledge shows the struggles and conflict that arise for students and institutions that have to negotiate the academic/vocational divide. Fenge (2011) found that students of HIVE value the opportunity to transform themselves from the label of vocational to academic learners in this context. However, it is suggested that this is achieved by way of successful completion of the course. There is little consideration of the critical way in which students negotiate this process and challenge their positions in the HE sector. What the value and use of independent learning, collective learning and critical thinking by mature students in this context also show are the tensions between HE and FE cultures based on middle and working class constructions of education that exist in HIVE and that affect the process of becoming an 'academic' learner. It provides analyses of the College's culture within the shifting terrain of struggle and conflict in the hierarchy of HE and FE learning.

**Difference in HE and FE practices**

There has been great difficulty by practitioners and researchers alike in defining what exactly HE is, and what constitutes HE practices in a diverse HE sector (Creasy, 2012). One way the mature students in these cases understood their HE experience was by drawing on their previous experiences of learning in FE. Often, when describing their experiences of HIVE, they did this by way of comparison between vocational learning and academic learning. Carolyn in particular, drew on her experience of NVQs when describing the differences between HE, as learning new knowledge, and FE, as getting a qualification for something that she already does in her work life. Her experience of FE learning echoes some of the concerns raised by Leicester & Field (2000) that a focus on employability in post-compulsory and lifelong learning may exclude older students. In spite of this, most of the mature students found that the main differences between learning in HE and FE was the difference in the depth of knowledge they had to engage with. Hussey & Smith (2010) have defined the differences in knowledge and learning in FE as having a distinct lack of critical analysis that is central to knowledge and learning in HE. This difference is reflected in these cases where notions of working with knowledge in HE learning, rather than reporting facts and providing standard responses in order to meet the course learning outcomes, were considered important in differentiating the two. This was both challenging and empowering, unlike the vocational learning they had previously experienced. However, some of the mature students, Clare in particular, felt that that the FE environment was advantageous in developing the ability to work with knowledge due to increased support, and she thought she would not have been given this in a university environment.

The differences the mature students drew upon in order to make sense of their experience can point to the way in which students are conscious of the disparities between the HE and FE sector. Whilst previous research has also highlighted HE in FE students' understanding of their relative position in the HE sector as 'not quite higher education' (Fenge, 2011, p. 375) there is less understanding about how these positions are understood and challenged by mature participants of HIVE. It is through considering agency that the divide between academic knowledge as abstract and inapplicable and vocational knowledge as practical and immediate can be reconsidered. An alternative interpretation of vocational knowledge as 'really useful' knowledge and academic knowledge as abstract, is that 'really useful' knowledge is subjective, takes different forms and is 'really useful' to different people in different contexts (Avis, 2014). In this study, it was academic disciplinary knowledge that proved 'really useful' to the mature students. The development of academic knowledge in relation to 'academic capital' shows how such knowledge, posed as abstract and inapplicable

is relevant and useful in practice for these particular students. However, this was a question of agency; in a context where both academic and vocational knowledge were present, these mature students chose to align themselves with academic knowledge as it proved to be the most useful to them. Rather than considering academic and vocational knowledge bases in competing positions as a dualism, it might be better to consider them along a continuum, whereby they become relevant and useful for persons depending on context and life course. For example, mature students who may have sufficient vocational experience may find academic knowledge to be useful, whereas a younger person with little vocational experience may find a vocational knowledge base to be more useful. Considering the academic/vocational divide in this way also highlights structural inequalities that limit the use of agency for these purposes. In one way, HIVE offers access to different forms of knowledge that may hold emancipatory possibilities in a way that solely academic or vocational institutions do not. However, these possibilities are only unlocked through the use of agency and through resistance to the dominant vocational culture of the college. How agency and resistance in enacted by mature students in this way is the focus of the next section of the discussion.

## *How the experience of HIVE in an FE context shapes mature student identities*

This final part of the discussion addresses the question 'how does the experience of HIVE in an FE context shape mature student identities?'. As can be seen from earlier discussions, identifying and defining HE practices within this context can be problematic. This then makes understanding how these practices contribute to the development of individual mature student identities difficult. Common understandings of HE identities in FE Colleges often identify institutional and sector differences in culture as being central to this issue. This section highlights these understandings, and moves beyond them, by operationalizing resistance theory in relation to the cases in this study to illuminate how individual and collective agency, as mediated by dimensions of age and class, in the process of identity work may contribute to those differences.

The role and function of higher education delivered in further education Colleges has been the subject of considerable attention in the field of higher education and widening participation studies. One of the greatest concerns has been the complex and often contradictory relationships between the two sectors and the competing interests that contribute to the 'boundary paradox' central to this this type of higher education (Bathmaker, Brooks, Parry, & Smith, 2008). It can be argued that further education

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performs a particular role within a mass system of HE of steering non-traditional students into lower status HE, but providing progression opportunities to those who prove to have the potential of their traditional counterparts, known as the 'dirty work' of higher education (Parry, 2010). On an institutional level, performing this dirty work sees further education Colleges that deliver HE confront issues and tensions relating to status and identity (Parry, 2010). These tensions on the institutional level have been explored to reveal how the position of HE in FE as straddling both the further and higher education sectors brings 'conditions of complexity, uncertainty and dependency' (Parry, 2009, p. 322). Less attention has been paid to the way in which this position, and the complex, uncertain and dependent conditions that accompany it, are understood by students of HE in FE.

Those that have directed attention towards the student experience of HE in FE have focused on the way in which the complex conditions of the increasingly diverse HE sector shape institutional identity and how these identity structures are imposed on such students. Creasy (2012) offers an alternative lens through which to consider the diversity of the HE sector; as a continuum on which research intensive institutions are located on one end, and teaching intensive on the other. He notes how position along the continuum affects the activity and culture of an institution, and how concerns have been raised about the effects of such differences on institutions' abilities to offer comparable academic experiences (Ainley, 1994). What further complicates a continuum of HE and the cultures and practices associated with them is those 'hybrid' (Smith et al., 2007) or 'dual sector' (Garrod & Macfarlane, 2007) institutions that offer both HE and FE provision, but are predominantly FE providers. One way in which this concern has been addressed by FE institutions that deliver HE is to foster and develop a HE culture and space distinct from an FE one within the same institution (Lea & Simmons, 2012).

The development of a distinct HE culture within FE Colleges that deliver HE as a way to ensure parity of academic experience is not without its problems or critics. FE and HE are thought to have very distinct and sometimes competing cultures that are related to different approaches to knowledge, different sector interests and status (Creasy, 2013). One approach to developing a HE culture is through 'critical mass' whereby a large HE student body in an FE College naturally develops an ethos of HE (Turner, McKenzie, McDermott, & Stone, 2009, p. 261). However, this approach does little by way of defining what a HE ethos is or should be in FE Colleges. Others have argued that developing a HE culture or ethos involves providing the right conditions for central, although problematically defined, HE practices and approaches to knowledge (as contingent, rather than fixed) to be engaged in (Lea and Simmons, 2012).

However, a focus on institutions and their cultures as the 'provider' of a HE or academic experience neglects the role of agency amongst individuals in shaping their own experience and identity. It also neglects the idea that individual and collective agency of particular groups may in fact contribute to, challenge or change the institutional culture, shaping it from an individual to institutional perspective, rather than the other way around.

Instead then, this study proposes that mature students may mobilize 'life experience' capital that provides them with a certain orientation to the contingent approach to knowledge and practices that characterise HE in order to 'work with knowledge' and develop academic capital. In these cases this approach is not solely developed as a result of a HE culture imposed on them. In fact, mature students use agency to impose their own orientation to HE on the culture itself. The way in which this agency is exercised is the process of individuation, that is, distinguishing themselves from other social groups within the College, most notably by resisting identification with their FE peers.

The process of individuation as an act of resistance shows the complex ways in which the mature students respond to the connections between their own assumptions, experiences and identity and structures of domination (Giroux, 1983b). Individuation as an act of resistance is supported by articulated interpretations made by the mature students themselves in the struggle for parity of esteem between their experience and that of a university experience. This conceptualisation of resistance is also supported by locating the historical and generational assumptions that underpin such behaviour to reveal the underlying and possibly competing interests of these mature students in the face of domination and struggle (Giroux, 1983b). An identification and analysis of assumptions made by the mature students reveals the hidden (or not so hidden in some cases) logic that underlies the resistant behaviour of individuation.

Longstanding common assumptions regarding the status of academic and vocational knowledge and learning were evident in the mature students' accounts. Assumptions of what characterises HE learning was often informed by family, friends and reflective of a generational or age influenced understanding of an elite HE system. Their assumptions reflected the notions of incompatibility between academic and vocational knowledge in a system of lifelong learning. For this reason, the mature students' assumptions of HE and their experiences of the social practices and values found in the context of FE as a social site were also incompatible and therefore undermined such learning.

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The collective values and assumptions that underlay the mature students' logic of HE learning also contributed to issues of identity. The mature students often identified themselves as different to others in two ways, as mature students, and as HE students. The mature student identity was conceptualised as unique from other students, both HE and FE in the College, due to the accumulation of life experience capital. Life experience capital was mobilized in several ways that contributed to the development of a distinct mature student identity. Firstly, life experience capital was used as a justification for entry to HE and in exchange of the more formal qualifications of their younger peers that rooted in middle class constructions of what type of capital is acceptable for entry to HE. Related to this, life experience capital was thought to have prepared them more readily for HE study than the vocational qualifications of their younger 'FE' peers. Thirdly, the life experience they brought to the HE community at the College was seen to enhance not only their own experience, but also the experience of their younger peers. Life experience capital as a concept is therefore central to uncovering the interests underlying resistant behaviour enacted by the mature students in these cases. The collective values, such as rejecting an employability model of lifelong learning and a vocational orientation to HE study are embedded in the accumulation of life experiences that provides an alternative reality of personal and professional advancement through participation in vocational forms of learning.

Alternatively, agency was exercised by the mature students in constructing a distinct HE identity to counter associations of vocational learning embedded in the predominantly FE social site of the College. In the face of an alternative HE at the College to the one that had underpinned their assumptions, the mature students exercised their individual and collective agency in shaping their experience that reflected a HE experience more akin to what they had envisioned. One way in which this agency was exercised was by developing a HE identity that was distinct from their FE peers at the College. The process of disassociation from previous working class identities has been noted by Castells (1997) who suggests that working class students may disassociate themselves from identities of which they are attached in order to create new, better selves in relation to HE and FE. In some cases the mature students drew upon consumerist ideas of HE learning as fee payers to do this. The question of agency is highlighted here too, as what this shows is that the mature students chose to draw upon discourses that were contradictory to their idealised view of HE at moments when they felt this was useful. These discourses armed them with a sense of entitlement and status as HE students. This in turn reinforced their assumptions that academic learning was higher status than vocational learning and this was displayed by articulated resistance to the FE community, influenced by classed understandings of the hierarchy of HE and FE. However, in a predominantly FE environment, some of the mature

students displayed features of resentment that the recognition of their higher status was not met and therefore they felt somewhat alienated. However, it could be argued that some of this alienation was self-inflicted through the process of individuation and the search for a distinct HE community.

The positioned self that arose from the process of individuation and through exercising agency in order to define a HE identity was complex and unique to each mature student. Lawler (2009) suggests that any one person can have multiple 'selfs' that help that individual to make sense of their experiences. There were, however, some common aspects that embodied the collective values of the mature students. Firstly, a certain sense of autonomy and the idea of taking responsibility for one's own learning was important. It has been argued that in a mass or near universal system of HE with a shift in financial responsibility from the state to the student, a shift in attitude may also be seen in students to that of a consumer (Lea and Simmons, 2012). Whilst this may be the case, it can be said that for these mature students, a consumer attitude was only exercised when necessary for gaining the respect and privileges they felt were appropriate for their status as HE students.

Conversely, a large part of the positioned self was about developing independence and being responsible for their own learning, as distinguishable from their FE peers. Feather, (2010) suggests that whilst the foundations of the old, traditional university have been somewhat dismantled, in the absence of a reconstruction of what HE is, individuals may continue to draw upon ideas of the old university and associated middle class values as points of reference in defining their own experience. It can be seen in these cases that the mature students did position themselves with reference to assumptions about traditional values and practices associated with HE. Their expectations of HE study mirrored attitudes of a more elite system of HE whereby participation is seen as a privilege rather than a right or necessity as in a mass or universal system (Trow, 1973). It has been acknowledged that attitudes to participation in HE can encompass those of right, necessity and privilege as features of elite, mass and universal HE at the same time (Bathmaker & Thomas, 2009). However, less is known about how these attitudes play out at the level of the student and how this may shape individual and institutional identities. Student behaviour with regards to positioning oneself within the HE sector is often viewed as being determined by what students deem reasonable about where they fit in such sector with a view to participation (Bathmaker & Thomas, 2009). Whilst this holds truth, what is not acknowledged is the way in which particular students may recognise and challenge this position during their experience if it does not meet their expectations.

One of the clear advantages of offering HE in an FE College that did not clearly differentiate between the HE and  FE provision offered, is the opportunity to close the transitional gap between the two types of learning in order to make this process more seamless (Bathmaker & Thomas, 2009). However, the recognition of this unclear differentiation by mature students led them to exercise agency by rejecting those vocational labels assigned to them that positioned their experience as 'FE' and lower status as students of HE in an FE College. Many of the mature students challenged the view that their experience was not 'real higher education' (Leahy, 2012) by resisting aspects of their learning that did not meet their expectations of real higher education, mainly FE attitudes and approaches to studying. In doing this they often challenged the power relations involved in positioning HIVE as lower status and of lesser value as part of the stratification and inequalities involved in a diverse HE sector. It has been argued that middle class academic cultures and practices of HE delivered in FE Colleges are largely determined and imposed by partner universities as referees of the field (Leahy, 2012). It has also been argued that students are shaped by the relative position of the institution they attend in the field of HE and the capital gained there reproduces inequality (Leahy, 2012). I would argue that, whilst this may be the case, students also bring their own life experience capital to the field which in turn, used in acts of resistance, contributes to shaping the institution to some extent. Attempts to differentiate this provision as 'higher vocational education' by the College was met with articulated resistance as the mature students' life experience capital and assumptions of 'real HE' told them it held less value.  Therefore, this study provides an alternative position; whereby the academic cultures and practices pervading HE in FE are considered, and to some extent, shaped by, the collective agency of particular groups of students. Using resistance theory in this way has highlighted the importance of individual and collective agency in establishing the mature student identity and experience of HIVE in an FE College.

Most commentators position participants of HE in FE as 'second chance learners' (Fenge, 2011; Robinson, 2012) and those that would not have had the aspirations to attend a university to undertake HE (Turner et al., 2009). This could be due to the view commonly associated with FE learners as having more support needs than other types of students (Hodkinson et al., 2007).  However, many of the mature students also rejected the label of a second chance learner, by highlighting the contribution they made as older students to the learning environment for the benefit of their younger peers, through the use of life experience capital. Leathwood and O'Connell (2003) pointed to the ways in which in a mass higher education system, widening participation students were marked as 'other' compared to existing and traditional students. It may be in response to this that students recognised themselves as 'other' and therefore resisted this notion by identifying themselves as

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legitimate HE students by othering their FE peers as, "vocational courses do not have the same status as their academic counterparts" (Leathwood & O'Connell, 2003, p. 601).

The process of individuation exercised in varying degrees by the mature students, also contributes the diversion/diversity debate by suggesting that some of the 'diverted', in struggling to carve out a distinctly academic whilst resisting a vocational identity, may in fact collectively contribute to the longstanding academic/vocational divide from within. Up until now, the way in which students of HIVE in FE Colleges position themselves in relation to their FE peers in order to shape their identity as HE students has been overlooked in the literature regarding HE in FE cultures and practices. This raises problems for those that have argued for a merging of further and higher education into one system in order to reconstruct the boundary between vocational and academic institutions into something more seamless (Young, 2006). Whilst institutions and sectors may strive for a more seamless system, the students participating in programmes of HE at those boundaries may not. What this shows is that the assumptions and expectations of students within both systems cannot be ignored as they have the potential to challenge and collectively resist a system that does not meet such expectations.

The data presented in this thesis could have been interpreted in several ways using the reproductive theories highlighted in chapter five. From an economic-reproduction perspective, it could be argued that the mature students participation and experience of HIVE mirrors the norms and values of the workplace and reinforces class divisions (Bowles & Gintis, 1976). However, this perspective does not take into account the way in which the mature students resisted certain vocational elements of their courses and challenged others, using academic and life experience capital. Their experience of HIVE, did not therefore reproduce compliant workers, but produced critical members of society with the ability to affect change.

Another interpretation that could have been made using reproductive accounts of education is one based on the hegemonic-state reproduction model (Gramsci, 1971). Using this model, it could be argued that the state legitimates the divide between high status (academic) and low status (practical) knowledge through the development if HIVE in FE colleges that is distinct from all other provision. It could also be argued that the legitimisation of HIVE as lower status HE by the state diverts different social groups to their respective place in the labour market and society. This is a valid interpretation from a structural perspective. It does not however, account for the ways in which people can be implicated in the reproduction of inequalities as well. When interpreted through the use of

resistance theories however, this can be taken into account. As stated in chapter 5, this thesis takes the position of resistance as relatively autonomous. That is, that resistance is both conscious and unconscious at the individual level, but that it is the collective resistance that creates a cultural logic capable of change. Using this interpretation, the relative autonomy the mature students have from the state gave them capacity to challenge, as well as support, social relations (McLaren, 1985). For example, through challenging HIVE as lower status HE by resisting the vocational aspects of their courses in this particular context, the mature students may also reinforce existing inequalities between HE and FE more generally.

The final perspective that could have been taken when interpreting this data is the cultural-reproduction model (Bourdieu, 1977) and in particular, Bourdieu's notion of distinction (Bourdieu, 1984). When thinking about the theme 'individuation' in particular, it could be argued that the mature students happened to be individuals who, by chance or otherwise, have been in a position to respond to serendipity and see the opportunity to become socially mobile. Bourdieu (1984) would see this as the struggle for distinction, where the chance to move into a more advantaged sector of the social field of HE relies in part upon distinguishing oneself from those in less advantaged positions. And in so doing, this actually reinforces existing inequalities, such that these individuals are the exceptions that prove the rule. This may be a valid interpretation; however it does not take into account the power 'the struggle for distinction' has in shaping the social field of HE to which the mature students are positioning themselves. If this oppositional behaviour is thought of as resistance, rather than distinction, the mature students can be interpreted as a counter-culture, derived from shared cultural understandings of the purpose of HE, that undermine the dominant discourses of employability and vocationalism prevalent in HIVE. It can therefore be argued that the theme of individuation, when taken on its own, resonates closely with Bourdieu's notion of distinction. However, when considered alongside the other themes of lifelong learning in HIVE and HE in FE practices, new insights can be generated using theories of resistance.

Using Giroux's theories of resistance has shown the complexity with which dimensions of age and class intersect to influence the mature student's perceptions and experiences of HIVE in the context of an FE college. Within the structures of class and age, mature students are able to use certain resources, such as life experience capital (associated with age) and academic capital, (associated with class), to negotiate their position in relation to the fields of HE, FE and other agents within those fields. The use of Giroux's resistance theories has also highlighted the way in mature students exercise agency within the

structures of class and age in a competing and contradictory way. As such, resistance as agency in these cases can be both reactionary - reproducing the dominant discourses associated with HE - at the same time as being progressive, and challenging those discourses. The classed dimensions of resistance, such as 'othering' were informed by a dominating logic, thus reproducing the dominant social order in a quest to become more mobile by the mature students. Whereas dimensions of resistance associated with age were informed by a liberating logic, which challenges the dominant social order. Therefore, it may also be the case that when age and class intersect to shape the agency displayed by the mature students, aspects of age and life experience capital became more important in the countering of negative effects of class on participation, and success in HE.

In summary, this chapter argues that, in terms of participation, mature students are somewhat (self) diverted to this particular type of HE in spite of their understanding of its relative position in the HE sector. However, rather than blindly accepting this position, the mature students exercised agency during their experience with a view to creating parity of esteem with more traditional types of HE. Unlike studies that problematize transitions for certain types of students, it appears that the struggles these students faced were in trying to engage in HE practices against the backdrop of an FE culture. The mature students can therefore be seen to constitute a HE counter-culture to the predominantly FE culture of the College. The dominating logic of that culture of vocationalism and employability was at odds with their understanding of HE and their lifelong learning needs. Resistance to these logics is political, in that it has the potential to undermine the power structures that determine the purpose of different types of HE. However, because of the location of their resistance, collectively this then reinforced the HE/FE divide from within, and reinforces, then, those hierarchies of knowledge that determine such divide.

# 8  Conclusion

The aim of the thesis is to understand the experiences of mature students studying HIVE in one medium sized further education college in the north of England. In particular, the study aims to explore why mature students (who at the time made up approximately 80% of the institution's HE student population) participated in HIVE, how they experienced learning practices related to HE and FE, as well as if and how this shapes their identities. These research questions were developed and underpinned by the critical tradition which in turn shaped the design and execution of the case studies. In doing this, the study seeks to contribute to the small but growing body of knowledge about mature student participation in HIVE by making visible the complex peculiarities of lived experience in this context.

As highlighted in the introduction and throughout the body of the thesis, the broad definition of the term 'mature student' is complex and the construction of individual cases has further acknowledged these complexities. However, a cross-case synthesis enabled a thematic analysis that provided meaningful interpretations of this phenomenon. Situated within the literature regarding debates of widening participation, access, and diversion or diversity, the study sought to restore a degree of agency when considering mature student participation in HIVE. Using an alternative and innovative theoretical framework commonly used to understand educational participation in compulsory schooling, the thesis argues that mature students' in HIVE may constitute a counter-culture of FE whereby participants exercise agency through resistance at the local level; by challenging the FE culture that values 'vocational' over 'academic' knowledge. Their participation in HIVE may also act as resistance at the structural level, by challenging the traditional means by which academic knowledge is obtained. The use of agency in this way may hold emancipatory possibilities for the individual, and collectively their agency undermines structures that shape hierarchies of knowledge and who has access to them. However, in challenging the means by which academic knowledge is obtained, whilst simultaneously resisting the vocational culture of the college, their resistance contributes to reproducing inequality in participation of forms of HE that may be more appropriate for their needs and, through the resistant process of individuation reproduces the disparity of esteem between vocational and academic education at the HE-FE interface.

## *Original Contribution to Knowledge*

The study claims an original contribution to knowledge in three ways. The first is the use of theories of resistance as a lens through which to interpret the data that provides alternative explanations for participation, success and failure of mature students in HIVE. In this study, the hierarchy of academic and vocational knowledge that structures the relationship between HE and FE and students between the two sectors both challenges and confirms that relationship.  In this sense, oppositional behaviour or attitudes are less about overcoming barriers and transitions and more about moral and political indignation (Giroux 1983b). The key proponent of analysing any act of resistance is the extent to which it contributes to opposition or struggle against domination or submission (Giroux 1983b). Resistance must also be able to expose accounts of domination and struggles for social and self-emancipation. Thus, using resistance theory with this data revealed mature students' critiques of structures of domination that labels learners in this context as 'vocational' and their struggles for recognition as 'academic' HE students. As suggested in chapter 5, this resistance is both conscious and unconscious at the individual level, but because the individual's relative autonomy from the state and its spheres of production, their collective resistance holds capacity for change. The interpretation of these cases using this form of resistance provides an understanding of the collective cultural logic of mature students as active agents of a social group. Whilst the methodological limitations of this study mean that limited generalisations can be made, the theoretical contribution may be useful for those interested in micro analyses of adult education with a greater focus on human agency. However, Wood (1983, p. 69) argues that "Giroux's work, whilst important and useful, is by design incomplete… A primary shortcoming of resistance theory is its translatability". Therefore this thesis sought to move beyond resistance theory through the development of additional theoretical concepts to improve its translatability in the context of mature students in HIVE.

Hence, secondly, the use of Bourdieu's 'academic capital' and the development of 'life experience capital' are a theoretical and analytical contribution to knowledge. The development of resistance theory in the context of mature student participation in HIVE has enabled the analytical concepts of academic and life experience capital to be developed in the context of this thesis. These concepts have contributed to illuminating the dynamics of accommodation and resistance amongst mature students in this particular context. These additional concepts move beyond Giroux's original theory from the concern with understanding the underlying structures that shape the mature students resistance and agency within a HIVE context, to the consideration of how specific age and class based

resources are operationalised as resistance in a way that both reaffirms and the challenges their social position as the mature students try to reposition themselves and become more mobile. In doing so, this thesis reveals the intersection of how 'class' and 'age' relate and operate to shape the mature students' experience.

The third contribution to knowledge this thesis makes is that it attempts to contribute to a gap in the current literature regarding HIVE that is yet to fully consider the way in which particular groups of students experience practice in these contexts. Often studies of students in HIVE either provide romanticised accounts of FE as providing a safe haven for a particular type of student that would not normally participate in HE, or of students diverted to unequal types of HE with limited consciousness and agency. This thesis argues that in the cases studied here, mature students are aware of the difference in status of different types of HE in a more nuanced way than previously considered, and exercise agency in order to affect position and status. Therefore, mature student's perceptions and motivations for participation in HIVE can be seen as a chance to reposition themselves and become more mobile. The thesis shows that age and class interrelate in the way the mature students exercise agency, resulting in both reactionary and progressive resistant behaviours that shape their perceptions and motivations for participation in HIVE. The mature students' understandings, perceptions and motivations in relation to HE, are informed by class and age based assumptions that reveal how the development of academic capital, grounded in individual interests of becoming socially mobile, can result in resistant behaviour that confirms the dominant social order. As such, reactionary behaviours influenced in part by the development of academic capital are informed by a dominating logic that serves to reproduces the dominant social order and the hierarchical structures of HE and FE. However, those same assumptions are implicated in a range of progressive behaviours associated with the mobilization of life experience capital that simultaneously challenges the dominant social order. Through the use of life experience capital, the interests of which lie in liberating logic, the mature students displayed progressive resistance to potentially oppressive structures. This represents a form of resistance that is grounded in collective emancipatory interests – the acknowledgement and use of alternative and valuable forms of working class and age based capital for entry to, and success in, HE. The thesis illuminates how students draw on the limited resources at their disposal in order to reaffirm the positive dimensions of their own cultures and histories (Giroux, 1983b) – their histories and 'life experience' capital as an asset to HE study. This poses further questions that have implications for further research, policy and practice.

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## *Implications for Policy, Practice and Further Research*

The use of theories of resistance as an alternative lens to view this data leads to more general questions about the appropriateness of the HIVE curriculum for mature students with regards to employability and mobility within the labour market. One of those questions is whether an overly instrumental focus on employability caters more for younger learners with little life experience and experience of the labour market than for mature adults already established in the labour market, a question which this study has addressed. However, as this study has been limited to perceptions of mature students in a very particular context, it would be useful to understand this finding from the perspective of younger participants of HIVE in a broader context.

Another question concerns the extent to which the ambiguity surrounding the nature of HIVE diverts adult learners from traditional HE pathways more appropriate to their needs and expectations of HE. These ambiguities are tied up in questions around policy and practice. The thesis has shown that the mature students' understandings of HE were not always drawn from policy discourses, but also from friends, families and the community. It would be useful to explore further the extent to which policy effects students' perceptions of HE in its different forms, including in FE. In the climate of diminished funding for adult education identified in the introduction, it may be the case that more and more adults are diverted to HIVE qualifications as a lifelong learning alternative that can be afforded by the student. Policy in the area of further and higher education is rarely devised using educational research. However, if more adults are to benefit from higher education in diverse contexts then we need policies that reflect the lived realities of those it intends to benefit. From a practice perspective, it is ever more important that these forms of higher education are fit for purpose and entirely appropriate for all who wish to participate in them.

# Appendix 1 – Information Sheet

**INFORMATION SHEET**

**Project Title:** Negotiating identities: An ethnographic case study of mature students studying HE in an FE college

**Purpose of the research:** This study is being conducted by Kathryn Lavender in fulfilment of the award of PhD in The School of Education and Professional Development at the University of Huddersfield

**Introduction and Background**
Education is a significant place for the construction of identity (Weil, 1986) particularly amongst young people, whereby the process of forming an identity often starts. For mature students this process has already started, experience has shaped their identities therefore education is an extension to their lives, rather than a completely new stage of it (Toynton, 2005). Many mature students that study HE in FE do so because of convenience and locality; negotiating family, work and study responsibilities. However, amongst the practical and pedagogical obstacles that mature students face, there is also a potential conflict between an already established identity as a parent, partner, professional or other and the demands of study and engagement as a student, which is an additional and significant challenge. Further to this, the complexity of forming 'HE' identities in an 'FE' setting makes the notion of identity even more problematic. Understanding learner identities is crucial to widening participation as identity is integral to successful learning and development; supporting access, participation and retention in education.

**Aims of the study:** To investigate the impact of FE and HE cultures on the identity of mature students studying HE in FE. Specific aspects of culture and identity will be explored;

- How do HE and FE cultures effect the experience of mature students in HE in FE?
- What is the nature of tension between FE and HE cultures?
- How any tension affects the identity of mature students in HE in FE?
- How does identity with regards to the HE in FE experience permeate the wider lives of mature students?

**Planned research methods**
The study is a longitudinal (18 months to 2 years) ethnography using an emergent design. A range of methods will be used including;
- Observations
- Informal, unstructured interviews with a sample of 10 mature students at the college
- Documents

**Confidentiality and Anonymity**
Data collected will be kept confidential and the college (as an institution) will remain anonymous. Students that participate in the research will also be ensured confidentiality and anonymity.

**Outcomes**
The findings of the study will inform policy and practice in HE in FE as well as contributing to institutional strategies, as it will provide a valuable insight into the experiences of an under-represented group of people in higher education. The findings therefore have implications for student retention and success by informing best practice in HE in FE; improving mature students learning and development; and the HE in FE student experience more generally.

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# Appendix 2 – Consent Form

**CONSENT FORM**

**Project Title:** Negotiating identities: An ethnographic case study of mature students studying HE in an FE college

**Researcher**: Kathryn Lavender, School of Education and Professional Development. Huddersfield University. Tel: 07738290691. Email: u1072043@unimail.hud.ac.uk
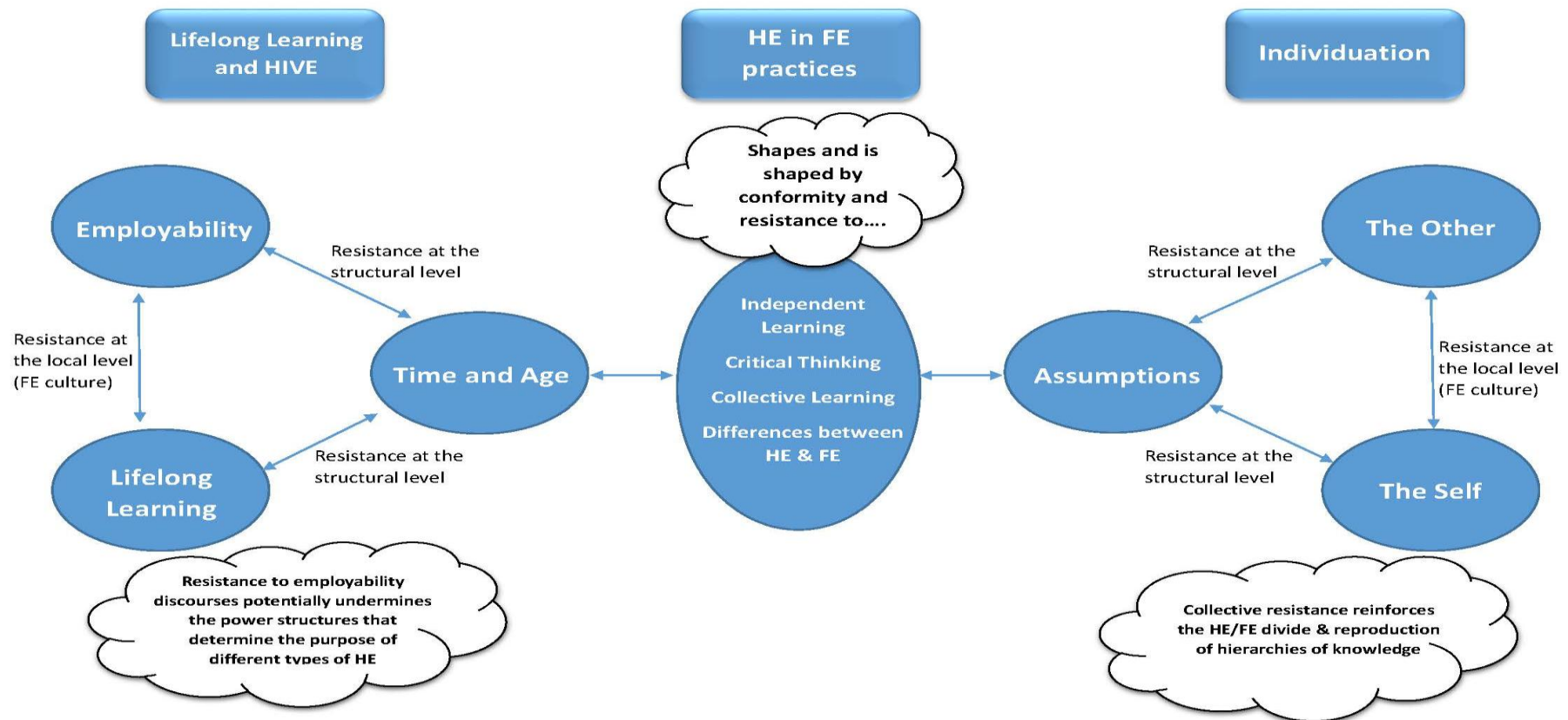
Please Tick

- I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet for the above study and have had the opportunity to ask questions.

- I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving reason.

- I understand that in the event of my withdrawal, any data gathered up to this point will be destroyed and not used in the research.

- I agree to the interview being audio recorded and the recordings to be used for the purposes of the research.

- I understand that the data will be anonymous and any direct quotes used in the report will be used under a pseudonym.

- I understand that data gathered in this research will be destroyed once the report is finalised.

- I would like to see a copy of the data of which I am involved in.

**Name**

_____

**Signature** _____**Date_____**

**Thank you for your participation in this research, if you have any further questions please contact me via email or telephone (see above)**

# Appendix 3 – Map of Analysis

# Appendix 4 – Interview Transcript

**Matt Interview 2 23/05/2014**

K: Ok, so last time we spoke it was about 6 months ago wasn't it? When you had your first interview….

M: Was it that long ago?

K: I think so yeh! So do you want to tell me a little bit about how you've found this year?

M: In the sense of how I personally found it?

K: Yeh

M: yeh, honestly I've really enjoyed it, its erm… I probably mentioned last time that it was a bit of a change for me coming back into sort of education erm… and it was never something before hand that I enjoyed so much really, I wasn't really, I mean I was always pretty good at this sort of style of learning er… I just never really enjoyed it so much so I ended up sort of dropping out of my AS levels and things like that just cause I didn't like classroom work and theory work and erm… but as I got older I obviously, I felt I was ready to sort of do that, cause I knew I could do it, I just thought I was in a plpace to actually commit myself to doing it, and I came with… not really many expectations of how, I mean I thought I was in a place where I could commit myself to it but I wasn't sure but then when I started, I started really enjoying and then the whole years just been something that I've really enjoyed, I've really enjoyed dpoing the sort of studying and the essay writing which is something that I never thought I'd really…. But that's been the best part for me, just learning about the topic about my subject and then putting it into my own… its been really enjoyable and err.. just the atmosphere at the college and everything as well erm.. its really good, I really like both the tutors, I really like the style of work we've been doing and the units we've been doing so yeh, I've really enjoyed it

K: Ok, good, so now you've finished a year, do you feel like you're in a place where you know what to do?

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M: Yeh I think I sought of, I think I picked that up, what I was expected to do and what I needed to do quite early erm… its taken me a full year to kind of learn how to organize myself properly with it, I think next year, I'll definitely be able to, now I know the sort of amount of work we're getting and the pace I need to work at for each one it won't be leaving so many things until the last minute sort of thing so its helped me sort of structure myself a little bit better, I'm hoping anyway, next year! [laughs] that everything will run a bit more smoothly and there won't be so many sleepless nights sort of thing, but yeh, and I've got a sound knowledge of the units and how the learning works, you know the basic information I'm going to get form tutors and then how much I'm expected to go and self study myself so, yeh I think I'm in a pretty good place to progress.....

K: and do you think that you know that because of the experience of doing the course over the year or is it something else?

M: Err…. I sort of knew how higher education, well not higher education necessarily because I didn't really know about that before I came here but, I think we discussed that last time but I knew sort of higher level learning, you know I mean I've got a lot of friends who have gone to uni and my girlfriend has been through uni and all of that, so I knew the sort of work and the sort of style and that… I didn't really know anything about this course when I er… in all honesty I sort of saw the topic you know, saw the subject which was a subject that I thought I'd be able to sort of, excel in, I mean I'd not done it since GCSE but I'd done pretty well there and I thought I could probably do it at a higher level and I've got you know, business admin NVQs and that so I thought I could probably do it, I had no idea about how the course was going to be and how the work was going to be so it was literally through the experience of being here that sort of taught me that

K: Ok, and have you found any difficulties whilst you've been here?

M: Erm.. difficulties was mainly just my own getting motivated to start doing assignments, it like once they're started I can sort of fly through them and I pretty much don't stop until I'm done, its that getting… initial sort of push to start doing work that's always the hardest bit erm… but I mean there's a lot fo support here for that sort of thing, you tutors are always motivating you and help you with scheduling and things and giving you an idea of how much tie you should be spending on doing your research and then erm… as far as difficulties go I've not, as far as the work goes I've not found the work particularly difficult but then again I think that's because I sort of know the subject a little bit anyway, I mean its not an easy level its not been to easy sort of thing, its at a level where I think I am so its

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fine for me so there's not really been too many difficulties again apart from just kicking myself up the behind to get it done!

K: Yeh, Can you see how you progress on your course you know, through the different levels?

M: Yes, I was actually looking back at some of my earlier assignments and, I think it was just last week actually err… procrastinating [laughs] but yeh the, I've, I was reading some of early reports and I was like 'oh, dear, I don't know how they got the marks' cause I didn't like them particularly and my style, I've not, erm to be honest I've not utilized, you know, you guys at all really, the academic skills erm.. its juts something that I sort of taught myself and once I found a style that suited my writing I sort of just kept at it, and reading, you know, from doing research and reading actual academic pieces a well you've sort of been able to pick up the style that is expected without having to sit and go through it with people really it was just I guess I sort of teaching myself and if I thought I might be doing something wrong or there's something I could be doing better, its just little things, like my style of writing as it is, that's what's really progressed I mean, I always thought I was quite a good writer before but its definitely a lot better now through the things that I've been reading, so my styles sort of changed….

K: Is that because you're doing it more?

M: Yeh, pretty much, I mean I'm writing a lot of essays obviously! My styles sort of changed a lot from first person stuff that I was doing back at the beginning, its always, even when I'm trying to put my opinion in its like I try and put it in in a third person sort of way, its just the style I found that looks more professional or reads nicer, I don't like reading the 'I' and 'I believe this' and you know, I know you're meant to put your own opinions in but I try and do it in a way that's not me going, 'I think this' and 'I think that' sort of thing, so its just, that's what I was doing at the beginning and as I've progressed I've sort of found new ways of being able to put my opinions in without with it reading, I think, with a higher level and I just think it reads nicer than what it would have done,

K: And is that just what you think looks nice I writing, or has that been conveyed to you by other people?

M: I think its more my opinion to be honest cause a lot of the things we, I mean when we have had things around academic skills writing and things, a lot of the talk has been around

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putting your own opinions in things to put up your grades, I just never like, I guess yeh its my style, I like try to write in a way that I like to read, you know, there's nothing worse than reading through your essays, its really boring so! I try to write it in a way that I'd find I enjoy reading, yeh so that's just something I've developed myself as opposed to what necessarily I've been told, but its getting me better marks as the yeasr progressed as well so I think it must have been working

K: and do your peers have a similar approach to studying to you?

M: I think on our course, I think it depends on the level that everybody feels that they're at with their studying, with it being the first year and everything and being new to a lot of people, myself included, you know a lot of people are just trying to get it to a pass and I think even at the end of the year some people are still working just to get it to a pass, you know, get it in and get through the year sort of thing, whereas my approach pretty much form the beginning was to be sort of excelling a pass, and there is a few people like that on the course as well I know, there's a couple who are, you know pretty much like me in like they're angry when they see a pass on the page, whereas half the class would be perfectly happy with that, I don't know its just what people want to get out of it and the level they feel they're at and able to achieve, I always felt I could do better…

K: That's interesting so is there no advice from tutors about how to get there?

M: There is, there is a lot actually I mean, the cool thing about here is erm.. every assignment you hand in you get feedback on and most of the time as well as long as its in on time, you get a chance to up your grade after the feedback so you can take the feedback and put it in to your assignment so there is, but I guess it's the level of what you get it in at as well as, to the level of feedback you get to get it up, I mean you know if you hand in a piece that's' not quite a pass, the feedback will generally be how you can get it up to a pass, whereas if you hand it in as a higher then the feedback you get is how to get it even higher, there's always feedback of how to get it higher, I don't think every time there is feedback as to how you can get it up to the highest level but we have had sort of lessons and tutorials around how you can hit the sort of higher grade as well, but the individual feedback is generally how to get it up to the next level but then again you take that feedback from the last one and put it to the next one, and you've still got that knowledge of how you put that up to that grade and you can sort of start writing at the grade you put the last one up to, so the feedback does help a lot

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K: Ok, so does the feedback facilitate independent learning?

M: So for me, I feel it hinders it…. In a way erm… I mean I always try to get my assignments in so that I don't really need any feedback, but that's just me being how I am….

K: Is that a feature of independent learning, being able to submit something at a standard where you shouldn't need to….

M: Yes, yes, I mean I always try to try and put you know, all the effort I can into a particular assignment and I don't hand it in until I'm perfectly happy that it is to a high standard and because I've learned how everything is marked now and what you need to do to hit certain grades erm, I've got a good idea of what I'm going to get before I hand it in erm… so I think for me the feedback is only useful if I have just missed something or done something a little bit wrong and I don't like the idea of, which obviously its good for some people when they're saying how you could get it up to the next level sort of thing but I'd like to think that I can do that without the feedback and then maybe you know 'maybe this could be better next time' not this time

K: that's interesting, we did a little focus group about employability and you mentioned about the employability focus of the course for you was around the reflective practice, do you still feel the same about that now? Is it still an important part of the course for you?

M: It's a dull part of it! I'm having to do a lot more, I think when we was talking about that last time, I was talking about the personal and professional development unit, which was about reflection in that sense, whereas now I've got to a point where I'm having to reflect on my actual work, which I can see is why its important,… actually no I can't! its important because it gets my grade up so its important in that sense  erm… but I don't particularly find it that useful to reflect on my assignments, I don't know if that's just because I don't know why we're doing it, a lot of the time when I'm sort of writing a reflective review it seems like I'm just bambling on and that sort of thing so I don't feel its that useful, its useful to get my grade up obviously but… the actual reflecting on…. I've never been one for reflection cause, at the end of the unit… its been a big thing, you know, when we're working in groups, reflecting on what went well and what went bad and I sort of know at the time what went well and whats gone bad and how I resolved it then I can sort of just take that without having to write it and reflect it, so reflections not really something, I guess It comes in useful when a similar sort of situation comes up again so you know, like 'how did I do

that last time?' but to do it straight after it seems more irrelevant to me, but I can see how that is a useful skill to have you know, for like I said, the next time a situation occurs to be able to reflect on it

K: So just explain to me the reflection on your assignments? Do you have to add a reflective component to the assignment you're submitting?

M: to get it up to the top grade yeh,

K: so you're supposed to reflect on that particularly assignment?

M: well no, I do it differently actually, how it works here is, or on our course at least, there's usually like for assignment to a unit and obviously is graded form like pass to distinction erm, and one assignment can't be a full distinction I know from one of my tutors that if it is at distinction level they'll put 'partial distinction' at the top and then at the end of the four tasks you do a reflection on the whole unit and that will put the partial distinctions up to a full distinction…. But I sort of go against that myself sometimes, if I'm feeling like or I'm thinking that this essay is good I'll do a reflection at the end of each assignment sometimes, so I don't know I sort of do it differently, they do say that you just need to do one at the end of the unit but a lot of the time I just do it like that, again that's not something really that's useful to me, its just something I've got into the habit of doing because I'm trying to get, you know it gets the good marks

K: Ok, I know that we talked about identity in your last interview but do you think over the course of the year you have seen a change in yourself?

M: As far as changes in myself I think, weirdly, I think I am a lot calmer now, which I think you'd expect to be the other way around when its coming to the end of the year and its deadlines and everything but I think I was more uptight about my assignments and presentations at the beginning of the year cause I wa so focused, cause I knew, you know, I really wanna do well sort of thing but as I've learned how to do them I've become a lot calmer about them including presentations, I've done, I did three presentations this week and I've had hated the idea of that at the beginning of the year, but I sort of just flew through them this week, so I think its actually calmed me down in a sense, I was a lot more stressed at the beginning with the assignments than I have been towards the end, so that's a good thing, as far as work goes, I'm not full time and its not really stuff you can use on it…. My organizational skills and things, you know, finance units have been good for

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budgeting and things like that so I've been able to take little bits, I know some people have been able to take erm… depending on what they're doing, there's a guy you probably know, simon on my course, he's been able to implement stuff that he's learned as he runs his own business, you know he's a photographer and he's got his own photography business so he's been able to take what we've been doing here and improve his business in that sense and there's another guy who's literally in the process of starting his own business, I know he's had a lot of meeting with you know, our tutors and we've done sort of e-business topics which have been good for him because he's sort of created his own website, and I can see how it can help in that sort of sense but I'm, at the moment don't have those sort of extra-curricula activities, I'm focused on just doing this but er…. Yeh I can see how it can hlp and how it has helped other people, I mean it has helped me in certain ways but not to the extent that it can in the outside world anyway, but academically its helping me, I'm learning a lot, a lot about the topics

K: Do you think its useful then to be involved with something to do with your subject before you start the course?

M: Er, yes and no, I think if you're involved with it before you start the course, I think when I mentioned simon his own prior experience has helped a lot in his case so it can be useful, I know some of the units he's been able to pretty much fly through because he's already got all the stuff and all the evidence as wel cause he's been working at It for years, so erm… it can be useful in that sense, but then again if you are involved at all before the course, when you are doing them units that you already know, I don't know really how much you'd be learning form it sort of thing, where as I sort of came in, had basic knowledge but not sort of that extra activity to get the wide range of knowledge that I can from going into other areas if I wanted to, so it sort of swings in roundabouts with that, I think its good for those people who are in them activities beforehand to improve theirs and put their knowledge in as well, and its good to people who aren't to learn how to do that

K: Ok, you mentioned before about the academic side, is that important to you?

M: To me? To me that's the only thing really, that's important to me at the moment, that's the bit I enjoy as well….

K: Why is that?

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M: I don't know, I always have regretted the fact that I never committed myself in sort of school and then A- levels and things like that, you know I was always expected to do quite well I just never committed and at that point academic really wasn't important to me at that point at all and then as I got older I always started to regret that cause I could have done quite a bit better and I could have done a lot more so now the opportunity arose to do it again and you know, that's what I regretted beforehand and I'm sort of just remedying that now I've got that chance to make it better, so to me that's really the only important thing, obviously I wanna go on afterwards and be successful but at the moment the focus is on the academic side of things…. And its for peers and that sort of thing, all my friends have got degrees and stuff so [laughs] and now I can go to the pub with them and talk academically!

K: [laughs] So your focus isn't on what happens after this?

M: No at the moment no….

K: Its just the experience of doing this?

M: Yes, yeh like I said its to remedy something that I personally felt I'd done wrong before hand you know I was academic but I didn't really commit to it then

K: Why did you decide to take that chance here?

M: As opposed to a university?

K: Well yeh I suppose

M: Yes, yeh a lot, I don't know, I never tried getting into university I don't know if I would have the right things required, I didn't have your typical sort of A-levels and things so I didn't know if I would be able to do it, I was considering when I started first thinking about going back on and studying again obviously university was the first thing that popped into my mind and I always found it wasn't quite clear on UCAS as to what they actually accept as the equivalent you know, examinations, your GCSEs and A-levels you know, what they would accept as equivalents, it wasn't really made that clear and I'd just moved to Halifax at the time and a brochure happened to just come through the door at the time I was thinking about it and then I saw this and… again I wasn't too clear what was equivalent because I remember when I signed up to it, it pretty much asked for your GCSEs and A-level grades so I just typed in all the other stuff I'd got instead, but then when I came in for

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he interview it became clear what the equivalents are err… and I've forgot the actual question!

K: Ha, I think I have as well now!

M: Oh, it was here as opposed to being at a university, and also the style, it's a lot easier to get back into a place like this, its local, its not as busy, you can sort of still live the life you were living before like going to university is a big sort of change you know, its moving away from where you are, so coming here has been a lot more easy to integrate into my personal life and I like the ways its smaller groups and more one to one focus with tutors so I think it has helped facilitate me into studying

K: How are the smaller groups and things a benefit?

M: Again, I've never been to university so I'm only speculating and I do know that people do have individual sort of tutors there that they can work with and go through work with but I also know the sort of lecturing style is going in with a group of, could be hundreds of people and sit there and listen and walk out and you never have any sort of one to one aspect with that lecturer, whereas here the groups are small a lot of the time lecturers, you know a lecturer in a university won't know the sort of 50-60 people sat around in front of him. He wouldn't know any of them, whereas the tutors here, we all know them personally, the lectures can turn a lot more into a discussion, and then when you can discuss your ideas with a lecturer then that lecturer can put you in the right direction, they can be like 'oh, you're thinking along the right lines' you get an understanding it sort of helps you understand whether you're understanding them properly. Whereas I imagine whereas sitting and listening, you get the same perspective of what they're saying whereas here, you can sort of have that conversation to point you in the right direction as to whether you're getting what they're saying properly, I think that's a really good help I really like that aspect of  it and I like the more informal, I like the fact that it can turn into a bit of a discussion and a bit of a joke sometimes, not in a bad way but you can sit and laugh about it and stuff, so yeh I do like that

K: Have your perceptions of what are involved have changed since the last interview?

M: At the time of the interview last time I think I'd been here a few months so I had an idea about what was involved, I don't think that's changed so much since then, once i'd got the idea about what was involved it was pretty much consistent, its been able to help me, yeh, I

guess I sort of, at that point knew what was involved but now I sort of understand whats involved and understand what I need to do to get things done so I don't think my knowledge of whats involved has changed but more of the understanding of it

K: Does that apply to your subject knowledge as well?

M: Subject knowledge, that's totally changed, when I came on I had very basic business knowledge and now as its gone long, I've definitely learned more than what I knew, its not I'm understanding more the stuff I already knew, its totally new things I've learned so, that's more of sort of a progression of what I know, that's definitely built up my knowledge of subject matter and things like that, its not like I'm sat there and being like, 'oh I already know this' sort of thing its, I'm sat there learning new things all the time, I don't think I'd be enjoying it that much if I wasn't, you know that was what I was saying before about the people who already work in business and know it, I don't think I'd enjoy it that much if I did, why go do something you already know? I like the idea of learning new things

K: Is there any else significant about your experience over the past year?

M: That study room! I think for me, I mean I spend quite a lot of time here erm.. I think I spend a lot more time than a lot of other people on my course….

K: Why is that?

M: I like the atmosphere, it helps me to do my studying, I think if I'm at home I'm less inclined, whereas if I'm here especially in the study room in there its always really quiet, I think I'm sort of motivated sometimes in there whilst I'm sat around other people doing there work, and I'm like 'wait, that's what I should be doing, whereas at home there's nobody doing the work there, so I'm less motivated to do it there so I think for me the actual building and the social side of it a well erm… I've made quite good friends with people on the course and we see each other outside of college quite a lot now as well, but I like that we can sort of motivate each other in a way, I mean over the last, especially the last couple of weeks there's been a group of four of us that have been, you've probably seen us sat in there constantly sort of thing, I think having a little group like that you can sort of motivate each other, so its sort of like pushing each other a little bit, so I think that's been really important for me, you know that sort of aspect of it and we can all sort of support and help each other as well, I think that's important, some of the maths side of stuff on the finance units and maths has never been my strong suit, yeh I had a lot of help form one of

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the guys but he's not as comfortable with the sort of writing so I've helped him a bit there so I think that's been one of the most important things, apart from the actual learning and academic side of things

K: Yeh, Matt you do spend a lot of time here, do you feel like its an FE college?

M: Yeh, I don't really see the rest of the college, no personally my experience of it is of a higher education facility because I don't really spend any time elsewhere in the college, maybe at the beginning, I think last time I said, it might have felt more like an FE cause there's younger people running around and stuff like that but as I've progressed with the year I've sort of zoned out of everything else that's, I only see whats going on with HE and with the other HE course, you this higher level so for me it surprises me when I'm outside having a smoke or whatever and there's a bunch of younger kids there, talking like younger kids sort of do, I forget this is an actual college, I consider as more of the level that I'm at cause that's what I see… so for me it feels like higher education and I like that, I like the college more now, maybe than I did at the beginning of the year or the middle of the year cause its turned into that for me, you know when I first came its was like 'oh, I'm going back to college again' it feels like a lower level at first but now its become sort of like a higher education place, and I only really hear about HE news up here, I never really hear about whats going on elsewhere in college, I don't really pay attention to the college website about whats going on anywhere else in the college really, I like that I've been able to zone that side of it out, being able to focus on higher education instead

K: Ok that's lovely, thank you Matt

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# Appendix 5 – Excerpt from Field Notes

Part ob EY 5.6.14

XXXXX is talking about referencing, and a marking mishap. The weighting has been given to them wrong.

Student are now discussing and e discussion which appears to be something very new to the students. The more mature students are one side of the room and the younger on another, the younger students seem disinterested in this conv. Playing on their phones etc. Maybe because they know already? We are now talking about theory and applying to practice. Students want some clarification on behaviour assignment, again this is directed from the mature side. A younger student gets up whilst the lecturer is speaking and sits on a comp next to me, this isn't acknowledged by the lecturer and the group. Students are complaining about some delivery by a different tutor, directed from the mature side. We are waiting for lecturer to get the pp up. Younger students are having a conv. about something else now, they are told to listen. The tutor asks about a normal childhood. students question what normal is. Students are applying their own experience of childhood to the theory. It's interesting that ys have tablets and laptops but ms are taking notes with pen and paper. Mature st. Are talking about children and workhouses, younger students don't seem to know about these historical things. Student that went on the computer gets up and walks outright in front of the lecturer again, no one bats an eyelids. The group are talking about teachers not having discipline 'in my day' it's all very nostalgic and they have strong opinions that seem to be deep rooted within their experiences. They seem to be benefiting from sharing their opinions and questioning themselves and each other, doubt seems to be cast in some cases. There are drinks and coffees everywhere, the setup is quite informal. They are now asking about the assignment again, the subject knowledge seems to be ok but they want guidance and meeting the requirements on the assignment, the session seems to have been about how to go about the process of producing that academic doc. I am surprised at how much critical thinking is going on in the group around the subject matter and vocational practice but how they are expecting strict guidelines on writing and academic skills, they don't question those practices. Tutor asks if everyone has got it, they all nod and one student asks why they can't have her all the time. Student asks how is she supposed to get her opinions in without using 'I', academic conventions. I'm quite surprised at how engaged the students are. They all contribute their experience to the lecture.

# Appendix 6 – Example of Document for Analysis

**DATE:** 11/12/2013    **Semester 1**
**TIME:** 14.00
**VENUE:** F01

| **Course:** | HND Business (Year 2) |
|---|---|

### Minutes

1. Student Support including:
   1.1    General

   1.2    HE Study Support
        1.2.1   [see 4.1.1]

2. Personal Tutoring
   2.1    Students value and enjoy the personal tutoring from individual tutors. They find that it enables the tutor to keep a track of their progress and it allows the opportunity to recap-on and discuss aspects of their work.

3. Structure of Courses

   3.1    Modules
        3.1.1   The students had some comments on several modules which they will bring to the END Meeting to discuss at that forum.

   3.2    Assessment

   3.3    Teaching Delivery
        3.3.1   Use of powerpoint has improved during class time. Before, it was used to deliver the whole lesson; now it is used much more as an illustrative tool for part of the lesson. The students liked this change.
        3.3.2   For the Law modules, can the powerpoint presentations be added to Moodle? This happens for other modules, but not this one. It would be helpful for students to have the powerpoint to refer to when recapping on the course content.
        3.3.3   The group feels that ▮▮▮▮ has settled in well.

4. Facilities including:

   4.1    Teaching accommodation/learning environment including links with University (where relevant)
        4.1.1   The study room – F06 – is really good. Students like the fact that there is usually someone from ▮▮▮▮ there to talk to if they need it. They commented that it would be nice if the room was open for

      students to access throughout the day rather than just at certain times.

      4.1.2  None of the computers in the classroom – F01 – are networked.

  4.2    Central Services

5.  Library and Resources
    5.1    Resources in the library (especially books) get better all the time

6.  Being a Student Representative
    6.1    Since the group is small and they are now Year 2, they all feel confident about raising issues and comments that they have about their student experience.
    6.2    Perhaps Course Reps play more of a role in Year 1 where the group is less confident and they need a person to represent them.

7.  Any Other Business
    7.1    Students feel that HE should be differentiated from Level 3 and below, with respect to classroom rules and food and drink. They like the new F-floor arrangement because it allows for HE students to work in space which caters for them specifically.

8.  Date of next meeting

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