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# STUDENT VOICES AND STUDENT CHOICES: NARRATIVE ACCOUNTS OF DIFFERENTIATED HIGHER EDUCATION EXPERIENCES OF FIRST IN FAMILY HE STUDENTS

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# UNIVERSITY OF PLYMOUTH

STUDENT VOICES AND STUDENT CHOICES: NARRATIVE ACCOUNTS OF  
DIFFERENTIATED HIGHER EDUCATION EXPERIENCES OF FIRST IN FAMILY  
HE STUDENTS

by

PHILIP COLIN GEORGE BROWN

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the degree of

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## **Author's Declaration**

At no time during the registration for the degree of Professional Doctorate in Education has the author been registered for any other University award without prior agreement of the Doctoral College Quality Sub-Committee.

Work submitted for this research degree at the University of Plymouth has not formed part of any other degree either at the University of Plymouth or at another establishment.

A programme of advanced study was undertaken, which included taught modules on: 1. Policy and professional practice (2011); 2. Communities, Cultures and Change (2011); 3. Professional Learning (2012); 4. Social Research (2012).

### **Publications related to EdD programme:**

Brown, P. (2015) Communities of Practice: A Heuristic for Workplace Reflection in Higher Education. *The International Journal for Recording Achievement, Planning and Portfolios*. 1 (1) 31-41 <https://www.recordingachievement.ac.uk/index.php/news-and-events/publications/rapport-sample/item/625-issue-1.html>

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Brown, P. (2012) Communities of Practice – a heuristic device for Work Based Learning. *Presented at UCP Marjon Learning, Teaching and Research Conference 2012: Redefining the contours of Learning, Teaching Research in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*. Plymouth: UCP Marjon. 5<sup>th</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> July 2012

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# **Abstract**

Philip Colin George Brown

## **Student voices and student choices: narrative accounts of differentiated higher education experiences of First in Family HE students.**

This thesis considers the HE choices and experiences of First in Family (FiF) HE students studying in a Sixth Form College (SFC), a FE College (FEC), and a small ‘teaching-intensive’ university. Using Bourdieusian sociological analysis it explored the complex influences upon students’ HE choices and the impact of the institutional environment upon student experiences. The implications of the study are considered in terms of policy and practice for students, institutions, and government. Neoliberalism and social inclusion policies have created a complex, competitive, and fragmented field of HE providers and qualifications. In exploring this field, previous research has predominantly used social class to compare choices and experiences of working-class and middle-class students across prestigious and non-prestigious HEIs. Little research is focussed exclusively on FiF students, and that which does tend to focus on HE access, or a specific aspect, rather than taking a longer-term holistic view of the student experience. Research on College HE (CHE) highlights some of the challenges for these institutions and students, yet there is little comparative research across non-traditional providers, or that which compares CHE to universities. This study contributes to understanding these gaps. The qualitative study draws on the empirical experiences of 15 FiF students, five students from each of the three settings. The longitudinal study followed students over two academic years and two narrative interviews explored students’ HE choices and experiences. Bourdieu’s conceptual tools provide the primary analytical lens to consider macro-political and economic influences on HE, meso level analysis of the HE field and its institutions, and the impact of these upon students.

Habitus and capitals strongly influenced HE choice, the FiF students were positioned at the margins of the HE field which influenced their decisions to select non-traditional institutions. CHE students applied for a single course offered by a familiar CHE provider and university students' choices were idiosyncratic, rather than strategic. The findings challenge policy rhetoric that students behave as 'informed consumers' when provided with sufficient course and employment data. The institutions significantly shaped doxic expectations and students' *illusio* was drawn to the social and cultural capitals they most valued across the academic, employment, and social domains of their HE experiences. Residential university students had transformational experiences and most valued the social and academic domains of '*the full university experience*'. This came at the cost of investment in specific career orientated activity. There was limited social engagement beyond taught classes in CHE environments. Young students in the FEC and SFC were instrumental and adopted 'part-time' approaches to study focused upon the *outcome* of their graduate status, rather than on the *experience*. CHE students felt constrained by institutional culture and practices and were ambivalent about the quality of their overall HE experience. Some students utilised the opportunities presented through condensed course delivery in CHE to connect part-time work to future career aspirations. Mature students had transformational experiences in academic and career confidence and new aspirations for their children in HE.



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## **1.0 Introducing the thesis: structure and overview**

This chapter outlines the rationale and scope of the research project that investigated first generation / first in family (FiF)<sup>1</sup> higher education student experiences. It outlines the political context surrounding Higher Education (HE) to situate the research project within this field and to introduce the ‘widening participation’ (WP) institutions in which the FiF research participants studied. Published literature in the form of government policy documents and previous scholarly work identify key issues and gaps in published literature to highlight the original contribution this study makes to understanding FiF student choices and experiences. I briefly outline the research questions and my narrative inquiry methodological approach.

### **1.1 Context of the study**

This thesis explores 15 FiF students’ HE narratives in institutions positioned at the periphery of the HE field. Five students each came from a small teaching intensive university, a Further Education College (FEC), and a Sixth Form College (SFC). The research covered a period of two academic years. Students were interviewed initially in the spring and summer of 2015 and again in the spring/summer of 2016 following the passing of a whole academic year. This longitudinal design facilitated longstanding interview relationships (Merrill and West, 2009; Squire, 2013) and a deep understanding of their experiences. The aim of the study was to understand what influenced these students’ decisions to study in the WP HE settings; what shaped their HE experiences; and what students valued about it. The key issues are considered in the context of the implications for policy and practice in HE.

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<sup>1</sup> at the inception of the study I referred to students as ‘first generation’ to HE. Through the process of the doctoral research I became aware of the term ‘First in Family’ used by other academics which more accurately expressed the research participants in the study.

My aim was to take account of the ‘whole student experience’ of FiF students. At the conception of this study I rather naively considered this to be a relatively modest research endeavour. I was engaged with the policy discourse, academic literature, and HE practice as a lecturer. However, I was not fully prepared for the complexity of the issues that influenced students’ choices and the variances and nuances of the student experiences, either in the literature or empirically. Students had rich narratives, and each theme felt worthy of a doctoral thesis in its own right. I recognise there are limitations in both the depth and breadth of what I am able to present within the constraints of the EdD thesis. I aim to explore these more fully in future publications.

My initial instinct at the start of the EdD journey in 2011 was that ‘student experience’ had growing salience. This has been borne out in national policy and within HEIs’ practice where student experience has much higher priority at the end of the EdD, than it did at its inception. Government HE policies are enacted through HE practices that are changing the field (see 1.4). My initial inspiration and interest in higher education experience was guided by research literature that utilised Bourdieu’s sociological approach which has gained prominence in educational research (Reay, 2004). Byrom and Lightfoot (2012) identify a body of literature which deals with issues in elite institutions, but less that focuses specifically on less prestigious institutions and FiF students.

Accordingly, much of the published work on Higher Education focuses comparatively on ‘working class’ students’ experiences between elite and non-elite Universities, or comparative perspectives between WP working class students and middle-class students’ experiences (Reay et. al., 2005; Crozier et al., 2008; Reay et al., 2009; Crozier and Reay, 2011; Bathmaker et al., 2016), and approaches to graduate employment (Burke 2015; 2016).



Analytically social class forms the basis of much of this work which stems from an understanding that class still influences access, progression, and academic and employment outcomes (Reay et al., 2005). In this study I considered that all FiF student participants were ‘working class’ but I refer to them by their FiF status. This aligns to the strong influence of Pierre Bourdieu’s sociological legacy and conceptual tools employed by researchers to explore social inequality, particularly in education.

Through a comprehensive analysis of literature the interconnectedness of both academic and social aspects of learning at university has been identified by a number of authors through empirical study (Reay, 1998; Thomas, 2002; Reay, Crozier and Clayton, 2009; Clayton, Crozier and Reay, 2009; Watson et al., 2009; Reay, Crozier and Clayton, 2010; Pegg and Carr, 2010; Field and Morgn-Klein, 2013; Meuleman et al., 2015). The corpus of literature highlights that FiF students face a number of challenges navigating the unfamiliar HE field and its institutions (Thering, 2012 and Luzeckyj et al., 2017) and ‘fitting in’ academically and socially can be problematic given their lack of familiarity with the field (Crozier et al., 2008; Byrom and Lightfoot 2012; Thering, 2012; Davies et al., 2014; O’Shea, 2015; Luzeckyj et al., 2017). Studies often prioritise academic experiences of fitting in, over an explicit focus on the social aspects of HE. Notable exceptions of a greater focus on social aspects of fitting in come from Thomas (2002) and Holdsworth (2006) Reay et al. (2010), Christie (2009) and Meuleman et al. (2015). This study explored FiF entrants to non-traditional HEIs and utilised Bourdieu’s conceptual tools. It departs from the approach of the published work identified above that makes comparisons across social classes, and prestigious, and non-prestigious HEIs. This study offers a nuanced exploration of FiF students’ choices, mobility, participation, transition, transformations and trajectories towards employment. It recognises FiF status as newcomers to the field of HE and their experiences studying in non-traditional HE providers at the margins of the field.

## 1.2 Research Questions

1. What factors influence first generation students' HE choices?
2. What do students' value about their higher education experiences and what influences these experiences?
3. What are the implications of these two questions for the policy and practices of higher education and higher education institutions?

## 1.3 'Student experience' in contemporary discourse and its use in this study

The term 'student experience' is widely used but elusive to define (Benckendorff, Ruhanen and Scott, 2009). The term is credited to Harvey, Burrows and Green (1992), who took an holistic view of the student experience, noting that it 'is not restricted to the student experience in the classroom but the total student experience' (Harvey et al., 1992:1 cited by Benckendorff, Ruhanen, and Scott, 2009:84).

*The Student Experience* (1994 cited by Temple et al., 2016) considered the 'student journey' from 'getting in', 'being there' and 'moving on' (Temple et al 2016:34). In a similar vein Temple et al. (2016:32) outlined the 'student journey' in terms of an application experience, academic experience, campus experience (student life beyond the course) and graduate experience (institutional support in 'assisting with students' transition to employment or further study'). Hussey and Smith (2010) also identify the importance of academic, personal, social and lifestyle experiences of HE. I share these views of the holistic student experience that has academic, social, and employment related aspects and these issues were evident in the narrative accounts of students in this study.

Stuart contends that to understand the whole student experience requires 'a different way of conceptualizing learning focused on the student and their *whole experience*

rather than just on the curriculum and the institution' (Stuart, 2006:107) and that more attention needs to be paid to friendship groups as forms of social capital rather than just focusing on learning itself (Stuart, 2006). Holdsworth reinforces this point stating that

[a]t such a crucial time for Higher Education it is appropriate to turn the spotlight of research directly on to students and their experiences of HE. Time spent at university is not just restricted towards the attainment of qualifications; but as students, parents, HE staff and even politicians recognise, *one of the most important aspects of going to university is the opportunities it provides for making new friends, enjoying a less restricted social life and taking part in a range of non-academic activities*. Yet this rather privileged ideal of education is not something that all students feel they have, or even want, to access (Holdsworth, 2006:496 [my emphasis]).

The institutional context plays a significant role in shaping experience (Thomas, 2002, Reay et al., 2010). Jacobs et al. (2010:224) highlight the importance of the institution and the

*centrality of the experience of higher education as a means to personal and social change*. The respondents were at great pains to explain how their time *at the institution* transformed them as individuals and affected both their personal and professional development throughout their lives (Jacobs et al. 2010:225 [my emphasis]).

And

The *physical experience of 'being'* at university had as much, if not more, of an impact on the development and transformation of individual identity, as the formal curriculum (Jacobs et al., 2010:224 [my emphasis]).

I consider that HE is a transitional or transformational space (Hussey and Smith 2010; Maunder et al., 2013) where transitions can be conceived as entry to, and journeys through, HE study that take account of 'personal experiences' and an 'emphasis on social and cultural factors' (Maunder et al., 2013:151).

In identifying three separate HEIs from which to recruit participants this research attends to the significance of the institutional places, spaces, and opportunities that form

different institutional contexts of HE (Reay et al., 2010; Merrill, 2012). The university offered a fairly 'traditional' HE experience for students. The institutional context within the SFC and the FEC offered non-traditional College HE (CHE) experiences.

There is recognition that students' HE experiences fits within a much broader trajectory of the life course and in the wider context of their individual lives; such as their family, work and community (Feinstein et al., 2008). Student HE experiences are shaped by relationships between home, educational establishment, and the wider aspects of students' lives which blur the boundaries between learning and personal experiences (Merrill and West 2009) and the 'binary of formal and informal learning' (Erstad 2012:30). Accordingly, learning is increasingly conceptualised as 'informal', 'lifelong', 'life-wide', 'life-deep' or 'biographical' (Coffield, 2000; Jacobs et al., 2010; Smilde, 2010; Erstad, 2012).

As my interest was in the whole university experience it is logical to consider academic, social, and employment aspects that interconnect to influence the whole experience as identified above.

## **1.4 Political context**

It is well recognised that, globally, government intervention in HE over the past 30-40 years has been driven by the twin processes of globalisation and neoliberalism (Brennan 2008 and Brennan et al. 2008), resulting in an overall massification of HE (Mount and Bélanger, 2004). Neoliberalism and social inclusion have been the driving forces behind the rapid growth of HE by successive UK governments (Ball, 2012). Public investment in HE is justified as both a public and private good; where both wider society and the individuals compete in a knowledge economy (Calhoun, 2006; Brennan et al., 2008; Talik, 2008).

The growing political and institutional interest in student experiences has intensified since the turn of the decade when the Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition government sought to further change the funding relationships between students and HEIs (Browne, 2010). From 2012 students in England were required to ‘pay’ full tuition fees of up to £9,000 (Browne 2010), following New Labour’s introduction of students contributing towards tuition fees (Furlong, 2013). The changes in tuition fees and the introduction of maintenance loans, replacing grants, created the perception of an increased *personal* cost of HE. This resulted in an increasingly consumerist orientation where students are both consumers and customers of HE (Ball, 2004).

In policy, HE is increasingly framed as a private good with an ever increasing focus upon graduate employment outcomes as the ultimate marker of a ‘successful HE experience’ (Burgess Group, 2007; Burgess, 2012; DfBIS, 2015; Temple et al., 2016). In addition, the perception of growing cost of HE has resulted in more students taking steps to reduce costs (Harrison et al., 2015). Living at home, and working part-time increasingly forms part of the wider student experience (Hodgson and Spours, 2001; Greenback, 2015; HEA, 2017; Advance HE, 2018). These factors impact upon both an individual’s experiences of HE, and their engagement with their course and the HEIs (Benckendorff, Ruhanen and Scott 2009; Hodgson and Spours 2001; Richardson et al., 2009; Greenbank, 2015; HEA, 2017; Advance HE, 2018).

The student experience has become increasingly politicised through neoliberal ideology. As noted, increased competition in the HE sector has more recently come through further liberalisation, market mechanisms and notions of ‘consumer choice’. This is outlined in the *White Paper Higher Education: Students at the heart of the system* (DfBIS 2011), the *Higher Education and Research Bill* of 2016-2017 (DfE, 2016), the Higher Education and Research Act (2017), and the creation of the Office for Students (OfS) on 1<sup>st</sup> January 2018. The OfS as regulator is ‘designed to champion the interests

of students, promote choice and help to ensure that students are receiving a good deal for their investment in higher education’ (DfE 2018a).

The current and previous government’s approach to collecting data on student experience has largely been through the collection of large-scale quantitative data sets. An outcome of the *White Paper Higher Education: Students at the heart of the system* (BIS, 2011) is that HEIs must provide Key Information Sets (KIS) on course pages. KIS covers areas of ‘student satisfaction’, ‘cost’, ‘employment’ and ‘Student Union’ (BIS, 2011:28-29). The data is compiled into the Teaching Excellence and Student Outcome Framework (TEF) where institutions may achieve a TEF rating of Gold, Silver or Bronze (UCAS, 2018a). The sector and HEIs are responding to government’s reshaping of the HE landscape, explicit marketization, and consumerist notions of HE, to compete for students to survive or thrive (Browne 2010; Temple, 2016).

Temple et al. (2016:33) consider that the ‘idea of the student experience, as a set of linked activities to be managed institutionally, is relatively recent one’. Student experience then, has become something to measure, quantify and manage (Temple et al. 2016) as it becomes used for marketing and recruitment activity (Benckendorff, Ruhanen and Scott 2009; Temple et al., 2016).

Tilak (2009:452 citing McPherson and Winston 1993 [my emphasis]) identifies that HE should be considered as an ‘experience good’, ‘whose product characteristics such as quality and price and even the benefits are *difficult to observe in advance*, but can be ascertained only upon consumption’. This study offers a detailed understanding of the *influences* that shaped FiF students HE choices and offers a deeper understanding of experiences of FiF students in non-traditional settings. It therefore adds to the literature as these voices are not often explicitly heard through a focus on *big data* sets which tend to silence individual voices. In a small way this research aims to address this

imbalance, by engaging with student voice of a small group FiF students, whom are unlikely to be heard within HE research.

## **1.5 Originality**

My doctoral thesis research makes a unique contribution to understanding FiF students' Higher Education (HE) experiences, within a university setting and in FE settings. Parry et al. (2012:104) identify the dearth of research in this area noting that research has not 'been undertaken which directly compares the experiences of higher education students studying in further education colleges with those studying in higher education institutions.' It is acknowledged that FiF students are an under-researched equity group (Thering, 2012; O'Shea, 2015; Luzeckyj et al., 2017) included under the umbrella of 'widening participation' (Thering 2012; Meuleman et al., 2015) and specifically when studying in non-traditional HEIs, and dual sector provision of HE in FE (Bathmaker and Thomas, 2009; Morrison 2009; Parry et al., 2012; Parry 2012; and Stoten, 2016).

Parry (2012) contends that, in general, higher education in Further Education Colleges (FEC) is poorly understood, even though it is central to government policies on expansion, diversity and widening participation. This is, in part, explained by CHE's peripherality, at 'the outer reaches and distributed part of the mass system' (Parry, 2012:118). CHE is not an insignificant part of the HE landscape with 1 in 12 HE students studying HE qualifications in FE setting (Parry, 2012). 93% of CHE students study in FECs, and only 1% of CHE students study in SFC (Parry, 2012). I found no published research on student HE experiences in SFCs and therefore this study makes an original contribution in this aspect alone.

Stoten (2016:9) cites King, Saraswat, and Widdowson (2013), who identify that much published research of HE in FE 'paint[s] a picture of what is currently happening in college-based HE, rather than to analyse the views of HE students. Therefore less is

known then about the student experiences of HE in FE students overall'. The study makes a contribution in understanding university and CHE FiF experiences over an extended period of time. Published research on students' experiences and transition often focusses on first-years (Penketh and Goddard, 2008). There are few exceptions where HE students are studied over extended periods, over two (Clayton et al., 2009; Reay et al., 2010) and three years (Bathmaker et al., 2016) but these studies tend to be social class focussed rather than specifically comparing FiF students' university and CHE experiences (with the notable exception of Reay et al., 2010).

Conceptually my Bourdieusian theoretical framework utilises the 'much neglected' concepts of *illusio* and *doxa* (Colley 2012; 201; Colley and Guéry 2015). Colley and Guéry (2015) suggest that Bourdieu's *illusio* is a 'potent analytical concept' that is 'rarely applied in educational research' (Colley and Guéry 2015:113). From an analysis of the research literature on higher education, the concepts of *illusio* and *doxa* have not previously been applied extensively to FiF student experiences of Higher Education, and this, therefore, makes an original, applied theoretical contribution to knowledge through this thesis. The study considers how students' *illusio* was drawn to the social and cultural capitals they most valued across the academic, employment, and social domains of their HE experiences.

## **1.6 Thesis structure**

The thesis is organised through the following chapters. Chapter 2, Analysis of literature, first introduces the Bourdieusian conceptual framework. The second part outlines the complexity of 'student experience' literature to consider the interactions through a multi-layered analysis of macro political and economic influences within the broader political and economic context of national policy that shapes the purpose and expectations of HE. These wider political dimensions shape the meso-level analysis of



the HE field and its institutions, which either directly or indirectly impact upon the micro-level individual student experiences of the participants in the study.

Chapter 3, Methodology, articulates the research design that used narrative inquiry to explore first generation students' higher education experiences. It identifies the philosophical assumptions, and methodological strategy and approach. The chapter explores the narrative method and my approach to data analysis and the ethical considerations of the study.

Chapter 4, explores the complexity of FiF students' choices of HE study and how habitus shapes and influences students' parameters of choice. The key findings consider how family and schools experiences have profound influence up students' HE choice and how FiF students do not establish HE trajectories until just very late in the application cycle which limited choice.

Chapter 5, explores what students valued about their HE experiences. The academic, social, and employment related aspects of student experiences are considered within the institutional context in which student studied. Students evaluated both the positive and negative consequences of their HE choice and experience and in particular highlights the challenges studying HE in FE environments.

Chapter 6, examines the implications to both contemporary policy and practice concerned with student HE choices and key issues associated with FiF student experiences that are considered from the analysis of the empirical study.

Chapter 7, concludes the study, it outlines the limitations of the study and future research directions.

## **2.0 Chapter 2 Literature Analysis**

### **2.1 Introduction, overview, and structure.**

As I outlined in the introduction, the ambition of the doctoral study was to explore three inter-related research questions concerned with FiF students' HE choices and experiences, and to consider the implications for policy and practice for HE. As this was an exploratory study, it was not possible to know in advance what aspects of students' lives may be important in making choices, and what students valued about their experiences. It was evident that I needed to understand the influences and interactions of FiF students within the field of HE, and therefore I needed to undertake field analysis. Grenfell (2008) outlined that Bourdieu proposed three levels of relational analysis to understand 'the various strata of the interaction between habitus and field' (Grenfell, 2008:222).

1. The specific social field must be analysed in relation to the overarching field of power (derived from economic and political power).
2. Field hierarchy and agents positions within the field is understood as being structured by practice and competition for capital.
3. The background, biography, trajectory, positioning, interactions, and capitals agents have inscribed in habitus must be considered in relation to their alignment with field practices.

The literature review is broadly structured using these three levels of field analysis; keeping in mind that they are interrelated. The summary below outlines the structure of the chapter: Section 2.1 outlines Bourdieu's theoretical concepts and their application to this study; Section 2.2 explores the field of power, economics, and politics through the twin agendas of national industrial competitiveness and social inclusion (Dearing, 1997; Burke, 2011). This first of field analysis is combined with the second to understand

how macro issues shape HE and institutional policy and practices that position FiF students. To achieve this section 2.2.1 outlines the doxa of neoliberalism (growth, competition and marketization) and public/private goods of the field of HE. Section 2.2.2 outlines the social inclusion agenda of Widening Participation (WP), including Foundation Degrees and FE based HE (2.2.3). I then consider how field hierarchy is reinforced through differentiated tuition fees (2.2.3) and consumerist notions of informed choice through student experience metrics and hot and cold knowledge (2.3.4).

The third level of field analysis interacts with levels 1 and 2 and is concerned with the habitus field alignment of FiF students, their backgrounds, trajectory, and positioning in the field (Grenfell, 2008). It is challenging to try to capture the ‘messy reality’ (Reay, 1998) of students’ choices through the themes in the literature review. Section 2.3 explores how FiF students’ can (mis)align to normative conceptions of a ‘typical student experience’ (2.3), including both academic and social aspects of HE study (2.3.2). I have also chosen to focus on: (im)mobility of home or away students (2.3.2); the choice to live at home and study in familiar CHE environments (and the challenges of HE study in these environments); and the desire of new experiences created through moving away to university; these both aligned with the sample population of study participants. I also briefly consider how HE students engage in part-time work alongside study (2.3.4); finally issues of transitions and transformation of habitus through HE study are considered (2.3.5). The analysis of empirical data draws on all these levels and themes which influence FiF students’ choice (Chapter 4) and experience (Chapter 5).

## **2.2 Bourdieu’s theoretical tools**

Bourdieu contends that sociological endeavours sit between the two premises of theoretical interpretation and empirical study (grounded in field practice) (Bourdieu, 1990; Wacquant, 1992). I utilise Bourdieu’s three central concepts of field, habitus, and

capital, which are ‘necessarily interrelated, both conceptually and empirically (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 96-97) in conjunction with Bourdieu’s lesser known concepts of *illusio* and *doxa* (Colley, 2012; 2014; Colley and Guéry, 2015) to draw out theoretically informed interpretations. Within the context of my constructionist ontology and interpretivist epistemology, the concepts are employed as heuristic ‘thinking tools’ (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1989: 50). Whilst I outline these separately below, I am mindful that they are relational, ‘[(habitus) (capital)] + field = practice’ (Bourdieu, 1984:101).

### **2.2.1. Fields**

Because this thesis focuses on the relationships that FiF students have with HE – both the organisations themselves and the people who inhabit and surround them – there is a need to theorise the forces involved in such relationships and the ways in which they interact, as people move from one location to another. Bourdieu offers us his concept of field as a mechanism to consider such relational forces in society. This allows a way to conceptualise the hierarchical influences between different aspects of the social world upon the habitus of my participants and the sites of cultural practice which they inhabit, that may produce and transform attitudes and practices (Bourdieu 1990; Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990).

Bourdieu offers the idea that it is the relationship between field and capitals over time that demonstrates the “historical arbitrary” of capitals as “each field calls forth and gives life to a specific form of interest” (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 116-7).

Understanding the objective relations in the field of HE is premised upon the recognition that a field encompasses a competitive system of social relations between agents from the field that define dominant and dominated positions (Bourdieu, 1990) and which functions as a hierarchy of positions according to the specific logic of the field. The field is “a space of conflict and competition” (Wacquant, 1992:17) and

Bourdieu offers the metaphor of game(s), in which agents compete for resources and stakes, and jostle for advancement of their views and interests and their representations or interpretations; constructed only through the ‘human doings of human beings’ (Colley, 2012:699).

Illusio is ‘pivotal to understanding the articulation Bourdieu envisage[d] between the sociable subjectivity of habitus and the objective determinations of field’ (Colley, 2012:324). Bourdieu seeks to overcome this binary, and the concepts of illusio and doxa are useful in identifying the ways in which habitus and field come together (Colley, 2012; 2014; Colley and Guéry, 2015). Illusio is one side of a theoretical coin concerned with consciousness, and doxa relates to unconsciousness (Colley, 2012), the latter being ‘the key means through which unity and unanimity [are manifested], the sense that people are ‘the same’ as one another in some respect or ‘belong’ to the same entity or field (Atkinson, 2011:340). Doxa is pre-reflexive, concerned with the unspoken rules of the game(s); the taken-for-granted presuppositions of practices (Bourdieu, 2000), which define the ‘principal practical schemes which make it possible to organize the world, but which remain implicit’ (Bourdieu, 2005: 36-37). ‘[I]llusio is (...) more explicit, conscious and agentic than [this] underlying doxa’ (Colley, 2012:324) and is conceived as ‘interest’ about the stakes and capitals in fields (Colley, 2012; 2015).

Applying these concepts allowed me to theorise the way in which doxa influences the stakes in the game by establishing and maintaining a set of unspoken rules (Bourdieu, 2005) in the field of power, HE, and within HE institutions. By using the game metaphor, I analyse (below) the struggles for the legitimacy of meanings and representations that symbolically order the field of HE (Bourdieu, 1990; Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992). I use doxa in the same way as Davey (2012), to consider how institutions are positioned within fields, and what becomes valued, or ‘should’ be

valued within fields. Davey (2012:514) argues that ‘turning our attention towards the institution and its place within the field is to understand the logic of that field’; such analysis highlights how Foundations Degrees (FD) and CHE are positioned at the bottom of the hierarchy of the field of HE (Bathmaker, et al. 2008) (see 2.2.3).

Illusio also expresses the commitment of ‘players’ in any field to invest in its stakes, that is to say, its objects of value (Colley, 2014). Through their participation FiF students demonstrate that the HE game ‘is worth playing’, or ‘worth the candle’ (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, p. 98, cited in Colley, 2014:69-70). It is exactly the nature and origin of the choices (how students decide to play the game), and how students negotiate the issues that shape choice and their stakes in the HE experiences, that this thesis aims to identify through narrative accounts of FiF students constructed in extended interviews.

### **2.2.2. Habitus**

The concept of habitus has dominated HE educational research as a tool to critically explore class-based inequality and social reproduction (Reay, 2004; Davey, 2012). Habitus is largely ‘a system of dispositions, that is of permanent manners of being, seeing, acting, thinking or a system of long lasting (rather than permanent) schemes or schemata or structures of perception, conception and actions’ (Bourdieu, 2002:27).

The dispositions which make up habitus are the products of capitals (see 2.1.3) and opportunities, and constraints from earlier life experiences (Reay, 2004; Burke, 2016). Habitus is ‘durably inculcated by the possibilities and impossibilities, freedoms and necessities, opportunities and prohibitions inscribed in the objective conditions’ (Bourdieu, 1990a, p. 54, cited by Reay, 2004: 433). I use habits as a way to speak about the embodied social histories and resources (from personal/life histories, family, and

school experiences) that FiF students bring to the field of HE and the ways these influence choices, experiences, and future possibilities in HE (Reay, 2004).

Bourdieu uses the metaphor of ‘the feel for the game’ which ‘is the social game embodied and turned into a second nature’ (Bourdieu, 1994: 63) to explain middle class advantage and sense of ease middle class students have within the field of HE. This idea has been taken on by educational researchers within the UK who identify that middle-class students’ habitus–field alignment reproduces social and educational advantage over working class students (Reay, 1998; Reay et al., 2001; 2005; 2009). Bourdieu’s much quoted metaphor emphasises this ease of fit.

Social reality exists, so to speak, twice, in things and in minds, in fields and in habitus, outside and inside social agents. And when habitus encounters a social world of which it is the product, it is like a fish in water: it does not feel the weight of the water and it takes the world about itself for granted (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992:127).

The notion of institutional habitus has been offered as a way in which to consider HEIs’ institutional history and culture, alongside the curriculum, and organisational practices which are deeply institutionally embedded and subconscious (Reay, 1998; Thomas, 2002; Reay et al., 2010). Institutional habitus operates as a form of institutional doxa (Atkinson, 2011; Davey, 2012). Both institutional habitus (Reay, 1998) and institution doxa (Atkinson, 2011; Davey, 2012) draw attention to the importance of alignment and fit between an individual’s habitus and the HE provider, and the degree of ‘academic and social match’ (Thomas, 2002:427).

Using these ideas, Reay (2004) contends that habitus influences parameters of ‘choice’, possibilities, freedoms, necessities, opportunities and prohibitions through habitus-field alignment. I used these ideas to consider how FiF students strategize’ (Bourdieu, 2005), and the extent to which doxic expectations and capitals from family and school shape

expected trajectories (Burke, 2016) towards (non)participation in HE and the ways in which students seek habitus and institutional fit in selecting HE providers.

HE researchers (identified in chapter 1), highlight the challenges that working class and FiF students can experience fitting in at university. To avoid the ‘social pain’ of not fitting in, Meuleman et al. (2015) argues that people often seek familiarity, rather than difference. As Morrin (2016) explains, confrontations of habitus are emotionally painful, and therefore often people seek to limit these types of experiences. These ideas are important in understanding the multiple ways in which FiF students’ experience habitus-field (mis)alignment that shapes choices and influences experiences.

Specifically, I consider below what influences students to select a familiar FEC provider or to move away to experience a more ‘typical university experience’, and how decisions can maintain or disrupt existing social relationships.

Bourdieu’s theorisations explain the consequences of disruptions or misalignment, arguing that when ‘habitus encounters a field with which it is not familiar, it experiences a disjuncture or ‘dialectical confrontation’ resulting in the discontinuity between an existing habitus and the new fields (Bourdieu, 2002; Bourdieu, 2005).

Bourdieu argues that habitus has a ‘permanent capacity for invention’ (Bourdieu, 1990) but ‘within limits’ (Bourdieu, 2005:46). I follow this and Reay’s (2004) contention that although habitus links histories, it does not *fully* constrain future possibilities where the agentic elements of habitus allow for adaption, growth and new trajectories, ‘transcending the social conditions in which it was produced’ (Reay, 2004:434-435).

The students in this study, through the very nature of their FiF status, had the potential to build new trajectories, and the study considers the extent to which FiF students see HE as a site of transition and transformation (2.3.5) and how their HE institutions enhance or restrict such opportunities.



### **2.2.3 Species of Capital**

As I have shown above, the interrelated nature of Bourdieu's theorisation between the field and habitus is concomitant upon capitals. Bourdieu (1986) identifies that capital is a social relation that structures both fields and habitus. It is a conceptual way to consider social *and* economic inequality and provides a language and analytical approach to explore the ways in which students seek to improve their capital through HE study.

Capital, which, in its objectified or embodied forms, takes time to accumulate and which, as a potential capacity to produce profits and to reproduce itself in identical or expanded form, contains a tendency to persist in its being, is a force inscribed in the objectivity of things so that everything is not equally possible or impossible. And the structure of the distribution of the different types and subtypes of capital at a given moment in time represents the immanent structure of the social world, i.e., the set of constraints, inscribed in the very reality of that world, which govern its functioning in a durable way, determining the chances of success for practices (Bourdieu, 1986:241)

Bourdieu (1986) asserts that 'economic' capital forms the basis of other forms of capitals, namely cultural capital and social capital and that capitals can act symbolically within fields.

### **Cultural Capital**

Bourdieu (1986) argues that cultural capital has three forms, an embodied state, an objectified state, and an institutionalized state. Embodied cultural capital resides within what Bourdieu refers to as the bodily hexis. This includes physical competence, or how one carries oneself in social situations, and linguistic competence, such as fluency in academic or professional discourses. Objectified cultural capital resides in ownership of objects and artefacts which indicate social status (Bourdieu, 1986). HE degrees hold objectified and institutionalized cultural capital that bestow symbolical capital upon degree holders (Bourdieu, 1984). Bourdieu and Passeron (1990) argue that academic qualifications are to cultural capital what money is to economic capital. The ranking of

HE qualifications is therefore significant, and below I consider the ranking of Foundation Degrees within the field of HE (2.2.2).

Bourdieu's theorisation shows how cultural capital operates symbolically whilst masking social inequality that 'legitimate the dominators, while judging and excluding lower classes' (Bourdieu, 2000: 170). Bourdieu offers a way to consider how subtle processes can be unconscious. I considered the ways this shapes FiF students' approaches to HE planning, choice, and experiences. As discussed above habitus and field alignment is important. Bourdieu conceptualises a process he refers to as 'symbolic violence'; 'to put it as tersely and simply as possible, is the [symbolic] violence which is exercised upon a social agent with his or her complicity' (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992:167). Within the cultural field of education, the pedagogic authority and pedagogic work of universities legitimise the use of symbolic violence which 'transmute[s] (...) social inequality into (...) educational inequality' (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990:158). Symbolic violence is conceptually powerful to consider how the field is structured and how WP students are positioned (see 2.2.2) and how this creates self-regulatory behaviours, or a 'cooling out' (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990:183) where students avoid institutions, courses, or social activities that are "not for the likes of us" (Bourdieu, 1984: 471; Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990:116) or 'not for the likes of me' (Maton, 2012).

### **Social Capital**

I have shown above how cultural capital operates; its power is enhanced through social capital (Burke, 2016), which draws attention to the importance of social connections which includes knowing the right people or having legitimate access to appropriate social groups. Bourdieu defines social capital in two ways:

As the product of investment strategies, individual or collective, consciously or unconsciously aimed at establishing or reproducing

social relationships that are directly useable in the short or long term (Bourdieu, 1986:51).

The sum of resources, actual or virtual, that accrue to an individual or group by virtue of possessing a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992:19).

The concept of social capital is useful in the study of FiF students as it draws attention to the social relationships facilitated through the field of HE and beyond. It is a useful perspective to consider the role HEIs play in creating opportunities for internal relationships and the nature of these relationships. It draws analytical attention to the importance of friendships with peers (Stuart, 2006), and academic and pastoral relationships with staff, and how the institution facilitates external relationships with industry.

### **2.3. Power, economic, and political influences upon the HE Field**

As outlined in the introduction, this section considers the effects of economic and political power which influence the field of HE, its institutions, and how students experience them. Political and economic forces are manifested through ‘officialising strategies’ of government (Colley, 2014). Ball (2012) and Bennett et al. (2013) contend that we think within a framework of neoliberal logic, of competition, efficiency, productivity, and performance measurement and management.

The growth of HE participation has seen authors refer to modern HE as ‘mass higher education’, associated with the commodification and consumption of education in a consumer society (Mount and Bélanger, 2004). Western neoliberal societies align HE with the economy and industry (Ball, 1990; Brennan et al., 2008). There is a ‘neoliberal capture’ (Ball, 2004; Olssen, 2006) of education characterised through the notion of the knowledge economy (Callinicos, 2001). Government policy valorises HE based on economic growth, national competitiveness, and productivity (Dearing, 1997; Olssen

and Peters, 2005; Browne, 2010; DfBIS, 2016). Burke (2011:172) argues that this ‘neoliberal framework has shaped the discourses around what it means to be a student in higher education’. Ball (2004) argues that a doxa of economism prevails. However, the doxa of HE is also understood to address social equity, mobility, social cohesion, and integration (Brennan et al., 2008).

Economic and political power influences the field of HE, and legitimacy is maintained through the public’s and students’ largely unconscious and uncritical acceptance of the doxa (see 2.2.1). HE field doxa creates taken-for-granted reference points which influences the ways in which students’ experience HE, and how students, and others, evaluate and value HE experiences through the alignment of *illusio* with field doxa.

The twin agendas of economic prosperity and social inclusion were articulated in government policy (Dearing, 1997) which promoted the expansion of HE encapsulated by Tony Blair’s ‘education education education’ mantra and the aspiration for 50% of young people to take HE qualifications (Time Higher Education, 2003). Such growth required an increase in participation of students from ‘non-traditional’ backgrounds (DfEE, 1998; Stuart, 2006; Bathmaker et al. 2008) which led to the introduction of Foundation Degrees and the growth of HE in FE to increase capacity in the system (Parry et al., 2012; Lea and Simmons, 2012).

### **2.3.1 Higher Education: Public or Private Good?**

I have outlined above the context for the expansion of HE in line with the economic and social inclusion agendas. Giddens (1998:117) conceptualised a ‘social investment State’ which invests in the human capital of individuals through improved access to training and education to enhance employability and reduce welfare dependency. James (1998) argues that academic and employment fields reinforce each other. The national economy benefits through the development of valuable cutting-edge knowledge and a

skilled workforce (Williams et al., 2010), graduates benefit directly through improved employment prospects and the promises of ‘graduate wage premiums’ (Browne, 2010; DfBIS, 2011), and HE benefits through a growth in student numbers through a taken-for-granted acceptance of its economic and social importance.

The ubiquity of HE qualifications reinforces the ideas that a degree is a minimum expectation for a wider range of occupations (Jarvis, 2000; Murphy, 2005; Burgess Group, 2007), which fuels fears of being left behind without them (Beck, 1992; Bauman, 2005). This suggests that HE offers individual benefits based on individual investments; that HE is a private good (Talik, 2009). The notion that HE is a private good is evident in the doxa of ‘employability’, which gained impetus following the introduction of the full-cost of tuition fees (Browne, 2010). The perception of the transfer of the full cost of HE to students (via loans) is justified by government on the basis that ‘[r]ecent OECD research shows that in the UK the benefits of higher education to the individual are, on average, over 50% higher than the public benefits’ (Browne, 2010:21), and that graduates average annual earnings increase by £12,000 (OfNS, 2011), and over a lifetime graduates can expect to earn ‘over £100,000 more (...) than someone with A’levels who does not go to university’ (Browne, 2010:15). The doxa of enhanced earnings is repeated time and again in public policy as the principle reason to engage with higher education study (Burgess Group, 2007; Burgess, 2012; DfBIS, 2015).

This study took account of the ways in which FiF students are influenced by the employability agenda. As Bourdieu argues, doxa is ‘is a formidable mechanism – a wonderful instrument for ideology much bigger and more powerful than religion or propaganda (Bourdieu, 1992:14 cited by Morrin, 2016:131) and influences the practices of the sector, institutions, and students. The CBI and NUS (2011:8) highlighted that ‘79% of students’ say they are at ‘university to improve their job opportunities’.

Similarly, Parry et al. (2012:116) found that CHE students are ‘concerned with improving their life opportunities (71%), getting a good job (62%), and pursuing long-term career plans (62%).

Neoliberal government policy sought to instigate market mechanisms linking employability and tuition fee differentiation.

Employment outcomes will also make a difference to the charges set by institutions. Where a key *selling point* of a course is that it provides improved employability, its *charge* will become an indicator of its ability to deliver – students will only pay higher charges if there is a proven path to higher earnings. When complemented by the improvements we propose to information, this will help students make a better choice about what to study. Courses that deliver improved employability will prosper; those that make false promises will disappear’ (Browne, 2010:31 [my emphasis]).

Murphy (2005:46) argues that the discourse of ‘employability’ ‘is a political sleight of hand’ that places self-regulatory expectations on individuals to ensure that their skills are up-to-date to meet the needs of increasingly unstable and highly competitive employment markets. Hodgson and Spours (1999:137) argue that this puts an ‘unrealistic amount of responsibility on individuals, particularly those with unequal capital, to access the type of learning opportunities they require to improve employability and to enter the labour market’, this is clear in Browne’s (2010) assertion that students need to make ‘better choices’. It shifts the responsibility from the state to the individual (Burke, 2011) and takes place without any explicit recognition that societal inequalities translate into educational and employment inequalities (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990).

Christie (2009:128) contends that ‘young people in twenty-first-century Britain have internalised policy assumptions about the importance of higher education for financial success, at the expense of any awareness of the dangers of an overcrowded graduate labour market’ and degrees may then have a reduced buying power (Bourdieu, 1984).

The overall increase in the number of graduates leaving HE creates a growing challenge for graduate employability where students need to demonstrate more than just a ‘good degree’ (Bathmaker et al., 2013; Greenbank, 2015; Burke, 2016). In line with the doxa of the employability agenda there is growing recognition of the need for students to engage in career orientated work experience and valuable extra curricula activities (ECA) as a method of gaining employment aligned social and cultural capitals in order to stand out to potential employers (Bathmaker et al., 2013; Greenbank, 2015). The study considers the extent to which students HE choices and experiences are shaped by the expectations of graduate employment and how FiF students invest in the stake of employability in practice.

### **2.3.2 Widening Participation and Foundation Degrees**

Widening participation is considered to be part of ‘lifelong learning’; related to a wider skills agenda for economic competitiveness, social justice and equality, and to ensure access to HE for underrepresented groups (Dearing, 1997; Reay, 1998; DfBIS, 2015). Underrepresented groups include students from lower socio-economic groups, low participation neighbourhoods, FiF, ethnic minorities, care-leavers, and disabled students (Thomas and Hanson, 2014; OFFA, 2014). First in Family is not a priority status, so the fifteen students in this study are not necessarily a priority but can still be considered more broadly as a WP group.

Ten of the students in this study were taking Foundation Degrees, delivered in CHE environments, which according to Parry (2012) forms a significant part of governments WP agenda. The addition of FD awards diversified HE qualifications which further blurred the boundaries between the Further and Higher education sectors (Bathmaker, et al. 2008; Crozier et al., 2008; Reay et al., 2010). The qualifications were promoted on bifurcated agendas of social inclusion and vocationally work-based orientations that matched wider field doxa (Aldous et al., 2014).

Foundation Degrees were introduced when the Higher Education Funding Council for England's (HEFCE) student number control-cap restricted undergraduate growth in universities for traditional on-site provision. Foundation Degrees can only be awarded by institutions with Degree Awarding Powers, which is largely the preserve of universities (Foundation Degree Task Force, 2004; Bathmaker et al. 2008; Harvey, 2009; QAA, 2010; Parry et al., 2012). Growth then was only possible through collaborative partnerships between Universities who validated Awards, and FECs who delivered them (QAA, 2010a; 2010b; Parry et al., 2012; Lea and Simmons, 2012).

The decision that FD degrees would be awarded by universities and their delivery in CHE settings was taken to both 'guarantee' the quality of the awards and to 'protect the reputation' and standards of the traditional honours degree (Foundation Degree Task Force, 2004; Burke, 2011). The notion of 'safeguarding' 'traditional honours degrees' and the delivery of the award within non-traditional settings, may be seen as evidence of institutional positioning within the field. Crozier and Reay (2011:145) contend that '[w]ithin the discourse of widening participation working-class students are most frequently constructed as deficient, high risk and problematic', so these students might be constructed within a deficit discourse as being more 'appropriate' to take an FD award in a CHE environment.

The construction of both the deficit discourse and the quasi higher education market and widening participation policy agenda 'tends to locate the problem of HE non-participation in those individuals who lack the right attitudes, aspirations and values'; rather than recognising systemic inequality with the structure and culture of mainstream higher education (Burke, 2011:171).

Universities may have preferred the opportunity to grow onsite provision, but CHE allowed some growth and provided universities with the opportunity to demonstrate



their ‘commitment’ to WP (Leahy, 2012). Further onsite and offsite growth was also possible through stand-alone Honours progression programmes delivered either at the awarding university or in CHE settings (QAA, 2010; Parry et al., 2012; Parry, 2012). Within this study, CHE students had access to internal and university-based level 6 progression programmes, and this was relevant to their HE choice and experience.

Harvey (2009) argues that the reason that many universities did not see FD awards as part of their own growth in on-site delivery was that sub-degree work can undermine prestige. What Bourdieu (1988:127) refers to as ‘statutory grandeur’ that acts symbolically within the field. FDs tend to require lower entry requirements than traditional undergraduate provision. This further reinforces the hierarchical position of CHE and FDs lower level ranking, and universities play a role in this ‘circle of baptism and confirmation’ of academic and cultural capital (Bourdieu and Passerson, 1990:37). Entry requirements appear rational, but support ‘social as well as cultural hierarchies by concealing social relations under the guise of technical selection’ (Bourdieu and Passerson, 1990:153). This is a form of symbolic violence can push WP students to the boundaries of the field, which ‘transmute their social inequality into a specifically educational inequality’ (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990:158). This may translate into less valuable forms of creditised capitals which have lower symbolic exchange value with the potential to impact on employment.

On the surface, FD in FEC claims to widen participation, but as Burke (2011) argues they conceal inequality. Only 3% of students from disadvantaged backgrounds enter highly selective universities, compared to 21% of young people from the most advantaged background’ (DfBIS, 2015:37). This demonstrates that WP students may face exclusion from traditional forms of HE. The WP policy discourse often articulated by the government in relation to concerns about social justice, but it serves to reproduce and mask inequality. Criticism of the social inclusion and widening participation

agendas are based on the recognition that in Britain social class position still has a significant influence on the decision to study higher education, the institution in which to study, and success rates (Reay et al., 2005; Stuart, 2006). Persistent class inequality has been identified in both access and completion rates where different types of courses and types of institutions, are accessible to, and accessed by, different social groups (Reay et al., 2005; Stuart, 2006; Bathmaker et al. 2008; Crozier et al., 2008; Burke, 2011). A more contemporary example of this from The Office of Fair Access.

The vision of this national strategy for access and student success in higher education is: that all those with the potential to benefit from higher education have equal opportunity to participate and succeed, on a course and in an institution that best fit their potential, needs and ambitions for employment or further study (OFFA, 2014:7).

There is evidence of systemic symbolic violence from government policy. OFFA's position statement does not attempt to provide equal access to *all institutions* and *all courses* for *all students*. Rather it seeks to suggest that students can have access only to institutions and courses that 'fit' their perceived social, cultural or educational context, and this helps to reinforce and legitimise the polarisation of the higher education sector.

### **2.3.3 Tuition fees reinforcing divisions between university and CHE?**

Government interventions have actively promoted increased competition in HE, and as suggested above, tuition fees play a role in the marketization of HE. It was announced in 2010, that from September 2012, students would pay full tuition fees of up to £9,000 (Browne, 2010). It was anticipated that

HEIs [would] actively compete for well informed, discerning students, based on price and teaching quality, improving provision across the whole sector, within a framework that guarantees minimum standards (Browne, 2010:8).

There was a government ambition that the HEIs would compete through price differentiation between institutions and courses (Browne, 2010; DfBIS, 2011) and a

two-stream funding model for tuition fees was introduced (Browne, 2010). Model 1 tuition fees were capped £6,000, and model 2 at £9,000. Institutions that had fees above the model 1 threshold were required to sign access agreements with the Office for Fair Access (OFFA) (HEFCE, 2011; DfBIS, 2015). An unintended consequence of the fees model was that price became a symbolic marker of quality and prestige which resulted in most universities charging maximum fees through a fear that lower fees would symbolically indicate lower quality. CHE providers were less able to commit to the requirements of fair access agreements, and in the game of prestige do not fare well against universities, so price competition was polarised between CHE charging model 1 fees, and universities charging model 2 fees (Parry et al., 2012).

#### **2.3.4 Informed choice, student experience metrics and guidance in choice making**

As outlined above, neoliberal government policy has promoted competition and market mechanisms under consumerist notions of ‘consumer choice’ (Temple et al., 2016) and ‘Value for Money’ (VfM) (Kandiko and Mawer, 2013). The government contended that students can make ‘better’ decisions, and more ‘informed choices’ if provided with information on student experience and employment outcomes (DfBIS, 2011). At the time the empirical data was collected government agencies collected student experience data through the National Student Survey (NSS), and employment outcomes through the Destinations of Leavers from Higher Education (DLHE) survey (HESA, 2017). HEIs were required to display data in Key Information Sets (KIS) on university course pages (Slack et al., 2014). Such metrics can act as markers of distinction for courses and HEIs that are ranked in various league tables (Temple et al., 2016). The requirements on HEIs encourage them to further apply a ‘market mentality’ in the competition for field positions and students (Bennett et al., 2013; Temple et al., 2016).

On the surface, it is not an unreasonable proposition from the government that increasing course information and outcomes might support students to make more

informed HE choices. Ball and Vincent's (1998) notion of hot and cold knowledge is used in Slack et al. et al. (2014) study on HE choice. Institutionalised information such as KIS would be characterised as 'cold knowledge'. Hot knowledge comes from family and friends and is therefore more trusted (ibid). The difficulty for FiF students is that, by their very status, they do not have a family with experience of HE to call upon (O'Shea, 2015; Luzeckyj et al., 2017). Bourdieu (1986) argues that one's classed-placed logic limits HE choice, and on this basis, Reay (2001; 2005; 2009) identified that WP students are less engaged with 'active planning', when compared to middle class families, explained through differing levels of habitus-field alignment and understanding of the 'rules of the game'.

The literature identifies that students may draw on 'hot-knowledge' beyond their family; from friends and teachers in existing educational institutions (Briggs, Clark, Hall, 2012; Slack et al., 2014). This highlights the importance of cultural and social capital from these relationships and the extent to which teachers can guide students through the field. Morrison (2009:219) argued that WP students and their teachers were 'aware of the functioning of a hierarchical HE market' and this strongly influenced the 'perceived scope for choice' to non-traditional CHE. On the contrary, Parry et al. (2012:123) considered that WP students exhibited a 'considerable lack of knowledge and awareness and indifference about the claimed differences between universities and colleges amongst the students surveyed'. Students can be reliant upon the guidance they receive from their teachers. However, it is also claimed that there can be a tendency for teachers and guidance counsellors to have lower expectations for WP students and guide them towards less challenging and less selective programmes and institutions (Baum et al., 2010; 2013; Smyth and Banks, 2012). The study considers students' engagement with hot and cold knowledge discussed above, in supporting HE choices (see chapter 4).

## 2.4 The 'typical student' experience.

Holdsworth (2006) usefully draws attention to the influence of the popular perceptions of 'the typical student' in her work on WP groups.

The typical student is very much a creation of contemporary folklore, and one that is often evoked in popular discourse about student life ... heavy drinking, socialising, political activity and getting into debt'. Students reflexively compared their own experiences to this imagined 'other' (Holdsworth, 2006:511).

Similarly, Maunder et al. (2013:144) suggest that the 'traditional' students move away to university after leaving school, studies full-time, and lives in university residences and has 'the whole university experience'. This notion is useful in considering how FiF students might embrace or reject these characterisations of what it means to be a 'proper' HE student.

Holdsworth (2009) contends that mobility and migration shape the discourse that 'moving away' is the 'right way' to study HE.

It remains the case that going to university is synonymous with young people leaving home for the first time and the opportunities this is assumed to offer young people. Media discourses about 'going to university' and the various guides published to assist young people through the transition are predicated on the assumption of geographical mobility. University prospectuses promote their locality as well as the institution, thus incorporating the assumption that mobile undergraduates have a choice about location (Holdsworth, 2009:1849).

Holdsworth (2009:1856) argued that mobility is privileging discourse of a 'typical student' that represents a 'restricted, but hegemonic, view of university life'. This could be considered as a form of symbolic violence that stratifies HE and positions non-traditional student experiences and 'staying at home' as an 'inferior model of participation in HE' (Holdsworth, 2006: 495-496).

#### **2.4.1 Mobility: challenging the idea of adventure and ‘independence’ vs local comfort, connection and ‘dependence’?**

The conceptualisation of ‘the typical student experience’ draws attention to the issue of mobility and immobility, where spatial mobility has been central to the ideas of transitions young people make to HE study (Christie, 2007). Scholars argue that the popular construction of the ‘typical student’ is synonymous with ‘independence’, and this is often negatively contrasted by ‘dependence’ for students who study at home (Holdsworth, 2009; Finn, 2017).

Finn (2017:744) argued for a much more nuanced understanding of issues associated with student mobility beyond seeing moving away to university as a ‘spectacular one-off’ event of ‘moving’. Mobility is often positively associated with a transition towards independence as university offers new academic and socio-spatial experiences (Stoten, 2016). The ways students manage their ‘mobility’ can be influenced by their approach to maintaining emotional relationships to home (Clayton, Crozier and Reay, 2009; Holdsworth, 2009; Finn, 2017) and are influenced by socio-spatial and practical considerations of existing commitments (Stoten, 2016).

Moving away requires temporary separation from local relationships but can be mitigated by connection to family and a sense of familiarity through habitus and institutional alignment (Clayton, Crozier and Reay, 2009). Mobile students may have greater choice, but mobility is clearly connected to home, and the distances students are willing and able to travel; alongside those issues of ‘fit’ in terms of habitus and institution alignment (Reay et al., 2001; Thomas, 2002; Reay et al., 2009; Abrahams and Ingram, 2013). ‘The spaces of home and university are recognised ... as material and physical entities but also spatial resources upon which students draw upon’ (Clayton, Crozier and Reay, 2009:159). Mobility is a significant issue influencing HE choice, and immobility restricts students to local HEIs (Christie, 2007; 2009; Finn,

2017). Christie (2009:2453) argues that mobility is ‘an important dimension of the new inequalities between home and away students.’

Scholars argue that there is a need to consider the wider everyday issues of mobility that has practical and logistical dimensions, for instance, when HE needs to fit within wider family and work responsibility (Holdsworth, 2009; Stoten, 2016; Finn, 2017). On this basis, Holdsworth (2009:1861) challenges the negative connotations of ‘dependence’ and argues that dependence can be positively framed ‘based on interdependencies, mutual support, and responsibility for others’. Studying locally can be positively viewed by immobile students as they can live at home, work part-time, and study towards a future career (Bathmaker and Thomas 2009; Morrison, 2009; Parry et al., 2012; King et al., 2013). Stoten (2016) characterises local student choices as being part of a ‘pragmatic approach’ where students are concerned with practical constraints such as location and convenience to work, family and child care, and perceived supportive teaching; rather than any overt restraint from ‘class-consciousness’. Parry et al. (2012: 117) reported five principal factors that were influential in students’ choice to study in CHE institutions: 1. The course is available at college (34%); 2. Already studied at the college (33%); 3. Contact with staff (29%); 4. Lower tuition fees at college (28%); 5. Feeling comfortable at college (27%).

Bourdiesian analysis draws attention to unconscious aspects of habitus-institution (mis)alignment with the doxa of CHE and University study. There is growing recognition from scholars of the importance of emotional aspects of (im)mobility, and the influence of family and friends (Christie, 2009; Brooks and Waters, 2010; Finn, 2017). Christie (2009:124) argues that decisions about HE are ‘intensely emotional practices, saturated with both conscious and unconscious thoughts and feelings, and bound up with the amalgam of emotional energy’. Brooks and Waters (2010) contend that economic, social and cultural capitals all combine to influence ‘mobility capital’,

and Cairns et al. (2013) understand that taken-for-granted assumption of mobility or immobility is embedded within habitus. The focus on practical issues (above) and ‘comfort’ might be due to a lack of familiarity with the field of HE (Thering, 2012; Luzeckyj et al., 2017) which means that often students will seek to study within the ‘comfort blanket of home’ (Byrom and Lightfoot, 2012:129) or ‘safety blanket’ of a familiar institution (Morrison, 2009; Simm et al., 2011; King et al., 2013).

#### **2.4.2 Social and Academic connections in HE study**

The social experiences of friendship, mutual support, and social networks are key influences of student experience (Thomas, 2002; Stuart, 2006), and these informal social interactions support HE study and the wider student experience (Thomas and Hanson, 2014; Meuleman et al., 2015). There is recognition in the academic literature of the differences in student expectations and experiences between those studying in universities and those who study locally in FE settings (Leahy, 2012; Parry, 2012). Leahy identifies that living in university halls of residence and engaging with extra-curricular activities, including Student Union activities, student bars, clubs/societies, sports facilities and cultural activities, and student support systems all contribute to wider student experiences (Leahy, 2012).

Within university settings, it is recognised that ‘day students’ or non-resident local students have more limited opportunities to break into the social circles of students living in halls (Christie, 2009; Field and Morgan-Klein, 2013; Thomas and Hanson, 2014). The evidence therefore suggests that students who live at home, and study locally and work part-time, or have family commitments, will be less integrated into ‘university life’ and feel less like ‘university students’ (Caller, 2005; Crozier et al., 2008).



Several factors can limit opportunities for wider social engagement in CHE. Parry et al. (2012: 98) are clearer that CHE students simply do not have access to an ‘intensive student culture/environment’ and FE environments do not provide ‘Students’ Unions, clubs and societies’. Simm et al. (2011) considered that FE institutional culture was strongly orientated towards younger BTEC and A ‘Level students. Caller (2005) and Leahy (2012) both argue that CHE students may not be motivated by the traditional wider student experiences. Leahy (2012) justified a lack of wider social activities in CHE claiming that

Ranzetta ([2007]) came to the important realisation that many of the questions posed about the student experience of HE in FECs are based on some imagined golden age of HE. The twenty-first-century HE learner does not have time or money to lead the social or cultural life that the idealised image of the doxa suggests. Alongside their studies, students have to work to earn money; many now live at home and commute to their studies (Leahy, 2012: 179).

Whilst other scholars argue that students are often economically active (working-part-time) and have wider family commitments (King et al., 2009) and are motivated to hold on to pre-existing local social relationships (Holdsworth, 2009) these would not preclude local students engaging with activities *if* they were available. It seems a curious position to suggest that students will not engage in something when it does not already pre-exist prior to their entry into the CHE institutions, students cannot engage in cultural and social activities that *are not there*.

As a result, CHE students’ interactions are much more limited CHE settings than university students. CHE students’ social interactions are course-based and classroom-based (Parry et al., 2012; Wood 2012) and therefore these are dependent upon the size and makeup of course cohort and relationships with tutors (Wood, 2012; Parry et al., 2012). Simm et al. (2011) suggest that this can lead to a sense of isolation. Students perceive familiarity and supportive staff as one of the benefits of HE in FE that came

with smaller class sizes and personalised teaching and pastoral care (Morrison, 2009; Rapley, 2014; Stoten, 2016). Some of FEC Principals interviewed by Parry et al. (2012) echoed this perceived strength of CHE teaching.

King et al. (2013) identified that students studying HE in FE express a strong preference for a physical separation between FE and HE, and HE students want exclusive facilities including a dedicated centre, library resources, academic, and social spaces. This view is often shared by HE in FE staff, as they feel a lack of HE specific facilities undermines the HE culture within FE (Turner et al., 2009). King (2013:22) claims that a desire 'for a distinctive identity is a powerful force amongst HE students.' The dominance of the FE culture, or doxa that prevails in FECs impacts upon students' sense of identity (Feather, 2011) and to the extent that they question their status as 'bona fide' HE students (Rapely, 2014:194).

Rapley (2014) identifies how FE culture dominates the organisation and management relationships across FECs, and this doxa then provides a set of taken-for-granted assumptions that shape individual and institutional relationships across FE in HE.

Feather (2011) found evidence that staff teaching across FE and HE found it problematic and stressful. Teaching that is resourced from an FE model and which takes no account of difference in preparation time for HE teaching can be particularly problematic (Turner et al., 2009; Feather, 2011; Creasy, 2013). Managerially driven efficiency dominates FE culture (Turner et al., 2009; Creasy, 2013) and therefore staff have very high teaching contact hours and can teach up to 27 hours per week (Feather, 2011) or over 800 per year (Creasy, 2013). This all leaves little room for engagement with research and scholarly activity which can undermine the HEness of HE in FE (Turner et al., 2009; Creasy, 2013).

Feather (2011) suggests that there was a feeling by CHE staff that HE in FE operated very differently in FECs than it would in a university. Similarly, Turner et al. (2009:261) interviewed HE in FE staff who consider that HE in FE has a ‘hybrid culture’ which is neither HE (as they perceive as prevailing within universities) nor FE (as perceived by FE colleagues)’. This all creates a mixed picture from HE lecturers in FECs leaving staff unsure of the commitment of their FEC to resource HE or to genuinely support a HE culture (Turner et al., 2009).

There are evident contestations in the literature related to the ‘academic’ environment of FE in HE and the overall ‘HEness’ of CHE experiences (Lea and Simmons, 2012). Researchers who work in CHE seem more positive about this (Morrison, 2009; Leahy, 2012; Rapley, 2014), than university-based authors who point towards a lack of HE environment and limited engagement of CHE staff in research and scholarly culture (Simms et al. 2011; Hussey and Smith, 2010; Creasy, 2013). Lea and Simmons (2012) note distinction in individual and institutional autonomy between HE and FE, identifying that universities have greater institutional, curriculum, pedagogy, and research autonomy. They claim the major impact is upon the ‘contest- ability’ of knowledge in HE, and a more fixed understanding of knowledge in FE (Lea and Simmons, 2012). Similarly, Hussey and Smith (2010) claim that HE is underpinned by ‘conceptual knowledge’, and FE is underpinned by vocational and practical knowledge. Whilst there may be differing doxic pedagogical expectations within FE, and HE institutions, the doxa of the employability agenda implies that in practice most HE will combine conceptual and vocational/applied knowledge. Parry et al. (2012:92) found self-conscious FEC Principals who expressed concerned at their College’s ability to provide ‘Full “HE-ness”’, but this they felt was countered by closer connection to ‘society as a whole’, the ‘real world’, which Principals implied was more distant at universities.

Leahy (2012:18) suggests than in questioning the overall quality of CHE environments, that universities might position themselves strategically to demonstrate their elevated positions within the field to reinforce that CHE is ‘very much at the bottom’ of the hierarchy. A Bourdieusian analysis draws analytical attention to symbolic capitals and how symbolic violence in HE creates and maintain field hierarchies (Bourdieu, 2000). Widin (2010) posits that *illusio* is manifested in three ways. Firstly, power differentials, capital evaluations and differing interests influence how people become positioned within fields. Secondly, dominant groups tend to hide their interests, by demonstrating ‘disinterestedness’. Thirdly, it is necessary to identify the *actual* stakes in the game the apparently disinterested players are pursuing. *Illusio* deepens the analysis of symbolic nature of HE and our understanding of how power and capitals are positioned, and position individuals in institutions, within the competitive field of HE. The pedagogic authority and pedagogic work of universities legitimise the use of symbolic violence and reinforce arbitrary power and cultural arbitrariness (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990; Bourdieu, 1984; Bourdieu, 1986). As Leahy (2012) suggests, universities and university academics may be using symbolic power to protect the boundaries of HE as the sectors face greater competition for students as a result of neoliberal marketing interventions from the government; or there could be legitimate and genuine concern about the quality of HE in CHE environments.

#### **2.4.3 Earning and learning: the implications of working part-time alongside HE study.**

Just over half of all HE students work part-time alongside their studies (Neves, 2017), and therefore government agencies and scholars are interested in understanding the influences and impacts that part-time work has on student experiences. For some students there is an economic imperative to fund basic living costs, for others, part-time work provides funds to enhance lifestyles, and some students connect part-time work to

future career ambitions. These issues resonate with the study question that explores what students' value about HE and its connections to their wider lives.

Illusio has conceptual utility to understand how student interests are drawn to competing field games, and their stakes and capital. A recent report by the HEA identified the growth in part-time work (economic capital), and a corresponding decline in time spent on both scheduled and independent study (academic, cultural capital), and a subsequent 'decline in participation in sports and/or societies [(social and cultural capital)] (falling from 60% to 54%)' (Neves, 2017:4) The trend for a decline in study-time for students was also identified by Neves and Hillman (2017).

Hodgson and Spours (2001) offer four 'ideal types' to consider student approaches to part-time work and the implication for students. 'Balancers' work for less than 10 hours per week so they have time for study and other student lifestyle activities (ibid). 'Risk takers' are more likely to be male and work too many paid hours which might jeopardise success on their programme of study (ibid). Deliberate non-workers' may have strong commitments to extra curricula activities (such as sport) and keep time free for study. Some of these students are financially supported by their parents mitigating the economic pressures to work (ibid). 'Connectors' were a small group of students who strategically aligned part-time work to their HE degree course (ibid). These ideal types identified almost 20 years ago remain relevant and have salience with contemporary research. Advance HE (2018) found that working for more than 10 hours negatively impacted students' impressions of their HE experiences in terms of learning gain and the value of HE.

Greenbank (2015) explored students' attitudes towards employability and found that many students did not seem to appreciate or value employment enhancing activities for their future employment. Similarly, Bathmaker (2013) and Burke (2016) identifies that

some students do not appreciate that the ‘game has changed’ and may not prioritise employment orientated activity. Burke (2016) found that approaches to employability were influenced by social class and middle class economic, cultural, and social capital, and a middle class advantage was evident in students from these backgrounds. Working class students were less likely to have cultural and social capital aligned to professional employment fields which impacted on their ability to make strategic investments for graduate employment (Burke, 2016). In addition, students who need to work to support themselves financially may not be able to take-up unpaid internships and had limited free-time to engage with valuable extra curricula activities (ECAs) (Bathmaker et al., 2013; Burke, 2016).

Greenbank (2015) contends that students in his study worked ‘not because they wanted to be able to survive financially or wished to avoid accumulating debt, but because they wanted to be able to enjoy the “student life-style” and the social life they felt was an integral part of this’ (Greenbanks, 2015:192). Similar issues were also evident in research by Hodgson and Spours (2001) and Richardson et al., (2009). These small-scale research endeavours do not capture a differentiated picture of students from across the social spectrum, or across all types of HEIs, but they draw attention to the fact that students might be motivated by the every-day here-and-now lifestyle rather than being strategic in their approaches to employment through part-time work, despite the increased focus on ‘employability’.

Turning next to consider the CHE environment in relation to part-time work, Wood (2012) cites The Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills (2009) report

considered the financial issues around studying higher education in FE colleges and in HE institutions. The research found that there was little difference between students’ incomes, however that students at FE colleges relied more on income from paid work and less on contributions from family and friends. In addition the research found

that students at FE colleges had smaller student loans and much lower borrowing levels than those at HE institutions.

This seems to support the idea that CHE students work part-time to support their wider-lifestyles, although this is more likely to be their local lifestyles, as the section above identified traditional student lifestyles are not available in CHE environments.

#### **2.4.4 Student identity: transitions and transformation**

Scholarly work has drawn attention to the transitions and transformations in identity that HE students may experience through habitus and field alignment in academic and social field-games (Crozier and Reay, 2010; Hussey and Smith, 2010; Merrill, 2012).

Transitions offer the potential for personal changes in friendships and in meeting new people (Stuart, 2006). Changes occur through incorporating HE study into an existing lifestyle which may include changes in living arrangements and socio-spatial mobility (Thomas, 2002; Hussey and Smith, 2012; Maunder et al., 2013). Maunder et al. (2013) recommend further research into the social and cultural factors of HE transition and

stress the importance of studying the process of transitions at an individual level and seeking to understand how personal histories are used to interpret university life' engaging the student voice to 'capture the complexity of experience, and understand what these issues mean for individuals (Maunder et al., 2013:140).

Hussey and Smith (2010:156) conceptualise a transition as a

significant change in a student's life, self-concept and learning: a shift from one state of understanding, development and maturity to another. They are changes that are judged of real significance by the student themselves, the educators, or other interested parties. Some may be planned while others emerge; some will be predicted while others are not.

What constitutes a transition is not precise (Hussey and Smith, 2010) but shares physical, academic, and social aspects (Maunder et al., 2013). Merrill (2012) considers HE as a temporary 'transitional space' consisting of boundaries of space, place and

time. There is theoretical alignment with students' habitus interacting within the field and the largely unconscious aspects of social and cultural integration of transitions to HE (Hussey and Smith, 2010).

Transitions in HE take place when individuals are faced with new situations such as moving from school to HE, leaving home to study independently, or changing institutions, and getting to grips with the new culture and campus (Maunder et al., 2013; Merrill, 2012). Transitions 'inevitably disrupt existing social bonds, while creating possibilities for new ties' (Field and Morgan-Klein, 2013:169) and therefore all transitions could be considered as emotionally challenging (Christie, 2009; Meuleman et al., 2015).

Students can manage the level of challenge by seeking local options as 'day students' (Christie, 2007). Students studying FD degrees may make several transitions, moving first to CHE and then to Honours study in university (Penketh and Goddard, 2008; Merrill, 2012), or with CHE environments (Morrison, 2009). Local students need to manage their local lives alongside HE study, and mature students have other roles such as 'wife/husband/partner, parent, worker and carer' (Merrill, 2012:23) that create conflict for time and attention and they may experience 'prevailing feeling[s] of guilt generated by failure to meet all competing needs simultaneously' (Penketh and Goddard, 2008:325).

Christie (2009) considers that university is part of a transitional infrastructure from leaving school before entering adult employment. Thomas and Hanson (2014:61) consider that although moving away from home to study is seen as 'traditional as a rite of passage for many young people (...) but 'the complexity of this process and the emotional resilience needed for adjustment are often underestimated' as students adapt to both the academic demands of their programmes and the social demands of study



(Marshall and Morris, 2011). Kandiko and Mawer (2013:13) note that '[i]t was common that students felt lost, unsure of what was expected of them and not sure of where to go for assistance in their transition to higher education'. Transitions for a general student population can be far from straightforward, and given a lack of familiarity FiF students may experience a greater mismatch between their initial expectations and actual experiences of university life' as they are unable to imagine their experience in advance (Briggs, Clark and Hall, 2012).

Students can feel 'in-between', in terms of identity, letting go of old parts of identity and changing to something modified or new (Merrill, 2012; Maunder et al., 2013). Letting go or maintaining an old identity might feel like an act of transgression from established class identity (Byrom and Lightfoot, 2012; Merrill, 2012) or family doxa (Atkinson, 2011).

In recognising these emotional dimensions of student identity Christie (2009), suggests that local 'day-students', can articulate HE study as '*doing*' rather than '*being*'. A framing of 'doing' HE was said to mitigate, at a surface level at least, the emotional challenges of 'fitting in' to a normative student identity. *Doing* was orientated towards 'fitting everything in' (in terms of time and commitments) rather than 'fitting-in' socially (Christie, 2009). FiF students may experience habitus clivé; or 'cleft habitus' if they have to manage a 'split identity' from 'inside university' and 'outside university' (Byrom and Lightfoot, 2012) or a 'home' identity and 'student' identity (Luzeckyj et al., 2016:1245). Habitus clivé; or 'cleft habitus' is a way to understand how their 'conditions of existence' change so dramatically over the course of their life that they feel their dispositions losing coherency and experience a sense of self torn by dislocation and internal division' (Friedman 2015: np). Abrahams and Ingram (2013) identify a 'chameleon' habitus across home life and university that creates a third space for reflexive evaluation of identity across fields. This aligns to Field and Morgan-

Klein's (2013:169) perspective that HE identity is a 'transitional process, perhaps even liminal in nature' and being 'a student' consists of an extended, yet temporary, transitional 'student identity' (ibid). This highlights the temporary nature of student identity characterised through the notion of a 'transition', being a student lasts only a few years, it is not an 'end game' as students experience further transitions out of the field, to employment. The extent FiF students invest or distance HE student identity and invest in the construction of a professional identity was an interesting perspective for this study.

## **2.5 Summary**

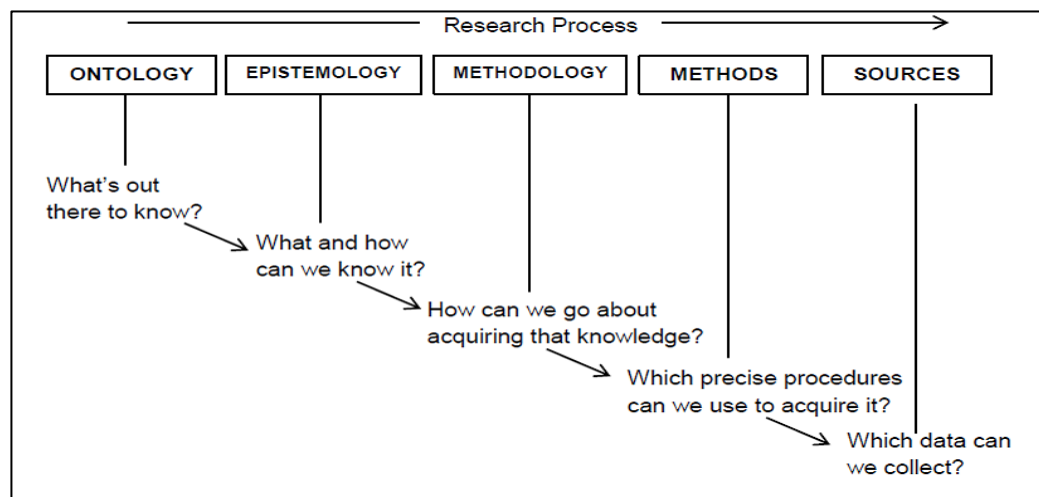
The literature review aimed to draw together the complexity of influences upon student HE choices and experiences. Bourdieu's three interrelated levels of field analysis and conceptual tools highlight the dynamic interaction of individual student's habitus and interactions within fields and how this may establish trajectories for the types of HE that seem accessible and desirable to FiF students in this study. The qualifications, institutions, costs, information and social relationships with peers and teachers all play a role in shaping choice. Institutions create doxic expectations based upon social, cultural, pedagogic, and social structures which shape students' experiences. Students' embodied life experiences in habitus interact with family doxa, HE doxa, and the doxa from the field of employment, and analysing the way students' *illusio* is drawn to the differing stakes in fields provides insight into what FiF students value about their HE experiences. As I have shown HE is only part of students' lives and students' levels of engagement can vary, moving away from home is likely to be a more immersive HE experience than studying locally where HE is embedded alongside other local aspects of their lives. These complex issues of choice and experience form the basis of this empirical study; chapter 3 outlines my methodological considerations and approach.

## 3.0 Chapter 3 Research Methods

### 3.1 Introduction

Good quality research clarifies the philosophical assumptions upon which the research is premised (Burke, Musselin, and Kehm, 2008; Crotty, 1998; Grix, 2002; 2010) and this chapter aims to provide a rationale for my approach. Grix (2002; 2010) articulates a threefold rationale for clearly identifying and clarifying research assumptions: 1. In order to understand the interrelationship of the key components of research (including methodology and methods); 2. To avoid confusion when discussing theoretical debates and approaches to social phenomena; 3. To recognise others', and defend your own, position.

Hay (2002:63) contends that 'ontology logically precedes epistemology, which in turn logically precede methodology'. Grix (2010) extends this logic across the entire research process (see figure 1) to achieve methodological coherence (Mayan, 2009) through the alignment of ontology, epistemology, methodology, methods and sources (Grix, 2002; 2010).



**Figure 1 Directional flow of Ontology, Epistemology, Methodology and Methods Source: Grix (2010:68)**

I am mindful that Grix's model provides logical coherences but can obscure the inherent 'messiness' within narrative enquiry (Connolly, 2007).

### **3.2 Research Paradigm**

A researcher paradigm is the net that holds a researcher's ontological, epistemological, and theoretical position/perspectives (Mayan, 2009). Research paradigms can be considered to be broad approaches to research, for example 'positivist' or 'interpretivist' paradigms. Different research paradigms can draw on broadly similar ontological and epistemological roots and therefore share paradigmatic assumptions, despite variant research approaches within broad categorisations (Grix, 2010). A particular view of the world influences the ways in which a researcher conceives how it is possible to discover meaning about students' HE experiences; what is *researchable* - ontological position; what it is *knowable* - epistemological position; and *how* to go about acquiring that knowledge - methodological approach and methods (Grix, 2002).

Part of the process of maintaining integrity is to locate myself within the research.

Reflective and reflexive approaches are therefore required (Finlay, 2002). Appendix 1 outlines my approach to reflexivity in more detail than is possible to outline within the main thesis. Part two of appendix 1 (1.4) utilised Wellington et al.'s (2005) reflective framework for doctoral students. I used the framework to give a narrative of my own personal life history and educational experiences I bring to my research; for example, I was a FiF student and I work as a university Lecturer and Programme Leader.

#### **3.2.2 Ontological consideration and position**

Ontology is the 'science or study of being' (Blaikie, 1993:6) and pertains to questions about what constitutes social reality and what can be known about it (Guba and Lincoln, 1994; Blaikie, 2000). Ontology is the foundation of the research process; it is a

philosophical perspective that cannot be refuted empirically (Crotty, 1998; Grix, 2002; 2010; Wellington et al., 2005).

Ontological assumptions are concerned with being human within the world and whether the social world is external, independent, and ‘objectively real’ - as in objectivism; or socially constructed, subjectively experienced and mediated through language - as in ‘constructivism’ (Crotty, 1998; Grix, 2002; 2010; Wellington et al., 2005).

Realist ontological perspectives in narrative inquiry were developed in the Chicago School of Sociology that assumed that narratives provided a direct representation of life experiences (Chase, 2005), and that narratives speak for themselves (Riessman, 2008). Narrative inquiry has since shifted to recognise the socially constructed nature of stories and the co-construction between the research participant and the interviewer (Chase, 2005; Riessman, 2008).

Furlong and Marsh (2002) highlight three main facets of the constructivist/constructionist paradigms that I align with: 1. Realities are local and specific; 2. Reality cannot be ‘discovered’ (as they can in objectivism); 3. Reality is socially constructed by actors who are not impervious to social, political and cultural processes. From this perspective, meaning is ‘continually being accomplished by social actors (...) produced through social interaction (...) in a constant state of revision (Bryman, 2001:16-18). In this study, meaning was narratively constructed through in-depth interviews. In adopting a narrative study of student choice and experience, I recognise that human conceptions of social reality are at least partially narratively constructed. Narratives help participants make sense of their HE experiences, of significant life events, past experiences, and long-term aspiration to employment. In line with Bourdieu’s sociology, narrative is a form of social action influenced by socio-

cultural factors, language, and wider societal discourse related to issue under investigation (Furlong and Marsh, 2003; Sparkes and Smith, 2008).

### **3.2.3 Epistemological considerations and position.**

Ontology is about what we may know, and epistemology is about how we come to know what we know (Grix, 2010). Ontology is concerned with ‘reality’ and epistemology is ‘the relationships between that reality and the researcher’ (Carson et al., 2001:4) and the ‘knower and what can be known’ (Guba and Lincoln, 1994:108). These both indicate the positionality of the researcher, and their way of viewing the world (Grix, 2010).

The two main epistemological perspectives are positivism and interpretivism (Crotty, 1998; Grix, 2002; 2010). Positivism is associated with the natural sciences and scientific approaches which have been extended to the study of social reality through post-positivist approaches. Biographical methods are part of a wider paradigm shift, or a narrative turn, in social research as an antidote to positivistic research (Andrews, Squire and Tamboukou, 2013; Chamerlayne, Bornat and Wengraf, 2000; Merrill and West, 2009; Riesman, 2008). My interpretivist position ‘is predicated upon the view that a strategy is required that respects the differences between people and the objectives of the natural sciences and therefore requires the social scientists to grasp the subjective meaning of social action’ (Bryman, 2001:13).

The tension in narrative enquiry emanates from two differing interpretivist conceptions. A humanist conception of holistic person-centred approaches that aims to understand meaningful experiences from the individual’s perspective (Elliot, 2005). The second conception came later from postmodernist / poststructuralist social researchers such as Althusser, Lacan, and Foucault (Andrews et al., 2013; Elliot, 2005). Poststructuralist and post-humanists challenged humanist conceptions of the authentic autonomous

human subject (Elliot, 2005). Post-structuralist critiques of life history, or biographical methods, are made when there is a lack of consideration of the wider social context and forces that shape narratives (Merrill and West, 2009). Post-modernist positions contend that human subjects do not have a pre-existing, or fixed, identity that is ‘ontologically prior to their position in the social world’ (Elliot, 2005:124). These positions stand in contrast to humanist conceptions of an essentialised identity, insisting instead that identity is an ongoing social project, always in production, always partial, with historical and discursive contexts. Postmodern conceptions of narrative identity are grounded in experiences and temporality; it has coherence without being static, fixed, or essentialised (Elliot, 2005). From this position, student identity would be viewed as temporary as it only lasts for the period of HE study (Field, Merrill, and Morgan- Klein; 2010; Merrill, 2012).

I ‘don’t have access to narrators’ direct experience’ (Riessman, 2008:22) and empirical reality is not directly accessible (Susen, 2011). I recognise the mediation and representational aspects of language to communicate higher education experiences (Mayan, 2009; Richardson and St. Pierre, 2005; Susen, 2011). ‘[O]nly through dialogue can one become aware of the perceptions, and feeling and attitudes of others and interpret their meaning and intent’ (Crotty, 1998:78).

In this sense, knowledge is epistemologically rooted and is not conceived to be as simple as turning ‘knowing’ (of the participant) into ‘telling’ (me the researcher) (White 1987 cited by Elliot, 2005). Students’ narratives of HE were produced *through* the interview process, understanding that knowledge is co-created and co-constructed in the social context of the interview (Chase, 2005; Denzin and Lincoln, 2005; Riessman, 2008) and I acknowledge that the wider experiences of HE are shaped by wider social and cultural dimensions.

### 3.3 Narrative Methodology

A narrative methodological approach aligns with my constructionist ontological position and interpretivist epistemology position. Within the directional model of the research process proposed by Grix (2010) a theoretical methodological position/perspective is the next logical step in the research process. Clandinin and Huber (2010) identify three factors to consider in justifying a narrative inquiry approach. These are i. personal justification, ii. practical justification, and iii. social justification. Social justification can have two forms, a theoretical justification, and social action and policy justifications (ibid).

My narrative inquiry attends to all three criteria.

- i. I located myself reflexively considering my own biography as a first generation HE student myself, and as a lecturer within HE; and I am personally very interested in FiF student experiences (hence this study).
- ii. Practical justification is derived from both my lecturing role working with FiF students and how this project has deepened my understanding to improve practice.
- iii. Theoretical and methodological justification are aligned. My Bourdieusian approach combines methodological implications, theoretical application, and empirical study that allows me to consider individual and collective student experiences and then relate these back to wider policy and practice, linking ‘individual and social action’ (Andrews et al., 2013:2).

Bourdieu’s theorisation aims to overcome the polarisation of structuralism and subjectivism; and between theoretical knowledge and practical knowledge (Lane, 2000; Grenfell, 2008). His methodological framework of ‘structuralist constructivism’ attempts to reconcile the dualisms of agency/structure, objectivism/subjectivism,



representation/reality, and the micro-macro through the relational tool of habitus and field (Reay, 2004). These tools become ways of talking about individual student experiences and society. It is possible to consider a habitus collectively for FiF students as ‘a compilation of collective and individual trajectories’ (Reay 2004:434). This can break down the individual societal divide as individuals occupy similar social spaces hierarchically within fields, sharing structural relations and positions as new entrants in an unfamiliar field (Bourdieu, 1989). FiF students might share similar social conditions through hierarchy proximities in fields (Bourdieu, 1989). As new entrants they have neither familial experience of HE or valued capitals of the field to call upon (Burke, 2016).

Bourdieu’s later work has an interpretivist dimension. He asserted that ‘[i]t can be said without contradiction both that social realities are social fictions with no other basis than social construction, and that they really exist, inasmuch as they are collectively recognised’ (Bourdieu, 1996:20). In considering individual student experiences I am also mindful that ‘a particular case that is well constructed ceases to be particular’ (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992:77). ‘[S]tories are social artefacts, telling us as much about society and culture as they do about a person or a group’ (Riessman, 2008; 105)

Narrative performance could be understood as ways students demonstrate their achievements, experiences, identity, or time and capital investments, within and beyond the field of HE. The presentation of self through narratives to the ‘audience’ (the interviewer or a perceived ‘other’ reading the research) requires the narrator to draw on certain forms of capital that present particular forms of *illusio* in the field of HE (Bourdieu, 1990 and Wacquant, 1995 cited by Barrett, 2015). Accordingly, ‘an interrogative awareness of the strategic deployment of life history narratives is an important analytic prism offered by Bourdieusian sociology’ (Barrett 2015:5).

### **3.4 Participants**

15 FiF HE students were opportunistically and purposively selected using the following criteria:

1. enrolled on a HE programme;
2. 'first generation' (FiF) HE students.
3. studying at one of the three institutions within the research project.

Five participants were recruited from each setting. Each HE provider acted as a gatekeeper in the process disseminating participant recruitment information. Students were successfully recruited from emails and messages posted on virtual learning environments (appendix 2).

Fifteen participants was considered an appropriate sample size as narrative interviews were in-depth, with multiple interviews, over an extended period and produced thick, rich data sets for analysis (Squire, 2013). Table 1 provides a summary of participants in the study.

Pseudonym	Gender	Age at first interview	HE setting	Part-time / full-time study	Programme stage	Course	Relationship	Children	Learning disability	Studied locally or moved away?	Living arrangements	Working whilst studying
Will	Male	22	University	Full-time	1 <sup>st</sup> Year first interview Withdrawn from study second interview	BSc Sport Science	Long-distance relationship with girlfriend			Moved away	Student House	Part-time
Hannah	Female	19	University	Full-time	1 <sup>st</sup> Year first interview 2 <sup>nd</sup> Year 2 <sup>nd</sup> interview	BEd Teaching	Single			Moved away	Halls First year Private student apartment 2 <sup>nd</sup> Year	No
Student X	Male	19	University	Full-time	1 <sup>st</sup> Year first interview 2 <sup>nd</sup> Year 2 <sup>nd</sup> interview	FdA Football	Girlfriend		Dyslexia	Moved away	Hall 1 <sup>st</sup> Year Student house 2 <sup>nd</sup> Year	Part-time
Daisy	Female	21	University	Full-time	2 <sup>nd</sup> Year first interview 3 <sup>rd</sup> Year. second interview	BSc Sports Therapy	Boyfriend			Moved away	Student house	No
Daniel	Male	22	University	Full-time	2 <sup>nd</sup> Year first interview 3 <sup>rd</sup> Year second interview	BA Journalism	Single			Moved away	Student house 2 <sup>nd</sup> Year On campus 3 <sup>rd</sup> year	Yes part-time
Richard	Male	20	FEC 1 <sup>st</sup> interview University 2 <sup>nd</sup> interview	Full-time	2 <sup>nd</sup> year first interview 1 year progression (3 <sup>rd</sup> Year) second interview	FdA Media BA Journalism (progression)	Single			Studied locally	Living with two mature housemates	No – voluntary experience
Kate	Female	26	FEC	Full-time	1 <sup>st</sup> Year 2 <sup>nd</sup> Year 2 <sup>nd</sup> interview	FdA Sport Therapy	Boyfriend			Studied locally	With mother	Part-time
Stephanie	Female	46	FEC	Full-time	2 <sup>nd</sup> Year first interview 3 <sup>rd</sup> Year second interview	FdA Health and Social Care BA progression Health and Social Care	Lone parent Divorced with new partner	4 children 15-26 years old	Dyslexia	Studied locally	Home owner	Part-time
Yvonne	Female	27	FEC	Full-time	1st Year first interview 2nd Year 2nd interview	FdA Early Years	Male partner	Daughter aged 9	Dyslexia	Studied locally	With parents	Part-time
Donald	Male	34	FEC	Full-time	1 <sup>st</sup> Year first interview	FdA Sport based	Married - Wife	Yong Daughter		Studied locally	Home owner	No

Pseudonym	Gender	Age at first interview	HE setting	Part-time / full-time study	Programme stage	Course	Relationship	Children	Learning disability	Studied locally or moved away?	Living arrangements	Working whilst studying
					2 <sup>nd</sup> Year 2 <sup>nd</sup> interview							
Roger	Male	30	SFC	Full-time	2 <sup>nd</sup> Year first interview 3 <sup>rd</sup> Year second interview	FdA Sport based BA Programme Sport based	Married Wife	10-year-old and 8-year-old sons	Dyslexic	Studied locally	Own home	Part-time
Jake	Male	21	SFC	Full-time	2 <sup>nd</sup> Year first interview 3 <sup>rd</sup> Year second interview	FdA Sport Based BA Progression Sport based	Single			Studied locally	With parents	Part-time
Jessica	Female	33	SFC	Part-time	1 <sup>st</sup> Year first interview 2 <sup>nd</sup> Year second interview	FdA Business and Admin	Married – husband	2 children aged 3 and 7 years old		Studied locally	Own home	Full-time
Tom	Male	19	SFC	Full-time	1 <sup>st</sup> Year first interview 2 <sup>nd</sup> Year 2 <sup>nd</sup> interview	FdA Sport based	Single			Studied locally	With parents	Part-time
Louise	Female	19	SFC	Full-time	1 <sup>st</sup> Year first interview 2 <sup>nd</sup> Year 2 <sup>nd</sup> interview	FdA Sport based	Boyfriend			Studied locally	With parents	Part-time

**Table 1 Participant Information**

### **3.5 Research settings**

Research participants were recruited from three different HE providers all based within one region in England. The three institutions were selected based on access and convenience as well as being different ‘types’ of HE providers, which provide different ‘types’ of HE experiences.

The first setting is a small teaching intensive university in a large city. The University offers a ‘traditional university experience’. Traditional here means that the focus of the organisation is full-time, taught undergraduate higher education provision, Freshers live in halls of residence, and wider social experiences are facilitated through the Student Union. All five students interviewed as part of the study had moved away from home, and lived in university halls, or in private sector student rentals.

The second setting, a SFC, predominantly teaches A ‘Levels and BTEC qualifications. The SFC is atypical in offering two Foundation Degrees and two BA progression programmes, within a Sixth Form environment. The SFC have under 50 HE students enrolled across all provision.

The final institution is a large city based FEC, which is a dual sector provider of post-16 FE qualifications and HE programmes. Most students take post-16 courses, the FEC runs a small number of Foundation Degrees and BA Progression programmes from several validating universities.

### **3.6 Setting up narrative interviews**

The interviews were arranged in advance via email and took place in private interview rooms within the institution students attended. Interviews were started by clarifying issues from the Participant Information Sheet (appendix 3) and Informed Consent (appendix 3.1). The first interviews lasted approximately one and a half hours, which is an optimum time for in-depth qualitative interviews (Elliot, 2005). The anticipated

length of interviews was established in advance which helped to convey the interview depth.

Students were interviewed initially in the spring and summer of 2015 and then again in the spring/summer of 2016, after they had completed another academic year. The longitudinal design facilitated longstanding interview relations (Merrill and West, 2009; Squire, 2013). All first-round interviews were conducted face-to-face, which established a personal relationship and rapport. Follow up interviews ranged from 30 minutes to 1 hour. Five follow-up interviews were conducted face-to-face at the university. Ten follow-up interviews were conducted over the telephone as they were undertaken outside term/curriculum hours.

### **3.6 Rigour in the narrative interviews**

Feminist narrative enquiry has done much to consider more equal relationships through interviews (Merrill and West, 2009). To consider issues of power in a practical sense I ensured I dressed casually and used ordinary conversational language (Merrill, 2012). The term '*inter-view* implies a relationship' (Merrill and West, 2009:114). Co-construction is present where the interview process is more like a conversation (Merrill and West, 2009; Squire, 2013) and the interviews undertaken here adopted a flexible semi-structured approach with questions acting as an aide memoir and to support cross-comparability (Bryman, 2012) (See Appendix 4 for interview questions).

Following Riessman's (2008) guidance, I asked a broad opening question, "how did you become a student here?" to encourage participants to lead the conversation, but to allow freedom to explore and follow up issues that emerged (Merrill and West, 2009). I finished all interviews by asking participants if there was anything that was significant in their HE experience that we had missed, and which needed discussion.

Despite narrative's obvious connotations with 'stories', I sought to understand student 'experiences', and experience interviews are not overtly concerned with eliciting 'obvious stories' (Squire, 2013; Pheonix, 2013). Focusing on 'small' stories (Georgakpoulou, 2006) means focusing on 'accounts that construct emotions, worldviews, characters or events in ways that illuminate why particular accounts are produced in particular ways – i.e. on sense-making processes' (Pheonix, 2013:76). Small stories can be fragmented or partial accounts (Phoenix, 2013).

Clandinin and Murphy (2007:647) contend that good narrative interviewing is concerned with "learning an attitude of empathic listening, by not being judgmental, and by suspending (...) disbelief". In adopting this approach, it enhanced the quality of engagement and was also essential to ensure good ethical practice in narrative enquiry (Creswell, 2013). My empathy came from a genuine interest in the topic and from shared experience as a FiF student and sharing the challenges of balancing HE study with pressures of work and family life.

Interviews were recorded electronically via Dictaphone, transcribed, and returned to participants, as suggested by Merrill and West (2009). Through transcription there was a marginal effect of 'cleaning' the transcripts (Elliot, 2005; Riessman, 2008). The transcripts were faithfully transcribed, but for the needs of this study did not require full verbatim recording of all utterances that utilises highly complex procedures of linguistic analysis (Merrill and West, 2009; Riessman, 2008; Squire, 2013).

### **3.7 Ethics**

Ethical considerations needed a great deal of thought as I worked directly with people discussing key areas of their lives and the meaning they gave to their educational experiences. British Educational Research Association (2011) Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research informed my ethics application and full ethical approval was

granted from the Plymouth University. All participants were given Participant Information Sheets and gave signed informed consent prior to undertaking interviews.

Issues of power between me, the researcher, and the research participants were managed in an empathetic and collegial approach in the interviews, which recognised their co-production. Participants were given their transcript from their first interview again, just prior to the second interview, to give ‘interviewees more power over the materials; to enable them to ‘look back historically or to continue the conversation’ (Squire, 2013:56). In the process of discussing the findings I had authorial power in the selection and presentation of extracts and vignettes from the transcripts that are used in the following chapters.

Issues of anonymity and confidentiality were part of the ethical clearance and discussed with participants who were assured that what they said in interviews was anonymous through the use of pseudonyms. Participants were invited to select their own pseudonym for the project, 6 participants took this opportunity, and I allocated names to the rest.

In order to further protect participants’ anonymity, steps were taken to limit the ability of readers to identify the specific university, FEC and SFC, and only broad contextual information is provided about the institutions, participants, the people, and places they referred to.

### **3.8 Rigour in the analysis of narrative data**

A participant’s narrative is always met with an analyst’s interpretation, which is situated within discourse, culture, politics and history and is open to a constant cycle of interpretation and reinterpretation (Salmon and Riessman, 2013). Authors vary in the extent to which they are explicit about the analysis stage of narrative research (Polkinghorne, 2007). Some authors say little about the process of analysis and the



epistemological claims that are made (Polkinghorne, 2007). Other authors give a clear indication of how they analysed their narrative data, and in some instances claim, ‘that their analytical techniques or procedures provide ... more definitive answer[s]’ (Merrill and West, 2009:129). There might also be the temptation to ‘standardize’ analytical practices simply to seek to ‘legitimize findings’ (Mello, 2002:234).

Mello (2002) suggests that openness enhances readers’ ability to judge the quality of the work. Creswell (2013) recognises the challenges of qualitative work; research that is absent of firm guidelines and ways in which the work might be judged once it is complete. Given a multiplicity of approaches Merrill and West (2009) argue that it is important to ‘read about, experiment and decide on an appropriate approach for you’ (Merrill and West, 2009:129). Accordingly, I undertook a comprehensive review of the analytical approaches to narrative research. I engaged with the corpus of literature on narrative enquiry and developed a good understanding of the field.

Several narrative scholars propose multiple approaches to analysis using a variety of analytical lens or perspectives (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000; Mello, 2002). From my review of the narrative methodological literature I identified various perspectives that had utility in my analysis, first individual author’s perspectives were collated (table 2 appendix 5) from this I developed summary table of analytical themes, modes of narrative analysis, and the implications for mindful analysis (see table 3 appendix 6).

My first stage of formal analysis was to listen to audio recordings, transcribe, and re-read transcripts on multiple occasions (Mello, 2002; Jacobs et al., 2010). Given my contention that narratives are coproduced I included both my voice and the participant voice in transcripts (Chase, 2005; Riesman, 2008) and interview transcriptions were returned to participants for checking. For each transcript I used pro-forma to allow space to identify themes, issues, and to make notes, memos, and observations of

significant issues (Merrill and West, 2009; Creswell, 2013; Squire, 2013). I was mindful of Mello's (2002) contention of the need to retain more holistic approaches to narrative analysis. Narratives that are divided beyond the natural conversation means that 'we run the danger of diminishing or misinterpreting the nature of the narrative as a *whole*, (Mello, 2002:235 original emphasis).

Overall, nearly 30 hours of interviews over two years generated over 330,000 words of data. I had produced thick and rich data sets. I felt 'daunted' and at times overwhelmed by the data (McCormack, 2000; Merrill and West, 2009). Mello's perspective of retaining 'whole' narratives was problematic in practice with 30 interviews, with 15 people, and presenting coherent discussion of findings, which inevitably leads to the presentation of only partial narratives that illustrate key issues.

Overall my analysis is driven by the research questions I set out to explore. I therefore broadly took an experience-centred, and sociocultural-orientated approach, to thematic analysis (Elliott 2005; Riessman, 2008; Merrill and West, 2009; Squire, 2013) which was conceptually underpinned by Bourdieusian theoretical analysis. The focus of thematic analysis is concerned with the content of the narrative experience (Riessman 2008), and to a lesser extent 'how' and why the narrative is expressed (Riessman, 2008).

Riessman (2008) highlights that thematic analysis can attend only to macro issues, so I was mindful of the local context and the *place* as "the specific concrete, physical and topological boundaries of place or sequences of places where the inquiry and events [have] take[n] place" (Connelly and Clandinin, 2006:480). The comparative approach to narratives took account of the local 'institutional context' and (Gubrium and Holstein, 1998) and physical infrastructure of the university, SFC and FEC. The processes of analysis also considered issues of time and temporal ordering, events, epiphanies,

turning points, periods of transitions, and academic and social transformations. The broad semi-structured approach helped me to manage the data into broad categories around family background and previous education, HE provider and course choices, HE experiences, and future plans. Each conversation followed this broad trajectory.

Analysis is a dynamic process and is not just about sitting down to ‘do analysis’, thinking about the data becomes immersive and I became deeply engaged with the narrative data (Merrill and West, 2009). To capture reflective and analytical thinking away from the formal time I set aside for the project I used the voice memo on my iPhone in order to capture my thoughts when they occurred, so these were recorded and reflected upon throughout the sense making process.

The final interpretative stages of my narrative research examine cross comparisons of individual stories in order to highlight similarity and difference (Chase, 2005; Mello, 2002; Merrill and West, 2009; Riessman, 2008). Narratives of HE were considered across the three settings, to develop a ‘layered understanding of the data’ and ‘to be more inclusive of multiple perspectives’ within settings (Mello, 2002:238). Appendix 7.1 gives a partial example of the template I used for individual and cross-case analysis. I used Microsoft Excel and it is not possible to effectively reproduce this very large table in paper form. Appendix 7.1 reproduces the text from the Excel documents as readable exemplar of Appendix 7.

### **3.9 Bourdieu: Social conditions - Individual to collective and ‘generalisability’**

Narrative approaches can provide powerful ways to connect individual stories to wider political and cultural agendas and therefore creates a bridge between macro policy contexts to individuals’ experiences (Chase, 2005; Clandinin and Connelly, 2006; Mello, 2002). Riessman (2008) and Merrill and West (2009:30) both cite the feminist

dictum: ‘the personal is political’ which played a key role in the development of narrative enquiry. ‘[A]ny narrative is significant because it embodies – and gives us insight into – what is possible and intelligible within a specific social context’ (Chase, 2005:667).

Just because narrative approaches interrogate cases (rather than population-based samples) does not mean results cannot be generalized. But inference is of a different kind. Generalizing from a sample to the entire population is the statistical approach; case study involves “generalisation to theoretical propositions,” which are, to some degree, transferable’ (Riessman, 2008:13).

Narratives of HE experiences are directly affected by policy changes where lived experiences have the potential to shine a light on UK higher education. Narratives need not therefore be representative, they can be illustrative, and offer insight into the experiences of FiF students and highlight the implications for policy and practice.

### **3.10 ‘Validity’**

Validity is a contentious topic in narrative research and is influenced by the ontological and epistemological positions of narrative enquirers. There is a total avoidance of the topic by some writers. Others address this but reject the natural scientific, post-positive framing of both validity and reliability as statistically derived terms (Merrill and West, 2009) and feel the term is at odds with qualitative enquiry (Elliot, 2005). Questions of validity are rooted ontologically and epistemologically; my position of ‘constructionism drives home unambiguously that there is *no* true or valid interpretations’ (Crotty, 1998:47). Polkinghorne (2007: 474) and Merrill and West (2009:164) helpfully refer to the ‘Latin root of valid – validus – [which] means strong, powerful and effective’. Polkinghorne (2007) contends that validity in narrative research can be achieved by identifying common experiences across several cases and that ‘validity is a function of

intersubjective judgment dependent upon the consensus in the community'. He also points to the 'general notion that judgments about the validity of a knowledge claim depend on the force and soundness of the argument in support of the claim' (Polkinghorne, 2007:474), and 'what counts as acceptable evidence and reasoned argument' (Polkinghorne, 2007:475). The community here may be the community of narrative enquirers or qualitative researchers, or the community of FiF students, or academics who study HE students' experiences.

I can confidently claim to 'know something' about the higher education experiences of FiF students' study, 'without claiming to know everything' (Richardson and St. Pierre, 2005:961). My stance is that 'readers are asked to make judgments on whether or not the evidence and argument convinces them at the level of plausibility, credibleness, or trustworthiness of the claim' (Polkinghorne 2007:477).

Silverman and Marvasti (2008:295) posit that research is of good quality when it satisfies the following criteria: it thinks theoretically through and with data; it develops empirically sound, reliable, and valid findings; it uses methods that are demonstrably appropriate to the research problem; and where possible, it contributes to practice and policy. It should be clear from my methodological discussion above that I consider that my approach to narrative study attends to all these features.

The methodological approach outlined above was used to answer the three research questions.

1. What factors influence first generation students' HE choices?
2. What do students' value about their higher education experiences and what influences these experiences?
3. What are the implications of these two questions for the policy and practices of higher education and higher education institutions?

These research questions are used to structure the discussion of the thesis over the following three chapters. In these discussions I draw together issues from across all 15 narrative accounts to consider the issues for policy and practice. I provide summaries of the narrative of individual participants in the appendix 8. I recognise the limitations of such an approach. I use vignettes from research participants to illustrate key issues throughout chapters 4 and 5.

## **4.0 Chapter 4: What factors influenced FiF students' HE choices?**

All students had one- or two-years' experience in HE when they were first interviewed.

In responding to the opening interview question, 'how did you come to be a student here?' participants' narratives connected their pasts, which influenced their HE choice (discussed below), with their current HE experiences, and to their future plans (discussed in chapter 5).

In analysing FiF students' narratives there was clear evidence of complex, interrelated, and diverse influences (both conscious and unconscious), which shaped HE choices. In order to manage this complexity, I created a heuristic diagram (figure 2 below). It is based upon the doxa of the HE field to outline an 'ideal type' of an imagined unhindered path to HE followed by 'advantaged students'. This stands in contrast to the disadvantaged experiences of FiF students in this study. The heuristic diagram has a temporal ordering to understand influences at specific stages of students' lives and journeys to HE, which includes influences and milestones in the UCAS application process (UCAS, 2018b). The stages consider the influence of:

- i. family
- ii. primary and secondary school experiences
- iii. approaches to HE planning in Year 12
- iv. approaches to HE planning in Year 13
- v. transitions from school/college to HE (this stage can include extended breaks from study).

The heuristic is a useful way to highlight how trajectories are established from an early age and demonstrates how FiF students planning lags behind particular milestones associated with smooth taken-for-granted trajectories of advantaged students. In doing

so, it highlights the multiple ways in which FiF students' disadvantage becomes compounded through all five stages in the diagram. The heuristic is used only for illustrative purposes, it is not applied in a linear sense through the discussion of the chapter, although it will be evident to the reader the stages under which the issues discussed would fall.

I provide a summary of issues that individual students *explicitly* said influenced their HE choice and their approaches to planning in appendix 9 (Table 4). The claims below are made on the basis that these were central to FiF students' narratives of choice. I have not been able to cover all issues that all students raised, the analysis inevitably focusses upon particular ones.

The chapter is organised in the following thematic sections.

1. Family doxa, expectations for education and work.
2. School experiences and influences.
3. The significance of 'place', mobility / immobility and emotional and practical connections to home.

I sign-post implications from each section in short highlighted sections. These are drawn together in chapter 6 to consider issues for policy and practice.



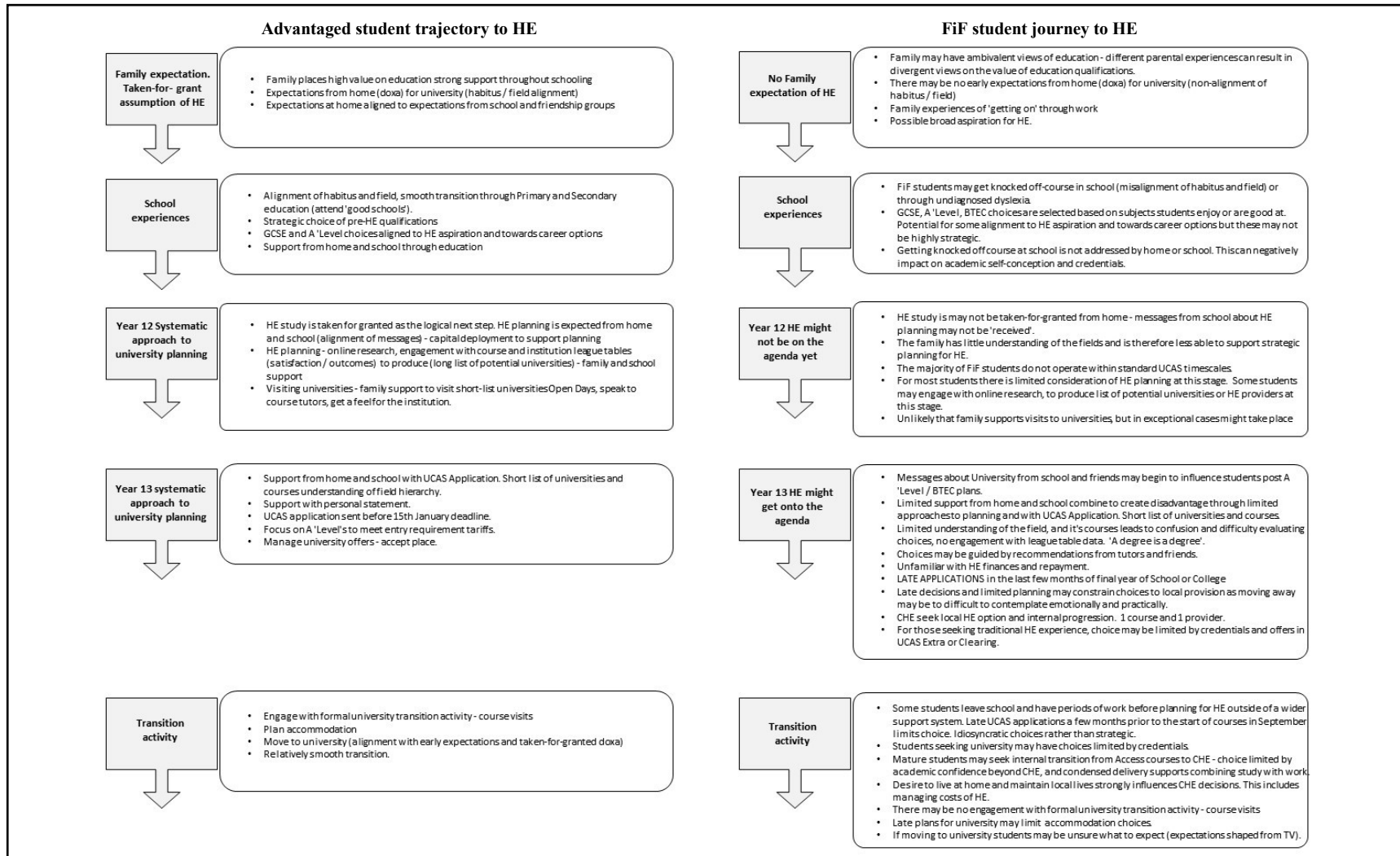


Figure 2 Heuristic diagram of advantaged student trajectory to HE (left) in comparison to FiF students journey to HE (right).



## **4.1. Family Influence: expectations of education and work**

In the sections below, I illustrate how FiF students' family had profound influences upon them. Burke (2016) argues that the family has the biggest impact on shaping expectation and support for HE, and this study adds weight to support this contention. The first section (4.1.1 below) outlines how students' narratives were underpinned by a family doxa related to 'work' and the relative value of education. Work was prioritised in some families over formal education, and HE was a transgression from 'getting on' *through work*. The second section (4.1.2 below) highlights how some families valued the transformative potential of HE, and how a new discourse emerged that HE was a '*necessary investment*' for employment (Murphy, 2005) (see section 4.1.4). Given the limited familial experience of HE, the support that families could provide was emotional and practical, rather than tactical.

### **4.1.1 The influence of family doxa: "*Why would you kind of effectively waste your time [at university]?"***

All FiF students in the study connected HE qualifications to future careers either in a broad sense, or through clearly defined career ambitions (see section 4.1.4). Some students in the study illuminated how a strong 'work ethic' had historically overridden a focus on education in their family. As Stephanie explained,

I came from a family who didn't particularly believe in education at all. I certainly wasn't encouraged to go to school and didn't go very much... I came from a family who really believed that ... you went out and worked. You didn't necessarily need to have any academic qualifications...to do that (Stephanie, FEC).

Students' had complex narratives of work and education embodied in habitus. A significant body of research identifies the unconscious influence of social class on HE study (Burke, 2016; Reay, 1998, 2004; Reay et al., 2001; 2005; 2009). Stephanie, a mature student, demonstrated an awareness of class-consciousness related to work and education.

[F]unctionally ... as far as she [mother] was concerned anything above that, she couldn't really see the importance of it... they were both...manual workers...from their background it would have been stepping out of class...to...think that I could educate myself beyond what was expected of me (Stephanie, FEC).

Kate and Daisy also shared Stephanie's understanding that HE study was a 'transgression' from family expectation (Byrom and Lightfoot, 2012). Stephanie's reflexivity was concerned with the legacy from her family history. On the other hand, Kate and Daisy were focussed on recent emotional challenges they faced, and their resilience in taking HE qualifications in the face of family disapproval.

I was...nervous... about what my mum would think...she is not a big fan of university, she is...‘build your career through your job’...which...is where my sister gets it from. I've always been a bit of a loose cannon (Kate, FEC).

[N]either of them went [to university], and both of them...said...“why don't you do what we [mum and dad] and your brother's done...get a job...we've worked hard, we've got this”. My brother...went straight into a job after college, and he seemed to do really well...Yeah, like 'why would you kind of effectively waste your time [at university] when we've succeeded and done well from not going' (Daisy, University).

This is illustrative of how familial experience shapes horizons of expectation that 'reveal dispositions of the habitus' (Reed-Danahay, 2005:32, cited by Barrett, 2015:6) with parents' taken-for-granted expectations of non-participation evidenced in references to siblings who had conformed to familial doxa. Kate and Daisy had to overcome such familial resistance to HE which contrasted with other FiF students who were more actively supported and encouraged by their parents (see 4.1.2 below).

It is analytically superficial to suggest that some families in the study simply do not value education. Tom said,

I didn't disclose much information with them [parents] on what I do, but yeah, they were pretty happy with it [HE participation in the SFC]. Mum's probably more happy with it than dad, I don't think dad takes much attention. So yeah, mum's pretty happy with it. All of the rest of the family, I think I was the first one in my family in general actually,

not only the close family, to go to Uni... well do a degree. Yeah they were pretty pleased with it. They don't take a massive invested interest. I mean he's [father is] not particularly academic himself, so I don't know if that maybe contributes to him not having such a vested interest in my education but, yeah, he's not too bothered about what I do educationally, so he won't necessarily ask how I'm doing. Mum will, but dad won't (Tom, SFC).

Atkinson (2011, citing Bourdieu, 1998) argues that families can operate as a 'field', and therefore parents can hold incongruent and ambivalent views towards education. Whilst familial expectations for education and work can strongly influence choice, the agentic elements of habitus allow adaption, growth, and new trajectories for HE (Bourdieu, 1990; Reay, 2004).

The implications from this section are that HE trajectories are deeply historically rooted and non-participation in HE is taken-for-granted within some families. Students become disadvantaged due to a misalignment between habitus and field. Whilst overt HE planning does not start until students reach the age of 16-18 years old, in Years 12 and 13, the roots of these decisions are deeply entwined in family history.

#### **4.1.2 Potential for Transformations: “*So what are you going to do with your life?*”**

Bourdieu contended that one may “refus[e] what one is refused” and HE may be seen as “not for the likes of us” (Bourdieu 1984:471). However, some families valued FiF status as a significant symbolic achievement.

They had always mentioned it [university] ...it's...a recurring thing... parents want their kids to do better...they want more opportunities than they had...I heard [from a BTEC Tutor]...I was eligible [for a university course]...brilliant and obviously, if I was eligible to do it, [I] might as well do it.

They [parents] was buzzing for me,...I actually am the first in the whole family *ever* to do it [HE], [it's] a *big* thing...I...was excited...my dad was...buzzing, telling his mates because, with all of his group of mates, I was the first to go to university...They were so happy for me (Student X, University [original emphasis]).

The family pride through the FiF status was common across many of the students' narratives. This confirms what others have found that despite not having direct experience of HE, FiF students' parents may still value HE (Bradley, 2015; Wong, 2018), and its potential for intergenerational transformation (Byrom and Lightfoot, 2012), social mobility (Loveday, 2015), and for a better life for their children (Threadgold et al., 2018).

HE was perceived to offer personal and employment transformations. However, Burke (2016) argues that there is a lack of sophisticated understanding of HE by (working class) FiF students and families that is necessary to support social mobility or graduate employment. This was evident in a watershed moment Daniel shared with his father after he had left school and worked for two years in retail.

[W]e had a beer ...he ... went 'so what are you going to do with your life?' ... "You've not progressed at work ... you're kind of stuck" ... "what do you want to do in life?"... "you're a really good writer, be a journalist"... "you've got an hour, find me a journalism course that you like"... It was just on my mind for a few days...God, if I apply for Uni I've got to go get all my A Levels from school... and get references...a lot of hassle...I had a really bad day at work...got home and I thought 'do you know what, I'm going on UCAS'...my brother...was going ...travelling [and I'd] have the house [we shared] on my own or [need to] find someone to live with, or...move out'. 'Oh God, okay'...I've got no friends to live with because they're all at Uni ... I'll have to go to Uni then won't I (Daniel, University).

Daniel clearly had several emotional and practical issues at play. The 'push' from his father related to a grand narrative of a lack of success in work and a belief that education might ameliorate this (see section 4.1.4 below). These examples capture the idiosyncratic nature of decision making. Choice was influenced not by careful strategy but by a limited understanding of the field. The significant emotional intervention from Daniel's father was not replicated with any meaningful practical or emotional support in selecting a course or a university.

The implications are that families and students value HE symbolically for the FiF status, and for its alignment with future employment (see 3.1.4). However, this is may be in a general sense as they may have limited understanding of the field and choice become restricted by a lack of field sophisticated knowledge. Instead choices are based more on feelings and assumptions about HE rather than being rooted in their own, absent, experience of HE.

#### **4.1.3 Support from Family and Friends: “*It makes no sense to us, so thanks!*”**

The literature recognises that there is less, ‘active planning’ with university choice for FiF students (Luzeckyj et al., 2017; Reay, 1998; Reay et al., 2001; 2005; 2009). Due to a lack of familial experience of HE, parents are unable to guide students and therefore all FiF participants are in a ‘position of educational disadvantage’ (Luzeckyj et al., 2017:1237).

Hannah found that her lack of familiarity with the language of HE made planning confusing and difficult.

They [parents] left me to look at the courses on my own...I am the first one to go to university ... so we didn’t really know how it worked. My aunty [a university lecturer] would reel it off, but we’d be like “it makes no sense to us, so thanks”. [C]hoosing the courses was difficult because there are a lot of courses out there...BEd now just sounds like ah, BEd/BA! That is just normal talk isn’t it here [at university]. But when you’re in college, you have *no* clue what you’re on about (Hannah, University [original emphasis]).

Slack et al. (2014) identifies the importance of trusted ‘hot knowledge’ from close personal contacts. It might be anticipated that having a family member with insider-knowledge would provide a social capital advantage. However, Hannah’s experience demonstrates that the accumulation of cultural capital cannot be delegated or ‘outsourced’ (Bourdieu, 1986). Hannah’s cultural capital came from her immediate nuclear family and she did not have a mastery of the HE discourse (Bourdieu et al., 1994).

Student X also demonstrated how a lack of familiarity with the field can make it difficult to make informed choices.

I don't know if I'm right ... obviously, with a university with...20,000 people you think, 'wow' it's not really that hard to get into...anyone can get into the university...you're just a number. But this one, obviously has a few thousand people... I like the sort of cohesion... with the lecturers and the students... [it's] a bit more personal (Student X, University).

Student X misunderstood university reputations and size and his concerns were emotionally driven about fitting in, and the trusted 'hot knowledge' from his friends was an important source of information, as he explained.

I had a few friends that went to [university], and they was like 'yeah [names university] is such a great university, like socialising, brilliant, education, brilliant, nice lecturers' things like that. I was like 'ah fantastic', that's the environment I want to be in (Student X, University).

Against a back-drop of historical non-participation in HE, friends become a significant source of influence for FiF students' transition to HE (Smyth and Banks, 2012). Student X supplemented information from his friends and tutor with a visit to the university to get a 'feel' for the institution and to get 'warm knowledge' from lecturers (Slack et al. et al., 2014).

Other students did not have support networks from friends or family to call upon, so just conducted basic online research.

I did look online, looked on UCAS and all the different places you can go to, and looked on some of the websites. I didn't actually visit any of the unis (Kate, FEC).

I'd never been to view the Uni; I didn't go to any open days. I looked at a photo or something, and I just went "right, I'm going to go for it" (Daniel, University).

Kate and Daniel were quite typical of students who looked online as part of the planning process. Kate was already familiar with the local FEC. Daniel, however, was atypical of



students in the study in not visiting the university before enrolling to get a ‘feel for it’.

Daisy was more typical in visiting universities since she was moving away, and she explained why this was important to her and her family.

I came down with my parents once ... they loved it...I'd been to look around another university...they [said] “if you're going to go somewhere that other university wasn't for you”. Then they'd come round here... it's all quite modern, especially the sports clinic... [parents said] “oh it's great; we love it here” (Daisy, University).

Getting a ‘feel’ for the ‘place’ was significant. A sense of social and academic fit was on an emotional level, demonstrating the unconscious nature of habitus and institution alignment.

The implications from this section revolve around students’ limited understanding of the field. Decisions were based upon ‘feelings’ of fit, and trusted knowledge from friends, rather than a clear strategy of evaluating the institutions. Students were confused by the field and were unsure how to select courses or institutions when the language of the field was beyond their existing experience. It adds further weight to challenge the notion that HE choices are informed (in a conventional sense of HE planning).

#### **4.1.4 HE and employment: “*Everyone here seems to have a degree*”.**

As noted in sections above, ‘work’ was a key influence on students. Work was aligned to family doxa and the hegemonic contemporary policy discourse that strongly connects HE and employment (Browne, 2010; Christie, 2009).

For all the mature students in this study, HE was closely connected to career progression or change. Some mature students had experienced frustration, a lack of fulfilment, or stalled career progression. HE was seen as a positive step to transform their circumstance.

I've never found it difficult to find employment. However, I realised I was never going to be able to sort of step any further without a piece of paper that said I had some formal academic qualification (Stephanie, FEC).

Jessica had taken a role working in the SFC and experienced a deficit discourse because of not having a degree.

Everyone here seems to have a degree. I know the first time someone asked me 'Oh where did you do your degree then?' and I had to say 'I don't have a degree', I felt like 'oh', I felt a little bit, I don't know what the feeling would be but, you know. Maybe, yeah, the credibility that I was maybe, not as equal, or, you know, or, their response '*Oh you've not done a degree!*', that sort of thing... and I felt like oh, now I feel like the odd one out and I don't have that. So that part of me was like '*well now I must do a degree*' (Jessica, SFC [original emphasis]).

Jessica sought alignment with the institutional doxa within the taken-for-granted field of education and was aware of how it might increase her earning potential.

I want to be able to provide for my children. I want my children to be able to go to university if they want to one day and I want to be able to support them to buy their first house. So, it's a lot about [that], sometimes it's about having what you didn't have and giving that to your own children as well. So, you know, being able to do as much for my own children so they have a good life (Jessica, SFC).

The mature students' return to study had an instrumental dimension aligned to careers progression and earning potential. There was also a significant emotional dimension to their return to study which cannot be underplayed. For Stephanie and others who experienced challenges, the return to education was a 'second chance' (see 4.2.1 below and chapter 5 'transformations'), and for Jessica this was to be held in equal esteem with her colleagues.

The choice of HEI was less significant than the symbolic act of pursuing a HE qualification and returning to education, Stephanie discussing how studying HE was 'just for me' (See chapter 5). There was a lack of detailed understanding of courses and institutions with the hierarchy of the HE field, and the implications for social mobility

(Loveday, 2015) or graduate employment, (Burke, 2016) at the point courses and HE providers were selected (see chapter 5).

For younger students in the study, HE was in all cases tied to career aspirations, either tightly, or loosely, and this directly related to the subjects students chose to study. There was recognition by students, and some families, that that ‘times had changed’. HE qualifications had become ubiquitous and a ‘necessary investment’ (Murphy, 2005:41). Daniel and his father exemplify this issue.

[D]ad left school ... straight into [work] ... He's one of the head managers...[he] worked his way from the bottom to the top. I used to say, “You haven't got an O' Level, look at you now”, and he would say “never use me as an example, you'll never do what I did. Those days are gone, and you can do better than what I do” (Daniel, University).

In part, this understanding is related to a recognition of the growth in mass HE (Mount and Bélanger, 2004), the decline in traditional industry, and an awareness of the growing ‘knowledge economy’ (Brennan et al., 2008; Olssen, 2006). Modernity creates a ‘risk society’ (Beck, 1992) full of uncertainty in established social structures and the future feels less stable or predictable. I consider that students and their families thought that pursuing HE qualifications was one way to manage risk and boost employment prospects, as without them you might get ‘left behind’ (Bauman, 2005; Smilde, 2010). Participants’ narratives connected taken-for-granted familial beliefs of ‘working your way up’ with the contemporary discourse that a degree qualification is ‘useful in the labour market’ (Jarvis, 2000:55). Increasingly employers aimed roles at graduates who required specialist knowledge and professional status. Hannah felt HE was her only pathway to achieving teacher status.

Hannah        If I didn't have to come to uni and I could still teach, if I could have done an apprenticeship in teaching, I would have done that.

Phil             Would you?

Hannah        Yes, I would have definitely done that. Yes, I have always said that all along. Uni was just, I have to do it to teach.

The study demonstrates how students appear to have internalised the broader political and economic discourse that HE qualifications were the only option for professional employment (CBI/NUS, 2011; Christie 2009; Parry et al., 2012). The doxa of work, economic success and security from work means that *illusio* is drawn to HE credentials that dominate employment; trying to ‘get in’ or ‘keep up’ is ‘*illusio* acting sensibly’ (Colley, 2014).

Christie (2009:128) argues that ‘young people in twenty-first-century Britain have internalised policy assumptions about the importance of higher education for financial success, at the expense of any awareness of the dangers of an overcrowded graduate labour market’. Daisy’s family’s resistance to HE appears to recognise this.

They [family] interview people ... for jobs. “Oh yeah they've got a degree, but they've got no experience, so they're still going to start at the bottom”. [M]y brother ... knows people that have been to university and can't get a job. I was like “but at the end of the day...when you were little, did you want to be in recruitment when you were older? No you didn't”. Or I said to my mum “did you want to be in that when you were older?” [she said] “No, but we had no choice”, and I was like “well we've *got* a choice now, so why would you *not* choose what you want to do?” (Daisy, University [original emphasis]).

Daisy was the only student whose family expressed concern over the investment in HE qualifications. Their concern was rejected by Daisy and, as I will show in chapter 5, evidence from this study suggests that education is valued in more complex and nuanced ways than simply a direct link to employment. Students like Daisy were interested in HE *as* a new educational *and* social experience and ‘*being*’ a university student was important to her (Christie, 2009) (see discussion below and chapter 5).

The implication is that students value a degree symbolically, and specifically for employment. The implication for policy and practice is that students make decisions that are not well informed, and which are emotional rather than purely strategic. Few

engaged in programmes that would lead directly to professional occupations with clearly defined professional career structures (discussed in chapter 5). HE was seen as a necessary investment because of limited alternatives or limited pathways into professions and careers.

## **4.2. Influences of schools: Confidence, credentials and shaping expectations of choice**

After the family, schools and colleges have the next biggest influence on HE choices and transitions (Briggs, Clark and Hall, 2012). Students' prior education experiences are complex and influenced them in multiple ways. The first section below (4.2.1) considers how students in the study explained the multiple ways they got 'knocked off course' in education. The second section (4.2.2) considers the specific influences schools and colleges had with HE planning during years 12 and 13. In many cases they highlight the limitations from schools in 'supporting' HE transitions of FiF students.

### **4.2.1 Getting knocked off course at school: *"I kind of closed off... I'd given up on the [education] system"***

Eight out of the 15 student narratives had elements of 'getting knocked off course' in education. This affected students' academic identity, confidence, qualifications, and sense of 'fit' in education, which impacted on aspirations and expectations for HE. As Thredgold et al., (2018:21) observe, '[t]rajectories in HE often begin with disadvantage at secondary school level, which then affects how the individual student perceives, makes sense of and acts upon any opportunities, choices and decisions that they are presented with in HE and beyond'. Getting knocked off course impacted students' perception of choice either through them selecting institutions for 'the likes of us' (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990:116); or 'not for the likes of me' (Maton, 2012), or not securing a place on first-choice courses or institutions.

Four students had dyslexia which was not identified during compulsory education. For the mature students, dyslexia had a significant negative impact, as Stephanie and Roger explained.

I've actually been diagnosed with dyslexia since I started the course ... as an adult, when you really start to unpick that, that was probably all connected with me not going to school. I probably found it really hard, didn't know why ... at the time ... it was all gobbledegook to me. My mum was completely dyslexic ... as soon as I could read and write, which I don't think I could do until quite late, but as soon as I could read and write, and letters would drop through the door, and I could help my mum read them, I was 'educated' (Stephanie, FEC).

The first year ... I was ... screened and diagnosed with dyslexia... my mum's ... severely dyslexic and my mum and dad split up when I was young ... there was a lot of stuff going on, I'm not using it as an excuse, but I ... obviously ... needed support. I wasn't picked up ... at school, dyslexia ... my life at home ... I kind of closed off ... I'd given up on the [education] system (Roger, SFC).

Roger described how he felt like he was seen as 'the stupid one' or 'the thick one' at school. Similarly, Yvonne said her sister would call her 'thick' during childhood arguments. These issues had a profound emotional impact upon academic identity and confidence. It was only upon returning to education as adults that their dyslexia was identified and students finally got the support they needed. They engaged reflexively in understanding their previous challenges, providing a sense of closure and self-understanding, coupled with new potential and strong motivation within the field of education; yet 'doubt' persisted (see below and chapter 5).

Other students identified the challenges and emotional energy required to fit into the social and academic demands of school.

I think it was at primary school I was sort of the big fish in a small pond. I sort of was one of the cleverest, I was captain of all the sports teams, and then I went there [Grammar School] and thought 'Oh God', and it was a big jump where everyone was the big fish as well ... You're through a sort of 'test of the best' ... I think it was a bit of a culture shock... like a rabbit in the headlights ... Year 8 ... I hit sort of puberty,

that was when it went downhill. I got 'the attitude'... I would never cause problems ... mine was more to try and be a bit of a smart ass ...

... [I] got my first detention, it wasn't the end of the world ... I think I failed a maths test ... something ridiculous ... I went home, and I was like 'Oh God, I've got to tell my parents' ... [dad said] 'I don't care, it's your life' sort of, you know. Because he sort of left school when he was sixteen and didn't leave with GCSEs or O Levels or whatever it was back then (Daniel, University).

Grammar Schools are associated with educational advantage (Ball, 2003; 2006) but this was not Daniel's experience. As noted previously, Daniel's father strongly encouraged university and Daniel took the 11-plus. However, the family had an ambivalent relationship with education and work. Daniel explained that his mother left school with few qualifications and it was not until she was in her thirties that she 'found' her 'career'. "She loves what she does, but she says "don't ask me about life ... I didn't know what I wanted to do". So, they are very much sort of 'you have to find it on your own [path]' (Daniel, University student). Daniel was a second-generation Grammar School student, yet there was a lack of social and cultural alignment between the high academic expectations of the school and the value the family placed on independence.

Donald similarly identified a struggle to fit in at school.

I didn't do very well on my GCSEs...I wasn't mature enough ... [I] was a 'lad'... interested in playing football more than doing my studies ... My dad was in the army, and we lived in Germany ... we travelled around quite a bit, so I was never really settled...I first went to school in [England] in Year 8 ... I found it quite hard to fit in because I was just literally a different child to someone from Devon...brought up in the whole [English] school system... I probably acted up a little bit more socially ... that ... had a bearing on me not doing so well on the academic side (Donald, FEC).

It might be just coincidental that both Daniel and Donald identified Year 8 when they felt their challenges of fitting in started. There was an overall feeling of being a fish out of water (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992). 'Fitting in' at school and academic achievement are interrelated, they are two sides of the same coin and both Daniel and

Donald's illusive was drawn to socially fitting in. Prioritising 'the social', over 'the academic' domains of the field had negative consequences that created negative trajectories (Chapter 5 considers how this was also evident in HE study).

The challenges with 'fit' demonstrates the problematic nature of unconscious misalignment between family and institutional doxa. This is a key implication for policy and practice. Students' families did not prioritise educational success and academic 'underperformance' was not recognised as an 'issue' by schools or parents (due to parental ambivalence through their own experiences). It could be argued that these are acts of symbolic violence by schools by reinforcing lower expectations.

Even students who fitted in well academically and socially could be knocked off course. Daisy said that she enjoyed school, 'it's a great laugh, great bunch of friends, great teachers. Yeah I would've said I enjoyed it' (Daisy, University). She experienced a physical injury sustained playing football, this affected her emotionally and negatively impacted upon her education.

I got very low about it because ... [of] a sports injury, but you think your life's over ... I was doing A Levels at the time and I was doing A Level PE and ... I couldn't do the practical side of it ... so I ended up quitting A Level PE. I was like 'I don't want to do it'. I was very low about it (Daisy, University).

Students in the study identified how getting knocked off course negatively impacted on their grades, which later limited the courses and institutions they could access. Daisy and Daniel explained that,

I initially wanted to get ... a lot higher [grades] to go to the different Unis I guess. I mean I did want to do Physio at [names university], but I didn't have the grades to do it (Daisy, University).

[H]alfway through [Sixth Form] ... I thought 'I don't want to go to Uni', I sort of did the classic give up on your A Levels, all your results plummet and then I didn't really think about it ... I got three Ds at A Level so I didn't think I was going to have a chance of getting in [to



university] ... I think ... [UCAS] just says 'unsuccessful' ... because of grades and UCAS point requirements ... four [universities] said "No" ... then one day, I think it was an email came up and went 'Update on your UCAS' ... It was Conditional...it was hard because I never knew what 'Conditional' was ... what does that mean? Does that mean I'm offered a place? ... I was like 'I don't know what's happening' ...it said "the terms of your conditions" ... 'send us a copy of your A Levels'. ... 'What, that's it?!' So, I was like 'I'm 'in' pretty much aren't I?!' (Daniel, University).

Daisy and Daniel's experiences exemplify how challenges at school or college can disrupt a smooth transition to HE. Five of the younger group of students in the study took a break of at least a year between finishing school and starting HE (4 from the university, and one from the SFC). With the exception of Will, who worked for Camp America, the students had not taken a 'gap year' for cultural experiences. Hannah was the only student whose deferral was tactical and strategic. She worked as a teaching assistant in a school having secured, and then deferred, a place at University on a Teacher Training degree. The other students worked in low paid and low skill employment. As a consequence of this they made late applications to HE.

[D]uring the year [out] I just did nothing, worked a bit, got a bit of money and then it was like last minute. I was like 'oh actually, I don't want to get stuck like this' ... I found [names current university], and I was like 'oh yeah okay that sounds good' ... I just applied and then said to mum 'oh yeah I've applied, got accepted' (Daisy, University).

Jake had initially applied to several different universities before deciding he wanted a year out.

I missed the deadline to apply... I literally got my place in June/July here [SFC] ... It was a bit like 'I'd better do something quick, I don't want to spend another year working; I just want to get it [HE] done now' ... do I really want to be doing another year of just working, or do I just want to kick start my career? ... [T]ime just flew by that year (Jake, SFC).

HE offered the potential to avoid 'getting stuck' in 'temporary' employment and to get 'back on track'. The consequence of being outside of the support network of school or college meant students made rushed or 'late' applications in the UCAS

cycle and engaged in relatively little planning. There might be an advantage in applying for HE as part of the institutional rhythm of annual UCAS cycle, however, as students demonstrate (below), the support from Schools and Colleges could be quite limited.

There are clear implications in the multiple ways that students can get ‘knocked off-track’. Schools and parents may not identify academic underperformance as an issue and this then inscribes habitus and academic self-conception. There can be significant damaging effects on academic confidence and credentials. Dyslexia can have lasting impacts for mature students throughout their life course. Leaving school without clear plans, taking gap years and being outside of education can result in students having less support than they would in school, and HE decisions can be taken at short notice, which limits choice.

#### **4.2.2 The role of schools and colleges: “*My tutor wasn’t very good*”.**

The UCAS application process officially opens in September, a whole year before students intend to start HE study (UCAS, 2018b). In order to make informed choices, planning for University normally takes place during the first year of A‘Level and BTEC in order to meet the first annual UCAS deadline of 15<sup>th</sup> January each year (UCAS, 2018b). Within a standard application cycle, individual HE applications are submitted 9 months in advance of the start of HE courses. As a result of the ‘widening participation agenda’ there is a greater demographic diversity in students seeking progression to HE. However, the students in the study demonstrate that there does not appear to be a corresponding diversity in the ways in which students are supported by schools or colleges if they are not already on a clear trajectory to university.

Daniel and Tom both attended ‘good schools’ with strong academic reputations and pedigrees of sending students to ‘good universities’. The schools were well versed in

the UCAS processes and timescales. Even so, as Tom and Daniel explain below they felt overlooked as they had not declared a strong interest in HE.

[I was n]ever really [thinking about university]. I knew that was the natural progression obviously from being here, but it never really was something that came in to my mind until probably about three months before the end of the last year of college (Tom, SFC).

[I]t was sort of halfway through the year ... all my friends had applied [to university] ... I still didn't have a clue ... there was no one really there [in school] that sort of said to me 'here's what you should do', there was no real help ... I was hung out to dry ... [the school] just care about the results and looking on the board [league tables]. They didn't completely disregard me, but those that wanted to go to the Russell Group Unis, they sort of got a *lot* more effort (Daniel, University [original emphasis]).

Tom made a late HE application to his existing SFC, and Daniel did not apply for university until two years after he left school. He had worked part-time in retail until his father's intervention (discussed above). Despite Daniel's clear academic ability, he was 'cooled out' from the idea that university, or Russell Group universities, were not for the 'likes of him' (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990).

The literature on HE transitions recognises the interplay of schools/colleges and expectations, non-expectations for HE (Briggs, Clark, and Hall, 2012). The issue is more complex than simply schools not supporting students who are seemingly not interested in HE. Hannah was a very successful student who clearly expressed a desire to become a teacher. As identified above, she was not conversant in the 'linguistic capital' of HE (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990:116) and the school did not help her manage this. She said,

My tutor wasn't very good. He wrote a really good personal statement for me but apart from that, not a lot of [help]. I would have got more help at school, not for uni, but career-wise ... College was just rock up, do that (Hannah, University).

Hannah had very good credentials, so it was not a case of her not being supported due to a perceived lack of ability, or not having enough UCAS points, or academic confidence. It seemed the tutor was either unfamiliar with the field or more focussed upon the day-to-day requirements of the current course. Somewhat surprisingly, there were no examples where students identified good levels of support and guidance, or significant support from schools or colleges. There was perhaps a lack of institutional support as teachers in colleges have only limited experience of the field of HE, and their illuso is aligned to the doxa of post 16 education.

Students in the SFC identified a significant intervention of the SFC FdA ‘Sport degree’ Course Manager, who was aligned to both post-16 and HE agendas in the SFC. Tom explained that his cohort of BTEC students had been ‘actively sold’ internal progression to the FD, and Jake, a former student, said he received a letter promoting similar messages. The Course Manager used his established relationships with current and former students to market his own provision and influence their choice, as Tom explained.

[O]riginally the costing is the thing that shouts at you, isn't it? ... [O]ver three years you're saving £9k just on tuition fees ... that originally kind of coaxed me ... it was a big thing, low costing ... [A] lot of universities ... charge you £9k isn't it, and I think here it's £6k and it was a case of chucking in level ones [coaching awards] ... kits and the fact that you got to live at home, so you weren't paying accommodation...it was three days a week so you could still have your part time job. He [Course Manager] got ... a student in to give an appraisal of the course...it probably worked very well. Got a few of us (Tom, SFC).

There are multiple factors in this explanation from Tom related to the financial implications of HE and his connection to ‘place’ (discussed below). The £3,000 annual differential in tuition fees was articulated by the course manager as a personal, rather than Government ‘saving’ (discussed in chapter 6). This aligns with the national

government discourse that HE is a private good, framed within a discourse of economic costs and benefits (Browne, 2010; DfBIS, 2015; OfNS 2011).

It became clear that Tom did not have a sophisticated understanding of Student Finance before he enrolled.

A lot of loans. It wasn't probably brought to my attention as much at the time. Actually, it probably wasn't until I started the degree course actually that I knew that I would only pay if I was earning over 21 [thousand pounds]. I didn't look into it a great deal. (Tom, SFC).

Students' illusive was drawn to economic capital and the research participants in this setting were clear in showing that staying locally, was the 'cheapest' overall option. Such choices illustrate how fears of financial liability, identified as an issue for HE choice in the literature, were evident in students' decision making (Bathmaker and Thomas, 2009; Leahy, 2012; Parry et al. 2012). Four out of five SFC students raised tuition fees as part of a broader narrative of managing the cost of HE. Despite the 'national debate' and politicisation of tuition fees, 'cost' was absent from the narratives of choice of University or FEC students. The fees had become an accepted part of the 'taken for granted' doxa of HE, until these were raised in marketing messages in the SFC. Where students studied in colleges that offered internal progression to HE, there were examples where staff guided students towards this provision (see below).

Overall the influence from schools and college was complex. Students could be overlooked, which left them making late applications, or no applications at all. Issues of getting knocked off-course limited both academic confidence and academic credentials which narrowed choice. These findings support the contention that most support comes from the family, and schools play a smaller supporting role (Burke, 2016; Smyth and Banks, 2012). This reinforces the contention that FiF students have an educational disadvantage, (Luzeckyj et al., 2017) primarily due to their family background where

university trajectories are not an established element of family doxa (Thredgold et al., 2018).

The implications for this section highlight that FiF students can be overlooked or not engage with HE planning that takes place in Years 12 and 13 and tend not to follow the standard UCAS application cycle. Going to a good school does not automatically ameliorate a lack of familial familiarity or support for HE. FiF students require identification and additional support. Students can begin planning ‘late’ in the last few months of college courses, or not at all and leave without making applications. HE may not be on the ‘agenda’ until very ‘late’ and this then restricts choices. There is an inclination towards local, familiar options which are less disruptive. Choice becomes limited to HE providers that are geographically, locally accessible. Students have a limited understanding of the field and student finance loan repayments, so choices are not ‘informed’ and this lack of understanding could be exploited within a competitive neoliberal HE market. Post-16 and CHE course leaders are not immune from internal and external market pressures and internal students are a captive market. There might be conscious, or unconscious, self-interest where tutors’ job security might be contingent on recruiting viable cohorts. FiF students rely on personal ‘hot knowledge’ and recommendations rather than use published course data to inform choices. Hot knowledge for course tutors may not be considered as unbiased.

### **4.3 The significance of ‘place’.**

Students in the study identified the significance of ‘place’ within their narratives of HE choice. There were two broad groups within the study. The first group comprised of both young and mature CHE students who all studied and lived locally. There were multiple dimensions that shaped individual decisions, which included: a desire to maintain local lives through strong emotional connections to family and friends, institutional familiarity and balancing family and work responsibilities; late applications

(discussed above); ambivalence about differences between universities and colleges; and a 'rejection' of the 'traditional student lifestyle'. These *all* played a part in influencing individual decisions and were interwoven, it therefore becomes difficult to disentangle the separate reasons that combined to influence local choices. Given the restriction upon space key issues are exemplified and discussed below (see section 4.3.2).

The second group were young students (aged 18-20 years old on entry) who moved to university and lived away from home. They were excited by the new adventure of university and the 'traditional student experience', influences included: independence from home; the desire to live in a new city; the draw of greater independence and wider social opportunities; and the possibility for transformation through a holistic experience of '*being* a HE student' (Christie, 2009) (see section 4.3.4 below).

#### **4.3.1 Sticking close to home: "*It was a case of 'comfort-zoning', 'I see it as a degree is a degree'*"**

The local students in the study had limited mobility which came from a number of interrelated factors. The younger local students who selected the SFC or FEC did not seek to relocate for HE study, this in-part came from quite late decisions to consider university and limited approaches to planning. Since their decisions were local, they were less likely to seek significant family input. Louise was atypical, she had engaged in longer-term planning and did consider moving away.

I visited Oxford Brookes, Southampton and Worcester. I didn't really look into here [existing SFC] until two weeks before the UCAS deadline, so it was really last minute ... [I]t was moving there [away from home], that was the main issue. I'm quite a homely person, so ... the thought of moving away ... I couldn't cope with it... mum and dad came with me to most of the places. Mum came with me to every single one to check them and help me with my UCAS and everything like that, so they were really supportive. It just wasn't right at the time (Louise, SFC).

Louise felt so strongly connected by her family ties and emotional relationships to home that this restricted her mobility (Clayton, Crozier and Reay, 2009; Holdsworth, 2009; Finn, 2017). Reflecting back on her decision in the second interview on the challenges of moving away Louise said, “I think what I would’ve done was dropped out and then done this degree that I’m on now a year later”.

Louise prioritised close family relationships which restricted her choice to what was locally available. This was a common theme. Seven out of 10 students who studied in either the SFC (3 out of 5) or FEC (4 out of 5) had taken Level 3 qualifications within the institution before internal progression to Foundation Degrees. Tom was drawn to the familiarity of the SFC and his home town.

I ... enjoy my comfort zone ... being here in rural [names town], instead of going to somewhere like London, was probably appealing to me, and staying with my friends. ... [A] lot of the people who are doing my degree course now, they were doing BTEC at the time ... I've been friends with them for quite a while, so it was a case of ‘comfort-zoning’ (Tom, SFC).

Tom and his peers acted collectively, and all decided to transition ‘as a group’ from BTEC to the FdA. Donald in the FEC also identified that most of his peer group ‘came from BTEC’ through a similar internal progression. Friendships established through BTEC demonstrates how strong social capital, prior to HE study, can bond groups of FiF students together and limit choice. Mature students also felt bonded to existing providers, which was influenced by their limited academic confidence as Donald explained.

I was that long out of education ... I was very nervous, really apprehensive ... I was almost shaky voice ... I was that frightened ... I was just in pieces. But, I've always been confident in my own little [way], but this was really throwing me out of - you're in your own comfort zone ... I was questioning myself ... I'd failed at school, I saw it as though I'd failed. As I was thirty, I thought maybe I'm here now doing this because I failed at school, and then you question are you good enough to go back...is this the right choice? ... Am I good enough or



bright enough or clever enough to do it? [T]hrough the access course, being able to do really well and come out of that with great grades was a real boost...

I made such good links with people at College and friendships, and I got on well with the tutors and ... sports staff. It just seemed right to ... stay there and do the Degree (Donald, FEC).

Other mature students experienced a similar boost in academic confidence through access courses, and similar strong connections to the FEC. As Stephanie and Yvonne explained.

There's various reasons ... it mostly comes down to the convenience ... of feeling safe somewhere and not ... jumping into the unknown. I was already jumping into the unknown to write essays, let alone jumping into the unknown, you know, different area (Stephanie, FEC).

There wasn't [any planning] ... I have a child so going to [names neighbouring city/university] itself wasn't ideal for me with working and obviously taking care of my daughter. So, my support lady that I had for my diploma recommended looking down this [CHE] route ... This was the only choice for me with my daughter. (Yvonne, FEC).

For mature students already in employment in this study, HE had to fit around work and family commitments which limited choice to local HE providers. The students managed the 'risks' associated with HE study by maintaining close bonds that were established in FE institutions, this confirms findings from the literature of students seeking comfort/safety blankets of home (Byrom and Lightfoot, 2012; King et al. 2013; Morrison, 2009; Simm et al., 2011).

Five local students lived with their parents (3 out of 6 mature students, and 2 out of 3 young students). As others have pointed out (Greenbank, 2015; Harrison et al., 2015; Hodgson and Spours, 2001) earning from part-time work can be used to maintain existing lifestyles. Louise lived at home rent free, her dad paid for her car and major expenses such as insurance. Through her part-time work she earned £500 per month to spend on a very comfortable local lifestyle. 'I like having money because I like to be able to go out and do stuff and not have to worry about anything' (Louise, 19, SFC).

Living at home was valued as it mitigated additional accommodation (Harrison et al., 2015) and travel costs (Parry et al., 2012). Students like Louise were not financially impoverished; on the contrary, by limiting their mobility they maintained everyday 'luxuries' that were important to them (Finn, 2017) which might not be available if income from part-time work was required for basic living costs if they moved away. Tom said that his life at home was,

very comfortable. Mum still does the washing, still cleans my plates occasionally. Yeah very comfortable. I mean I'm self-dependent in the fact that I finance myself. They don't help me finance it as such. I've got my own car that I have to pay monthly kind of rental on and insurance so in that regard I'm pretty self-dependent, but in other aspects I'm definitely still a mummy's boy and she does a lot for me (Tom, SFC).

Christie (2009) considers a conceptual difference between local students *doing* HE rather than *being* a university student. Rather than the emotional challenges of 'fitting in' and being university students, day students are more concerned with 'fitting everything in' (Christie, 2009).

In choosing to study in the SFC, Jake reflexively engaged with the normative discourse of moving away for a 'traditional student experience' (Holdsworth, 2009). He was instrumentally focussed on his career and becoming a PE Teacher. He was not concerned about getting a

proper student life ... [and] at the end of the day, I see it as a degree is a degree. They all count" ... It's the same work, it's the same difficulty. I don't see any difference really. I know the older PE teachers I see are like 'you have to go away to get a degree' and all that, but yeah, I don't see it like that at all (Jake, SFC).

Whilst on the surface a degree is a degree, there was evidence of misrecognition in the field (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992), by some of these students who perceived degrees of the same title, or franchised provision, to be 'the same' whether studied at a University or within a CHE. Kate said,

I didn't really prep where I was going to go. I did look online, looked on UCAS and all the different places ...looked on some of the websites ... it would have been nice to go to those cities, [but] the courses seemed to be exactly the same as it was here [FEC]. ... I would just be studying the same thing, and actually I really like it here (Kate, FEC).

The belief that it is 'the same', regardless of the institution demonstrates students could be mystified by the symbolic ordering of the field of education. Students were ambivalent about the hierarchy of the field and 'about the claimed differences between universities and colleges' (Parry et al., 2012:123), or at least their desire to stay at home overrode reputational considerations.

Emotional connections to home and concerns about 'everyday mobility' (Holdsworth, 2009) meant that HE study needed to fit around their existing local lives; rather their lives having to dramatically change to accommodate HE study. A key point for both policy and practice is that students who live at home have their HE options severely limited by their geographical proximity to local HE provision (Christie, 2007: 2009; 2017).

Moving away' was perceived by CHE students as an unnecessary complication, and given that HE was only considered a few months before the start of courses, it was difficult to contemplate and choice became constrained to locally accessible HE provision. The Sixth Form students did not have a university locally and their choice became severely restricted between two small local CHE providers; neither of which offered a hierarchical advantage over the other in the field, but locally the SFC had a better academic reputation and Jessica said that it was 'very highly thought of'.

Geography certainly shaped choice, but the notion that the FEC or SFC was the 'only choice' can be problematized. The FEC was in a city with a Russell Group university. The SFC students who planned to teach (3 out of 5) in second interviews discussed accessing a relatively local university for a PGCE study. There were clearly practical

and financial issues in selecting the local existing provider; but these were underpinned by limited planning, and limited understanding of the field or confidence to move beyond familiar local providers. Confirming the findings of other studies, students in this study chose to enrol onto less academically challenging programmes at less selective institutions (Baum et al., 2010; Smyth and Banks, 2012; Wood, 2009). This confirms the powerful effect of habitus and institutional alignment upon choice identified in the literature (Bourdieu, 1984, Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990; Crozier et al., 2008; Davey, 2012; Reay 2004; Thomas 2002).

The implications from this section clearly align to some of the other implications outlined above. Late planning results in students only considering local options. Students have limited understanding of the field so cannot effectively evaluate differences between HE providers. Students can lack confidence to consider moving beyond an existing local provider and choice therefore becomes constrained by locally ‘accessible’ provision. In the case of FiF students in this study, this meant that most students did not look beyond their existing college. Students prioritised educational continuity and continuity with their local lives to minimise any disruption or risk. This overrode any other considerations.

#### **4.3.2 Moving away. “*Uni was just like a new adventure*”, “*I thought if you're going to do it, do it properly*”**

All five university students’ narratives highlighted excitement about the traditional ‘university experience’ and moving away from home. As identified by others, moving away to university creates social and academic ‘risks’, but such decisions give students greater independence and new social opportunities within a new institution and city, which offers the potential for transformational experiences and identity change (Byrom and Lightfoot, 2012; Clayton et al., 2009; Holdsworth, 2009).

Hannah balanced her desire to select a BEd degree at a university with a good reputation for Teacher Training alongside other influences.

I was bored of being in [names home City]. I needed a change of scenery and I like 'going off'. It is different, but it is close enough to home if I really wanted to. But I would never want to go home 'just because'. [Names university] city is too much fun. I needed that time away. I am the only one out of my group of friends who have gone to uni, so that is quite weird. When I go back, they are always "ah nah I'm working"... I think I was ready for my independence. I was in a long term relationship, and I decided that wasn't a great idea. So that was that. I was with him for six years. That was not because of uni but because I was ready to do something on my own. That I had always been in a group of friends that were pretty secure, always been really supportive of each other. And uni was just like a new adventure, isn't it, I think (Hannah, University).

Travel time of under two hours between home and university played a part in the decision of three University students. The relatively local option enabled the three students to return home as frequently, or infrequently as they wished as time and travel costs were manageable. Student X described this as the "best of both worlds".

Increased independence was a key influence for all students. Two students deliberately sought greater geographic distance between university and home and they considered that this was 'the right way' to do university (Finn, 2017).

I always said somewhere as far away as possible because I think if you get given a chance to do... I mean it's not often you get to live with your friends in a different city. I mean my mum was always like "well if you're going to go, if you have to go, go to Newman or go to Birmingham", which is a ten-minute drive. I was like 'but what is the point when you can live, when you can still have that experience, but you can live in a different city'? You're not there on the doorstep because if I was to live and go to Birmingham Uni, chances are I would've probably stayed at home, wouldn't have met the same amount of people. I think it wouldn't have been the exact same experience. I just think I would've been a bit spoon-fed... I just thought if I get the chance to effectively move away, on kind of like a '*free pass*' if you like. Like I just couldn't understand why people would choose to live at home and stay at home. I just couldn't get my head around it. I thought if you're going to do it, do it properly sort of thing, go to a completely different city (Daisy, University [original emphasis]).

Holdsworth (2009) almost describes Daisy as an imagined ideal type.

Take, for example, a student growing up in Birmingham... the chances are there will be an appropriate institution within travelling distance that offers a suitable course. So, the question we should consider is: why move? The answer to this question is not in most cases sought in reasons connected with academic study, and students certainly do not explain their choices in this way. It is the opportunities of freedom and independence associated with this move away from home that appeal to students (Holdsworth, 2009:1861).

Daniel had a similar perspective to Daisy. 'If I'm going away, I want the full experience. I want to meet new people; I don't want to come back home every sort of two weeks. I was like I don't want that' (Daniel, University). Daniel had idiosyncratic criteria: he wanted to be more than two hours from his home town, but in England; despite wanting to get away, he did not want the travel logistics to be too difficult; he did not want to know anyone who studied at the university as he valued the opportunity for re-invention. He explained that he did not want his university experience to be contaminated by his school-based reputation.

[I]t was that I knew at school with my friends I'd been, I was easily egged on. So, say someone wanted someone to do something funny, they'd all look at me and go 'You do it'. I'd be like 'Oh go on then'...So I thought if I'm going to Uni and it's going to be like that, it's going to impact on my studies, because I know that'll happen. They'll be like 'Let's go out. Let's skip our lecture'. And I was like 'Right I need to be far away from people as I can'. Like they're still my friends, but on a personal level, I need to do this properly. So, for me it was just that and that was my first bit of like maturity. I was like 'Right I need to make sure' (Daniel, University).

In the end Daniel only had one offer for university so his choice was limited. He committed to moving away to the University without ever visiting it and without any significant practical support through the process, so the decision was emotionally charged.

I'd never been to view the Uni; I didn't go to any open days. I looked at a photo or something, and I just went 'Right, I'm going to go for it' because they'd accepted me. I was like 'I can't be picky'...It was the

first time I ever sort of left [names county]. I think it was the first sort of ballsy thing I did. (...) I'd never even been to [names city]! So, I got my sister to drive me, and I remember just loading the car up, and my dad was like "right, see you later", ...I sort of expected some sort of, you know, big speech but he just went 'see you later'... I remember him saying "I'll see you next month when you'll be back because you don't like it and you'll be moving back in" (Daniel, University).

Daniel's approach was high risk. He said he felt embarrassed working in retail, essentially doing the same job he had while at school. "So, I thought 'right'...it was a chance to reinvent myself" (Daniel, University). Daniel recognised the transformational potential of University and aimed to manage any 'contaminating' aspects of his home friendships that associated him negatively to his Grammar School education. Entering a new field provided an opportunity for habitus transformation through its 'permanent capacity for invention' (Bourdieu, 1990). Habitus links histories but does not fully constrain future possibilities where the agentic elements of habitus [illusio] allow for adaption and growth and new trajectories (Reay, 2004).

Despite Daniels's father's encouragement to go to university, he goaded him that he would drop out.

"[Y]ou'll miss your nan [and] home comfort[s]". No one had ever upped sticks and gone...that sort of challenge...I'm going to prove him wrong ... there's not a chance that I'm going back and stack shelves for thirty-nine hours a week (Daniel, University).

Daniel's 'mobility capital' (Finn, 2017) aligned with his family's doxa of 'finding your own way'; but against the relative immobility of his family's direct experience and his father's expectation of a swift return. 'The spaces of home and university are recognised ... as material and physical entities but also spatial resources upon which students draw upon' (Clayton, Crozier and Reay, 2009:159) in terms of development and deployment social capital. Daniel recognised that University provided an opportunity to break the family doxa and university supported this in multiple ways providing a 'clean slate' for re-invention and independence (see chapter 5).

Students who sought to move away considered HE as a new adventure. The traditional HE experiences would fulfil this adventure and connect social, education and potentially future employment within a holistic ‘life experience’. The implication for this group was that the ‘adventure’ was a strong motivational factor. Some students had experienced educational disadvantage and their unconventional trajectories meant that they had a limited understanding of the field and were less selective. For some students this was coupled with limited academic credentials which further restricted the courses and institutions that were accessible to them. There was some evidence of planning, but often this is idiosyncratically strategic and resourceful, rather than conforming to typical approaches of rational strategic approaches.

#### **4.4 Summary discussion**

While Bourdieu and Passeron (1990) postulate that habitus has transformative potential when an individual encounters an unfamiliar field it does not mean that this transformation is pain free. Students in the study appeared to ease the transitional pain to HE through managed mobility. Students studying at the FEC and SFC aimed to ameliorate the shock of moving to an unfamiliar HE provider in an unfamiliar location. However, this ‘pain’ might transform habitus. Conceptually habitus is a useful concept applied to the study of HE choices within this study. The intention for all students was to ‘grow’ their symbolic capital through HE participation. All five students who were studying at the University had made a conscious decision to ‘get away’ from home to study in a new city and a new HEI for adventure and independence. In contrast all ten students in the FE and Sixth Form settings chose to limit the upheaval of moving from home to ‘maintain’ their existing lives alongside the transition to HE study. Rather than new adventure they sought to integrate HE into their existing local lives. For mature students with wider family and work commitments this was presented as a ‘necessity’ and clearly their mobility was limited. However, their narratives of choice highlight



academic and social anxieties about fitting in at an unfamiliar university environment. The younger students seemed to reject the wider social experience of HE. Their *illusio* was drawn to the emotional connections with local family and friends, maintaining a proximity between home and study allowed them to maintain local social capital and maintain their local lifestyles.

It was evident that all fifteen FiF students had limited understanding of the field, its qualifications, and institutions. The data presented in this chapter adds further weight to the published literature that recognises that there is less ‘active planning’ by FiF students for HE (Reay et al. 2001; Reay *et al.* 2005; and Reay et al. 2009). The FiF students in the study had non-traditional approaches to the planning and choice. The notion, within national policy, that students are informed ‘savvy’ consumers is not borne out through students’ narratives of choice. The choices were not informed by data on student experience that dominates policy discourse (Stoten, 2016). Students decisions were taken with limited or partial information, horizons of choice were limited by family and school expectations. The ‘field of possibilities’ (Bourdieu, 1984) was restricted by a lack of habitus-field alignment and all students sought only W.P. ‘type’ institutions and it was evident that ‘prestigious’ HEIs had not been considered.

As previously stated, the three research questions are closely connected. The HE choices of the FiF students in the study were informed both consciously and unconsciously by the ‘fit’ between the student and institution, and the type of student experience that they anticipated that they would value. The choice of HE provider and course had a profound impact on the types of experiences student had and what they valued about these experiences. Chapter 5 explores this further and considers how students gained a ‘practical mastery of the field’ (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992) and developed a ‘feel for the game(s)’ (Bourdieu 1990). Through their HE practice students’ *illusio* was drawn to academic, social and employment aspects of their HE

experience. Chapter 5 explores how students valued, and (re)evaluated this experience over the two year period of the study.

## **5.0 Chapter 5: What do FiF students' value about their HE experience?**

This chapter considers the second research question. “What do students' value about their higher education experiences and what influences these experiences?” This is understood from what students explicitly said when asked the direct question “what do you most value about HE?” (see individual responses in appendix 10 table 5) and from their responses to wider questions, and by bringing to bear Bourdieu's theoretical tools to analyse the complex influences that shaped students' *practice*.

HE is only part of students' lives, and their *illusio* was drawn to the fields of education, home, and work (Pegg and Carr, 2010). Students' *illusio* reveals their interests and investments in social and cultural capitals from these fields. Investments were both conscious and unconscious, influenced by *habitus* and field *doxa*. *Illusio* drew students' interest and labor-time which revealed the time and effort that students committed in *practice*. As Bourdieu notes

the conservation of energy, profits in one area are necessarily paid for by costs in another ... [t]he universal equivalent, the measure of all equivalences, is nothing other than labor-time (in the widest sense); and the conservation of social energy through all its conversions is verified if, in each case, one takes into account both the labor-time accumulated in the form of capital and the labor-time needed to trans-form it from one type into another (Bourdieu, 1986:231).

Students' *illusio* was drawn to competing field-games across three interrelated (heuristic) domains of HE: academic; social; and employment. Students' labour-time was spent on '*fitting in*' in HE and students were unable to '*fit everything in*' (Christie, 2009) - their investment of labour-time was unequal across the three domains. Table 6 (appendix 11) gives a summary of how each student invested their labour-time across the three domains. The table clusters students into three heuristic population and place groupings: 1. Mature CHE students; 2. Young CHE students; 3. Young University

students. The brief summaries below outline broad features of experience narratives from each group which are then expanded on in the rest of the chapter.

1. The first group are mature CHE students [6] who studied in the SFC [3] and FEC [3]. Four students were parents. Three lived with their parents, and three lived in their own accommodation. Students balanced existing family and work commitments with the condensed CHE course delivery. HE study was aligned in some way to future career ambitions. Most mature students experienced quite profound changes in self-conception and self-confidence which was the most highly valued aspect of their HE experience. However, studying in the young CHE environments could be problematic.
2. The second group are young CHE students [4], who studied in the FEC [1] and SFC [3]. Three lived with parents, one rented a room in a professional house-share. They sought to maintain their existing local lives and adopted part-time instrumental approaches to their HE programmes. They most valued the ‘*outcome*’ of graduate status over the *experience* of HE. Students’ had ambivalent HE identity that came from studying in SFC and FEC.
3. The third group are young students who moved away to university. They most valued the ‘whole student experience’ and the independence and confidence they gained from this. Students blurred the boundaries between the social and academic domains and invested in social and cultural capitals of the university.

Students had relatively little understanding of the HE field prior to entry. They had to expend labour-time to learn the ‘rules of the games’, and they could only act strategically once they developed practical and symbolic mastery of the field-games in HE and how they could position themselves advantageously. Students could differentiate symbolic capital values in the fields and could articulate gaps between their *intentions* and *practice*. For example, students were conscious of some acts of

misalignments when they prioritised part-time work (see 5.2.4) or socialising (see 5.1.3) over longer-term investments in academic or career orientated capitals. However, other aspects were unconscious through the mystification of the field as a result of misalignment of habitus and field. As students spent more time in the field they were able to (re)evaluate their experiences and investments over the two-year research period.

The chapter is structured to examine: 1. how students fitted in - valuing and evaluating academic and social aspects; 2. connections between HE and employment; 3. personal and family transformations through HE.

## **5.1 Fitting in, valuing and evaluating academic and social aspects of HE**

This section considers the extent to which students' felt they 'fitted in' academically and socially in their place of study, and how students valued, and (re)evaluated their HE experiences. I considered that 'place' had social, physical and cultural elements, including the location and size of the institution, its facilities, student populations, courses, and the taken-for-granted expectations (doxa).

### **5.1.2 Fitting into the SFC and FEC; *"I'm not going to lie. It just feels like I'm in a college"***

The overall 'HEness' of the CHE environments (Lea and Simmons, 2012; Rapley, 2014) created multiple challenges for students. Most CHE students progressed internally and had given little thought about their HE experience in advance.

[I'd] not really [thought about this]. I just thought because I enjoyed [names SFC] quite a lot when I was here, so I thought it would just be a follow-on from that, which it is, but it is a lot different. But yeah, no, [I] never really [thought about it in advance] (Louise, SFC).

Young students did not foresee the challenges they experienced 'fitting in' within the familiar SFC environment.

It's been on and off. It's had its ups and downs...obviously you've got the younger children which after a little while get quite annoying ... I'm

still surrounded by them and not my own age group. [And] because the class sizes are so small, I'm the only girl in our group, and there's about, I think there's seven of us, so it is *really* small, so other than my friends outside I don't really meet anyone. I don't meet any *new* people or anything like that (Louise, SFC [original emphasis]).

[I]t's difficult actually [being a HE student here] ... my friend [Jake] and I was speaking ... it's really difficult, a motivational factor for him walking around the campus feeling there are sixteen-year olds here and he's twenty-one... people stare and stuff... It's a strange feeling sometimes ... But we are situated, I think they try and keep us away from the A'Level people as much as they can. So, we won't have breaks when they do, we'll be in different buildings ... rather than in the main campus (Tom, SFC).

CHE students only came on to campus for timetabled teaching sessions which were compacted into 2 or 3 days per week.

The 'newsroom' [is] the room where we've been based for most of the last two years, while we are in there its very much colleagues. We don't speak about anything that isn't related to the work in hand (Richard, FEC)

The SFC students did not experience discontinuity or 'dialectical confrontation' between habitus, field, institutions, or through relationships with peers and teachers (Reay, 2004). There is an interesting paradox from Tom and Louise's narratives. They sought continuity staying within the SFC, however, this environment then caused the frustrations of being 'surrounded by younger children', 'small cohorts', and 'not meeting anyone new', which did not align with their wider expectations of HE.

Whilst young SFC students had peers who were a similar age to them, Donald and Kate were the only mature students in their cohorts. They felt isolated at both a course and institutional level. These challenges spilt-over into their wider lives.

There's definitely a difference, an age ... a cultural difference ... this is the YouTube generation I'm at school with...you've got an eighteen-year-old, no children, talking about that he's going to go home and play Xbox ... There isn't a social side. My social interaction is just chatting away on a daily basis ... We had a great banter in my old work ... all that socially, it was brilliant, so I miss that because I've come away from that day-to-day of ... having proper conversations with people and

going out and socialising ... to going into a setting where that just doesn't happen, which is a big change (Donald, FEC).

Kate said she was jokingly called 'Grandma' by her course peers.

I'm basically hanging out with like a bunch of nineteen-year olds, two days a week, sometimes three ... I still work where I had my full-time job, ... they sort of changed their relationship with me, where I'm now just like a 'part-time student' ... I do feel like I've lost like ten years ... *I'd like to be like twenty-seven again* (Kate, FEC [original emphasis]).

There were more diverse student cohorts on Early Years and Health and Social Care courses in the FEC, which helped build relationships and fit.

Christmas, [and] birthdays, [we] go out ... if it happened ... to fall when we were around, we'd go and have lunch at the local pub, or eat here in the college. Socially I've seen a couple of them outside of the course ... friendships have been formed (Stephanie, FEC).

Yvonne studied an Early Years programme, she was very positive about her CHE experience, "I just love it. Absolutely love it, it's amazing. I adore everything". Mature CHE students said they were not looking for a 'traditional student experience', but Yvonne still contrasted her experiences with her younger sister's local university experience.

[T]here's no sort of social aspect to it at all [FEC HE]. The only problem is I compare my experience to my sister's. She does Archery, Rifle Shooting, all the social things. She's always out every night, you barely ever see her (Yvonne, FEC).

Universities are able to provide wider HE environments and cultural opportunities which encourage students to spend time on campus beyond taught classes. Research on local students studying in university settings acknowledges that local students may be less socially engaged at university (Holdsworth 2006, Clayton et al. 2009; Reay et al., 2010) and operate within a 'betwixt space' (Palmer et al. 2009). As is evident from Yvonne's discussion about her sister's experience, local university students can 'opt-in', but these options are simply not available in the FEC or SFC with their focus on post-16

education. The lack of social spaces and opportunities, coupled with the younger environment, resulted in CHE students feeling socially and physically peripheral which dissuaded them from spending time on campus and limited their opportunities to develop social and cultural capital. CHE students developed ambivalent HE student identities.

It doesn't feel like university, it feels the same as when I was at college. The only difference is the workload. ... it doesn't feel like university...it does, and it doesn't. I'm not going to lie. It just feels like I'm in a college. (Yvonne, FEC).

At other points in the interviews Yvonne described CHE as 'uni'. This identifies a new type of betwixt space for CHE students. Yvonne, did not feel like a college student, nor did she feel like a bonafide 'university student'. In contrast, Stephanie was emphatic that the FEC was not university, and she was not a university student.

I always found it quite interesting in listening to how people described [it] ... I think if you ask most of the people they'd say 'I'm at Uni', and I just think 'we're not, we're at college'. But I wasn't looking for that experience and if anyone outside asked me 'What are you doing at the moment?', I'd say 'I'm studying something at [names] college, and maybe there's a little bit of embarrassment behind that, at studying a Foundation Degree at 46, and ... the course doesn't lead to a 'profession', so I couldn't say 'I'm training to be a Social Worker' (Stephanie, FEC).

The lack of HEness in CHE could be symbolically problematic. Most students spoke positively about graduating from the FD CHE courses, but Stephanie evaluated their status and she said she would not graduate until she achieved a Masters Degree from a university. The symbolic nature of the SFC resulted in people saying to Tom that it was not a "proper degree", or it was a "Mickey Mouse degree" (Tom, SFC).

I kind of say to them that it's ran on the same basis as [names validating university]. I'll be getting my degree ... from [names validating university] so that's my back-up line. It's not actually a degree from [names SFC] (Tom, SFC).



Despite his riposte, his non-traditional experience cast doubt on the credibility of his academic credential. Tom also said he would put the university on his CV and omit any reference to studying his FD and BA degree in the SFC. “You get more out of it and [if I] say I go to [names validating] University and I've got a First rather than going to [names SFC] doing a degree and getting First” (Tom, First SFC).

The dual sector environments created additional emotional and symbolic factors for CHE students to manage, which were absent from the taken-for-granted HE university student identity. I discuss below (section 5.1.5) how students evaluated course management and teaching and how this also added to their ambivalence about the quality and credibility of CHE.

The implications are clear that the FiF students in this study had not given advanced consideration to the potential challenges they would face as HE students studying in CHE institutions. The small class sizes could be appealing, but this limited the opportunity to develop cultural and social capital with a diverse range of people. The organisation of the timetable and spaces made CHE students feel peripheral. Since there are no wider opportunities for social interaction students limit time spent on campus which further creates a ‘part-time’ mentality and more isolated experiences. The non-traditional environments posed additional emotional challenges for CHE students that can undermine HE student identity and the symbolic nature of their accumulation of academic capital.

### **5.1.3 Fitting in at University: “*I think I enjoyed the social life a bit too much*” “*you get to your second year and you're like 'right, it steps up a bit. Got to be more switched on*”**

The university students in this study sought the ‘*whole experience*’ and highly valued the independence that came from moving away from home. Their illusive was focused

HE *as* a new experience and their narratives amalgamated these social and academic aspects more holistically than CHE students' (as discussed above).

University students invested time and effort in fitting in to their new HE environment and the small campus helped students to meet a diverse range of people and build new relationships. Daniel said, "it's a bit different at [names university] obviously it's a much ... smaller [university], so it's more of a family feel" (Daniel). This was echoed by Student X "[it's] close knit ... people know each other, people are with each other. You're not just a number".

I live in accommodation on campus it's really easy...all the BEd boys ... on campus ... live below me. Me and other BEd girls live in different flats but the same Halls ... we are all quite friendly. We are always sat in each other's rooms, probably doing work or doing something (Hannah, University).

Residential students spent significant time with course peers, living and studying together. This aligns with Jacobs et al. (2010) contention that spending time at university makes a bigger impact on identity transformation than the formal curriculum, and that cultural and social capital development from university friendships can become an important resource (Thomas, 2002; Stuart, 2006; Crozier et al., 2008).

In contrast to the CHE students, the university students had a large range of opportunities to meet new people and build diverse friendships through their courses, living arrangements, and Student Union (SU) clubs, societies, and 'socials'. There was a keen sense of the university community and a collective sense of identity that came from *being* a student at the university. Representing the university in sports teams was highly valued and carried significant symbolic cultural capital and reinforced supportive relationships. When asked "what was the best bit of uni?" Hannah said

[t]hat is hard. Netball really. I think so. I think netball has been really enjoyable this year. Yes, [the] netball club at [names university]. Just those

girls, being in a team and playing for [names university] and all that have been very supportive.

Sports teams competed against other universities in British University and Colleges

Sport (BUCS) fixtures which bonded students across all years and courses. After

playing fixtures the sports teams would meet up on Wednesday nights in a local

nightclub. “BUCS Wednesdays is massive obviously. You know that. That is a *big-big*

social” (Will [original emphasis]). Students had to work out for themselves how much

investment to make in the social domain.

You know when you watch TV and you get like all the colleges and university, like themed programs, and you think “oh wow!” that’s what university’s going to be like, literally partying every day, doing no work and stuff like that. Obviously, there’s work involved but it’s very limited when you watch it, but that’s what I thought university would be like, which it has sort of been at the moment. I think I enjoyed the social life a bit too much during my, like first semester. And that’s what shot me in the foot really, because I just enjoyed that too much, and my sport too much and did little with the work. But, obviously I’ve got my head on now and started to do work a little better (Student X, University).

It is interesting to note how Student X’s expectations of HE was shaped by American

TV. O’Shea (2015) found similar issues from Australian FiF students which

demonstrates the ubiquity of American culture. The illusive of FiF students in the study

was drawn to the pleasure of socialising and this could be problematic until students

developed a practical mastery of the field and modified their practice.

Daniel suggested that there was a temporal ordering to how students managed the social

and academic domains of a typical university student experience.

[Y]our first year everyone comes for the party life and people sleep around, you get drunk... You get to your second [year], because your first year doesn't really count does it... You get your forty percent ... you can sort of get rid of the first year and you get to your second year and you're like 'right, it steps up a bit. Got to be more switched on'. [A]fter Fresher’s everyone sort of suddenly started getting into relationships ... I think it's just because they like that sort of balance. They have that sort of commitment (Daniel, University).

Interestingly Daisy's experience broadly followed this pattern. She is "known on campus" (Daisy) and this was highly valued. She said that her fresher year living in Halls "[was the] best year of my life" (Daisy). Through university she developed three distinct group of friends, from halls, her course, and her sports team. Daisy decided to live with her old hall-mates in order to maintain two separate groups of friends so she had extra social support from both groups, and as an insurance if a friendship group broke down. Maintaining this breadth of social relationships took significant 'labour-time' and emotional resources.

I'm really good friends with the girls that I live with and the guys, but I've got about ten friends on my course, ... I would class as an equal level...but just in different ways...[housemates] kind of get very jealous over it, they don't really like that (Daisy, University).

Daniel also strategically selected housemates to manage competing forces in the academic and social domains.

I've chosen [house mates] quite well ... the right balance of going out and staying in and doing work ... if I'd done that two years ago, I'd have gone 'Right, Party House! ... I think this was the first time I thought 'Right actually' (Daniel, University).

The students were involved in multiple 'field-games' and struggles over the legitimacy of various meanings and representations of the field and its symbolic ordering (Bourdieu, 1990; Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992). The social domain facilitated the development of social and cultural capital that connected students and acted as a 'social glue', to bond friendships, and lubricate 'fitting in'. This network of friends provided support and resilience when students experienced difficult situations. For example, Student X thought that the best bit of university was "probably like the social side, social acceptance". His friends supported him to get help with dyslexia (discussed below) and with counselling.

I had some personal problems back home... stuff going down, I had counselling and things like that...the whole support of mates and things made it a lot more easier... in halls you're sort of forced to live with people, sort of forced to ... talk ... and obviously you get more personal with them ... it took me about semester...because I'm not just going to walk in and say 'hi, I've got this happening' ...obviously when your friendship builds, you get more trust and then I started telling people, and then they got me to get counselling. (Student X, University).

Student X's girlfriend suffered from mental health problems and this began to also affect him. His girlfriend remained at home and university provided sanctuary and support.

In a way, like, out of sight out of mind really isn't it? If you're here [at university], like it's not as bad, but you know it's happening ... I know it's horrible to say ... she's still there ... I have a lot more focus on my university (Student X, University).

The literature suggests that social interactions with individuals and groups from similar or different socio-economic backgrounds promotes social cohesion, which is an important wider benefit of HE (Feinstein et al., 2008). *Habitus clivé* was evident in the way the students could manage their home and university lives (Byrom and Lightfoot, 2012; Friedman, 2016). Hannah felt university was 'eye opening' and Student X found it shaped and revealed *habitus*.

I've seen people on my course I've never seen in my life before ... you get really different characters like, from all over the country ... just the different cultures of people ... you learn a lot more socially, like you learn a bit more ... you do find yourself in university, like you find out who you *really* are (Student X, University [original emphasis]).

Spending time on campus was important. Will had an atypical fresher's experience. He applied late to university and invested heavily in relationships with second and third year 'rugby lads' that he lived with off-site.

[Rugby is the] most important thing at uni without a shadow of a doubt. Because I live off campus the Rugby Club has been a massive, massive influence on my first year here...My best mates all play rugby. All of them. I don't really have any mates off my course... I just don't spend enough time with them... I don't really know any of the Freshers.

Because I am not on campus it's not that easy for me ... I think I would have liked to have been here [on campus] ... a little bit more (Will, University).

Will's illusive was strongly drawn to the rugby club and reconciling this with his academic ambition became increasingly difficult. When asked what he most valued, in his first interview he said.

I think all of it combined really. It's kind of, the academic side of it has made me realise ... I can push myself further than I thought, ... the goals that I set myself before I came here, are genuinely achievable ... anything below a seventy - not good enough for me (Will, University).

Many students experienced competing demands upon their time, and distractions from study. However, towards the end of the first semester of his second year Will stopped attending university. He said that he had been offered a senior role at a summer camp in America where he had previously worked. Four months after withdrawing he took part in the second interview and reflected on his experience.

Being away from it all [university] has ... shown me a different side to my personality ... I kind of like change a lot with the people I'm around. I don't know, you're just on edge ... always ... tense ... ready to just smack someone for no reason ... Since I've been away and ... changed the people I'm around, everything's ... completely changed again, because it got shifted. It was my [rugby] house ... without chucking the gender stereotype at them, but they're all blokes ... between the age of nineteen and twenty four... driven towards testosterone-fuelled kind of boozing, scrapping, all that kind-of-stuff, which seems great when you're doing it but when you step back from it and have a look at what you were doing ... I kind-of realised that, as much as I enjoyed uni, it's not really the kind-of lifestyle I want to live. If I do uni again, I'll do it ... [I'll] work...and [do it from] home sort of thing. Do it differently to the way I did it here (Will, University)

Burke (2006; 2009; 2011) contends that HE can be challenging for working class men when managing their gender identity. Will's investment in the social and cultural capitals from the rugby club were not useful outside the environment in which it was developed (Reay et al., 2001) and ultimately were counterproductive to his ambition to achieve a good degree. Colley (2014) identifies that an 'inability (for whatever reason)

to invest one's *illusio* into the dominant stakes of the field engenders a lack of fit between *habitus* and field, leading to alienation and exclusion' (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, p. 173 cited by Colley 2014:671). All other university students managed the competing emotional pressures of building and maintaining relationships on their courses, while maintaining wider relationships across the university.

A superficial analysis might question the legitimacy or value of social experiences and students' pursuance of non-dominant social and cultural capital, but the examples above demonstrate its importance. In discussing how students invest within the social domains Bathmaker et al. (2013:734) contend that building and making friendships 'arguably involve[d] the generation of capitals, but they do not easily translate into something for a CV'. The students in this study built friendships playing university sport, and took on formal roles which would be valued on a CV. Daniel pursued formal voluntary 'social' roles in the SU. He invested heavily in institutionalised, dominant forms, of social and cultural capital. He successfully stood for SU President, a full-time paid sabbatical role. This role was symbolic and carried honour, respect, prestige, and authority (Bourdieu, 1986). During the election period in his third year this became his top priority.

I put a lot on the back burner with the whole election ... and obviously my *diss* [dissertation] ... people were saying ... 'We haven't seen you in the library ... 'You've disregarded your course?'. "I haven't disregarded it, I've just put it slightly down my priority ... There's only so many universities, only so many Student Unions, and you can only have one President a year, so I'm sort of unique in that way" (Daniel, University).

Daniel focussed inwardly on his roles in the SU and recalled a conversation with his father about what he might do once he finished his year as President.

[Dad] was like ... 'do a Masters' 'you thrive at the university ... in that community' ... 'You need to just stay there, you've found your niche' ... 'Become a lecturer, work your way up to...'. So, his whole outlook

changed, because I remember I said one day about how much like Vice Chancellors earn and he was like ‘Oh why don’t you do it then?’ (Daniel, University).

Daniel appeared to be in a strong position holding symbolic capital at the apex of the SU. His father was aspirational for him within the institution/field, yet there was an underlying fear that his accumulation of cultural capital might not be valued or exchanged outside the university. The university capital institutionalised Daniel and his father’s thinking, they had become captivated by the doxa. Staying at university was better

than just go[ing] back and work[ing] in a dead-end job’. ‘You know, there’s nothing worse than being lost’. He [dad] was like ‘You might as well be lost whilst you’re still sort of learning’ (Daniel).

Daniel was rich in cultural and social capital from his university experience. His social capital was ‘the product of investment strategies ...consciously and establish[ed] ... directly useable in the short or long term (Bourdieu, 1986:51). However, he did not understand *how* to mobilise his capitals at the point in which the second interview was conducted. Daniel had a personal transformational HE experience (see section 5.3) but this did not build towards employment in an overt sense near the completion of his degree (discussed in section 5.2).

The implications are related to the importance students put on developing friendships that bring together the academic and social domains which support ‘fitting in’. Students and universities should be mindful of the potential for ‘over-investment’ in the social aspects of the HE experience that can negatively impact upon academic or employment orientated activity. It is importance for students to develop positive relationships in their first year, these relationships support students throughout the university experience and seem to be developed most successfully when students live on-site. Therefore,



special attention needs to be paid to students who live off-site as they might more susceptible to dropping out.

#### **5.1.4 Academic engagement, assessment and peers influence; “40% is the new 100%!” “It’s just frightening, their lack of drive”.**

Over two decades ago, Kneale (1997) contended that students were unwilling to put effort into non-assessed academic activities and characterised them as instrumental, strategic, and assessment driven. Kneale’s comments demonstrate that staff concerns over instrumentalism are well established. However, students are responding to the demands of the field, they are ‘acting sensibly’ (Colley 2014) in recognising and pursuing highly valued capitals (grades and degree classifications) that can play to their advantage.

I’ve got a competitive edge ... I just want to get the highest and the best grades. Obviously, it’s hard to get into the PGCE at [names Russell Group University] and that’s my main aim, so I’m trying to get the highest grade I can (Jake, SFC).

Jake understood the competitive logic of the field, he was instrumental and strategic in the ‘labour-time’ he was prepared to commit to his future graduate employment (discussed in 5.2 below). His instrumentalism became more pronounced when towards the end of his second year when he was made aware that the FD result did not contribute towards the BA degree classification. Jake said, “I just thought well these don’t count towards my BA so I’m not going to put so much effort into it” (Jake, SFC). Roger took a different view.

[A] big thing [is] that people have switched off this year towards the end. I haven’t because I want to make sure I’m still developing myself, but some people have thought, because it doesn’t count [towards the BA], it doesn’t count (Roger, SFC).

The FD was perceived as a transitional qualification to the BA and then a PGCE. The 'next' qualification was understood to hold more symbolic capital than the last. Jake was strategically playing by the rules of the game.

Roger valued HE learning and prioritised this strategically, beyond instrumentalism. All mature students acted strategically. The study confirms the findings of Clayton et al. (2009) and Merrill (2012) who identified the challenges mature students have balancing study with wider commitments. Students' *illusio* is also drawn to the competing fields of the family and work, as Stephanie and Jessica explain.

It's a full-time course but it's only two days a week so I think that's part-time but student finance class it as a full-time course. Obviously, you're expected to do a certain amount of hours of reading alongside that which I do sitting at the side of football pitches, tracks when my son's running. You know, you just multitask. You just fit things in (Stephanie, FEC).

Jessica worked full time, studied part-time, and had two young children aged 7 and 3.

Oh God, [it's] hectic. With family/life balance...Oh God, it's a nightmare. So now, it's going to change next year because I'm going to put more study time in. Yeah, so I didn't put as much study time in last year. I suppose I didn't realise the importance for it later down the line... I didn't realise the expectation ...I just didn't realise the impact of it. ...'Okay realistically when am I going to fit study in'? (Jessica, SFC).

These narratives chime with the finding of Crozier and Reay (2011). HE is challenging as a result of mature students' busy lives and trying to 'fit everything in' (Christie, 2009), rather than being simply derived from the intellectual demands of study.

Intellectual demands and motivation were discussed through a deficit discourse within CHE, particularly around the practices of students who internally progressed from BTEC to FD study.

[A] lot of people on our course ... find it quite hard to find motivation ... Maybe it's because we came from BTEC and weren't doing a lot of

academic stuff in BTEC ... motivation's quite a big thing and we all start [assessment] pretty late (Tom, SFC).

In his second interview a year later Tom said,

certain people [Louise]... try their best ... academically put a lot of commitment in ... the majority of the group are probably on about ...seventy percent [effort] rather than, you know, ninety or whatever you should be at or a hundred? ... We ... have to be guided a bit ...we're pretty fresh from college and a lot of us are from BTEC as well.

Burke (2009) suggests that working class men can feel 'not worthy' of HE participation and might explain academic underachievement through a discourse of 'male laziness' rather than (in)ability, as is evident in Tom's narrative. Students' lower levels of motivation also impacted on the pedagogical approaches of teachers (see 4.1.5).

Merrill (2012) discusses that mature students can experience doubts about their academic ability when compared to younger, more confident university students.

Conversely, Donald became frustrated by the *lack* of academic engagement from FEC peers.

Once we were doing an assignment...I've been working on [it] for six to eight weeks. They [BTEC progression students] were starting at 4pm that afternoon and it had to be in at 11pm. I really want to do this, whereas, for them, it can be half-hearted sometimes (Donald, FEC).

A year later he said "two of us turning up at the moment. It's just frightening, their lack of drive". Donald adopted strategies to mitigate negative impacts from his peer group.

I've had to be quite coy. I've worked with people, especially early on in the year, that have just not been a great fit...where you might not be getting the same workload back that you're putting in...you feel like you're carrying [them], or your grade might be affected...I did have to have a word with the tutor. I've actually got a good friendship with a lad... from a different background. The rest came from a BTEC ... and carried on as part of the course, but this other lad who joined, came from a similar background to me. Although he was younger, he did A Levels... that really stood him in good stead workwise. He's a very mature lad so we sort of get on...forged a bit of a link (Donald).

The lack of a wider HE culture, and the small course cohorts did not challenge students to modify their practices from college to HE, the continuation of study in ‘safe’ college environments seemed to undermine the academic commitment of younger male CHE students. Crozier and Reay (2011) identified the importance of understanding ‘invisible pedagogies’. Student X also progressed from a BTEC course, but he studied at the university. He too was critical of practices from BTEC, and the transition to a university made this clear to him.

It’s different to lecturers [at university], but like, he [BTEC Tutor] would sort of like *give you the work*, if you know what I mean? Like in an unethical teacher way, he’d like ‘*give you the work*’ (Student X).

All students are required to learn the rules of the assessment game (Bourdieu, 1990) within the institution which are develop through *practice*. Student X said he valued gaining an understanding of the field of HE and that ‘the transition between the first year and actually knowing what’s expected of me and what I’m supposed to be doing [has] definitely improved (Student X, University).

University students’ understanding of the rules of the game was also influenced by peers and second- and third-year students. Daniel said his friends had joked that ‘the first year doesn’t count, 40% is the new 100%!’. Peer relationships were complex, but generally supportive of academic success.

[A] good few [of my peers] have dyslexia and they said ... “if you think you have it [dyslexia] go and get an appointment done”. So, I thought I’ll get it done because in school ...[reading] I’m only finishing my first paragraph and everyone’s on like the next page, so I knew I was quite slow ... and my spelling was bad ... I knew I had something (Student X, University).

...I’m reluctant to kind of post on there [course Facebook page] ... I know that the people who are going to answer are going to be my friends ...I’d rather just send them a text...I think it’s the fact of no one wants to look ‘the keen-bean’ (Daisy, University Student).

There were subtle signs of symbolic violence in trying to strike what students considered was an ‘appropriate’ balance between social and academic domains, not being seen as too-keen was a strategy to manage complex student identities. Daisy was conscious of managing academic and social aspects. She recognised the gap between her academic *intentions* and her *practice*.

I was like ‘Yeah, next year ... 9-5 in the library and come home’. So, that hasn’t happened ... I’ve tried to be more proactive ... I’ve done a lot of stuff before the deadline’s due which was kind of like a weakness of mine...But in terms of actually utilising my time to its full potential, it’s been still a bit of a struggle.

I would like to get a 1st but ... I don't think I will...I am one to get too absorbed into [what] everyone's doing ... or going out instead (Daisy, University).

Daisy understood the value placed on academic knowledge and credentials, yet it was challenging maintaining her academic intentions as the pressure intensified in her third year.

With my dissertation now, I’ve finished up to the word count and it’s ready to go be printed ...I know my discussion isn’t as strong as it could be but in my head I’m just thinking I’m just done with it ... I just can’t be bothered anymore. I’ve got so much other stuff to do ... though it’s not the full of my potential...it’ll do ... that’s just because I’ve lost all motivation and I’m just ‘done’! (Daisy).

There were negative consequences to Daisy’s instrumental approach to academic and applied engagement in her Sports Therapy course that impacted upon her feelings of confidence and competence.

[C]onsidering [I’m] a third year, and in a month or so I will finish ...I feel like my knowledge is not there and to me I think well if you don’t know it now, you’re not going to know it. You just know what you need to know to pass your exams, and that’s it (Daisy).

Daisy’s loss of motivation was also connected to her trajectory to graduate employment (see 4.2.1).

The implications are that students' *illusio* is drawn to the academic domain, but there are clear examples of challenges that arise from competing forces which limit students' deeper academic engagement. Through the pressures of *fitting in* and *fitting everything in* students can get 'knocked off course' and undermine deeper academic engagement. Students were inclined to adopt instrumental approaches to assessment and did not necessarily prioritise *learning*. Students need to be made aware of the long-term consequence of adopting superficial approaches, which can cause doubt in academic and applied knowledge and confidence. Students continue to develop their symbolic and applied understanding through ongoing practice, but prior habits from college and Freshers can influence practice at all stages of HE study.

#### **5.1.5 Perceptions of course management, teaching quality and relationships with staff; *"you could keep going because she actually cared"; "I think possibly the College don't know how to run it"***

Students evaluated the support they received and their perceptions of teaching quality and course management. Within the university, teaching and course management was largely reported positively. Hannah, said that she highly valued the support from fellow students and that her Programme Leader and Lecturers had been 'awesome' (Hannah, University). Similarly, Student X spoke positively about small class sizes in the university and the 'cohesion' between the students and lecturers.

Small class sizes and close relationships were valued across all three settings. Merrill (2012) identifies the importance of personal, as well as academic support, for mature students which was evident in CHE.

Our lead tutor that we had ...knew all of us ... she just took that extra step which made you feel like you could keep going because she actually cared (Yvonne, FEC)

I'd have struggled with a big institution and it's felt very comfortable, it's felt very safe here. The tutors ... it'd be too strong a word to say they've sort of become our friends, because they've been very professional, but they've become very easy to talk to (Stephanie, FEC).

Kandiko and Mawer (2013:9) contend that students' value being 'taught by well-qualified, trained teaching staff in small settings.' Good teaching and support were generally expected and taken-for-granted. When issues fell below students' expectations the interview created a space for students to discuss their feelings and concerns. Students said that often they had not raised issues directly with the institution. As discussed above CHE student experiences were orientated around courses and taught classes. Course management and teaching therefore had increased salience in CHE students' evaluation of their overall HE experience.

Kate's narrative had a 'regressive plot' (Elliot, 2005) the 'turning point' (Denzin, 1989) was a negative second year in the FEC.

Kate This year like me and all of my classmates, we've had a really big issue with how they've run the course ... I'm just not very impressed ... a bit annoyed ... like three quarters of it we just didn't learn anything, and now the last bit they're shoving it all in and it's just not very well run at all. In lectures, I just feel like we sort of sit there ... nothing's ... taught to us ... The lectures just literally seem pointless this year. I just didn't feel like I was getting anything out of them at all, which is such a shame, but I guess there's nothing I can do about it now unfortunately.

Phil No? That's a real contrast from what you were saying in the First Year as well.

Kate This year is so different from last year. I wish I hadn't chosen to go to [names] College, I wish I'd gone to a 'proper university' ... I've had the problem with this year because they're run by somebody who hasn't got the teacher training, the sort of qualifications and stuff ... So no lessons are structured. She's like "What do you want to do today? I don't really know what to do ... we'll just go by what you want". We've got our exam next week and she's changed the whole sort of format ... it's been so unstructured, and she just hasn't really known what she's doing. 'Oh great, I'm paying you to be here, and it's not going very well, so wonderful' (Kate, FEC).

By developing a practical mastery of the field (Bourdieu, 1990) Kate (re)-evaluated her HE choice. She said the FEC employed a part-time lecturer, who also ran a private Sports Therapy Clinic, and had recently begun a Masters Degree. Curiously Kate said

the staff were the same as in the first year. In her first interview Kate said she most valued

the opportunity ... to learn something that I probably otherwise wouldn't have done ... I have never taken that for granted...I have never thought 'oh it's just uni' ... having that opportunity, those people [lecturers] ... that have all this knowledge and they are just willing to give it to you (Kate, FEC).

HE was aligned to Kate's career aspiration and in the first year she had not conceived her knowledge in a 'consumerist' discourse.

However, in Year 2 she focussed on 'paying for it' and questioned her investment.

Part way through the year I was like 'Do I want to do Sports Therapy anymore? Is this really what I want to do?', because of how badly this year has gone ... See I really liked being at the College and I like the fact that there's a smaller group and obviously when I came into it, I didn't have a lot of academic skill ... that's why I chose the College, and I do think if I did it again, I probably would choose a big university, if they let me come in, obviously with like the qualifications I had at the beginning. I ...feel like at the College, the university degree is kind-of-like, a side-line bit, so they're not that worried about it. A lot of people came into it thinking 'I want to go to the College' because there's that sort of closer relationship with the lecturers and you get a bit more one-on-one time. But a lot of them now feel 'I wish I'd gone to [names University]'. Which is a bit sad really because I always think like it's really good that [name] College do all of these things and give opportunities, like the higher education opportunities, to people like me who probably wouldn't have got on to the uni degree, and for me to feel like 'Oh I wish I hadn't gone there', it's a bit sad' (Kate, FEC).

Kate's critique of the College and the Programme aptly demonstrates how student's illusive can become 'ruptured' (Colley, 2012). One lecturer's poor practice had shattered her confidence, not only in the course, but the whole FEC, and she claimed her feelings were replicated across her cohort.

Similarly, Stephanie expressed some concerns about the way the BA Early Years progression programme was delivered in the FEC.



It's been 'interesting'. It's been their first year running the BA so it's been a little bit hit and miss... I think possibly the College don't know how to run it, having the right tutors at the right academic level. Two of the tutors have left during the course ... that's not been ideal. One's gone to lecture at [names university] and one ... to a SFC school (Stephanie, FEC).

Both Kate and Stephanie were mature students and selected the local FE option as they wanted to maintain close connections to home. They suffered symbolic violence in considering that universities would not be for the 'likes-of-us' and felt pushed to the margins of the field. Selecting non-traditional HE environment cast doubt over the quality of the experience.

The SFC'S HE provision was even more marginal than the FEC. The SFC had only 40 HE students. Given these low numbers, staff taught BTEC, A'Level and HE. Jessica, an employee at the SFC studied a Business FD part-time. She explained her relationship with her tutors, who were also her colleagues.

They're very different...in their styles. So [Jim's] more relaxed ... fun, lots of energy, and [Karen] wants us all to do the very best ... and pushes us to do that. ... I would never not have a piece of work ready for [Karen], put it that way. [Jim], I would approach ... I wouldn't go to [Karen] and say 'I need some help'. I'd be too scared... I have heard comments that ... she maybe treats us too much like the sixteen-to-eighteen provision (Jessica, SFC).

HE in FE is characterised as providing supportive environments and pedagogies.

However, 'Karen' the Course Leader had a style that deterred students from seeking help. Similarly, Louise felt that the Sport FD Course Leader's pedagogical approaches were not differentiated.

He's exactly the same as he was at A Level... Being on a degree, I thought I'd have a bit more independence ... more down to me and learning ... to organise myself, not having others organise me... I think it works well with the rest of them [course peers] because they don't do it, but with me, it's sort of just by the end of it, I get a bit like 'Oh for goodness' sake'! (Louise, SFC).

[T]here are certain things that aren't kind of degree-like so you maybe get your hand-held a little bit from certain lecturers... I don't know, you kind of feel like sometimes you are being hounded into doing stuff that you don't necessarily want to do (Tom, SFC).

Tom contrasted his experience with the independence he considered he would have got if he had moved away to university.

So going away, being independent, learning how to live on your own and that's pretty crucial up at university, it's a big part of it. Making new friends, meeting new people and then I guess at university you have a massive state of independence so you can turn up to lectures if you wish. I guess if you don't turn up, you don't get hounded as much as you would here so it's a case of, if you want to do well at university it's your choice, where here you it feels more of a college/school environment in that if you're not turning up to a lecture you'll get like a slap on the wrist and stuff like that. Yeah and you do feel like you're missing that whole experience that you do get at a university (Tom, SFC).

The Course Manager applied practices that aligned to institutional doxa which encouraged close management of 16-18-year olds' attendance, retention and achievement, to HE students. His illusion was 'acting sensibly' within a neoliberal doxa of education (Ball, 2004; 2012). Crozier and Reay (2011) utilise Bernstein's classification and framing to consider issues of dependence and independence. The 'strong framing' adopted by the course manager was also evident in his teaching style that caused disengagement.

Some ... lecturers, you can have your own opinion and it'll be fine whereas other lecturers you can't. I tend to stay quiet in some lectures and just sit down and just listen, whereas other lectures I get a bit more involved because I can, kind of thing. I feel a bit more able to speak... (Louise, SFC).

These practices did not align with independence, choice, and greater freedom students associated with HE. The SFC degree has an external part-time tutor, and an internal member of staff who each taught one module. Their knowledge and competence were questioned by Tom.

[T]here's a couple [of modules] that [we] have done, there's one last year and one this year, you feel that there's no chance they would've kind-of lectured at a university standard. It's like 'how do they lecture here?' kind-of-thing, that's a perception you get (Tom, SFC).

Students identified the difficulty in raising concerns.

It's obviously awkward because if [names course manager] taking the committee and some of the stuff is about his course, you don't really want to say it to his face in the weirdest way. If you wanted to say something, it would feel difficult definitely I think (Tom, SFC).

As our group, we have [discussed this] but not with the lecturers...It gets mentioned quite a lot and it's one of the reasons I probably will go somewhere else [for a third year progression]...if I go somewhere else it might be hard, I might not get as much input but I get my independence and if I don't achieve that's not anyone else's fault. That's my fault that I haven't sort of stepped up (Louise, SFC).

Louise's narrative had 'progressive plot' (Elliot 2005) in the second interview.

[T]hey let us, well they get us, to be a lot more independent now so we have to do more of it ourselves. We don't get pushed or anything like that, like we did before...I understood that some people needed that, but they sort of didn't differentiate. It's been a lot more practical, so it's a lot more sports based and learning based in schools and things, which is what I want to do.

I'm going to do the BA at [names SFC] now. I've applied for that and I just thought it's just easier ... it'll like upset everything to go for a year and then have to move another year [for PGCE] and upset everything again. It's easier just to keep it going and then make that move once (Louise, SFC).

Louise's initial desires to maintain her local life was still the overriding focus on her decision to continue to study locally in the SFC. These examples demonstrate that in some cases studying within a CHE environment was initially seen as accessible and appealing but was (re)evaluated when it did not meet expectations. Transitions between years could result in totally different HE experiences from one year to the next.

The implications in this section are orientated towards CHE delivery and Quality Assurance from validating universities. Students raised issues about the HE-ness of their experiences which created ambivalence about HE identity. Resource pressures in CHE (caused by government underfunding) meant HE staff were part-time with outside commitments or were deployed beyond HE teaching. There was evidence of ‘under-qualified’ staff teaching HE (without Masters Degrees or teaching qualifications) which further suggests resource pressures. Staff may not be appropriately experienced to differentiate post-16 pedagogical approaches when teaching HE. Whilst HE students value close support, too much control by programme teams can undermine students’ expectations of independence in HE. Even though students focus on assessment they do not expect their approaches to *their* studies to be dictated and controlled by staff. The implications here may stem from low student numbers so staff are focussed on retaining students and therefore manage students through assessment to avoid progression failure. The lecturer singled out in FEC as the most supportive left the CHE environment to take a position in a university. There are obvious retention issues for staff who are most orientated to HE teaching seeking better paid and more prestigious roles in universities.

Overall, these issues can undermine students’ confidence and it may be difficult to fully invest labour-time if there is ‘doubt’ in system, or that HE is a ‘side-line’.

Students did not raise concerns with the CHE or validating university, which calls in to question the effectiveness of the Quality Assurance and a failure of support and oversight from the validating universities, and the extent to which ‘collaborative provision’ truly collaborative.

## **5.2. Connecting HE with Employment**

All students in the study valued their HE qualifications for its symbolic status over non-graduates. Some students experienced a hysteresis effect (Hardy, 2008; Burke

2016a) by playing by the ‘old rules of the game’ (Bathmaker et al., 2013:736) by assuming that a degree alone would secure graduate employment (see 5.2.1). Other students clearly recognised the need to develop valuable employment-focussed, social and cultural capital connected to their degree (see 5.2.4). Two students prioritised the immediacy of financial capital and over-worked in low-paid, low-skill jobs, limiting both academic and employment related activity (see 5.2.4).

### **5.2.1 Valuing graduate status; “*there's quite a prestige about doing a degree*”**

All students in the study valued HE qualifications. Student X said he most valued “the opportunities [his degree] open[ed] up for ... future work because obviously if I went for a job, someone gives the guy with the degree [the job], rather than the college course. So literally it’s just jobs” (Student X). There is misrecognition of the devaluation of credentials through the growth in the number of graduates (Bourdieu, 1984; Ainley, 2003; Bathmaker et al., 2013) and ‘hysteresis effects’ (Burke, 2016) in thinking he was competing against non-graduates.

Students appreciated the symbolic hierarchy of degrees and there was unanimity in understanding that Honours Degrees held greater institutionalised symbolic capital than Foundation Degrees. Tom captured how FD students needed to level the playing field.

I think doing the two-year course is a bit pointless really ...the whole point of it, I guess of doing a degree, is getting above certain people in the pecking-chain of getting jobs. So, if you're doing like a two-year course, you're only above the A Level students. But if you don't do a three-year course, you're still quite a bit below the people who have a full degree. So, I definitely feel like I need to do the third year to get at least at that level to be competing for jobs .... there's quite a prestige about doing a degree (Tom, SFC).

Some students had a general understanding that a degree might be useful in the labour market but did not have clear paths to employment. The illusio of students with loose career trajectories could not be drawn to an undefined ‘end game’ as the route to employment was not clearly defined. Students’ illusio can also be drawn to other areas

of their lives, such as an over-focus on the academic, or social domains, or to fields beyond HE, such as over-working in low paid low skill jobs (see 4.2.4).

Upon entry to her degree Daisy was interested in becoming a Sports Therapist. It was only towards the end of her degree Daisy began seeking full-time positions in sports therapy and she was shocked to discover the pay and conditions did not live up to her expectations. This coupled with negative placement experiences shook her graduate expectations.

Daisy        We started ...placement in the clinic [internal to the university] and ...an external placement... long story short...I just hate them both... and it's made me not like my degree. And then kind of applying for jobs ... in the subject ... Sports Therapy... the pay is just ridiculous. It's just a cheek ... I've been applying for other jobs just in other random stuff, like sales, recruitment ... some jobs the pay is twice as much. I'm quite money motivated ... I think, how can you have trained for three years in a certain thing and they pay you £10,000 a year less for something that anyone can do, you just need a degree? ... I was just like well ... I just don't want to do it [Sport Therapy].

Phil        Okay, so you don't feel like your degree has then set you up for your future career?

Daisy        ... before I came to university, that is what I wanted to do but I didn't really look into kind of the pay and the life of it... having placements ... out into the real world-ish and realised what you have to do, for what you get paid, it's just, well for me, I was just like it's a cheek.

Daisy experienced a 'shattering of illuſio' (Colley 2012), she had invested her labour-time in academic and applied aspects of sport therapy, and in the *idea* that a degree would deliver a 'graduate premium' within this field of employment (Bourdieu, 1986; Browne, 2010). Career pay, and conditions were researchable in advance, however, as Brynin (2012:285) contends '[i]t is unlikely that many young people calculate the economic value of education relative to an expected career'. Daisy still valued her whole experience, she said she 'loved it' and she 'would still recommend to other people if you don't know what you want to do, just go to uni just for the experience,

just because I think it's such a good three years'. She focussed on the transferability of her degree in non-specialist roles.

[F]or me kind of money is the main thing and I want to have really nice things and do really nice things and it's just a shame that Sports Therapy won't give you that ... I know I can achieve twice the amount by just ... getting a job (Daisy).

Donald was very focussed on the academic aspects of his degree. He suffered a hysteresis effect (Hardy, 2008) due to his heavy investment in the academic domain. He was an atypical mature student who chose not work alongside his studies. In his second interview he was quite critical that he did not get career support from the FEC.

I thought, when I went into the degree... I'll create some sort of links and relationships ... people will ...see you ... you might get an offer of a job...But that sort of hasn't really happened and, careers-wise...they've got your money now, they're teaching you the subject. Actually, I don't think they feel it's their job to help you try and find that career...and I suppose some of them don't know how to do that (Donald, FEC).

In Semester B of the second year he had started to work a few hours in career related activity.

I work for [names professional football club] on a Thursday night... I sent them [senior staff] an email about, you know, who I am, saying that I'm currently working for the club, about to finish my [foundation] degree, if anything comes up please let me know. You know, I even shared a coaching philosophy, a bit of [assessed] work that I did that I got Eighty-Four (percent) for ...that was four months ago, not one email back from anybody (Donald, FEC).

Sending an academic essay to senior people in the football club (some of whom are non-graduates) suggests a possible misrecognition of value of academic capital in the field of employment. Donald had not built relationships with these senior staff prior to sending this email, his social capital was horizontal with immediate work colleagues, but not vertical with 'individuals and institutions with power and authority' (Feinstein et al., 2008:22).

There are ‘practical implications’ for staff and students about the need to build employment related capital beyond a degree and the importance of developing strategic relationships with people responsible for hiring staff, or who can support career development. Students’ programme choices were not necessarily well informed and as such they may have a limited understanding of their employment destinations. For these students it is difficult to be strategic if there is not a clear career plan or ‘end game’. There is a danger that they may ‘drift’ through HE. In addition, it is important to recognise social and structural inequalities that put FiF students at a disadvantage. Many ‘graduate’ careers lack clear routes to employment and therefore students may become mystified in trying understand the field. FiF students might not be able to call upon family members to support career plans. In the same ways that their habitus limited HE choice, it may also limit career planning. Achieving a degree will not level this playing field. HE students need time, support and resources from HEIs to engage in career planning early in their degrees.

### **5.2.3 Connecting study to future employment; “*People always want experience*”**

Some students in the study recognised that a degree was only the ‘first tick on a CV’ (Brown et al., 2003 cited by Burke, 2016:51) and that the chances of securing graduate employment can be improved through employment orientated extra curricula activities (ECA) (Bathmaker et al., 2013; 2016; Greenbank, 2015) and developing social capital in the field of employment (Bathmaker et al., 2013; Burke, 2016; Threadgold et al., 2018). Bourdieu contends that the ‘economic and social yield of the educational qualification depends on the social capital, again inherited, which can be used to back it up’ (Bourdieu, 1986:243). FiF students did not have high levels of inherited social capital. Some students therefore developed strategies to develop their own professional networks, but this can be challenging in unfamiliar fields.



There were examples of students having symbiotic connections between their professional networks, jobs, and HE study.

They're completely combined. Everything I do at Uni, I bring into work. Everything I do at work, I can bring into University ... as soon as the position came up, the management approached me. They were like 'You'll be the best person for this' (Yvonne, FEC).

[T]he course I'm doing doesn't lead ... directly into a profession... I've changed my job since doing the course and, if I'm honest, I think being able to say that I was .... undertaking a degree level course probably got me the interview ... it certainly helped me confidence-wise (Stephanie, FEC).

Students' existing employment-orientated social and cultural capital was derived from their existing non-graduate jobs. Whilst studying HE positively changed self-conception and employers' perceptions, it did not necessarily facilitate access to a profession or significant wage premiums. Stephanie 'worked out' the relative value of her FD Award, and her career plan through a growing practical and symbolic mastery of the field (Bourdieu, 1990), rather than 'in advance' (Threadgold et al., 2018).

I didn't intend at that point to want to get this qualification. It's progressed along the way. It sort of started out as 'Okay, I'll give the foundation degree a go' and then when I realised I could do that, I thought yeah, obviously I'll finish the top-up year, and now I've realised I can do that, I think I'm ready to, you know, just think about taking on the role of a social worker.

I'm not even thinking of it as successfully completing the Masters. I'm thinking of having a professional qualification...and it's more about reaching my earning potential. I look at jobs that I want to do that I've got, you know, lots of the skills and knowledge ... but without the qualification ... I wouldn't have to do Masters 'for me'... [it is to] register with a Professional Body and have a profession (Stephanie, FEC).

Stephanie's example shows that it is possible to build clear career plans through HE, but this could be challenging and time-consuming. Stephanie invested 5 years to HE study, from the Access Course to the Masters to work towards becoming a Social Worker. Stephanie's entry to HE was serendipitous and tentative, her confidence grew

working through each qualification, her career plans developed embryonically, and she would not have had the academic or professional confidence to sign-up to social work training initially.

Qualifications with a professional status became most highly valued by students as they could provide access to professions. The university award coupled with Professional Body recognition symbolically conferred academic and professional competence upon the holders, and this was understood as being more readily converted into economic capital (Bourdieu, 1986).

The students in the study with clear careers plans balanced academic demands with highly relevant career experiences. In particular, students who wanted to become teachers had clear trajectories to employment. Hannah strategically took a gap year deferring her place at university. 'I was a teaching assistant in a secondary school [for a year] working with special educational needs children. People always want experience' (Hannah, University).

The need to gain experience was embedded into professional and vocationally-orientated programme and offered work placement modules.

I've been doing a work placement at [names] secondary school and there is a strong possibility that I will be working there next year as ... a supply teacher for PE, which obviously helps towards my PGCE application. Also, I was running the girl's football team ...they didn't have one so ... I put one into place...It's been really good at the moment, my placement ... leading to good opportunities...it's about who you know, isn't it? (Jake, SFC).

The HE-facilitated placement enabled students to experience structured boundary spanning experiences between HE and employment (see Brown, 2015). Students could engage with experienced professionals and begin to develop their own professional identities and discourses (Brown, 2015). Students who had clear career plans and who

already held relevant cultural and social capital could strategically deploy these resources.

Jake's placement and condensed course delivery enabled him to secure a part-time job in the school.

That's hugely benefited me ... one of the main reasons why I got into [names Russell Group University PGCE] was all my experiences... you do a practical assessment on the interview day and I don't want to sound big-headed ...but compared to the other sessions... I felt that mine was one of the best...I felt that I had the best ...teacher skills of the group (Jake, SFC).

These examples demonstrate the importance of students strategizing to achieve career orientated extra curricula experiences (Burke, 2016; Threadgold et al., 2018). In contrast to the published literature there were more 'connectors' in this study who strategically aligned part-time work, rather than those who worked just to fund their 'lifestyle' (Hodgson and Spours, 2001; Greenbank, 2015). This is perhaps due to the number of mature students who were engaged in the study where part of their return was connected to employment. The focus upon the employability agenda across the sector draws the illusio of students and staff. As the three institutions had smaller student cohorts it is possible that staff and students had closer relationships and were able to discuss wider issues, including employability, more frequently than might be achieved in courses and institutions with very high numbers of students. The vocational nature of FDs might also have drawn students more overtly to issues of employability.

There are a number of implications for mature students. Those who initially connected their existing employment with FDs may find these qualifications enhance vocational employment but alone may not facilitate (professional) career change. Whilst there were examples that students could gain promotion in fields there were not significant earning premiums. This was not something that concerned all students, but those who were

focussed on increasing their earning potential may be disappointed or require further qualifications. There is evidence of the need to support returning mature students who may feel less academically confident upon entry to HE, but who successfully and progressively build a long-term trajectory to professional employment. Many degrees can lack specific career destinations and are orientated more towards fields. This can be challenging for students to develop clear career plans. Professions with clear ‘gate-way’ qualifications, such as PGCE/BEd have higher-value professional status, and more clearly defined career structures. Clearly defined entry qualifications provide clarity for students who may feel more confident to invest labour-time in accumulating academic and employment capitals. Students valued placements that formed part of their degrees, these enabled them to develop social and cultural capital with employers. The evidence suggests that having connections to ‘industry’ during year 2 gives students enough time and capacity to make strategic decisions to support employment whilst still in HE. Students appeared to have internalised neoliberal ideology that they were largely responsible for their own employment plans, and as identified there appeared limited engagement with Career Services or recognition of support from HE providers. Compacted course delivery in CHE allowed students to have clear days for work which could be used strategically. This posed risks for students who had loose career plans, as it created a ‘part-time’ mentality and ‘days off’ were used to earn money in non-career related employment (discussed in 5.2.4 below).

#### **5.2.4 Dangers of over-working; “[I] feel pretty sleepy, pretty drained”**

Hodgson and Spours’ (2001) ideal-types identify a group of ‘risk takers’ who are likely to be male and jeopardise HE through over-working in paid employment.

I think it was close to ten-fifteen hours ... part time employment that [names course manager] recommended ...I definitely didn't follow that...

I do a lot of [work]. So, I work probably two other days than I'm doing the degree ... Thursday and Friday ... Sunday overnight and ...I tend to work one of the other days. All quite long shifts, seven/eight hours ... I do come [in to college] and feel pretty sleepy, pretty drained, and I definitely don't want to be doing thirty hours in the week that I've got assignments and stuff to write.

I work part time at McDonald's regretfully... I'd much rather be working somewhere else but ... I can't leave ... due to the fact that I've got Direct Debits ... to pay so it's pretty difficult (Tom, SFC).

Low paid work was motivating him to change his circumstances, but his career plans were loose.

I definitely want to come out with the degree and move on really, whether that's in teaching, or what have you. I don't know, but it's something that motivates me ... I ... definitely don't want to be stuck in a £5.30 an hour job for the rest of my life. (Tom, SFC)

Will also over-worked, as a waiter in a diner. Balancing employment, HE studies, and playing rugby at the weekends was

stressful... annoying, [I'm] tired constantly [and] by the time Monday comes round you've got a nine o'clock lecture and you are ... 'really'. 'Really!'... trying to juggle three things at once. It's not the easiest thing in the world (Will, University).

Will and Tom's illusio was drawn to immediate economic capital to fund short-term lifestyle choices. The consequences of which was an inability to invest in valuable institutionalised cultural capital through academic programmes or valuable employment orientated ECAs (Bourdieu, 1986; Burke, 2016; Bathmaker et al., 2016).

The university curriculum was spread across the week and Will over-worked mainly at weekends. The condensed course delivery through CHE meant Tom was able to over-work during the week. In year two his time-table changed which reinforced his part-time mentality to HE.

Because it's [FD Course] running Wednesday, Thursday and Friday now, it feels like a bit of an afterthought of the week because you've got obviously Saturday, Sunday, Monday, Tuesday all before and it's

almost as if it greets you like a bit of an afterthought ... Yeah so it's difficult I guess (Tom, SFC).

The implications are clear that despite explicit warnings of over-working students were prepared to take 'risks' to fund their immediate lifestyles. Rather than maintaining existing part-time employment, students should be encouraged to consider how they connect employment strategically to their future careers. There is a clear benefit to time-management and managing personal finances by working, but over-working in low-paid, low-skill, and low-status work which is not connected to course programmes or career ambitions may be best avoided. Over-working reduces time for investment in academic or career-orientated activity and these risks should also be made as explicit to students as possible and HE providers should consider how best to support students who over-work.

### **5.3. Transformations through HE**

The sections above identify some of the ways that HE could be transformational, personally, socially, academically and through careers. Section (5.3.1 below) considers the ways students who faced significant personal or academic challenges in school transformed their habitus through HE. In contrast some young CHE students harboured doubts that they might have 'missed-out' staying in their 'comfort-zone'. Section (5.2.3 below) considers how FiF students' HE study transformed family doxa and expanded the 'field of possibles' (Bourdieu, 1984: 110) in education and careers.

#### **5.3.1 Personal Transformations: *"I've proved to myself that I can do it" – "the best thing I did was I changed myself and I wasn't afraid to"***

Christie (2009) identifies how 'day students' from WP backgrounds were concerned by *doing HE*, rather than, *being HE students*. *Doing HE* was characterised by a need to fit HE study around local lives which limited its transformative potential. Some younger SFC students suggested that they did not have transformational experiences. Their

desire to stay in their local ‘comfort-zone’ and functional and instrumental approaches to HE did not create ‘dialectical confrontation’, or discontinuity between habitus and fields (Bourdieu, 2002; Reay, 2004).

Yeah there's always the nagging feeling that I could've gone away and done it somewhere else ... I'm sure it would've been greater for me on a personal level. I just don't know, my kind of level of life here is probably better. I have a nicer car and I live in a nice house and stuff like that, rather than living off of cocoa pops at university, but yeah there is always that nagging feeling that it may have actually improved me to go away (Tom, SFC)

Tom appears to suggest that his local life restricted his personal development. This is not to suggest young local students were in stasis or did not have meaningful experiences. Tom, said he valued becoming “more analytical” and that he had developed his communication skills, “more life skills, rather than just academic kind-of skills” (Tom, SFC).

Students who had difficulties at school saw HE as a ‘second chance’ and had narratives with redemptive qualities where HE challenged their established learning identities (Crozier and Reay, 2010; Merrill, 2012). Stephanie valued the confidence she developed through HE.

Absolutely [studying HE is] *just for me* because from starting off thinking I couldn't do it at all, to progressing to the second year and mostly getting that sort of distinction mark for everything, I've proved to *myself* that I can do it (Stephanie, FEC [original emphasis]).

Stephanie's academic and career confidence grew as she ‘assimilat[ed] to the field’ (O'Shea 2015), and gained confidence continue HE study which was internalised, and largely private.

Roger's class mates jokingly called him the ‘poster-boy’ as his image was used to market HE on a large billboard outside the SFC.

When I was at school ... I did struggle, and I think people see me as ... I don't know, the stupid one, or the thick one, or non-academic. I think now when people see [the poster], ‘Oh hang on, what's he in there for,

and he's doing Higher Education'. I don't know, it's a bit of a point to prove ... I might not have had the best start, *but I can do it, and I'm doing it now* (Roger, SFC [original emphasis]).

Roger's image was symbolic and public. It reified his change in self-conception and desire to identify, and be identified, as educated (Nash, 2002). Student identity was actively constructed and therefore nagging doubts inscribed in habitus from home and school could resurface. The new 'learner identities' (Crozier and Reay, 2010; Merrill, 2012) were not fully reconciled. Roger's personal struggle with dyslexia and in education in general was discussed at his interview for his PGCE.

I went to [names Russell Group university] they actually said that I'd obviously come a long way and I've shown in my academic capabilities since I've started the degree and they said, 'You've got a lot to give'. So that kind of pulled me up a bit ... and through the letter and they said kind of that 'You shouldn't really doubt yourself as much' (Roger, SFC).

His educational challenges still inscribed his habitus; however, he could deploy his story as a powerful form of symbolic cultural capital. 'I think that's why I want to go into teaching because I want to support the underdog' (Roger, SFC).

As discussed previously, Daniel also had personal struggles in education. He sought personal transformation,

I was like 'Right, do I want to be what I am now in sort of ten years' time', the answer's no. I want to be someone better, someone different, someone that's actually doing something (Daniel, University Student).

Daniel actively developed social and cultural capital through the Student Union (identified above) and said he most valued the confidence he gained.

I feel a lot more confident ... more willing and open. [F]our years ago I'd never dream of like replying to you and saying I'll help you out [taking part in the research]. Like moving-in day, greeting people, helping them move their stuff in ... I'd never in a million years have done that four years ago ... my mates ... they'd have laughed you out [of] the place. Now, you know, everyone sort of knows me on campus. I never used to be 'that sort of guy'...the first few days of Uni I was a bit nervous ...one day I just woke up and went 'you can be who you want to be'...'here's my clean slate' ... not enough people



embrace it ... the best thing I did was I changed myself and I wasn't afraid to (Daniel, University).

Daniel's epiphany (Merrill and West, 2009) was his explicit recognition of the transformational potential of HE (Merrill, 2012) for 'working out' and 'reconstructing identit[y], disposition and habitus' (Merrill, 2009: 134).

I think I said about it last time, back home I sort of stuck to my friends ... a clique ... I didn't really do anything ... I didn't have the confidence to try anything new, but since I've come to uni, you have to...if you've got no confidence, you'll struggle because it's a different world ... I had to adapt.

So, I spent a lot of the time sort of talking to people but the most interesting thing I think is one of my best friends now is someone that I would never ever be best friends with back home ... I don't know how, we just became best mates, sort of clicked. ... I remember sort of thinking one day actually, like he's nothing like ... Like back home I sort of wouldn't even talk to him ... I think that's when I thought 'oh God, I need to start really broadening'. It's where I'd sort of been so in my bubble back home, I was like what if back home I missed out on people like this? (Daniel, University).

There is reflexivity in the significant transformative potential through 'struggle' in a 'different world'. In his first interview Daniel said he felt he had a divided identify (or Habitus clivé) from 'home' and 'university' (Byrom and Lightfoot, 2012; Abrahams and Ingram, 2013; Friedman, 2016; Luzeckyj et al., 2017). Daniel embraced this,

I thought 'I quite like this', sort of you know, it's different and then I sort of gained these two lives. I had my [names home] life and my [name university] life and I was like I can just ease in and out of them as and when I want. I was like 'I really like this' (Daniel, University)

Luzeckyj et al. (2017) discuss the potential challenges of managing feelings of disjunction, but this was not the case for Daniel. By the second interview Daniel discussed a 'resolved' habitus where his 'university identity' had 'taken over' his old identity'. This was in marked contrast to CHE students' desire for continuity in a 'comfort zone' to avoid such confrontations of habitus.

Students who moved away took greater social risks, but evidence from this study suggests there are greater potential for transformation (if this is the desired outcome). Geographic mobility disrupted local relationships and created opportunity to develop new relationships in new environments. Significant mobility, such as moving a long way from home is only part of this picture though. Donald, a mature student, managed his local mobility (Holdsworth, 2009; Finn, 2017) to enter an unfamiliar CHE environment. When asked what he most valued about his HE experience he said.

Not so much... any sort of value, what is on the course. What it's given me is...confidence...a new beginning really, that thirst for knowledge...just wanting to know more. That's honestly been the best thing. It's sort of reignited my fire...made me ... more ambitious (Donald, FEC).

All students were studying in 'accessible' WP institutions. Regardless of programme or setting most students reported a boost in academic confidence gained through their growing practical mastery at a new academic level. The symbolic nature of participation in HE offered the potential to transform learner and social identities, but this did appear to require a 'leap-of-faith', into unknown HE environments, given the lack of previous familial engagement in HE.

The implications from this section demonstrate the potential personal benefits derived from HE study. A geographical 'move' away provided a break from existing expectations and relationships and opportunities to develop social and cultural capital in transformative ways. Mature students seemed able to experience transformations staying within existing education providers, but young students seemed too comfortable and this comfort appears to encourage instrumental approaches for this group. The implications are that young students should be encouraged to move education providers yet given neoliberal pressures this might not be encouraged in practice.

### **5.3.2 ‘Higher Education is for the likes of us; “*I would love them to go to uni, I really would*” “*I don’t want them to limit their limitations*”**

As outlined in chapter 4, FiF students identified how going to HE was outside their families’ field of possibilities, HE study was quite a radical departure from family expectation and FiF students acted as pioneers, pathfinders, and role models to open up new possibilities for their families’ in education. Through the period of study, HE became part of the every-day taken-for-granted conversation, which challenged wider family members’ own expectations for education. For example, Stephanie’s partner enrolled on an additional Maths course to support her and gain a qualification for himself. Yvonne encouraged her boyfriend to take an IT course alongside his job, “he was talking about all the things he wanted to do in life and he never did so I got him to enrol” (Yvonne, FEC). Richard had a younger brother who had twice started but dropped out of college. Richard said studying HE was

quite important. I mean, if it motivates my brother...he is academically gifted, more so than me... but if I show him that it’s possible, you can achieve good grades and eventually a good job, hopefully he tries to mimic, or even better than what I achieve (Richard, FEC).

In his second interview, following his transition to university, Richard’s brother took even more interest.

My brother asks me a lot more questions... now he knows that I’m at an ‘actual university’ ... because he gave up education a couple of years ago... I think at some stage in his life he would like to return as a mature student.... So, I think me coming to [names university] it’s definitely, I would hope, inspired him to do the same thing at some point in his life (Richard, University).

Roger said his wife had been inspired by his return to study and was contemplating a future career in teaching. Additionally, his mother who was also dyslexic, had returned to education.

Since I've been doing this course, she's gone back and she's doing NVQs. Yeah so, I was like 'Oh wow'. She's doing stuff and we'll have a chat and she's like 'Oh I've got to do my essay tonight'. I was like 'I can't believe we're chatting about this...She might be thinking 'Hang on a minute' [I can do this too] (Roger, SFC).

Roger's profound identify transformation also impacted upon his young son's aspirations for their career and HE study. HE became part of the family conversation.

The way I look at life...before I was just ticking over...it's given me belief. Belief and hope and shown me that I can achieve ...what's that going to open up for my boys and what they're going to then be able to achieve?

Academically I've improved tenfold ... I don't want my children to go through the same and be missed out. So, it's kind of a bit more of developing myself to develop them ... I don't want them to limit their limitations and what they believe they're able to do. My oldest is talking about uni ... the other day "Oh yeah I don't think I want ...to be a policeman anymore. I want to be a science teacher", and I was like 'Oh wow. I would love them to go to uni, I really would. ... people in my family don't normally go to uni (Roger, SFC).

'What grade did you get Dad?' ... 'Awesome, that's going to be like a 2:1 isn't it?'. I was like 'Yeah, yeah, yeah'. [or] they're like 'Oh yeah what did you get? and they guess my grade ... in the house before we go out, there's like a little 'You'll get your grade back today, what's it going to be?'. They'll write down who thinks I'll get what (Roger, SFC).

FiF students breaking the mould could transform family doxa to open new "field[s] of... possibles" (Bourdieu, 1984: 110). As others have identified, habitus transformation can positively influence children and wider family (Feinstein et al., 2008; Crozier and Raye, 2011; O'Shea, 2015). Their children would then have the cultural capital and habitus alignment to 'fit in' to HE (Crozier et al. 2008)

The implications from this section demonstrate how FiF study can have profound impacts on individuals and their wider families. Impacts can be immediate through other family members returning to education, or through longer-term education and career aspirations which change family doxa and potentially inscribe the habitus of wider family members or children. FiF students can help to alleviate educational

disadvantage and offer family members insight into HE that they themselves did not have. HE can be a powerful force for change beyond the immediate person who is FiF to study HE, and this is absent from the HE policy discourse which is focussed on graduate employability.

## **5.4 Summary discussion**

As new entrants to the field, FiF students were relatively unsure what their HE experiences would be like in advance. Students all had to invest significant labour-time to fitting-in within HE environments. The extent to which students' *illusio* was drawn to academic, social, and employment domains was influenced by the student(s), the institution, the opportunities for new social and cultural experiences, and how students connected HE to employment trajectories. Students could develop instrumental approaches to HE or experience transformative experiences that fundamentally shaped *habitus* of students and their families. The implications outlined in chapters 4 and 5 are now considered in chapter 6.

## **6.0 Chapter 6: Implications for policy and Practice**

This chapter draws together issues concerned with FiF students' HE choices (chapter 4), and experiences (chapter 5). Since the inception of this doctoral study, there has been an increased interest in 'student experience' from the government, HEIs, and the media. In order that my research maintains contemporary salience to students, institutions, and policy makers, I outline below significant policy developments and their implication for practice (6.1). The remainder of the chapter is structured into two major sections that consider the implications for policy and practice on HE choice (6.2) and HE experience (6.3).

### **6.1 Contemporary policy and sector developments**

The DfBIS's (2016) publication 'Success as a Knowledge Economy: Teaching Excellence, Social Mobility and Student Choice' was a significant intervention from government. It further promoted market competition, introduced the TEF, and instigated the major reorganisation of sector agencies, resulting in the creation of the Office for Students (OfS). Figure 6.1 (below) outlines the four objectives of the OfS which align to the research questions on HE choice and what students value about HE. Essentially, the OfS are concerned with issues of access, experience, outcome, and value for money (VFM). As I have previously identified, academic aspects of the 'student experience' often take prominence, and this is the case with the OfS's second policy objective (below). As I have shown, students evaluate their HE experience well-beyond a narrow academic focus. The OfS's third objective takes account of employment success and refers to 'fulfilling lives'. Students in the study were clear that they valued the social and transformational aspects of HE well beyond HE being a site for 'job training'. The OfS currently only measures graduate employment outcomes via DLHE and LEO data, so it is unclear how 'fulfilling lives' is measured, evaluated, and included within metrics (which drive institutional behaviour). Lastly, the OfS explicitly recognises that

perceptions of VFM operate across all aspects of HE. I consider VFM to be problematic, as this narrows the focus to economic issues, where I have shown students spend ‘labour-time’ and value their experience well-beyond an economic discourse. I explored how FiF students had a limited understanding of the financial implications of HE, and how the current finance system lacks transparency to both students and taxpayers. The cost of HE is part of the Augar review into post-18 education announced by Prime Minister May, in February 2018 (DfE and May, 2018). There are four substantive objectives of the Augar review outlined below.



**Figure 3 OfS objectives (OfS, 2019a)**

1. Post-18 informed choice; providing information on earning potentials across academic, technical or vocational routes.
2. Value for money: review the graduate contributions to study ensuring transparency of costs, so this does ‘not stop people from accessing higher education or training’.
3. Access: ‘to people from all backgrounds to post-18 education supporting disadvantaged students’.
4. Skills: supporting the long-term economy and UK competitiveness (Gov.UK, 2018).

The doxa of neoliberalism promotes an economic framing evident in discourses of VFM and competition. The DfBIS (2016:15) states that the ‘OfS will be explicitly pro-competition and pro-student choice’, and similarly the first paragraph of the Terms of Reference (ToR) of the Augar review state that government wishes to ‘incentivise choice and competition across the sector’. These premises have a profound impact on the field of HE and the student experience’, as Ball so powerfully argues:

Neoliberalism gets into our minds and our souls, into the ways in which we think about what we do, and into our social relations with others. It is about how we relate to our students and our colleagues and our participation in new courses and forms of pedagogy and our ‘knowledge production’ (Ball, 2012:18).

### **6.2.1 The implication of pre-HE experiences from family and school**

The study confirms that many of the issues around choice have antecedence from the family (Burke, 2016) and school experiences which inscribe habitus and create challenges for FiF students to establish a trajectory to HE (see figure 1, chapter 4). FiF students demonstrated that they were not completely constrained by habitus, but it shaped horizons of choice of what felt possible or probable in HE study (Bourdieu, 1984; 1990).

The issues identified through the narratives of the 15 FiF students in this study concerning their trajectories to HE has been confirmed by recent research by OFFA and UCAS.

The survey responses indicate that having university as a goal from age ten or earlier makes a significant contribution to future success – and those from disadvantaged backgrounds are the most likely to have adopted that goal much later in their education. Advice and guidance post-16, while valuable in itself, is too late for many (UCAS, 2016:4).

An established body of evidence suggests that interventions targeting 16-19 year olds is mainly effective in influencing the choice of subject and institution rather than actually widening participation as the effects of disadvantage are already manifest at Level 2 (GCSE) (OFFA cited in Harrison et al., 2018:6)



FiF students are in a position of educational disadvantage due to their familial background (O'Shea, 2015; Luzeckyj et al., 2017). The FiF students in the study raised concerns about school support, and even 'good schools' with a strong tradition of supporting transitions to 'good universities' failed to support FiF students. FiF students can be 'cooled out' (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990:183) of the idea that university is for the 'the likes of us' (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990:116). FiF students felt overlooked as their school would prioritise students with clear HE intentions. UCAS has substantiated this point as a wider sectoral issue.

[T]he generic advice and guidance provided by schools and colleges is often directed most at those who arguably least need it, the high achievers already aspiring to higher tariff universities... the interventions provided by schools themselves or by third sector organisations, tend to be targeted at a narrow group of young people, already close to making the decision to progress to HE. A much larger group has been left behind, disaffected, and disenfranchised (UCAS, 2016:4).

The narrative accounts of FiF students highlight the damage that such processes can cause to individuals' self-confidence and self-efficacy. Given the evidence, it can be assumed that similar stories are repeated across HE. This inequality of opportunity may damage individuals' life-chances, sense of fairness, and social mobility, as championed in HE policy. Students' narratives shine a light on the difficulties FiF students face in building trajectories to HE in schools and colleges, and how despite this being a well-recognised issue over several decades in academic research and HE policy, the issue is stubbornly persistent to overcome in practice.

### **6.2.2 HE aspiration and outreach activity**

There is recognition by government of the challenges for social mobility and the reproductive influence of parents' social position (DfE, 2018). Beyond families, it has been long-recognised in WP policy and practice, that schools and universities have an important role in raising aspiration and facilitating access (Dearing, 1997; Reay, 1998).

The FiF students in this study did not indicate that they had been involved with *any* outreach activity from universities and as discussed in chapter 4 they felt support from school was very limited.

Practical and financial issues can limit outreach engagement ‘transport costs are a significant barrier for 58% of schools and colleges’ (UniTasterDays.com, 2019:4).

Beyond these practicalities, schools and colleges have a key role to play in mediating the relationship between WP target groups and HEIs. With the introduction of higher tuition fees, OFFA, (now OfS) requires HEIs to have access and participation plans that raise both access, aspiration, and attainment for underrepresented groups (OFFA, 2018; OfS, 2019a; 2019b). FiF is not a recognised priority group (OfS, 2019b) although some FiF students may fall within other recognised priority categories. There is a danger then that FiF students will continue to be marginalised and overlooked.

OfS research identifies that campus visits can raise HE aspirations and build relationships with schools; however, concern is expressed that schools might not appropriately target WP students (Harrison et al., 2018:29). Since the period of data collection, the government has recognised the need to provide better support and guidance to students in schools and colleges, framed through a discourse of careers guidance (see DfE, 2017; 2018). The DfE (2017) career strategy uses Gatsby best-practice benchmarks. Using these, the DfE (2018b) states that by the age of 16 all students are expected to have a meaningful engagement with a Sixth Form, FEC, apprenticeship providers, or HEI. ‘By the age of 18, all pupils *who are considering applying for university* should have had at least two visits to universities to meet staff and pupils’ (DfE, 2018:8 [my emphasis]).

Outreach and aspiration raising are problematic if FiF students are not clearly expressing a desire to apply to university until late in the admissions cycle, messages

may not cut-through given misalignment of habitus and field. The DfE's (2017) career strategy may compound this as students may not have clear career goals at such a young age (UCAS, 2016) and career choices may be constrained through habitus (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990; Burke, 2016). WP students could continue to be guided towards SFC, apprenticeships or FE education, reproducing the status quo. As students in the study show, HE also provides a space in which to explore career options, but this will not be available to all, if students are subtly streamed into different groups through conscious or unconscious processes.

### **6.2.3 Sticking to what you know**

As shown in chapter 4, FiF students were ambivalent towards the hierarchical position of the WP university and the CHE providers as they did not have a good understanding of the field. Instead, their choices were idiosyncratic or emotionally connected to existing providers. Nine out of fifteen FiF students did not engage with active planning beyond their existing, or local provider. They had not been drawn to university as 'a traditional rite of passage' early in their trajectory to HE (Thomas and Hanson, 2014), and taking late decisions can feel overwhelming (DfE, 2018). CHE students, therefore, sought the familiarity of an existing provider, while the university students sought 'adventure' to 'get away' to a university that felt geographically and culturally accessible.

The SFC students lived in a HE 'cold spot' where there was no local university. CHE students' *illusio* was drawn to friends, teachers, and institutions which were familiar, in order to minimise social and academic risk (Morrison, 2009). Christie (2007:2453) contends that the local availability of HE is 'an important dimension of the new inequalities between home and away students.' There is a need to improve the geographic distribution of good quality HE provision, and to raise aspirations to university so that moving away feels like a viable option for 'the likes of me' (Maton, 2012).

Harrison et al. (2018:27) contend that FECs do not engage with outreach activities as universities do; instead, they focus on recruiting Key Stage 4 students onto college-based level 3 courses, and then internally to HE courses through ‘inreach’ recruitment. As outlined in Chapter 4 the students in the SFC demonstrated how a key staff member focussed on the internal HE option overlooking external options. There is a need to problematize these inreach practices. In principle, a level 3 qualification opens access to young people and mature students to a wide range of HE opportunities. However, inreach practices can limit the horizons of FiF students; particularly students who rely on ‘hot knowledge’ from CHE staff.

Competition for HE students is part of the logic of neoliberalism and the notion of ‘a market’ suggests that consumers are aware of a variety of suppliers, not just their existing provider. CHE staff operate in a paradoxical position; they are not immune from pressures to recruit and retain HE students, while simultaneously being expected to act altruistically in the best interests of students by highlighting a variety of HE choices. If SFC and FEC staff effectively support transitions to university, they may lose the very students that make CHE viable. In supporting transitions, CHE may then be a casualty of increased market competition and be forced to ‘close some or all of their courses, or to exit the market completely’ (DfBIS, 2016:10). The notion of a HE market is less problematic in this regard for universities as they do not have an internal market of post-16 students. However, they still aim to actively recruit students, so their advice is also clearly not impartial. These issues reinforce the problematic nature of the HE market.

#### **6.2.4 Price competition in HE: promoting and seeking the ‘cheapest’ option?**

The cost of HE was a factor in SFC students’ HE choice. Lower fees were ‘sold’ to students by a HE course manager, alongside the ‘promotion’ of other ways to reduce costs, such as living at home and working part-time. The headline annual ‘saving’ on tuition fees of £3000 per year, or £9,000 over a degree, was promoted as a ‘discount’

compared to university fees. In tandem with this, some students were not aware that ‘loan’ repayment was contingent upon future earnings, irrespective of the size of the total debt. Martin Lewis, ‘Money Saving Expert’ and HE campaigner, is clear that it is not a ‘loan’ in any conventional sense.

The solution is to change the name. Language is powerful. In some countries around the world that use our student finance system, repayments are called a contribution. In the UK we (...) misname it a loan – that’s what’s killing us. With the constant barrage about the 2012 increase in tuition fees we risk damaging a generation of youth because of it (Lewis, 2013).

The discourse of the cost of HE is complex and confusing since it is articulated as a ‘personal cost’ through a ‘loan’, alongside seemingly contradictory statements that ‘[f]or all students, studying for a degree will be a risk-free activity’ (Browne, 2010:3). The discourse is inconsistent as the government also promotes price competition, and frames HE as a ‘private good’, with a graduate salary a ‘private benefit’ (Browne, 2010). It is understandable that CHE staff and FiF students’ behaviour was shaped by these conflicting messages and taking steps to mitigate debt (Harrison et al., 2015) as it *felt* like a private risk (see 6.2.2 for further discussion). UniTasterDays.com’s (2019:4) research with careers advisors confirms that this issue is widespread; 50% of survey respondents said the greatest barrier to university was the ‘cost of tuition fees’ and the cost of living is also off-putting. ‘The real risk with ending grants is the fact larger loans can be a psychological deterrent, especially to those from non-university backgrounds’ (Lewis, 2018). Fees can be misunderstood or misrepresented, as part of recruitment strategy by ‘cheaper’ providers who feel unable to compete on the grounds of prestige, so compete on price particularly through inreach recruitment. This is a significant issue as students may be cooled out of HE study altogether, or feel priced out of the full-cost of university (see 5.2.6).

### **5.2.5 Challenging the notion of informed choice: an absence of engagement with student experience metrics**

The government highlighted the variations in student outcomes in ‘Success as a Knowledge Economy’ (DfBIS, 2016). Despite a wide recognition elsewhere of how wider socio-economic factors strongly influence these student outcomes, the government states that ‘[a]t the heart of this lies insufficient competition and a lack of informed choice’ (DfBIS, 2016:8). Rather than recognising the complexity of societal inequality, a facile solution of more competition and more information is prescribed.

By introducing more competition and informed choice into higher education, we will deliver better outcomes and value for students, employers and the taxpayers who underwrite the system (DFBIS, 2016:8).

The government, its agencies, and HEIs have all become increasingly orientated towards student experience metrics, rather than addressing the root-causes of unequal graduate outcomes. To compound this, the FiF students in the study did not indicate that student experience information available when they made their HE choice had any significant influence upon their choice-making behaviours. Some students said they used UCAS and university websites. However, beyond this, students did not refer to official sources of information’ such as Unistats (no date), on satisfaction from NSS results, employment, or league tables data, as having any influence on their choices. The extent to which adding new and more complex layers of student experience metrics becomes highly questionable at this stage, for this group of students.

The Browne review established the premise of ‘well informed, discerning students’ (Browne, 2010:8). However, all of the FiF students in this study challenge this neoliberal perspective. Students did not behave like ‘informed consumers’ as they were

not equipped to make fully informed choices given their lack of field familiarity.

Choices were constrained by other hidden social, economic, and educational inequalities. The implication is that more advantaged families with a complex understanding of the field may use student experience data to maintain their social and educational advantage through more sophisticated choice-making decisions and behaviours. Student experience data may create a veneer that such information levels-the-playing-field but might instead have the potential to continue to mask inequality through the notion of ‘informed choice’.

#### **6.2.6 Widening Participation– masking inequality?**

As identified in the literature review, when FDs were launched in 2003, there was an explicit statement that these would help to protect the status of Honours Degrees (DfEE, 2000; DfES, 2003a; DfES, 2003b). Some WP students were characterised as ‘problematic and high-risk’ and streamed toward non-traditional qualifications in non-traditional FEC settings (Bathmaker et al. 2008; Crozier and Reay, 2011). It was argued that this masked inequality of access of WP students to university (Crozier and Reay, 2011; Burke, 2011).

Universities are complicit in the trick as they mask social and cultural hierarchies by ‘concealing social relations under the guise of technical selection’ (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990:153) which ‘transmute ... social inequality into a specifically educational inequality’ (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990:158). Universities use their hierarchical field advantage to provide a ‘meritocratic seal of academic consecration’ (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990: ix-x) to FD awards studied in CHE, which obfuscates their lower cultural values. Universities then compete for more profitable full-fee paying dominant groups. The government recognises issues of inequality but does not appear to consider that its policies and practices (as outlined above) may have unintended consequences for WP students. The government explicitly recognises WP challenges.

[W]idening participation in higher education is a priority for this Government and will help to drive social mobility. Lifting the cap has liberalised the HE market 18.2% of students entering HE in 2015/2016 came from disadvantaged backgrounds (DfBIS, 2015:36). But only 3% of students from disadvantaged backgrounds enter highly selective universities compared to 21% of young people from the most advantaged background (DfBIS, 2015:37).

However, the government does not appear to consider that its policies and practices (as outlined above) contribute to inequality through its neoliberal policies and market mechanisms, such as fee differentiation, student experience data, and CHE. WP students suffer symbolic violence by being marginalised from mainstream HE. HE policy and practice seem to continue to reproduce hierarchies in the field, and HE reproduces social inequality, rather than challenging it.

### **6.3 Implications for FiF students' experiences of HE**

HE FiF students' illusio had been drawn to play the 'game' of HE in academic, social, and employment field-games. There is an opportunity-cost in investing labour-time and students made complex investments based on what they valued in institutions that significantly shaped overall HE experiences. Each institution's doxic logic influenced field games that drew illusio of students in different ways. Students were ambivalent about HE institutions when they made their initial HE choice and learned local rules through 'practice'. Colley and Guéry (2015) suggest that players may not play the game whole-heartedly. 'Homology between the space of positions and the space of dispositions is never perfect and there are always some agents 'out on a limb', displaced, out of place and ill at ease' (Colley and Guéry, 2015:117 citing Bourdieu, 2000:157). Being temporarily out on a limb has the potential to offer transformation, but feeling this way for too long can shatter confidence in capital investment (discussed below).



### 6.3.1 Valuing personal development and transformations: powerful connections in the social and academic domain

Students are active agents in the process of capital development (Bourdieu, 1990) through their investments in field games. Students expressed a difference between what they *valued* and what they *enjoyed* and recognised each was not necessarily always aligned. Illusio could be drawn to non-dominate field games, such as spending time socialising, or over-working in part-time jobs; students recognised this was not a strategic investment in labour-time, but socialising was a valuable part of the wider student experience and working felt like a necessity (see chapter 5).

The government, through the OFS, recognise that students' value 'fulfilling HE experiences' which can 'enrich[es] lives, and careers'; but focus on academic aspects (objective 2) and only measure employment outcomes; so, it is clear where the real focus lies (OfS, 2019a). Some students became very highly invested in HE and they valued and embraced the opportunity for personal development and saw HE as a transitional space of identity development and transformation which were both personal and professionally orientated.

Students did not frame their discussions of transformations in negative ways, as if they were somehow previously 'deficit'. They valued HE as it provided time and facilitated opportunities for personal growth and reflection, and to work out what they valued, and where passions and interests lay. HE was described by students as being: '*just for me*'; about '*finding out who you really are*'; that it '*changed my life*'; '*the best thing I did was I changed myself*'; and '*it's given me and hope and shown me that I can achieve ...what's that going to open up for my boys and what they're going to then be able to achieve*'. These narratives (see chapter 5) are what some students *really* valued about their HE experience. FiF students valued their FiF status, they were able to 'break-the-

mould', and they felt this would support their family in the future. These are often not the things that are discussed in policy discourse and focussing too heavily on employment misses some of the *real* value of HE and can be problematic (discussed in 6.3.2 below).

If students are seeking personal development and a significant change, the experiences of students in the study suggest that this is achieved through 'out-of-environment-experiences' (Burke, 2015) which create a 'dialectical confrontation' of habitus (Bourdieu, 2000). Mature students experienced dialectical confrontations through returning to education and overcoming previous educational challenges, which created profound changes in self-confidence, there were particular challenges for lone mature students on CHE courses (see chapter 5).

University students experienced a habitus 'shock' by moving away. Meeting new people developed new social and cultural capitals in their new academic and social world at university, with reshaped habitus (Bourdieu, 2000; Reay, 2004). Good social relationships in academic classes are important at a course level and living with peers particularly in the first year was important. Wider social experiences through SU clubs and activities helped to develop diverse and meaningful relationships which are highly valued.

Younger CHE students in the study aimed to remain in their 'comfort-zone' to avoid feeling like a fish-out-of-water (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992). However, students did not meet many new students or staff, so opportunities to build new social and cultural capital were limited (Stuart, 2006). The comfort-zone could be frustrating, and not that 'comfortable' in practice, as students' position within the institution had changed with their new HE status. Paradoxically, students felt out-of-place in a familiar setting as the younger CHE environment did not reflect students' idealised view of HE (see 6.3.3

below). The implication is that young FiF students may gain more from their HE experiences by moving to a new, unfamiliar HE provider. However, this goes against neoliberal inreach recruitment practices for CHE (discussed above).

Aiming to make transitions as smooth as possible seems logical. There is evidence to suggest that successful transitions are those which are ‘manageably-challenging’ as these offer the potential for personal and academic growth. Greater recognition may help to encourage students to leave their ‘comfort zones’, as by their nature these restrict growth opportunities. Reframing a ‘successful’ transition to HE as one which involved a period of uncomfortable adjustment might be useful so when students do inevitably feel-out-of-place they are prepared for this. It would appear that growth is more likely by moving away from home, or perhaps by seeking an unfamiliar HE provider.

The social networks – and skills and capabilities – developed in the educational process do not however, simply follow from attendance at educational institutions. They emerge from complex interactions in numerous contexts. The effects of education depend on the nature of that experience: on interactions with peers, teachers and others; and on the ethos, pedagogy, assessment and curricula in the learning environment (Feinstein et al., 2008:22).

### **6.3.2 Problematising employability and student finance.**

Students discussed career trajectories as part of their HE experience. Few FiF students had very clearly defined plans upon entry, but all students felt that a degree would be valuable in the labour market (Jarvis, 2000). Students drew on their personal and familial experiences to inform career aspirations (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990), for some this ‘did not hugely challenge ... existing habitus, [as it] retain[ed] historical baggage from the past’ (Friedman, 2015:119), but four students were working towards becoming teachers.

Students engaged with employability in complex ways. Defined professional roles, such as teaching and social work had clearer ‘entry criteria’ to the profession, so students felt more confident making strategic investments of ‘labour-time’ to professionally aligned extra curricula activity and part-time work in order to develop valuable educational, social, and cultural capital (Bathmaker et al., 2013; Burke, 2016). Compacted CHE timetables provided days off study to support this.

For students with less well-developed career plans, HE provided a transitional space to gain an understanding of career potential, rather than as a site of specific career ‘training’. Students were not constrained by their initial HE choice. FD Awards were *transitional qualifications* to BA qualifications, and BA degrees could be transitional to postgraduate study. Stephanie’s journey to Social Work evolved, it was not predetermined on entry. Working towards a professional occupation took her longer than signing-up to a BA Honours in Social Work, but her route demonstrates flexibility and progression in the way some students built career trajectories.

Graduate salaries did not heavily feature in students’ discussions. Daisy was disappointed by Sport Therapy salaries, however, she still highly valued her HE *experiences* in-and-of-themselves, and valued the degree for its transferable capital as it gave access to graduate training schemes. Heather was aware that there would be only a modest earnings premium in taking Early Years programmes, and learning was highly valued as it provided personal and professional development and fulfilment.

The government’s focus on graduate earnings creates a restrictive view of what constitutes a successful HE experience, and LEO data has been heavily criticised and caveated (WonkHE, 2017; GuildHE, 2018). Browne (2010:31) argued that ‘[c]ourses that deliver improved employability will prosper; those that make false promises will disappear’, without any evidence that courses ever made such false promises. The ToR

of the Augar review strike a similar tone; '[a]verage levels of graduate debt have increased, but this has not always led to higher wage returns for all graduates' (DfE, 2018c:1). Successive governments' have propagated a false doxa that successful HE is based upon a graduate wage premium, and that students only *really* value HE for employment. Students with loans in excess of £50,000 make good copy for news editors, the BBC, for example, reported OfS research under the headline 'Tuition fee value for money: I feel ripped off' (BBC, 2018).

There is a growing recognition (as discussed above) that students do not understand student finance. The Augar review seeks to, 'maintain the principle that students should contribute to the cost of their studies while ensuring that payments are progressive and income contingent' (DfE, 2018:3). Augar is yet to report his findings, but I consider that an alternative approach to student finance that accurately represents the reality of funding repayment is urgently needed. The government links courses to income tax (through LEO data) to show earning potential, this could be extended to present the actual cost of corresponding monthly fee-repayments. Including annual salary and monthly repayment costs presents a more realistic way for students to evaluate their investment and the real economic costs and benefits of HE to them. This could strengthen the principle that repayment is *only* in-line with earnings and that repayment is progressive. It might make clear that total borrowing, which is sensationalised in media reporting, is totally irrelevant for most. This might reduce the fear that HE cannot be afforded and stop students making decisions based upon headline costs and judging their success on the ground of 'graduate salary'. Some roles and course, such as Early Years and Sports Therapy, may not provide a graduate premium, but they do offer fulfilling careers for individuals who make valuable contributions to society, beyond crude pecuniary measures (Vila, 2005). I consider that the government policy must

begin to manage expectations of how ‘success’ in HE is framed. The current focus on private costs and benefits is toxic, as it skews the value of education towards only economic evaluations, which could be damaging to students, HE, and society if knowledge becomes valued only on instrumental grounds. Students valued HE in multiple ways, universities and the sector must challenge the restrictive doxa of neoliberalism.

### **6.3.3 CHE experiences – is this ‘the real thing’?**

The experiences of students in this study challenge the popular perception and literature that HE in FE has supportive WP pedagogies. Students raised concerns that they felt marginalised within the young CHE environment where FE doxa prevailed in course management and teaching, which led to doubt about the HEness of the institutions and some courses (see chapter 5). Students questioned if CHE was ‘the real thing’, which resulted in instrumental approaches to assessment and programme engagement.

The resourcing model for CHE should not be overlooked. CHEs receive at least £3,000 less per student compared to universities. This creates structural inequality in resources which further reinforces the lower ranking of CHE in the HE hierarchy. CHE students recognised the work and support of core staff, despite highlighting some limitations. CHE is characterised by high deployment hours which inevitably puts staff in challenging and stressful positions (Feather, 2011; Creasy, 2013). The Sixth Form staff were deployed to teach BTEC, A-Level, FD and BA modules.

There was evidence of recruitment and retention challenges of staff in the SFC and FEC. The SFC were reliant on a ‘casualised workforce’ and students complained about being taught by inexperienced part-time staff. A reliance on fractional houred staff is a symptom of wider underfunding in the FE sector. At the other end of the spectrum, well qualified and experienced staff could be difficult to retain within challenging CHE

environments. Some FEC students reported that their best lecturer's absence was strongly felt when she left the FEC to take up a lecturing role in a university. The SFC in this study could be considered as a 'micro' provider of HE. It had very few students, no dedicated HE staff, and no real dedicated HE facilities. Within the FEC there were similar issues of isolated cohorts. Even though the overall numbers of students was larger, the day-to-day experience of students was limited to teaching spaces and small cohort interaction which could result in quite restricted HE experiences due to limited time and resources.

#### **6.3.4 FEC, SFC, and University Collaboration**

When FD qualifications were first introduced in CHE, these programmes had clear progression routes to honours study at university. More recently there has been a growth in separate one-year Honours progression courses offered by CHE providers. Although no students in the study officially 'signed-up' to a three-year degree, most students were able to plan to study to honours level in the SFC and FEC. Given the experiences of students and the issues identified with the HEness of these environments (see chapter 5 and above), I would suggest that FDs should be the highest qualification in such environments. FD CHE programmes can boost students' personal and academic confidence, and this should support a transition to university study, if not CHE students are cooled out of university throughout the whole HE journey.

Both the internal monitoring processes in CHE, and the monitoring processes between the validating universities and CHE, seemed ineffective. The students said that they had not raised issues that were discussed in the research interviews through any formal channels. Partly because the only option was to raise issues directly with programme staff. It appears that external oversight and quality systems were orientated to academic standards, rather than the quality of the overall student experience. Universities and CHE providers seemed complicit, in paying little regard to the wider social aspects of

HE, resulting in the restricted small-class experiences. University students' benefit from a wide range of social opportunities to build social and cultural capital, but there is a tacit acceptance that these are not important to CHE students (Leahy, 2012). The doxa of FE institutions does not align well to the doxa of universities, and there are also practical issues of critical mass in micro HE (as discussed above). HE students operate in a betwixed space, not fully in FE or HE.

Part of the solution may come through greater collaborative practices between validating universities and partners colleges beyond awarding degrees in the university's name. Simm et al. (2011) suggest collaboration between HE and CHE lecturers. A more radical solution would be for universities to fundamentally reconceptualise their collaborative arrangements. Colleges and universities could move away from light touch collaboration through limited validating relationships and move towards more integrated delivery models. This could include greater collegiality including co-teaching of programmes between CHE and University staff, and sharing institutional resources, the use of universities facilities for course delivery, and joint-graduation ceremonies, which may help to allay students' fears that CHE is 'not the real thing'. Closer relationships could be built where universities provide foundation experiences in FECs or university summer schools to ensure students are prepared (and confident in their ability) to progress 'early' to university (if this is something they desire). The main barrier is the competition for students and a government policy that promotes competition rather than collaboration. Within the current model, it would seem unlikely that the FECs would wish to encourage transitions to university as they would lose HE funding for students. Given a backdrop of 8% percent real-terms funding cut per-student in FECs, and 21% in SFCs, since 2010-2011 (Institute of Fiscal Studies, 2018) it is understandable that CHE may seem comparatively well-funded and 'profitable'. Neoliberalism dominates the policy and practice and continues to shape



‘the discourses around what it means to be a student in higher education’ (Burke, 2011:172).

## **7.0 Chapter 7: Conclusion, contribution, and future directions remarks**

### **7.1 Concluding remarks**

This thesis began by posing questions about HE choice and student experience. I was motivated initially to understand how students made choices and what they valued about HE. Despite being engaged in HE practice and reading relevant academic and policy literature I was not quite prepared for the complex ways in which students made both conscious and unconscious choices and the extent to which the institution shaped their experiences. I had read about the differences between elite and non-elite universities, but the differences in experience across WP institutions, between a non-prestigious university and CHE were quite distinct. It was evident that students were not particularly able to navigate the field, so the extent to which they ‘chose’ to have these experiences is questionable. The geographic distribution of universities means that they are not easily accessible for all students and therefore immobility and strong connections to home can severely limit choice for students. Having good quality CHE then becomes important for these students, however, it would appear that the niche nature of CHE makes it impossible for students to have immersive holistic experiences in CHE environments.

Authors who write from the perspective of CHE accuse university researchers of aiming to preserve their place in the hierarchy when they highlight shorting-comings in CHE experiences. Whilst there is a clear theoretical and academic argument which can be explained through Bourdieu’s conceptual framework, and I have reflexively considered this, I still harbour concerns about small scale CHE. The challenges to resource HE in FE seems to be problematic for students, and from what the participants in this study say, it would appear to also be problematic for staff due to the overall marginalisation of HE in these environments. Staff and students seem to make the best of their HE

experience, in spite of these challenging environments. I am minded towards an analogy of Bourdieu, of competitive games in fields. As a lecturer who teaches on sports programmes, it feels sometimes like CHE are playing on the same field, but with different rules, a different team, and with a different ball. I consider the issues of CHE to be saturated by issues of inequality. I must be clear that I do not want in any way to appear to ‘blame’ FiF students for making ‘bad choices’ or CHE Lecturers for not delivering the full HEness of HE in FE.

There appears to be an acceptance that the resourcing of CHE is only *just* ‘good enough’, and the current funding model where CHE effectively receive a third-less per student than universities, that the government is complicit in accepting that suboptimal HE experiences, are ‘good enough’ for ‘WP students’. I wonder if a resourcing model would be tolerated if this was inverted, and prestigious HEIs received a third less funding than CHEs. I imagine this would be considered as a national crisis.

Neoliberalism creates the doxa of marketization in HE which promotes competition and fragmentation rather than collaboration and cooperation. I believe there is a danger of creating quasi-HE in the CHE environment. If governments do not adequately resource CHE, and if universities and their FE partners do not engage with much deeper and thoroughly collaborative approaches, then it is difficult to see that the issues this study identifies will change in another 20 years. Reay’s 1998 study drew my interest, yet the issues of inequality seem as evident in 2019 as they did then. Whilst deeper collaborations may support HE in FE, I fear that the move to remove the student number control cap will result in universities prioritising their resources towards on-site full-cost growth, and therefore withdraw resources either overtly or tacitly from the lower financial returns of collaborative provision.

In an early EdD assignment I used Bourdieu's concepts to explore foundation degree policy to practice, and at this stage of my understanding, I felt they were too determinist and too reproductive. I think reflexively that this was because I *hoped* for greater individual agency than my initial reading of Bourdieu seemed to offer. This was probably shaped by the doxa of neoliberalism, of individual responsibility and social mobility which would have shaped my thinking. The study has shown the extent to which Bourdieu theorisations have highlighted the multiple ways in which social advantage/disadvantage can be maintained and reproduced. Whilst, HE study may attend to issues of social justice, it can also reproduce social and economic injustice through unconscious reproduction of cultural capitals through habitus and field. I understand the challenges of achieving real equality in society and now feel less optimistic than I might have done at the start of the study. Whilst there is evidence of 'success' by FiF students in this study, it tends to be 'relative' and 'modest' in terms of social mobility.

HE appears to offer transformational potential beyond economic conceptions of the employability agenda. The HE students in this study valued their experiences in non-instrumental ways and, as a HE lecturer, I feel optimistic that I can make positive contributions to students' HE experiences. Although, given the nature of institutions at which I teach, and its student profile, I now have a more measured perspective of its potential. We do not live in a meritocracy and I realise that the deck in the HE game is loaded in favour of those with existing advantages.

I believe that there is a need to rebalance the HE sector away from strong neoliberal practices and orientations, although I accept that this is highly unlikely. I value education, and I fear that the road towards instrumentalism, commodification, and marketization will sap the energy, resources and creativity of HE staff as they are drawn into neoliberal economic stakes, not educational ones. Neoliberalism seems to

undermine the very purpose and autonomy of the HE sector. Resisting this neoliberal discourse and promoting HE for non-economic grounds, valued as public as well as private goods, might move back towards valuing education in non-consumerist ways (as was evident by students in the study).

Whilst I am pessimistic about some of the socially reproductive aspects of family upon habitus, I am optimistic that FiF students can positively impact upon their wider families. The FiF students in the study showed they could develop a level of practical mastery in the field. This enabled them to offer encouragement and guidance for HE to their wider family members, who will therefore not hold an FiF status themselves.

I am also optimistic as I have seen recent changes in the practices of schools and universities which aim to counter issues of lower participation by WP groups. For example, at my own university I see evidence of a change in WP projects with Primary School children more frequently being on campus, and local schools engaging in GCSE and A 'Level/BTEC revision classes. This might begin to open the minds of young students to the idea that university is for the likes of *everyone*. In my own practice I make sure I warmly greet visiting groups of students from schools when I bump into them on campus, so they see that university is a friendly and welcoming place, where the staff are interested in *you* when you visit.

One major current issue is students' tuition fees and maintenance loans. These create additional barriers to participation. Whilst these maybe progressive in design, they are often poorly understood by those without HE experience. Removing HE tuition and living costs from students and restoring maintenance grants and moving HE funding back to mainstream taxation would no-doubt alleviated fears over the cost of HE. This may encourage some FiF students to consider HE at university, rather than seeking the 'lowest cost' option of CHE.

As a FiF student myself, as are many of the educational researchers who have inspired my work, I remain optimistic of the potential of higher education to transform lives of FiF students. However, I am realistic about the impact HE can have on FiF students in its current state. Finally, I turn my attention now to the contributions this study makes (7.2), its limitations (7.3), and potential future research directions (7.4).

## **7.2 Study contributions**

The study aimed to utilise Bourdieu's well-known theoretical concepts of habitus, field and capitals alongside lesser used concepts of doxa and illusio to further our understanding of how students' interests and investments are drawn to HE study, and how these interests and investments shape students' assessments of value through HE experiences. The study makes an original contribution in the way in which it offers a view of student experience which is holistic and identifies the importance of studying social and employment domains alongside the academic domain in institutions at the margins of the field of HE.

FiF students are an under-researched equity group (Thering, 2012; O'Shea, 2015 and Luzeckyj et al., 2017) and CHE is a relatively under-researched area despite one in 12 HE students studying HE qualifications in FEC institutions (Parry, 2012). Existing CHE literature identifies what is happening in CHE, rather than focussing on the views of CHE students and comparing these to university students (Parry et al., 2012; Stoten, 2016). This study fills gaps in the published literature and therefore makes an original contribution to academic and professional knowledge.

The narrative accounts from the student participants of this study illuminate the subtle ways in which educational disadvantage is inscribed in habitus through familial and school experiences which shape trajectories of FiF HE students. Attending a good school has been seen as a way that families may enable their children to develop social,

cultural, and educational capital, to be socially mobile, and to attend university (Ball, 2003). However, the role of the family still strongly shaped doxic expectations for school and university for this group of FiF students. The study highlights how FiF students can be *cooled out* and *priced out* of university. FiF students can be overlooked through WP outreach activity resulting in continued marginalisation in mainstream HE. Evidence from this study suggests that FiF students deserve specific designation as a recognised priority group from the OFS and special attention in access and participation activities of universities.

There is evidence that a focus on achieving an academic credential can undervalue the complexity of HE student experience. Overall, the research challenges the narrow conception of HE study that is evident in the discourses, and metrics, promoted by the government through the OfS. For example the study shows that FEC can be an effective environment for mature students returning to study, and for young students with a clear career focus. However, it can be a less effective environment for young students who lack a clear career plan and who drift into CHE study as a result of a lack of other viable alternatives.

The study highlights how neoliberalism and marketisation masks inequality; for example, FiF students did not behave like ‘informed consumers’. It highlights the paradox of the HE market and problematic relationships between universities and FE providers that reinforce HE hierarchy based on competitive-collaboration (to grow market share through franchising) rather than collaborative provision to enhance the quality of non-traditional HE. CHE funding pressures creates dependence upon ‘inreach’ recruitment, which restricts, rather than broadens some students’ horizons of choice.

The research highlights the challenges of working in CHE environments for both staff and students who operate in the FEC, and in particular ‘micro HE’ in the SFC. In both CHE institutions, FEC/SFC doxa prevails, leading to the marginalisation of HE in these spaces.

### **7.3 Limitations with the study**

The study offers an insight into the complex narrative accounts of 15 FiF students across three WP providers. The small numbers of participant in this study captured rich narrative accounts of choice and experience but is of course limited by the small sample size. There are limitations too in the level of detail that can be presented to the reader within the thesis and therefore the sections of narratives presented in the study offer partial insights that illustrate key issues, rather than being able to tell the full stories of each participants.

Participants who met the sampling criteria were recruited opportunistically. Students were all white and not ethnically or culturally diverse, and therefore culturally relative references are likely to be rooted in western Christian traditions, although students were not necessarily practising Christians. The study had disproportionately high numbers of mature students; this group were not particularly targeted, but their stories added a very interesting dimension and perspective. Research participants took part voluntarily, and therefore it might be assumed that all participants felt relatively confident to share their life and HE experiences.

The claims are epistemologically and theoretically robust, which adds strength to the illustrative vignettes from students. There is an inherent limitation in the research design, but just because narrative approaches interrogate cases (rather than population-based samples) it does not mean that results cannot be generalised ‘to theoretical propositions which are, to some degree, transferable’ (Riessman, 2008:13). Narratives



are illustrative and offer insight into the experiences of FiF students and highlight the implications for policy and practice. It is possible to infer that the experience of study participants may be shared by similar groups of students in similar ‘types’ of WP institutions although further research would be required to substantiate this empirically.

The study did not seek the opinions of family members, school teachers, or HE staff and therefore alternative perspectives on the issues that FiF students discussed are not considered. A potential approach would have been to interview the lecturers in the three HEIs and family members of the students. However, given the limitation of time and resources, as sole researcher, this was not pursued, and a choice was made to focus on the students themselves as it was student experiences and their perceptions of these that the study was designed to explore.

There was an inevitable time lag between the interviews in April 2015 and 2016, and changes in the policy and practice the dynamic HE sector. Chapter 6 aims to connect the empirical data to contemporary policy to maintain its salience, but this has limitations as student experiences did not take place in the same period.

## **7.4 Future research directions**

There are a number of potential future research directions.

1. The existing group of FiF students could be invited to take part in a further longitudinal study to follow-up their reflection of HE choice, experience and post HE lives. This could include how HE impacted their wider lives and shaped their employment and if issues of (im)mobility in HE influenced post-HE-mobility.
2. There are opportunities to replicate this study in other FECs and, in particular, SFCs ‘micro HE’ environments, and other alternative providers. The

government is promoting more diversity in HE competition without necessarily giving much regard to the impacts upon student experience.

3. An interesting research dimension would also be to explore student HE experience from the perspective of their families and HE teaching and support staff. In this way the central role of the student experience could be considered by key actors who are interacting with students.
4. Contemporary policy in HE in 2019, such as the Augar review, will have implications for HE choice and potentially re-shape funding arrangements. There will be interesting opportunities to research the ways in which government frame fees, choices, access, and outcomes, (using metrics and TEF) which may be considered alongside the DfE (2018b) careers strategy and OfS/university access and participation plans. All present fruitful areas of research for FiF and general student populations.

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## Appendix 1: Reflexivity and Reflection in the research process

‘Analysing one’s relation to the object of inquiry does not mean relating the subjective experience of research and producing a self-referential and narcissistic account of this experiences. It means insisting on the social conditions which act as boundaries within which the act of knowledge becomes possible (Golsokhi et al, 2009. P. 789 cited by Colley, 2014:676).

It is worth saying something about this reflexivity before I move through the research design. Working through my methods chapter and the research project more generally has required reflexivity and a self-conscious questioning throughout the doctoral process. Methodological coherence encompasses philosophical and theoretical perspectives through the research design and the operationalisation and practical implementation of this research project. I was aware that a socially constructed perspective insists ‘we understand knowledge, reality, and truth as human constructions, [so] we have even more responsibility to think, argue, and make up our minds about our own views and then defend them’ (Burr, 2003:94). ‘This proved to be easier said than done!’ (Brown, 2016). The reflexive processes involved in the development of my research strategy have been complex, at times very unsettling, and series of ‘struggles’ to ensure coherence. Creswell (2013:76) identifies that narrative research is ‘a challenging approach to use’. Writing my Methods chapter and presenting my ideas at a postgraduate research conference were key processes in ‘working through’ and ‘working out’ my approach within the complexity of my narrative qualitative inquiry’ (Brown, 2016). Through this often long and lonely retreat into the literature and re-reading Creswell’s work served to remind me that ‘qualitative research, or its methodology, are characterized as inductive, *emerging*, and shaped by the researcher’s experience in collecting and analysing the data’ (Creswell, 2013:22 emphasises added). Reflexively thinking, the research strategy became considered to be partial and incomplete at the outset of the study (Trahar, 2009) working with the data it became evident that the methodology was an ‘emergent and evolving design rather than tightly

prefigured design’ - despite substantial forethought (Creswell, 2013:46). I ‘knew’ from the outset that this was part and parcel of the work of qualitative researchers, but it was nonetheless destabilising at times and when faced with working through the process became all *too* real!

My research is about student experiences within different settings within in higher education and I consider that to gain understanding of these higher education experiences they need to be considered as are part of the research participants’ life histories / biographies. This provides a context for their higher education experiences and which in turn became part of their narrative accounts of their HE experiences.

If I extend this rationale to myself it became incumbent upon me to recognise that the doctoral process is part of my life history and my own biographical learning journey (Wellington et al., 2005), I am the narrator of my doctoral research experiences. To this end Wellington et al. (2005) propose that Doctoral Students adopt an autobiographical approach to their doctoral programme. This is advocated to encourage doctoral students to maximise their personal and professional benefits of doctoral study, to consider ‘research related beliefs, values and practices’, to consider the value of life histories as a research approach, and most importantly for my perspective, to identify researcher positionality (Wellington et al., 2005:16). I follow Wellington et al. (2005:22) in

rejecting the tradition of hiding ourselves by using discourses that seeks to minimise, neutralise, standardise, control, distance or disengage our subjective and personal experiences or the subjective and personal experiences of the people whom our research may be concerned.

What I am setting out to do is reject the traditional approach of presenting doctoral work as unbiased or an objective analysis pertaining to the interests of the doctoral student. I aim to be explicit in recognising that my authorial presence is embedded within this

research. Life histories aid the researcher in being explicit with their researcher positionality as

[t]he biography of researchers, how and where they are socially positioned, the consequent perspectives they hold and the assumptions which inform the sense they make of the world, have implication for their research interests, how they frame research questions, the paradigms, methodologies and methods they prefer, and the styles that they adopt when writing up their research (Wellington et al., 2005:21).

Only towards the end of completing the thesis proposal for my research and through a process of reflexivity did I become fully aware of my researcher positionality within this research. That is not to suggest that previous to this I considered myself to be ‘objective’ to the research process. But, more specifically, the realisation was that 20 years ago I would have personally fitted the criteria upon which research participants were purposefully selected. This realisation came towards the later stages of writing my thesis proposal. At this stage I wrote

Throughout my doctoral thesis research I intend to apply Bourdieu’s notion of ‘reflexivity’ (Bourdieu, 1988, 1990). Only through this reflexive approach and towards the latter stages of writing this proposal have I ‘recognised’ that upon entering University I would have met the research participant criteria for my own doctoral research! The notion of class is interesting as I now have a middle class occupation. However, upon entering higher education I identified myself as a working class male, I was the first person in my family to enrol on a degree course; I studied at a widening participation HEI on a vocationally orientated sports related degree. I studied at my local HEI (it was only a mile from where I grew up) and I lived at home whilst studying and working a number of part-time jobs. Although I integrated well with fellow students who lived in halls of residence, I recognised at the time that I was less embedded within the university than I would have been if I had moved away from home. Reflexivity has allowed me to identify that staying local within a small W.P institution was a ‘less risky’ transition to HE for me (Brown, 2014:3).

Much in line with Hodgson and Spours (2001) and Greenbank (2015) research, my part-time work was not for ‘economic survival’, or always connected to future employment, but to pay for wider things to enhanced my lifestyle, such as running my car, to have

cash for socialising and holidays, and this money helped enhance by higher education experiences, and my wider life that was not directly connected to university study.

## **1.2 Researcher in context – professional context**

Within my research I have utilised Bourdieu's sociologically theory in order to critically examine a number of issues within my doctoral studies. Bourdieu uses the metaphor 'cultural fields' to capture sites of cultural practice which produce and transform attitudes and practices. I consider that I am part of 'cultural field' of Higher Education (Bourdieu and Passerson 1990). I have been part of this cultural field since I started my undergraduate degree in 1995 and through my readings of social theory I recognise the heterogeneous nature of Higher Education both in terms the type of HE courses and HEIs. This applies not only to my professional practice but also to my undergraduate experiences.

I have worked as a lecturer in Higher Education since 2006 having previously worked within local government as a sports development practitioner. I studied as an undergraduate between 1995 -1998 in the same institution in which I now work. I have experience of two other universities. Northumbria where I studied an MSc in Sport Management, and Plymouth University for Doctoral study.

In 2013 my University College gained full University status from the Privy Council. My institution describes itself as a 'teaching led, research informed' 'widening participation' Higher Education Institution (HEI) (XXXX 2011a and 2011b). In 2007 my institution applied to the Privy Council to change status from a College, to a University College. With this status the institution gained Taught Degree Awarding Powers and the ability to accredit its own degrees (XXXX 2010a). Previously a prestigious regional university had validated the institution's Awards and my HEI helped this prestigious HEI to engage in the Widening Participation agenda, albeit at

arm's length. As I have discussed elsewhere, (Brown 2012a), taught Degree awarding powers gave my HEI the opportunity to diversify its academic portfolio and to grow its student numbers. This was achieved by validating awards for a wide variety of international, national and regional partner organisations (XXXX 2013). Additionally it was able to introduce new awards, such as Foundation Degrees run on campus and via partnership arrangements with regional Further Education Colleges (FECs) (Brown, 2012a).

In 2008 I was appointed as the Programme Leader for my institution's first sports based Foundation Degree alongside my lecturing role on honours degrees. The programme tends to recruit young male students straight from school from within the region, and very few mature students. This programme was franchised in 2009 to a partner FEC and I was appointed as the Academic Link Tutor for this collaborative arrangement. In 2011 I also became the Programme Leader for a one-year progression course. The 1 year progression programme offers students the opportunity to top-up their Foundation Degree to a full BA Honours Degree. In 2013 this progression course was franchised to a FEC partner who also ran a Foundation Degree which enabled them recruit students who could complete a full BA Honours Degree, via the FD and BA top-up.

Interestingly most of their recruitment comes from within the FEC so students can take A 'Levels or B-TECs and then complete a full degree within this one institution.

I also recognise that my own experiences, as a first-generation student, and now working within the widening participation HEI (in which 5 students in the study are based) and as a Link Tutor connected to the Academic Sixth Form in which 5 students involved in this study are based, I am not a neutral bystander but embedded within this study.

### **1.3 Reflexivity through empathy**

As part of the reciprocity of conversations in my narrative enquiry (Riesmann, 2008 and Squire, 2013) through conversations with participants I mentioned that I too was the first in my family to go into higher education and there was empathy in this and other ‘shared’ experiences inasmuch that we are both ‘students’. They were undergraduates and I was a doctoral student. As students we had similar pressures of study, of deadlines, we experienced our own academic challenges, our own self-doubts. Mature students had children, I have two boys myself. The participants had their own domestic or familial commitments, as do I. Many of the participants worked part-time so we shared the challenges of balancing studying, with work and family commitments, and we all managed and ‘struggled’ with these complexities in our own lives in our own ways. We shared empathy in research. Second year students had studied methods, third year students were engaged with dissertation research projects. Empathy is not a one way street. Participants were empathetic towards me with my own research project, most students were actively interested in my research (they agreed to take part!), not just the substantive project or their involvement, but its scale (the number of years of study, the overall thesis word count, the number of participants, the length of interviews, the length of transcripts, and the transcription process itself). They were interested in my approach to working with them, how I was going to analyse the work, and how I going to write it up. Mello (2002) identifies the link between the researcher and learning narratively. The enquiry process itself becomes part of a shared narrative. ‘[Q]uestions and perceptions originated by informants were felt to be signifiers of curiosity, indicating that participants were attempting to make meaning from the research events by using narrative’ (Mello 2002:240).



## **1.4. Reflection using Wellington et al.'s (2005) Framework**

This was written initially during late 2016 when I was reading and drafting the first version of the methods chapter.

### **1.4.1 Place of birth**

I was born in Plymouth in 1975.

### **1.4.2 Family background and history including ethnicity and religious affiliation**

I come from what I would describe as a working class background. My mum was the daughter of a Policeman, her father died age 42. This was significant in her life and she grew up with her three sisters, she is the youngest, and her mum. They lived off a fairly modest widow's pension from the Police Force and lived in a council house. My dad spent part of his childhood growing up in Singapore. This shaped his life insomuch that they had a housekeeper, a gardener, and he had a tutor. These might be considered as middle class experiences. My dad has always had aspirations above which his occupational pay in England could deliver. I think this may stem from his time in Singapore. When his family returned to the UK they did not have the same privilege or status.

My parents are both white British. Historically they would describe their religion as 'Christian' or 'Church of England'. They have not to my memory ever been 'practicing' Christians who would attend Church or pray. More recently they are probably more outwardly agnostic.

### **1.4.3 Parents' occupations and level of formal education; their general character and interest**

My mum did very well at Primary School and successfully passed her 11 plus and went to a Grammar School. She has told me how she went from the 'top of the class' a relatively 'big fish in a small pond' but found the move to Secondary School quite

challenging. She felt 'small' even though she was tall from her age and lost some confidence at secondary school. She left school with O'level qualifications and these are her highest qualifications. She went to work in a Bank as a Cashier.

My dad is in many ways quite shy and introverted. He either didn't take or didn't pass his 11 plus and left school to take an apprenticeship in Devonport Dockyard as a Shipwright (general tradesman). He worked there until he took early voluntary redundancy in his mid-forties. I always got the impression that he didn't fit in that well at the Dockyard, I think he would his co-workers to be on the 'rough side', he didn't really approve of the bad language or their coarse behaviour. Knowing his character, I imagine he felt his was better than they were, I wonder if this went back to his early childhood experiences in Singapore.

Both mum and dad were quite aspirational and decided to build their own house through a self-build scheme. This provided that family with a nice detached house which might otherwise been financially beyond their reach. They both worked hard physically on the project that lasted several years and which was never quite 'finished' when I was growing up.

When my parent had children my mum gave up her job at the Bank. She worked in the local Primary School as an Infant Help and did Childminding afterschool and in the school holidays to bring in some extra money. She also worked on a Saturday mornings in a Building Society in town.

Dad was quite capable practically so could fix cars and do DIY. He always seemed to be working on a car in his spare time when I was young. My parents weren't ones for taking many family holidays or day trips. On reflection my mum's Saturday job curtailed any family activity on Saturday (we'd go to either my grans or aunties) as my dad would often work overtime on Saturday morning. On Sunday' he might be busy

working on the house or fixing a car. He seemed to need my mum around for moral support, or for practical help, to hold things or pass things.

Much of my childhood was centred around the family home and local streets. I'd make my own fun or and play with friends who lived in the street. During the summer holidays the house would be full of children, my mum 'child minding' other people's children and also looking after my cousins for three days a week to help her sister out.

My mum was quite entrepreneurial and sold clothes 'party plan'. This evolved into a small clothing wholesale business that my dad's redundancy money was used to invest in a van and rented premises. Although hard working my mum struggled to make the business pay well so spent many hours working on the road and in the 'warehouse'. This was coupled with frequent trips to the Midlands with my dad to buy stock.

There became quite an imbalance in the work between my mum and dad. As us children grew up we'd see less of my mum, and more of our dad, as he was at home. The business was failing for many years and my mum carried most of the work burden and financial stress. My dad seems to go into himself and burry his head in the sand about the situation. He wasn't supportive to my mum, in fact he has always tended towards criticism and pessimism. He would work hard on buying trips to the Midlands and the following day restocking. He is quite introverted and 'selling' in the warehouse or on the road was not something he did.

#### **1.4.5 Siblings: place and dates of birth; occupations and level of formal education, their general character and interests.**

I have an older sister who was born in 1970, she is two and half years older than me. I have a younger brother who was born in 1982, 7 and half years after me. My sister completed her GCSE and A'Levels at the local comprehensive school. She went onto study a business based HND but did not complete a full degree. She went to the local

Polytechnic and studied the same course as her best friend from school. She now works for the local council in an administrative role.

My younger brother is also bright. He went to the same comprehensive school and completed his GCSEs and A'Levels. At 18 he had no interest in University and took an admin job within the public sector and then working in University. He found Admin roles frustrating and was uninspired by the mundane nature of the work and the office politics. He has always tried to focus on getting promotions to earn more money with each move. Whilst at the University he enrolled directly onto a Masters Business Administration programme. He enjoyed the challenges of studying and in the past year gained a PhD studentship. He is currently coming to the end of his first year and is doing some HE teaching on a part-time basis.

Me and my brother play in a band together and he's the lead singer. We perform at a variety of functions including weddings. We have a close relationship and discuss most things – including the challenges of Doctoral Study – regularly.

#### **1.4.6 Extended family: occupations and level of formal education, their general character and interests.**

I only ever met my grans. Both grandfathers had died by the time I was born. My dad's mum would look after my sister and myself when we were quite young (around 5 years old) on Saturday mornings when my parents were at work. She was fairly quiet and tended to sit in her chair and watch TV – she didn't seem overly interest in the grandchildren. By dad's mum died when I was around 7 or 8 years old so I don't have memories beyond being fairly young. Both my gran and her husband ran a small general store locally later in life. My grandad was involved with the merchant navy as far as I'm aware, hence some time spent in Singapore.

My mums mum, was much more active and engaged with the grandchildren. We'd more enjoy spending time with her. She used to like to make us laugh although I do remember 60 years old as being considered 'old' by her and my mum. As soon as she got her 'old age pension' it felt like she happily accepted the 'pensioner label'. My mum's mum lived until I was in my early twenties so I have different memories of her. She bought her council flat and spent lots of time watching TV. My auntie would take her out for a weekly day trip / shopping trip.

I spent quite a lot of time with my cousins when I was young. This was really due to child care for both families but they were very much like extra brothers growing up. My eldest cousin is two years older than me, he left school and did an apprenticeship in electrical engineering and has never done any further or higher education. He now lives in Ireland so I don't see him much. His younger brother was my school year at school. He did his GCSEs and went on to the sixth form and then university. He is now a building surveyor and works in Manchester.

#### **1.4.7 Your childhood: description of home and general discussion of experiences.**

In writing the other sections I've already given some overview of my childhood. I spent time living in a caravan on site of the self-build when I was very young. I'm not sure I have memories of this or if they are false memories from photographs. It was generally a loving family. My mum and dad were generous to us children during birthdays and Christmases and we were always cared for, clean and well fed. The self-build home was extended after my brother was born. The extension seemed to last forever and for a long time part of the house was unfinished. Once my mum and dad started running the business the progress became very slow and they started using space at home to store and organise cloths for sale and there was always business related paperwork around the house.

Life wasn't particularly 'great' but it was okay. My auntie and uncle were very good to me and my sister, and then my brother when he was born. They had the use of a small beach house on the coast and they'd somehow jam my all 5 children in their car on a Sunday and take us to the beach.

We never seemed to do much as a family and days out were rare. Life consisted of hanging around with my mates and making our own fun. Playing football in the street or in a field. I went to swimming lessons and judo for a while at primary school and I went to the cubs.

**1.4.8 Educational experiences: pre-school, schooling, courses taken, subjects favoured, qualifications attained, or not; general character of school experience.**

My mum tells me that I was very capable as a young child and was quite far ahead of my peers when I joined school. I went to a Primary School at the end of my road where my mum was the infant help. I enjoyed primary school, I liked the variety of the lessons, doing organised PE, cooking, music and enrichment activities. I got the impression from my mum that I could be a bit of a day dreamer at school (she'd sneak a look at my books) and I'd not always do much! We had workbooks when I was lower down the school. I remember comparing myself to my class mates. The top students seemed to race through the work and although I had a self-image of being 'bright', yet, as hard as I'd work to catch up they'd just get further away. I remember being a bit frustrated by this. Recently my son, who is aged 7 and very bright has been identified as potentially dyslexic. It has made me wonder if I had/have similar challenges.

My neighbours from my street all went to the same school so I became friends with them and we'd carry on these friendships out of school. I do remember noticing the 'differences' between children. The catchment for the school was the self-build and private houses and council houses. There were some 'rough' families who I knew were different to my own.

Primary school was generally really good, and I was excited to go to the comprehensive school. My sister had gone there and I'd met a few of her friends and heard about the more specialised lessons. I do recall some talk about taking the 11-plus. But, I'm not sure my mum thought I'd pass (or that I did), and we discussed not going to school with my friends from primary school, so the discussion was fairly short lived as I recall. If I'd have passed getting to school would have meant catching a buses and it all seemed like too much hassle and moving schools alone was daunting.

The secondary school's catchment was from two different council estates and some private housing. There was an even greater mix of children than I'd experienced at primary school. It was clear that some children were quite used to being violent, many smoked at the age of 11 and this all came as a bit of a shock to me.

I really enjoyed the variety of lessons in school and the facilities. It was good fun and generally I had a good group of friends. It wasn't a good idea to stand out too much, there wasn't an academic culture at the school. Sport seemed to be quite highly prized and playing for the A Team at football was the panicle of success (as judged by my peer group). I was okay at sport, but I was quite small for my age so never really made an impact in a way that was 'impressive' in sport. I remember puberty was a bit of a challenge! I was quite a late developer so it became a bit embarrassing that most of my peer group were developing and I was still very boyish – this effected my confidence a little. I enjoyed drama and I was quite good at it (I got an A at GCSE) I could make people laugh so it was a nice feeling to be publicly good at something.

I was generally a good student and had good relationships with my peers and teachers. There were kids that it was best to avoid but I was never bullied in any significant ways. I enjoyed having freedom to eat what I wanted at lunch and to have a kick around with my mates at lunch time. I did okay with my GCSEs I got two A;s and 6 C grades. I

passed every GCSE I entered. I hadn't really thought much about Sixth Form but I was encouraged to do A Levels by teachers.

I had been working part-time and I remember negotiating not having to come in on Mondays as I had no lessons. I did 2 A 'Levels, Business Studies and Psychology. I had been working in retail since I was about 14 years old. I enjoyed Business Studies at GCSE and took it at A Level. I thought that I might like a career in retail management. I didn't apply to university at all, I heard conversations about it in the Sixth Form but never really got involved. It wasn't something I aspired to or had any inclination towards. None of my family had ever been to university so it was outside of the family doxa. I applied for some jobs for retail management schemes but didn't get beyond the assessment centres. I looked very young at 18 so I'm not sure if it was a capability issue, or that I just wouldn't have looked convincing! I'll never know.

Once my A'Level grades came out my teachers for the first time mentioned university to me directly. Before then it had been a broad conversation but no one had ever spoke to me, personally or directly about it. They said I could probably get on a course through clearing, at Plymouth Polytechnic / University. I was quite flattered I think that they thought I would be capable and I had no immediate plans.

I enrolled on a Business Information Management Systems degree. I had no real concept of what the course was about, but it had 'business' in the title and it was the only course I could get on. Moving away to university didn't really cross my mind.

I met my future wife in the 6<sup>th</sup> form, she was lower sixth and I was upper sixth. I think I used not wanting that relationship to finish (the "everyone splits up at uni line") as a bit of an excuse. But I really had no knowledge of university really and no clue where I'd go. Studying down the road seemed like a big enough challenge without going 'away' to uni.



#### **1.4.9 Higher Education and professional preparation**

I didn't stick with the course at Plymouth Uni for more than about 8 weeks. I officially withdrew at the end of the first semester, strategically, so I didn't need to repay any grant I had. The course wasn't for me, I had no sense of what I was doing there, where it would lead to, the whole campus was pretty overwhelming and I didn't really know that many people. Some of the students I met were a bit 'odd', I knocked around a few weeks with guys living in a private rental in a rundown part of the city and they seemed to spend most of their time/money on smoking marijuana. It seemed like a very stereotypical student experience and I just didn't fit with that or the course. I felt out of place and self-conscious. If I wasn't in a class I felt I had nowhere to go, the Student Union seemed to be full of people that knew each other and I hardly knew anyone.

Whilst trying to get on to retail management schemes I applied to Pizza Hut. You needed to be 21 years old to get onto their management training scheme. I was too young but they suggested that I got a job in store to get 'experience'. I was paid around £3 per hour and the work was pretty dire. Whilst doing this registered as a temporary member of staff at a local Council's temporary Admin Support function. I got offered clerical work in a Magistrates Clerks Office on a 9 month contract and took that. It was a glorified tea-boy come admin-boy! I had lots of 'down time' in the office, I didn't learn that much and felt I could achieve much more. I planned to go inter-railing for the summer but had no firm plans when the contract was up.

I decided to organise a careers interview and chatted about liking sport, fairly loosely. The careers adviser suggested I trained to be a PE teacher so I applied to my local University College for a BEd programme. It was quite competitive and I didn't get offered a place but I did get offered a place on the BA programme. It was a major minor qualification, as I still harboured ambitions to teach I took Physical Recreation Programmes with Geography. The university was very local to my family home (10

mins walk!) and I got a full grant. I had a great time on the course. Even though the HEI was actually quite small, under 5,000 students it still felt quite big to me in terms of getting to know lots of different students. I got a 2:1 overall without trying as hard as I could have.

I have subsequently taken a MSc in Sport Management on Distance Learning basis. I studied whilst working full time as a lecturer (2006-2009). There was no direct contact with the university beyond email and the odd telephone tutorial. I got a Distinction my MSc and won a prize for having the highest grade average overall. I was quite pleased with this. I didn't go to graduation as it was quite expensive and I didn't really know anyone there so it didn't feel right and I couldn't really be bothered to make the effort to travel to Newcastle! Looking back I did regret not marking my achievement as the MSc study was fairly challenging (not academically necessarily) but challenging in fitting this in with my family life, fulltime work, and social life – where I play semi-professionally in a band. Given the challenges, on reflection, I felt I should have paused to celebrate my achievement, rather than just feeling relief that it was over!

#### **3.4.10 Occupation: general work history; particular interests; highs and lows; successes and failures.**

Whilst at university I started to change my career plans. I wanted to work in sport but I didn't feel I wanted to be a PE teacher. I did lots of extra awards to enhance my employability and worked on schemes to gain experience. On finishing university I worked as a Lifeguard for 3 months, on a full time basis, and then got employed in a local Council's recreation division (a graduate level position). I met the other candidates at interview and I was really pleased to have been successful. I had bought my first house with my, (soon to be wife), and it felt like we were making real progress.

I had some self-doubt but generally did a good job and got the post regraded to get a higher wage as I was working above my pay grade. I made some good contacts

internally and externally, but suffered a little work related stress as I was trying to do everything to the best of my ability and worrying unduly. I also worked in quite a closed office and found this experience a little isolating at times. I managed my stress through exercise but it was the feeling of isolation that was new (unpleasant) experience for me.

I moved to another local council to achieve a promotion and worked there for 5 years on a number of externally funded projects. One project was a national free swimming pilot funded by the Department of Health and this had a research element that I was very interested in. I was working with Academics from a university in the north of England and a Professor from Plymouth University.

Whilst working in this role I was approached by my old secondary school to teach an Access to Higher Education course. I taught the sport element on a Thursday evening. I agreed to this but I was shocked at the lack of 'hand-over' or resources. I also had to teach anatomy and physiology, that I wasn't previously that familiar with, and overall it was a very daunting experience to start with. I was very anxious about the role but forced myself to do it. Overall I enjoyed working with the mature students and did this role for around 3 years. This was my first experience of teaching.

I was approached in late 2005 by my old university to say that there was a lecturing vacancy. I had some teaching and industry experience and I was encouraged to apply. I was appointed to a lecturing role in Jan 2006. I only had my undergraduate degree and a condition of the employment was gaining a HEA teaching qualification and getting a Master's degree (as detailed above).

Moving to HE was very challenging but rewarding. There was quite a culture shock between my professional experiences in Local Government and university. After several years I was appointed to Senior Lecturer and Programme Leader with

responsibility for developing a new Foundation Degree in sport. Promotions were tied to Programme Leadership so to 'get on' you had to do a role like this.

I worked with my Head of Department closely and when he retired I felt, and many of my immediate colleagues felt, I'd be appointed to this role. I was not however successful at interview. An internal candidate got the role who had a different disciplinary background so I was quite shocked and needed to take a week off work to get over it as it affected me quite badly. My colleague, and new boss, had a Doctorate already and this was a small factor in his favour. I worked well with this new person and I've often reflected that not getting this role was a lucky escape given what he's gone through!

I've enjoyed teaching and working with students. I've developed really good relationships with students over the years and take great pleasure in seeing their careers develop post-university. I've worked in HE for over 10 years.

#### **3.4.11 How you came to enrol on the doctoral programme?**

I enrolled on the doctoral programme for several reasons. It was recommended to me by a colleague who was leading the HEA programme. I went on to get the HEA Fellow award and was discussing further study with her, at the time it was possible to complete as research project to achieve a MA in Education. I was considering this but she advised against a second M level qualification.

I enrolled on the EdD just prior to the vacancy of Head of Department (that I was unsuccessful at). Part of this was strategic, I could at least say I was enrolled on a Doctoral programme, and I was aware other potential candidates already had doctorates.

I also recognised that my 'industry experience', for which I was originally appointed to a lecturing role, had currency but the longer I was out of 'the industry' the less relevant

this would become. Although my HEI wasn't particularly research focussed I was aware that HE currency is different. Having a doctorate was increasingly seen as more common place and having one would be useful to my career and ability to generate research outputs or even maintain employment.

I was interested in the academic challenge. Many colleagues had gone through a similar route of working full-time whilst undertaking their doctorates. It seemed really challenging but worthwhile.

My career in local government, working in sport, a discretionary area, and often on fixed term contracts had always made me quite sensitive to job security. I thought that taking an Educational based doctorate might keep my options open for my future career. I have toyed with the idea of teaching in Primary Schools, not an ambition as such, more of a plan B and something I felt I'd enjoy. I felt an Educational Doctorate might have wider appeal than doing a PhD in a very narrow area of Sport policy. I'm not sure if I still hold this view, I am ambivalent about this now, but it got me onto the EdD in 2011. I think there is clearly something of a localism too. The EdD was practically easy to engage in, it didn't involve travel or overnight costs for accommodation. Its structure of a modular first two years also felt more achievable as I could work my way into the programme rather than jumping straight into a PhD. It also felt flexible that I could study issues I was interested in, so it wasn't restrictive.

#### **3.4.12 Challenges of the Doctorate**

Overall, I have found the Doctorate extremely challenging, yet rewarding endeavour. I actually found the module stages relatively straightforward. I have enjoyed the academic challenges, of reading complex social theory, exploring new areas of academic literature, of expanding my academic horizons and changing the ways in which I think and evaluate day-to-day information as well as the specific subjects in

which I read or write about. Overall it has improved my confidence academically and improved the depth in which I understand philosophical debates that underpin research. It has also exposed areas of academic insecurity where I never feel I've quite read 'it all'. Having discussions with my brother who is doing a doctorate now, he says that he feels I've gone to the 'nth degree' on everything – his supervisors seem to be suggesting a pragmatic approach to research methods for instance.

The challenges of part-time study, a busy full-time job, which is beyond any normal 9-5, and a growing family have caused the biggest challenges. Many are logistical in nature and related to time, to study, the space, to study and having the energy to study. There are times when the Doctorate has been very high priority, and other times where it's not been touched for months at a time. There is always the 'weight' of the doctorate, whether I'm actively engaged with it or not. A pressure and a sense of angst that I'm not making the progress as fast as I'd like to. When I have managed to carve out what feels like substantial chunks of time for the doctorate it's been frustrating that progress only ever creeps forward, rather than springs forward. I totally underestimated the amount of time all stages would take. I have invested very heavily in this programme.

I feel most of the time that I'm being pulled in multiple direction, either from my job or my EdD and this impacts upon my young family. When I started the EdD I had a 1 year old child (conceived after 5 years of IVF). He has recently turned 7 years old and I also have another child who just turned 2 years old. The changes in my family life over the course of the EdD have been amazing but not conducive to a long term academic project with a high stakes final outcome!

## **Appendix 2: Recruitment Message Posted on Virtual Learning Environment**

### **Student Experience Research Project Volunteers.**

Dear XXXX College HE student,

My name is Phil Brown, I'm currently completing my Doctorate with Plymouth University and I work at the University of St Mark and St John. I'm looking to recruit 5 XXXX College HE students who are the first in their family to go into higher education for my research (first or second years, males and females, from a variety of academic programmes). Participation is confidential and anonymous. The project uses a biographical approach to interviews and I'd like to conduct the first interviews either before the end of the academic year or early in the summer vacation and then interview you again later in the next academic year. Time-wise interviews will probably take about 60-90 mins each and we can arrange a time that suits you. I'm interested in your total student experience, what you did before you came to study and why you chose XXXX College, your programme, and your aims for the future. If you are interested in sharing your experiences and contributing your story to my research please read the attached participant information sheet and email me at [pbrown@marjon.ac.uk](mailto:pbrown@marjon.ac.uk) to express an interest in taking part.

Thanks

Phil Brown

Doctoral research student

## Appendix 3: Participant Information Sheet



Phil Brown

Phil Brown, Doctoral student

University of St Mark and St John

Plymouth Institute of Education

Derriford Road

Rolle Building

Plymouth

Drake Circus

PL6 8BH

Plymouth

PL4 8AA

### Higher Education student experiences

I would like to thank you for your interest in my doctoral research project. I am currently completing a Professional Doctorate in Education (EdD) with the University of Plymouth and I am currently employed as a lecturer at the University of St. Mark and St. John in Plymouth.

There is increasing choice about what to study in higher education and where to study. I was the first person in my family to complete a degree and I am interested in speaking to students who are the first person in their families to enrol on a higher education programme.

I am interviewing first generation HE students who are currently completing a higher education qualification either at university, or within a further education setting.

The aim of the study is to understand how first generation HE students make complex decisions about HE participation when selecting HE programmes and institutions. I would like to talk to you about what you value about your HE experiences and how these experiences are influenced by the wider issues in your life, your prior learning and your future aspirations.



The project specifically tries to answer the following questions:

1. How do HE students incorporate HE choices and experiences into the biographical narrative accounts of their learning lives?
2. What do students value about their higher education experiences and what influences these experiences?
3. What are the implications of these two questions for the policy and practices of higher education and higher education institutions?

The results of the study will inform my thinking about first generation students studying in different higher education contexts. I want to understand what students value about their higher education experiences and what influences these experiences. My research, based upon what you and other students tell me, will contribute to debates about access and experiences of first generation student in higher education.

As a requirement of my doctoral degree I will write a 50,000 word thesis about this research. Upon completion of my thesis it is my intention to publish and present my findings from this study to influence higher education policy and practice.

What it entails:

- I would like to interview you to discuss the issues above and to audio record this. Following the interview I will provide you with a transcript of the interview for you to check its accuracy.
- It is likely that I would ask to interview you on a minimum of two occasions, possibly more, and each interview is likely to last between 60-90 minutes.
- At the follow-up interview(s) we can discuss themes from the previous interview and follow up areas in more detail.

I will be interviewing 15 students in total. 5 from your institution and 5 from two other institutions. If you take part your experiences will contribute to the wider study. I would like to interview both male and female students from a variety of programmes from within each institution in order to capture a wide breadth of student experiences within each institution and across the whole research project. In order to be fair with participant recruitment my overall approach will be to work with students on a first come first served basis. However, in order to achieve a gender balance and to interview students across a number of programme areas this might not always be possible.

It is important to understand that interviews will be confidential and anonymous, you will never be personally identified in the research project. You will have the opportunity to choose a pseudonym (fictional name) and we can discuss how you would like to be referred to when the research is written up or published. The institution that you are studying at will not be named in the research but a general description of it will be given to provide readers with a picture of your place of study. I would like to conduct the interviews onsite at your HE campus, so it is possible that we will be seen staff and students, but the nature and topics of our discussions will not be shared or attributed to you personally. Plymouth University's research ethics policy states that data should be securely held for a minimum of ten years after the completion of the research project. Electronic data will be stored on 8 digit password protected computers or laptops and individual files and/or discs must be encrypted.

Hard copies of data must be stored in locked filing cabinets and disposed of securely when no longer required.

If you choose to take part, you have the right to withdraw yourself and/or your details fully or partially from the study without offering any explanation or suffering any consequences. This applies up until one month from receiving the interview transcript from your final interview, after which time I will assume you are happy for me to use your interview data.

At the start of the first interview I will provide a verbal overview of the study and at any time throughout the project we can discuss the research and revisit the purpose of the study. You will be provided with the transcriptions of your interviews only. Should you wish to you, will be able to read the full thesis, a summary, or future published work from this study, if you request this.

**If you are interested in taking part in the project or** if you have any further questions please contact me (see below).

Thank you for reading this.

Yours sincerely



Phil Brown

Contact Details:

Phil Brown    Tel: 01752 636700 Ext: 8691    [pbrown@marjon.ac.uk](mailto:pbrown@marjon.ac.uk)

University of St Mark and St John postal address for Phil Brown:

Derriford Road, PLYMOUTH, Devon, PL6 8BH

Director of Studies (project supervisor)

Dr Nick Pratt    [nick.pratt@plymouth.ac.uk](mailto:nick.pratt@plymouth.ac.uk)

University of Plymouth postal address for Nick Pratt:

Plymouth Institute of Education, Rolle Building, Drake Circus, PLYMOUTH, Devon, PL4 8AA

## Appendix 3.1 Participant Consent Form



### Participant Consent Form

(one copy to be retained the by the participant)

Please return a copy of this form in the enclosed addressed envelope, or by email, to Phil Brown, University of St Mark and St John, Derriford Road, PLYMOUTH, Devon, PL6 8BH [Email returns will be counted as 'signed'.]

If you have any questions you can contact me by e-mail: [pbrown@marjon.ac.uk](mailto:pbrown@marjon.ac.uk) or telephone 01752 636700 ext. 8691 (and leave a message).

### Title: Higher Education student experiences

Researcher: Phil Brown

I agree to participate in this study based in the Plymouth Institute of Education. I have read the details provided by the researcher (Phil Brown) and I understand that my participation is entirely voluntary. I can withdraw my consent at any time up to one month from receiving the transcription from my interview(s) without offering any explanation or suffering any disadvantage. I can also have the results of my participation removed from the research records (which will be kept for 10 years in a secure store).

- I consent to being interviewed individually
- I consent to audio recording of the interviews
- I understand that data relating to me will remain confidential and anonymous at all times.
- I can select a pseudonym (fictional name) to ensure confidentiality and anonymity when the information I provide is published. If I choose not to select a fictitious name one will be given to my story by the researcher.

(Please delete as appropriate if you do not give your consent for any part of our study)

Please provide an email address below so copies of your interview transcripts can be sent to you to check for accuracy (please write clearly) ..... Please also provide a contact number should the researcher not be able to reach you via email.

Tel: .....

If you would like to have access to a copy of the final thesis - please tick box.

☐

If you would like to have access to a summary of the final thesis - please tick box.

☐

If you would like copies of future academic publications - please tick box.

☐

Signature of the participant:..... Date:.....

Print Name .....

THANK YOU. I very much look forward to working with you.

## **Appendix 4: Interview schedule - pool of sample thematic questions**

The protocol below is a pool of example questions or trigger questions to explore themes across several biographical interviews.

The biographical interview aims to be a conversation that explores how first generation HE students make complex decision surrounding HE participation when selecting HE programmes and institutions. These conversations will be guided by the participants as much as the researcher. The research is concerned with what students' value about their HE experiences how these experiences are influenced by wider issues in their lives, their prior learning and their future aspirations. The themes below have been influenced by literature about widening participation students. It is not the intention to ask all these questions; rather they represent the themes that I plan to explore through the biographical interviews over the course of several interviews.

### **About you?**

1. Could you tell me about yourself, how old you are and a bit about your background?
  - a. How would you describe your previous educational experiences?
  - b. You are the first in your family to do a HE qualification, is that correct? Would you mind telling me what your parents do for a living?
  - c. You are the first member of your family to take a higher education qualification, how important is this to you, and your family?

### **Pre-entry to your higher education course**

2. Can you describe how you came to higher education?
  - a. Had you always planned to go on to study a higher education qualification or was your decision a little more recent than that?
  - b. Did anyone encourage or support you to apply for HE study? Did your friends and parents influence your decision making, if so how?
  - c. What preparation did you do for higher education study whilst at college / sixth form? Did you feel well informed about your options?
  - d. Did you visit higher education providers to find out about the institution and the courses on offer prior to enrolling on your current course?
  - e. How many different universities or colleges did you visit prior to study and who accompanied you?
  - f. Did you get on your first-choice course at your first choice provider?
  - g. Did you ever consider not studying a HE qualification, what alternatives did you consider and how come you made the decision to come here in the end?

- h. What influenced your decision to take this course and study here?
- i. Did you move away from home to study higher education or stay locally? What were the reasons behind your decisions?
- j. Was the cost of higher education a factor in your decision to study on your programme at this institution? (if so how did it affect your decision)?

### **Your higher education experiences**

- 3. What has your higher education experience been like so far?
  - a. Can you describe your typical week to me?
  - b. On average how much time do you spend on campus, (both formal and informal).
  - c. What do you do whilst on campus?
  - d. How much of your time off campus is spent on your studies?
  - e. So far, what has been the best bit about being a student here?
  - f. So far, what's been the worst thing about being a student here?
  - g. Describe the transition from school or college to this institution?
  - h. Do you feel like you fit in on your course and in this institution? What makes you feel like this?

### **Social**

- 4. Overall how important is the social side of your higher education experience?
  - a. Are you living independently whilst at university, either with other students in halls of residence or other accommodation or are you living with parents? Why did you choose this option? Would you have preferred something different?
  - b. Who are your main social groups that you hang around with during term time (inside and outside of university)?
  - c. How far away is home from this institution? Was this distance significant in your choice to study here?
  - d. How important are your friendship groups to your HE experiences?
  - e. Have you joined any clubs or societies? Are there opportunities to do this here?
  - f. Are there social activities organised through the institution (by the student union)? Do you get involved with these? If yes why, if not why not?
  - g. Do you socialise with other students in activities that you organise together?

### **Academic**

- 5. Can you tell me about your academic experiences in HE so far?

- a. Did you feel well prepared for higher education study, and confident that you'd make a success of it? If so why was this, if not why was this?
- b. How are you coping with the academic elements of your programme?
- c. What support (either formal or informal) is available to you? Do you use this support?
- d. Are you working your hardest or just trying to get by? Why is it like this?
- e. How would you describe the relationships you have with your HE tutors/lecturers?
- f. How would you describe your relationships with people on your course?
- g. How has your higher education experiences been influenced by formal learning and assessments?
- h. How has your higher education experience been influenced by informal learning?
- i. Through your higher education experiences what have you learnt so far? Have you learnt anything new about yourself or see the world differently than before you started here?

### **Identity**

- 6. What's it like being a HE student?
  - a. What does being a higher education student mean to you?
  - b. How much of your current identity is tied to being 'a student'?
  - c. How much of your personal identity is currently defined by your programme of study?
  - d. How much, if at all, do you feel that you have changed as a result of your HE experiences?
  - e. How is the higher education experience different to your previous educational experiences?

### **Finance**

- 7. How are you managing financially whilst studying?
  - a. Are you getting financial assistance to cover your living costs?
  - b. Has a lack of money ever made you consider dropping out?
  - c. Are you working whilst you are studying? If so what are you doing and how many hours per week do you do this?
  - d. Why have you chosen to work whilst studying?
  - e. Does work get in the way of your HE programme, does it change your HE experience at all?

### **Values**

- 8. What things do you value most about your higher education experiences?
  - a. If you had to pick just one thing that you value the most what would it be?
  - b. If you could change one thing about your higher education experience what would it be?

- c. If you had a time machine and you could go back to before you started in higher education what is the one piece of advice you would give to yourself? Why is this?

### **Future plans**

- 9. What are your plans for the future (any hopes or fears)?
  - a. How focussed on your future employability are you at the moment?
  - b. Are you doing anything to improve your employment prospects right now, either through the course or off your own back?
  - c. Do you have a career plan, how does your current programme fit into this?
  - d. What do you plan to do after graduation?

## **2<sup>nd</sup> Round Questions**

### **Higher Education experiences – follow up questions generic**

As you know the final study will anonymise all data to protect your anonymity and ensure confidentiality. In order to make your story engaging I want to use a name (not your own) rather than just referring to you as 'participants'. You can choose a pseudonym – what would you like to be called?

### **Your higher education experiences (Present)**

- 10. How have you been since we last spoke?
  - a. What has your higher education experience been like since we last spoke?
  - b. What's the most significant things that have happened since our last interview?
  - c. How was the transition from the last academic year to this academic year?
  - d. What did you learn from last year that you took into this year?
  - e. How much planning ahead did you do for your current academic year?
  - f. What have your living arrangements been?
  - g. How much of your time is devoted to your degree?
  - h. So far, what has been the best bit about being a student here?
  - i. So far, what's been the worst thing about being a student here?
  - j. Do you feel like you fit in on your course and in this institution? What makes you feel like this?
  - k. What have been the biggest challenges you've faced during the time you've been in HE?

- l. What have you learnt through the experience of being a HE student
- m. How would you describe your levels of self-confidence and self-esteem now? Have these changed?

### **Academic**

1. Can you tell me about your academic experiences in HE so far?
  - a. Did you feel well prepared for higher education study, and confident that you'd make a success of it? If so why was this, if not why was this?
  - b. How are you coping with the work?
  - c. Have you had any learning difficulties / strategies and support - Do you use this support?
  - d. Are you working your hardest or just trying to get by? Why is it like this?
  - e. How would you describe the relationships you have with your HE tutors/lecturers?
  - f. How would you describe your relationships with people on your course?
  - g. How has your higher education experiences been influenced by formal learning and assessments?
  - h. How has your higher education experience been influenced by informal learning (for instance work-based learning)?
  - i. Through your higher education experiences what have you learnt so far?
  - j. grades

### **Social**

2. Overall how important is the social side of your higher education experience?
  - a. Have your living arrangements changed from last time we spoke?
  - b. How important are your friendship groups to your HE experiences?
  - c. How has being at university affected your personal relationships?

### **Identity**

3. What's it been like being a HE student?
  - a. Looking back since you enter HE do you feel that you have changed as a result of your HE experiences? How?
  - b. Have you learnt anything new about yourself or see the world differently than before you started here?
  - c. What has being a higher education student mean to you?
  - d. How does it feel when considering that you might not be a HE student for much longer?

### **Finance**

4. How are you managing financially whilst studying?
  - a. Are you getting financial assistance to cover your living costs?
  - b. Has a lack of money ever made you consider dropping out?



- c. Are you working whilst you are studying? If so what are you doing and how many hours per week do you do this?
- d. Why have you chosen to work whilst studying?
- e. Does work get in the way of your HE programme, does it change your HE experience at all?

### **Values**

- 5. What things do you value most about your higher education experiences?
  - a. What have you valued about your HE experiences?
  - b. If you could change one thing about your higher education experience what would it be?
  - c. Do you have any regrets?

### **Future plans**

- 6. What are your plans for the future (any hopes or fears)?
  - a. How focussed on your future employability are you at the moment?
  - b. Are you doing anything to improve your employment prospects right now, either through the course or off your own back?
  - c. Do you have a career plan, how does your current programme fit into this?
  - d. What do you plan to do after you finish your course?
  - e. Any further study in the future?
  - f. You are the first in your family to do higher education, do you have aspirations for your children to go into HE in the future or any other family members?

## Appendix 5: Table 2: Review of Narrative Literature: Authors' approach to Narrative Analysis

Author	Modes of narrative analysis	Overarching theme / implications for mindful analysis.
McCormack (2000:285) multiple lens metaphor	Viewing the interview transcript through multiple lenses, which involves the following: immersing oneself in the transcript through a process of active listening;	Multiple modes of analysis
	identifying the narrative processes used by the storyteller;	Ways in which story is told
	paying attention to the language of the text; acknowledging the context in which the text was produced.	Language and context of story
	identifying moments in the text where something unexpected is happening	Focus on unexpected
Riessman (2008) four main methodological approaches	1. Thematic analysis focuses on content; less focus on how the narrative is delivered. The focus is on meanings and understanding the specific issue being discussed.	Content analysis – issue focussed
	2. Structural analysis takes a detail structural form as in conversation analysis – classic Labovian narrative analysis. Structure can also refer to genre and plot.	Structural semantics / linguistic analysis
	3. Dialogic/performance analysis is concerned with issues of coproduction of narrative - dialogically produced and performed. How the narrative is performed and who is it performed to. This emphasises person/group. These analytic approaches are a hybrid of different traditions that emphasise dynamic nature of social reality.	Co-production –‘performance’ of narrative
	4. Visual narrative analysis provides new insights to narrative analysis if data collection is beyond just the spoken work. Visual representations may include, drawings, paintings, images photos, video, and a variety of creative art forms.	Visual aspects (not a form of data I collected)
Chase, (2005) five interconnected analytic lens	1. Narrative as a distinct form of discourse, retrospective meaning making. A way to organise events and experiences into a meaningful whole, connections and consequences over time. Describe what happened but includes, emotions, thoughts and tellers interpretations.	Making meaning by looking back – make whole out of fragmented experiences. Pay attention to emotion and the tellers interpretations.
	2. Narrative as verbal action. Teller constructs, performs the self, experience and reality. Narrators voice is important as it communicates both subject positions and social locations. The what, how and where is the individuals voice. Narrators are accountable for the credibility believability of and their stories.	Subject positions with social context. Individual voice, what, how and where.

Author	Modes of narrative analysis	Overarching theme / implications for mindful analysis.
	3. Narratives are enabled and constrained by social resources and circumstances, history, community, culture, local settings and institutions influences.	This lens can be used to highlight similarity and differences across narratives and experiences – locality of experience.
	4. Narratives are socially situated interactive performances produced in a particular setting, for a particular audience for a particular purpose. The story is shaped by the interaction and coproduced.	The narrative is performative – coproduced in the context of the interview.
	5. The narrative researcher is the narrator of their research. Their voice is present in the stories they tell about their research (either spoken or written).	The four lens above apply to the researcher as well as the research participants. As a researcher I develop my own researcher's voice as I narrate the voices of the research participants. My voice is enabled and constrained by my own positions, experiences, and social resources.
Denzin, (1989)	Narratives as 'turning points'.	Turning points / watershed moments.
Creswell (2013)	Chronology: Events and Epiphanies.	Event focused narratives.  Epiphanies – seeing things in a new light / Turning points / watershed moment.
	Plot – Characters, Settings, Problem, Action, Resolution.	Plot characteristics.
	Thematic analysis – content themes within and across narratives.	Identifying content themes that run through and across narratives.
	Three dimensions of space.  Interaction / Continuity / Situation.	'Place' is important 'where' they study; where their experiences take place.
	1. The personal and social interaction (inquiry space).	Interaction in interview.

Author	Modes of narrative analysis	Overarching theme / implications for mindful analysis.
Connelly and Clandinin (2000) identify three dimensions to narratives	2. The past, present and future (continuity).	Temporal / Chronology.
	3. The place (situation).	Place – situation – context of HE study, locations, institution, and course.
(Clandinin and Connelly, 2006, Three aspects of narrative inquiry	1. Temporality: Time, Chronology, time dependent, past, present, future. Temporality related to people, places, events, and experiences.	How did time, people, places, events and experiences influence the narrative of HE?
	2. Sociality:  Personal conditions: feelings, hopes, desires, values and moral positions.  Social conditions: broader societal conditions and contexts, macro society, institutional cultures, and micro factors.	How the participants feels.  Influence of wider societal factors upon narrative of the HE experiences.
	3. Place: specific physical / concrete locations. Where the experience or event takes place.	H.E experiences are shaped by place, city / town. Did the student move locations?  Institutional context of HE.
Elliot (2005) using Hinchman and Hinchman's (1997) narrative definition identifies three elements and these are	1. Narratives have a temporal order, a chronology, and sequence to/of events.	Temporal / Chronology.
	2. Narratives are meaningful, in that combined, they form into a whole, where events can be considered in relation to other events and through their relationship to the whole.	Meaning is relational.  Part / whole analysis.
	3. They are 'inherently social in that they are produced for a specific audience.	Interaction in interview

Author	Modes of narrative analysis	Overarching theme / implications for mindful analysis.
factors considered in analysis	4. Elliot also suggests narratives can be considered for both genre and plot. Plot may be progressive, regressive, or neutral.	Plot lines. Is the story progressive (things improve), regressive (things get worse), or neutral – the story stays the same (not obviously better or worse).
Jacobs et al. 2010	Reading and re-reading transcripts	Deep immersion in transcripts.
Voice relational method:	Plot – from literature genres.	Plot lines.
Mauthner and Doucet	Participant voice ‘I’.	‘I’ voice.
	Relationships (wider relationship (friends / family) through the narrative and the relationship within the interview.	Relationships.
	Positionality of researcher.	Reflexivity and recognition of interviewer’s biography.
	Role of place / space - ‘spoken visuals’.	Place and space of context of experiences - in HE experiences ‘being’ on campus in narrative accounts.
	Articulation of transitions and transformations.	HE as site of transition / transformation.
Mello (2002)	Overview: Holistic analysis of texts (conventional coding techniques that dissect text into small chunks should be avoided).	Retain whole narratives.
	Collocation (multiple forms of analysis).	Multiple forms of analysis.
	Multiple forms of analysis of individual texts.	
	Textual operation: Mythic cycles, plot structures, motifs, patterns, subjective significance, and symbolism.	Focus on content and form – reference to ‘typical student’ as ‘other’ in their own experiences.

Author	Modes of narrative analysis	Overarching theme / implications for mindful analysis.
	<p>Transactional operation: Relationships between teller and audience, physical context, meanings shared or developed at the time of the event, intent of teller, entertainment and humour.</p> <p>Cross text comparisons (side by side analysis) and juxtapositions to highlight contrast for comparison.</p>	<p>Focus on relationship between interviewer and interviewee.</p> <p>Cross comparison for similarity and difference.</p> <p>All stories for collective voice.</p>
	<p>Sociocultural operation: Ceremonial information, cultural interpretation, social functions, and therapeutic functions and meanings.</p>	<p>Overlap with textual operation.</p> <p>Focus on beliefs and identity.</p> <p>Beyond personal towards collective.</p>
	<p>Educative operation: Instruction, didactic information, rote memorization, learning and development, pedagogy, curricula, standards, and frameworks.</p>	<p>Pedagogical forms of narrative understanding.</p> <p>Construction of knowledge through narrative interview – meaning making.</p> <p>Questions ask by interviewees of the interviewer demonstrates engagement of their inquiry processes.</p> <p>Narratives of things participants have been thinking about and learning about – life or HE course content / teaching and learning.</p>

**Table 2 Review of Narrative Literature: Authors' approach to Narrative Analysis**

## Appendix 6: Table 3 Summary of analytical perspectives from the review of narrative literature and the implications for this study

Analytical Theme	Modes of narrative analysis	Overarching theme / implications for mindful analysis.
Deep engagement in text	Reading and re-reading transcripts (Jacobs et al., 2010).	Deep immersion in transcripts.
	Immersing oneself in the transcript through a process of active listening (McCormack, 2000).	Listening back to the original audio files as not to miss emphasis in speech that is less obvious in written transcripts.
	Collocation analysis across texts (Mello, 2002). Cross text comparisons (side by side analysis) and juxtapositions to highlight contrast for comparison (Mello, 2002).	Cross comparison for similarity and difference.  All stories for collective voice.
	Multiple forms of analysis of individual texts (Mello, 2002).	Retain whole narratives / language and context of story.
	Holistic analysis of texts (Mello, 2002).	
Thematic analysis	Focuses on content, less focus on how the narrative is performed. The focus is on meanings and understanding the specific issue being discussed (Riessman, 2008).	Content analysis – issue focussed.
	Thematic analysis – content themes within and across narratives (Creswell, 2013).	Identifying content themes that run through and across narratives.
Research positionality and reflexivity	The narrative researcher is the narrator of their research. Their voice is present in the stories they tell about their research (either spoken or written) (Chase, 2005).	My authorial presence, and voice is enabled and constrained by my own positions, experiences, and social resources (habitus /field / capitals and alignment illusio and doxa).
	Positionality of researcher (Jacobs et al., 2010).	Reflexivity and recognition of interviewers biography (appendix 1).
Narrative production / performance	Coproduction of narrative - dialogically produced and performed. How the narrative is performed. Who is it performed to (Riessman, 2008).	Co-production –‘performance’ of narrative.
	Paying attention to the language of the text; acknowledging the context in which the text was produced (McCormack, 2000:285).	These narratives were elicited specifically for this study.

Analytical Theme	Modes of narrative analysis	Overarching theme / implications for mindful analysis.
	Teller constructs, performs the self, experience and reality. Narrator's voice is important as it communicates both subject positions and social locations. The what, how and where is the individuals voice (Chase, 2005).	Subject positions with social context. Individual voice, what, how and where.
	Narrators are accountable for the credibility and believability of their stories (Chase, 2005).	Is the story convincing?
	Narratives are enabled and constrained by social resources and circumstances, history, community, culture, local settings and institutions influences (Chase, 2005).	This lens can be used to highlight similarity and differences across narratives and experiences – locality of experience. Alignment with Bourdieu.
	Narratives are socially situated interactive performances produced in a setting, for a particular audience for a particular purpose. The story is shaped by the interaction and coproduced (Chase, 2005).	The narrative is performative – coproduced in the context of the interview.
	Narratives are 'inherently social' in that they are produced for a specific audience (Elliot, 2005)	Interaction in interview.
Relationship between student and researcher	Personal and social interaction (inquiry space) (Connelly and Clandinin, 2000)	Interaction in interview.
	Relationships between teller and audience, physical context, meanings shared or developed at the time of the event, intent of teller, entertainment and humour (Mello, 2002).	Focus on relationship between interviewer and interviewee.
	Relationship within the interview (Jacobs et al., 2010).	
Experience centred	Narratives are a distinct form of discourse, retrospective meaning making. A way to organise events and experiences into a meaningful whole, connections and consequences over time. Describe what happened but includes, emotions, thoughts and tellers interpretations (Chase, 2005).	Making meaning by looking back – make whole out of fragmented experiences. Pay attention to emotion and the teller's interpretations.
Time	Chronology – time sequences of events (Creswell, 2013)	How did time, people, places, events and experiences influence the narrative of HE?  Past experience, present experience, future plans (continuity or discontinuity).
	Temporality: time, chronology, time dependent, past, present, future. Temporality related to people, places, events and experiences (Clandinin and Connelly, 2006)	
	The past, present and future (continuity) (Connelly and Clandinin, 2000).	



Analytical Theme	Modes of narrative analysis	Overarching theme / implications for mindful analysis.
	Narratives have a temporal order, a chronology, and sequence to/of events, (Elliot 2005 citing Hinchman and Hinchman, 1997)	Sequence to events. Different experiences from one academic stage to the next.
Events	Focus on specific events (Creswell, 2013).	Specific planned events or significant happenings told as narrated as an 'event'.
	Events are meaningful in that combined they form into a whole, where events can be considered in relation to other events and through their relationship to the whole, (Elliot, 2005 citing Hinchman and Hinchman 1997).	Meaning is relational (temporal). Part / whole analysis.
Visual narratives	Visual narrative analysis provides new insights to narrative analysis if data collection is beyond just the spoken word. Visual representations may include, drawings, paintings, images photos, video, and a variety of creative art forms (Riessman, (2008).	Visual aspects (not a form of data I collected).
	Spoken visuals (Jacobs et al., 2010)	A picture is deliberately painted by the narrator of the 'scene'.
Epiphanies and unexpected	Identifying moments in the text where something unexpected is happening (McCormack, 2000).	Look for 'unexpected' narratives.
	Epiphanies, moments of realisation (Creswell, 2013).	Epiphanies – seeing things in a new light - "I'd never thought of that before".
Place	Three dimensions of space Interaction / Continuity / Situation (Creswell, 2013).	'Place' is important 'where' they study.
	Place: specific physical / concrete locations. Where the experience or event takes place (Clandinin and Connelly, 2006).	H.E experiences are shaped by place, city / town. Did the student move locations?
	The place (situation) (Connelly and Clandinin, 2000).	Institutional context of HE. Place – situation – context of HE study, locations, institution, and course.
	Role of place / space (Jacobs et al., 2010).	Place and space of context of experiences - in HE experiences 'being' on campus in narrative accounts.
Plot	Plot – Characters, Settings, Problem, Action, Resolution (Creswell, 2013).	Characters, Settings, Problem, Action, Resolution.
	Plot – from literature genres (Elliot, 2005; Jacobs et al., 2010).	Plot lines or genres (comedy/drama/romance/satire/tragedy in HE.

Analytical Theme	Modes of narrative analysis	Overarching theme / implications for mindful analysis.
	Plot may be progressive, regressive, or neutral (Elliot, 2005).	Is the story progressive (things improve), regressive (things get worse), or neutral – the story stays the same.
	Mythic cycles, plot structures, motifs, patterns, subjective significance, and symbolism (Mello, 2002).	Consider symbolic characteristics – the ‘typical student’ as reference point, or a recurring theme (employment / self-improvement / doing it for a better life).
	Identifying the narrative processes used by the storyteller (McCormack, 2000:285).	Ways in which story is told.
Social conditions	Social conditions: broader societal conditions and contexts, macro society, institutional cultures, and micro factors (Clandinin and Connelly, 2006).	Influence and interface of wider societal factors, institutional factors and individual behaviours upon narrative of the HE experiences.
Personal / to social	Personal conditions: feelings, hopes, desires, values and moral positions (Clandinin and Connelly, 2006).	Feelings, hopes, desires, values and moral positions expressed in relation to HE in general or their individual experiences of HE.
	Relationships - wider relationship (friends / family) through the narrative (Jacobs et al., 2010).	Impact of relationships with fellow students, and wider relationships with friends and family and how this has effected the HE experience. Positive and negative experiences.
	Participant voice ‘I’ (Jacobs et al., 2010).	Talking about their own experiences rather than general or collective.
	Ceremonial information, cultural interpretation, social functions, and therapeutic functions and meanings (Mello, 2002).	Ceremonial – graduation, I am / am not a ‘typical student’. Talking through issues helped was like therapy (explicit comment from mature students), things becoming meaningful through the process of the interview.
Transitions and transformations	Articulation of transitions and transformations (Jacobs et al., 2010).	HE as site of transition / transformation.
	Narratives as ‘turning points’ (Denzin, 1989)	Explicit, or implicit turning points / watershed moments.

**Table 3 Summary of analytical perspectives from the review of narrative literature and the implications for this study**

## Appendix 7: Example of thematic analysis overview template

[illegible]

## **7.1 Exemplar of text from Example of thematic analysis**

### **Participant name pseudonym**

Will

### **Gender**

Male

### **Age at first interview**

22

### **HEI setting**

Uni.

### **Pre-HE history**

Took three years to do his A'levels. Had some personal issues involving the Police and an ex-girlfriend and got knocked off course. Originally applied to Universities for teacher training but was rejected by all due to lack of teaching experience. Took some time out to train as a Personal Trainer. Worked for two summers at Summer Camp in America and then decided he wanted to 'get his act together' and came back to university. A levels, C DD and E. He had an issue with his ex-girlfriend and it was significant to throw him 'off course' for 2 to 3 years. He went to one Counselling session and it didn't feel right, his dad seemed to encourage him to just 'get on with it'. He has taken time to gain trust again but has a new girlfriend. The issues still play on his mind but not to the extent to affect him greatly. He put his problems in perspective after talking to older children at American Summer camp where he worked and hearing about these issues. Camp was a significant thing in his life in helping him get over it and changed his 'outlook on everything'. Comments on income inequalities in the States and how children from rich and poor backgrounds integrate. Worked at Camp and met girlfriend there.

### **Choice / planning**

Applied for three courses at Marjon and applied 1 one a St. Mary's - assumed he wouldn't get offered a place but was. He also considered the expense of living in London and after discussing with parents went for the option that was closer to home. He put some good thought into his course options. He wanted a route that would keep his options open and considered some programmes to be too specialised for undergrad. He describes it as a 'hit and hope' approach to the application. He's planning ahead for a Masters in his first year of his degree. The 2nd time he looked at universities he only did online research - he didn't visit any. In hindsight he regretted the lack of planning he put into his accommodation as this impacted negatively upon his first year and his desire to 'get away' from university, although this was framed in the job offer. On reflection he clearly didn't want to be drawn further into the rugby house culture for another year. He came back to visit the house for a night out and there was more alcohol fuelled trouble with the house mates. He had a run in with someone from another uni who punched him again and he was worried about a criminal record ruining his future employment prospects. If he comes back to Marjon he'll give it a few years so all of the current cohort have moved on.

## **Home or away**

Moved to a university near home (until parent moved) but is independent and has experience of living away from home for extended periods. The second time of university he looked at universities that were close to home - but far enough away to be 'awayish' from home. There is a bit of him that regrets not being on campus with the other Freshers as his relationships with them aren't as close. He would have liked to have been on campus a little bit more.

## **Transition / transformation**

He lived off-site as he took a room in a student house to help someone out from home. It was with a group of 'rugby lads' and he was happy to have his accommodation sorted as he was away in America and had nothing lined up. He didn't get accepted to the University until April and was away in America so everything felt quite last minute. There has been a big change from his 'previous life' to 'uni life'. He has had to get used to managing his budget and learnt the ropes of being a student and feels well set for year 2. The transition from year 1 to year 2 was initially smooth. He said grades were good but then before Christmas he decided to leave university. He was offered a full time job in America and felt it was too good an opportunity to miss.

## **Academic Aspects**

He has enjoyed learning and applying this in a practical contexts. Some lecturers have been good but he focusses on one or two lectures where a lecturer has been late and not filled the two hour block. He feels he is here to learn and values the time allocated as much as the quality of what is covered. He is strategic, putting effort into modules that he cares about, and coasting on ones that he doesn't feel are important. His writing has improved from his first submissions. He has been really stimulated by a recent assessment so read everything for deeper understanding, this suggests he's engaged more superficially elsewhere. He feels the essay writing process is a way to learn just as much as lectures are. He's enthusiastic about the learning he's done from journals. He prefers to get a bit of stress from a deadline and works about 3 days out from an assessment to. Locks himself in his room with energy drinks and has an intense focus on the work. He understands that the first year doesn't count towards his degree. He is aiming to get over 70% next year. He knows he is 'capable' and wants to achieve this.

## **Social Aspects**

He's had a real problem being knocked off course by being a member of the rugby squad. Pressure to attend every training session that run over an affects lecture attendance. Rugby is the MOST important this about his university experience. As he lives of campus the 'rugby boys' have been a massive influence on him. His friendships have come through the rugby group rather than through his course peers. He also lives with rugby guys from years 2 and 3. Lived with the captain, Vice-Captain etc. Has 'grand senior' senior roles the club give themselves! Power of influence - he's a man who can help! Grand Seniors are 3rd years, Seniors 2nd years and freshers. Their roles is looking after you and stopping you getting into fights on a Wednesday night! They live together, play rugby, and socialise together and have a very close bond. He had

never met these guys and flew from America straight into the house and had been earmarked for the first team. The rugby team has got into fights on nights out and he's been involved, and it's caused problems. The rugby boys seemed to wind people up, and then it escalates into violence. They give it but if it comes back then it can explode! Living off-site means he didn't feel like he got to know his fellow freshers very well (implications for year 2 when the rugby guys move on from uni). There is a desire to keep the house they live in a 'rugby house' so they get rugby players to move in to replace them. BUCs sport has been significant. the main 'Social's on Wednesday's tie into this. Otherwise there are more casual low-key socialising on weekends.

## **Relationship**

He has a long-distance relationship with an American girl. Distance is problematic staying up late to talk. Gets on very well with his girlfriend's mum who was his boss at summer camp. Gets lots of support from her. His girlfriend has planned for him to move to America and get married. He is passionate about his dad's knowledge and career. He almost seems to embellish and talk him up. They get on very well and talk a lot about the body and training. His dad teaches (but has no degree) and helps him with his assignments. Dad was in the navy so was away a lot when he was growing up. See challenges - the club have created a divisive them and us culture and enjoy 'baiting' other groups either in person or on social media groups - for 'banter'. Because they live together and play rugby together the look like a 'pack' when they go out or to key events. The physicality of the rugby boys, to him comparatively, means he 'acts up' to play a alpha male role. He uses the size of his team mates to back him up in fights, 'have you seen the size of them'... he's happy to be violent as he has back up. It's a one in all in mentality. Talks up the violence but then tries to talk it down at the end.

Relationships with his rugby mate extend to help and advice with academic aspects of the programme. He has struggled to remain faithful to his long-distance girlfriend, the lad culture has caused challenges to fit in with the house and maintain his fidelity. He's had disagreements with his friends, he finds a struggle to be away for 6 months at a time. He gets annoyed for being called out for it - and is struggling to accept he's done wrong and defends himself... he knows he's screwed up massively - but is not an 'awful person'. He feels it was meaningless and he could never tell her, so he has to deal with it on his own. His relationship with his girlfriend broke down over the summer period. His girl-friends mother no longer works for the American camp and he was offered a 'director' position based on the work he had done over the last few summers. He sounds like he might have had less choice about the end of the relationship in some ways as he sounds like he might be hopeful that things rekindle when he's in America - although he doesn't quite say as much.

## **Value – Stakes investment**

He values that he is first generation. That his mum is proud of him. And he is aiming to achieve a 1st overall. He highly values the personal relationships from his rugby friends. He highly values when he feels he's gaining new knowledge. He is striving to achieve above 70% next year (plan from yr 1 interview). He feels he will invest his time - and therefore it is achievable. One of his lecturers said that the first year didn't count

but he also expected one of the rugby boys would have told him not to try so hard. The interview is dominated by 'relationships' - yet what he values most is the academic side of the programme. That he's learning, and his goals are achievable. The first year has allowed him to 'map out' the next two years and he wants to conduct himself differently... He is enjoying being away from university and enjoying spending time with his dad cycling and spending time - this is completely different to his uni experience.

### **Habitus / identity**

He is proud to be a HE student and wants to complete and for this to start a family tradition.... particularly with the men going to HE as no one on his father's side have ever been to HE. His mum is very proud that he's gone, she never thought he'd have the courage to go. He mentions he can 'fit in' in new surroundings, he was different at Camp, before uni when he was training. He thinks he's kept a relatively low profile and will be able to reinvent himself in year 2 and study more. Without being well known he feels people won't have preconceived ideas about him. He feels like he was 'easily influenced' in his first year and didn't want to continue like that. HE CHANGED a lot due to the people around him. He went out for a drink with his dad and nearly got into a fight. He was always on 'edge' tense and ready to have a fight. Since he's been away from that environment he's calmed down and feels back to normal. He felt the house acted in a stereotypical way. He couldn't get into a club in a town hundreds of miles away as he was identified as a trouble maker, he was out with new friends from work and was really embarrassed and regretted his behaviour. He is pleased now to be away from his 'uni lad' persona and back and being more 'chilled'. he changed his 'colours' to match who he's with. His authentic sense of self seems easily changed. He seems the pros of fitting in with people can be a 'con' in changing to fit in with the 'wrong' crowd. He has shifted his 'student identity' and student aura very easily. He just copied the behaviour of people around them.

### **Field habitus alignment**

his habitus was aligned with the rugby club and a hypermasculine environment rather than with academic field. He was more aligned with the academic field but the two were incongruent. He suffered from habitus clivé - not able to maintain both aspects of the rugby culture and the need to get on academically. What he expected from university and what he got were very different. He expected more academic focussed students. He was surprised by the culture from his house that promoted that you don't go to 9 o'clock lectures as a first year. This bad influence from living with 2nd and 3rd year 'rugby lads'. When he did want to go as he's paying £9k for it - he was 'mocked'. This culture demotivated him overall. He got more sucked into the social scene which had a negative effect upon his studies. He's emphatic that he's not quite, he's just got a better offer of work. He's spent the last 6 months justifying his decision to people.

## **Field**

He understood the HE field more after applying to prestigious universities, Durham and Exeter, the first time around with A'Levels that weren't great. He said, 'there's no way I'm getting in there'!

## **Doxa**

His dad works in education and encouraged him to do A levels rather than BTEC as these were worth more. He didn't do well at A level so there was some tension. He felt that his dad was living through him and getting him to do the things he didn't do, or didn't get the opportunity to do. The family doxa was split, his mother's side had some experience of HE. His dad had 'got on' without a degree. His dad was quite positive about him dropping out but his mum wasn't very happy. She felt he'd invested time and money on his degree. His dad felt he could pick up his degree whenever in the future. His university friends tried to talk him out of leaving university on a bit of a whim. He didn't speak with his PL or AA and sent a few emails. He didn't quite know what was happening himself so couldn't really communicate with academics. He got caught up with doxa of the rugby house and took this behaviour for granted.

## **Place / Event**

The 'rugby house' is a key 'place'. Key event was being offered a job in America. He quickly 'dropped' his investment in the university qualification. He wanted to get back into a 'proper life' not going to bed at 3am and getting up at mid-day. He thought about the 'job offer' and took advice and didn't want to miss the chance. The 'place' of the house - he visited and thought it was disgusting and couldn't believe he lived like that. He felt everything about the place was the same, same characters, same banter.... it was just 'boring'.

## **Finances**

his finances are challenging as he need to pay to go to America at Christmas and for the summer. His mum and dad can't help him financially. He's working as a waiter between 7 to 24 hours a week. His most hours is 32. Working evenings and weekends and at the weekend not getting home until gone 1am. He plays Rugby at the weekend so by Monday morning he's tired before the week starts. It's the pressure of managing multiple projects that causes stress, not just the hours. Talks about being generous with money and giving away £500 this year. His loan next year will take account of his parents' lower incomes, so he can access more money, and he is reducing the cost of his room. Student finances were not a significant issue for him. He understands how student finance worked and this did not influence his decisions. He thinks the system is fair compared to other places even though the debt does hang over your head. He has had to learn how to budget being a student.

## **Work and career.**

He initially wanted to teach but through studying, training and play sport became more passionate about that and changed focus. Still potential to go into teach later in life - teaching children. He wants to work in America and is very optimistic about employment prospects. He has worked in restaurants for 4 years to earn money, but this isn't aligned to his career. He wants to get a job in a gym and claw back some of the £3000 he's spent on Personal Training Quals. He decided to 'drop out' at Christmas



from university, he was offered a full-time job in America that was due to start in March but there were issues with his visa and this was delayed. He planned to move back in with his parents to save some money. He justifies leaving university as he was 'busy' doing pre-work tasks, online marketing etc. He has given up university on the basis of 3-month summer visa for work with the aspiration of getting a 3-year work visa. If this doesn't work out, then he felt he might be back at University in September. He is clear he wants to complete his degree at some point, it's just the opportunity of the job has taken his focus. He's unsure how he will complete a degree but says he wants to either in the UK or in America.

### **Time**

He's learnt more about time management being a student and the difficulty of trying to play sport in and outside of university, work part-time, and study and the challenges this brings. He feels like he can come back to uni at any time in the future, in his late twenties. He has got the experience from this time at university that he can put to good use.

### **Challenges issues**

There was an issue with the rugby clubs being sanctioned for disciplinary action and they were banned for 3 months. Violence is associated with the rugby club. They were singing songs about a rival university, which was banter, but once they sang a song back it descended into violence. He seems to think they got caught only because one guy was wearing identifiable kit, not that they were singing targeted songs. They were initially banned for a year but after intervention of the SU president this was reduced to 3 months if the club did community activity to restore faith in them. the club has a bad reputation and they tried to rehabilitate this.

### **Epiphany / turning point**

is reflective looking back at things that have happened through the interview that have influenced how he ended up here. Use the story about buying his friends food on the Maini trip to demonstrate he's a generous guy. His epiphany was that he didn't particularly want to be a student anymore, not in the way he was one. The job offer provided the catalyst for this epiphany.

### **Plot**

The plot is one of new beginnings but because quite focussed on then them and us of the rugby club. A violent story that he aims to roll back from towards the end. He has to get out of the situation or is offered the chance to get out of the university experience by taking a job offer which gave him a 'justifiable' reason to himself and everyone else why he was 'dropping out'.

### **Other observations**

He didn't officially withdraw from his course even though he 'left' in December. He was doing some additional CPD modules and hoped to get some kind of Foundation Degree (even though this is a validated option). Reflection - he really enjoyed university but if he did it again he'd do it differently. He feels he'd study locally and not get sucked into the uni lifestyle.



## **Appendix 8: Summary of interviews with participants**

### **8.1 SFC**

#### **Tom**

Tom spoke about the here and now and mainly in terms of his experience of grades and assessments, teaching and relationships. Overall there was a neutral plot, it was neither regressive nor progressive. He felt academically he was an average student that drifted through 6<sup>th</sup> form taking the easy option. He had no plans for university but was 'sold' the college's internal FdA and he and some of his friends went for this. It was sold on the basis that he could stay at home, study part-time and work part-time and the fees were cheaper. Discounted HE qualifications essentially. He felt he's 'save' £9k studying here. He moved with his friends and feels some regret about not going away to Uni but is constrained now by his earlier choice for the progression programme. Very limited planning and guidance. Has a very comfortable home life 'a mummy's boy'. The transition was easy as he did BTEC work but the expectations for academic work were more difficult. His peers all seem to lack motivation and he is in a small cohort. The course manager then 'manages' them to complete assessments. He questions the quality of some of the teachers teaching HE feeling the temporary workforce are poor teachers or would never get a job in a 'real' university. He feels his cohort put in about 70% effort. He moved onto the course with three of his best friends and they still socialise outside of uni. As the town doesn't have much HE provision and no university the nightlife is quiet until students return who went to uni's elsewhere. He feels his tutor as continued the same teaching style from BTEC so things are on a plate for them and he doesn't think this is standard HE practice. As there is only 7 people they get treated the same so if things are organised rather than a voluntary aspect it all becomes compulsory. He values the credentials for HE to stand out above those without degrees. He doesn't think the FdA is enough so he's topping up. He has valued critical thinking

and communication skills from the degree. After his first year, he felt academically confident, as he didn't feel his BTEC prepared him for the academic nature of HE. He regrets not challenging himself to grow through moving away. His habitus is not aligned to the field of HE and people have questioned the value of what he's doing as 'Mikey mouse'. A Place college campus is problematic being surrounded by young kids, doesn't feel like HE. He works long hours to fund his 'nice' lifestyle. By year 2 he is working up to 34 hours per week and this is negatively affecting his energy and time to study. HE feels like an afterthought in his week rather than the focus. He feels that the group are unable to really voice concerns about the programme and standards to the course manager because the group is so small so issues are not raised as it feels too difficult to do this.

### **Jake**

Jake spoke and framed this about the outcome and future all orientated towards his future ambition to be a teacher. His whole narrative interview was orientated towards him working towards this career. The plot was progressive as things went to plan for him and he was quite instrumental in his approach to the achieving the necessary qualifications to become a PE teacher and he was far less concerned with his 'experience' of HE, providing he got his desired outcome. An employment focussed narrative lots of applied experience facilitated through degree. Aligned himself to the demands of the field of employment as well as he. His stakes or illuio was 'invested' in employment. Recognition of a stratified field of he but considered that at FDA and progression that wouldn't affect him.

### **Roger**

Roger had a heroic story of overcoming adversity - progressive plot. Inspirational story and sad that his dyslexia had been overlooked and had such an impact on his life. Luke had a troubled start in education. He had undiagnosed dyslexia and struggled with

school. He had a challenging home life whilst he was in secondary school where his parents split up and most of the attention was focussed towards his brother who was addicted to drugs. He felt overlooked at home, as middle child who was able to drift, and unsupported in school and was turned off education. He was a successful runner and felt his school teachers paid him attention for his running as this was something he excelled at and didn't give due attention to his academic progress. He felt his family was 'looked down' upon by his extended family as they were a split family who weren't very successful, his brother had had drug problems, and his mother had dyslexia and he'd heard negative comments made about them from his wider family. He is married with two boys and aged 30 at the first interview having just completed a Sports based FdA and starting a BA progression programme at the same Sixth Form institution.

He didn't do well at school and felt he had unfinished business with education so a year after leaving school he enrolled on a BTEC at a local college and completed this and got a job working as a fitness instructor. He did industry fitness awards and continued to work as a fitness inductor whilst studying for his degree. He worked alongside university students who would share their experiences about university and he wanted a piece of this but never felt it would be an option. He spent 5 years of this life applying unsuccessfully for the RAF but eventually passed but left as by this time his wife had just given birth to his first son and he needed to be at home to support his family. His wife had troubles with her own family and they decided they needed to be together to ensure their own family had a better start in life than they'd had. He describes how through his 20s he became 'lost in running' he was a successful runner and became locally recognised and excelled and focussed a lot of his time and energy around this.

His major turning point was when he heard that the local Sixth Form college was offered a Sports based FdA with BA progression programme. He felt this local option would allow him to get a degree and stay working and living in the local area. There

was no other university level courses available locally so HE had never seemed like a realistic option before. He didn't consider any other options and once he'd explored the finances with support from the school and in discussion with his wife he committed to gain a degree. His return to education was focussed on building a new career as a PE teacher and providing a better life to his family. He was also very conscious of being a role model to his son who was at Primary School and who he'd helped learn to read. He was worried his son might also have dyslexia and didn't want him to have the same negative experiences of school. He felt like being a teacher he could support the 'underdogs' who might get overlooked in school (the same way he felt he was).

His transition to HE was difficult and he lacked confidence in his abilities. He failed his first essay and felt like dropping out. His dyslexia was picked up 'officially' whilst in the first year of his FdA and he got support for this. He had very positive relationships with his tutors and peer group. He was the only mature student and had some light-hearted banter about his age. The course leader made a comment about his practical capabilities might need to balance his lack of ability in written work. This was a throw away comment as he felt his tutor didn't have faith in him but this inspired him to prove him wrong and he applied himself with consistency to his studies to achieve grades consistently in the high 60s. His academic success became a 'family affair' where his boys would be involved in guessing what grade boundary his work would be in. They became familiar with the language of HE and aspirational about what they will study when they go to university. His HE experience was transformational for him and his family's aspirations and expectations for university. His immediate family have had mixed opinions his sister and mother are very proud of his achievements and his mother has returned to education herself to do an NVQ and they both now talk about their assignments together. His younger brother is not supportive seeing this move into education as a transgression away from the families doxa of just 'working'.

His course is condensed over 2 days a week but feels full time as he has support from the dyslexia tutor on a separate day and works in the fitness industry at other times along side his studies. One of the implications of the FdA and separate BA progression programme has been that the FdA doesn't officially count towards the BA honours. So the results of the BA programme is over just one year. He feels that once his cohort were aware of this they 'switched off' in semester B as they knew their efforts weren't going to impact upon their degree classification. The second interview takes place at the end of his BA progression year and his confidence is high. He is concerned but confident that he'll achieve a 2:1 and he has secured a place on a PGCE for secondary PE teaching at a prestigious Major university in neighbouring city. He attended a interview and transition day and shared his 'story' with the course tutor who was impressed by his journey and by his practical delivery skills. He was positively encouraged by the team to be more confident in what he had to offer as they also so great potential in him. He was delighted that lecturers in this institution valued the degree and his personal journey and were so impressed he was offered a place on the PGCE course, he was told 'you are good enough to come here' – he was aware of the different rankings of universities in the field of HE and this recognition was a major confidence boost. Through the process his has strongly valued his 'second chance' in education that has been strongly career orientated. He has grown considerably in confidence and developed confidence in his own academic abilities. He has strongly valued that this process has been life changing for him, but also for his own children and their future career aspirations that involve HE study and he would love them to go to university. His HE experience has been shared with his children and his wife. His wife is considering returning to HE once he's completed his PGCE. They are all looking forward to the symbolic graduation ceremony and his boys look forward to seeing him wear those 'silly hats'. In preparing for the PGCE he had to take and pass 'skills tests'

in Maths and English and he's been doing practice papers at home and his eldest son has been doing these with him. The nature of conversations at home have also changed and his sons are now discussing things like politics with him and he's blown away by this.

His story is of personal achievement and personal transformation. One of growth in personal confidence and learner identity and how this has impacted up him as a parent and how he is working with his own boys. His story is of his shared journey through his degree - a - family affair. Results were of family significance. His outside employment in coaching and sport and his industry experience paid the bills and aligned to his career aspirations. Focussed on making a 'better life' for his family through education to become a teacher. Wider impact on family as university discussions already taking place with young sons so the doxa of the family and understanding of HE has changed through this process.

### **Louise**

Louise's is a localised story. Of a 'declining' family through death of grandparents and an only child reluctant (unable to cope) with the thought of moving out of the town. She did look at other options but wasn't confident enough to make the move – to 'break out'. She was slightly frustrated by her course, the small numbers of students (all boys) and on occasions the quality of the HE environment and the overbearing 'management' where students were not encouraged to be independent enough. Her lecturer is too opinionated and she's given up trying to express an opinion so stay's quiet and works on her own stuff secretly. The boys in her group have low motivation and it's a difficult environment so she isolates herself to some extent to cope. She progressed through the FdA to BA with a plan to go on to teach. Her story is career orientated towards Primary teaching. There is no real social dimension to her experience. She strongly values the credential the piece of paper to and credits to move to the next stage. She starts to value



more the applied knowledge in teaching in year 2 and in particular her school based experiences as she can see how this directly translates to her career goals. As first generation she was unsure about the HE process and had no wider friends to ask. Family so proud she's doing HE. She is conflicted as she thinks she wouldn't have coped moving to Uni and there was no local option. But studying in an environment surround by 'little kids' without much of HE ethos has been challenging. Financially her family are well off and supportive. She earns £500 and can spend this so has a very nice lifestyle living at home. She has not needed maintenance grants or loans and study in FE is cheaper so your overall debt is lower. She has struggled to take feedback (negative) and has quite fragile confidence academically. She is not that interested with the whole HE experience and getting a degree is a necessary 'middle stone' to become a teacher.

### **Jessica**

Mum of two 33 working full time at the place she is studying part-time. She is a non traditional student who has always done some form of study alongside working full time. Working in education made her realise that her lack of 'degree' (capital deficit in field of education) made her stand out amongst colleagues for the wrong reasons. Getting a degree was never on her radar until she came to work in education. There is limited HE provision locally and having the opportunity to study whilst working felt like the best option so she never considered other providers. She is confident and was confident that she would cope well with the studying in HE although there was a shock at the difference between vocational study in NVQ and a Foundation Degree that is underpinned by academic knowledge. It was a shock that her opinion, that was so valued through her workbased NVQ counted for little in the academic assignments. She has struggled with engaging in depth in academic text preferring short online articles to academic texts or academic journals. She has a superficial approach just quickly

searching for something to back up her point rather than reading in depth. She had some APEL in year 1 and many assignments came towards the end of the year, when she realised she hadn't actually done as much as she thought and felt lots of pressure to get work in. She is generally time poor and spend minimal time with her peer group preferring to go back to her desk to be 'productive'. She has made sacrifices in the busier assessment period and has missed spending time with her children. She has lots of support from her mum and her husband is relatively supportive. She is able to establish a 'student' identity that is separate to her role in the college. She has two teachers one is very supportive and helpful, the other seems to adopt quite an old fashioned approach to her relationship and is quite 'strict' even though most of the class are adult learners. She is focussed on the prestige of gaining a degree and the potential to earn more money. However when explicitly asked she focusses on learning new knowledge as things of value even though she has adopted a relatively superficial approach given her time challenges. She feels more aligned to the field of education through her job and her study as she has assimilated and understands what is valued within the field. Her family were not orientated towards academic knowledge but her father was an instructor in HE and her mum is taking an interest in her studies. Through her experience she values a degree and hopes that her children will follow in her footsteps into HE. The degree is integral to her career but isn't part of a desire to change career or essential for it. She is valuing it's worth in the employment market and exploring internal and external options. She has tentatively explored what she might need to be a solicitor and has long term aspirations for a director level position. This is driven by prestige and income to help her children financially in the future. The interview is reflective and explores some historical and current issues in work and her tendency to take too much on and be critical of others. She is optimistic and exploring

future possibilities. The story is strongly interconnected with her current career and her HE experiences – they relate strongly to each other.

## **8.2 University**

### **Will**

Will is a 21 year old who had some troubles in his private life during A levels and transferred to a Btec. He worked in Camp America prior to coming to HE and this has been life changing for him. His move to university involved some planning and considered several courses at this university and one in London. He selected to go ‘away-ish’ where the university was only an hour from home. He was put off by the cost of living in London. He took a degree in sport that he felt would leave his options open. His late acceptance to university meant he didn’t actively plan his accommodation. He accepted a room through a friend who needed to find someone to take his place as he was dropping out and ended up living off-site in his first year with second year students rather than living in halls with the other first years. The ‘rugby house’ significantly shaped his HE experience. He spent significant time with the ‘rugby boys’ who influenced his approach to studying the his first year in a superficial way as ‘it doesn’t count’ towards the final degree. It was a bit of a culture shock from working in America prior to uni and then getting into the ‘uni lifestyle’. He has engaged with HE learning and clearly values this knowledge. He is driven to achieve a 1<sup>st</sup> and has improved his written work as he’s understood what is expected of university work. He is strategic in the effort he puts in, if you values the subject he works hard, but will coast if he’s not as stimulated by the module. The social aspects of training, playing, socialising and living with the rugby team is the most significant aspect of his university experience. The rugby club has been involved in some violent situations on nights out and he’s been involved in this, living up, to expectations of the rugby culture. The team seem to like to wind people up for ‘banter’. His most significant relationships have

come via the sports team rather than his year peers or course peers. He is trying to maintain a long distance relationship with an American girlfriend he met through Camp America and has found this difficult and challenging and hasn't remained faithful to her. This has caused him some stress and anxiety. His relationship broke down with his girlfriend over the summer between year 1 and year 2. By Christmas he was thinking of withdrawing from university as he had a job offer for Camp America which he felt was too good to miss. He moved to greater london to live with his parents who had moved during his first year to save and planned to go to America in March although this was being delayed. He is at pains to stress that he's not 'quitting' university, he will complete a degree at some point but he feels that the job offer is better. He 'shed' his university persona very quickly and feels he was playing a role whilst at university. He will either complete his degree once everyone that knows him has left or at another university and study in a very different way next time. He feels he was easily influenced and not his authentic self at university. Quitting was a way to reassert his non-rugby-student identity. He felt his student identity and rugby identity were incogurent. He wanted to study but this didn't fit with the culture of the house mates he was living with and he felt split over this. What he expected from university was very different to the mirco culture he entered. His alignment to this subculture meant he valued for a short term these things but he experienced a shattering of illusio and this investments felt counter productive to his wider investment in the dominant doxa of HE. He has worked up to 30 hours per week to fund his student lifestyle. The job offer was a key turning point in stopping the student experience he was having, to work, and the break up his degree study and 'do it differently' next time.

## **Hannah**

Hannah studies a BED in Secondary PE and completed the first interview at the end of her first year of stuides. She always loved school and has wanted to work in as a teacher

since she was very young. She is very focussed on this career ambition and understood that university was the only way to achieve this. If there was an apprenticeship route to have been school based she would have done this. She has been successful in the school system and worked for one year as a teaching assistant prior to university. Although she and her family were unfamiliar to university application processes she they were able to get support from an antie who worked in HE and a family friend who had just been through the process with there daughter. She applied to a number of universities and went to a number of Open Days. She chose a university that was 60 mins travel from home. She wanted to get away from her home location but to be close enough to home for convenience. Her programme is a mixture between having 'academic' and vocational teacher training. She is in university for three semesters rather than two semesters and her workload feels heavier than that of students on BA degrees. Her programme includes a number of school based placements so her programme is punctuated with extended periods of time in schools as a 'trainee' PE teacher. She is very committed to her studies and is putting in her full effort to her work and assessments and achiviing 2:1 grades. In the first year she lived in halls of residence and went out socially quite regularly. She found living in halls of residence quite challenging due to the lifestyle choices of others and found shared living and the mess in the kitchen and food choices of peers challenging. She is physically active and training in the gym in the mornings and eats heathily spending time preparing fresh meals from produce supplied by her parents. She has found the university to be very friendly and has highly valued the friendships she's made through her course, through playing in sports teams, and with university staff in the sports centre. She surprised how much of a family feel there is. In year 2 she lived off site in purpose built private student accommodation and valued the quality of this accommodation and it's proximity to university. Her social experinece of university in year 2 was very different and she had

only been out once socially in year 2. She and many of the girls had boyfriends in year 2 and they spent their social time with them. Having a boyfriend put additional pressure on managing her relationship with her mum who was quite demanding of her time and had a bit of a hard time with her leaving home, when she did return home there was pressure to spend time with her mum. She highly values her social relationship and the support that has been forthcoming from these relationships and her course tutors. By year 2 she highly values how prepared she feels for her career as a PE teacher. She has valued the new experience afforded through university, moving away and the whole experience has been a 'new adventure'. She carries some negative connotations of being a 'student' and more clearly identifies with being a 'sportswoman' and 'trainee' PE teachers rather than HE student. She is strongly vocationally orientated and has difficulty understanding why someone who study a degree, such as drama, when it doesn't obviously lead to a career. Her parents are supportive of university but they never had the opportunity to go so she has had to break new ground in moving away and training for a professional job. Her younger sister is also going to university, and with her experience, she has been able to support her sister through the process who has benefitted from her experiences. She hasn't worked through university and gets financial support from her parents and grand parents. She had saved money from her gap year before university and has been careful to budget this. In her second interview she has had further two school based placements and got a boyfriend who works in an FE environment. She has orientated her career ambition to teach in FE rather than schools and is planning ahead for life after university getting her boyfriend to save for a deposit for a house and talking about her career, getting married and having a family. Her story is one that is aimed at 'getting on' with life and starting her career as quickly as possible, the university experience is secondary to her career plans she has had a positive and smooth experience through HE.

## **Student X**

Student X had aspirations to be a professional footballer and didn't work as hard as he could at school as he was convinced this dream would come true. He studied a Btec in a non-traditional provider linked to a football club and didn't think this prepared him well for HE. Staying thought staying at the football club was an opportunity to still 'get spotted' by the football club. He chose the university and his football degree as it seemed like an easier option in terms of transitions, it was 'local' to home but still gave him the opportunity to leave home but maintain contacts with his home life (parents / girlfriend, and football club). Other options seemed too far away to contemplate. He found the physical transition to university smooth but didn't feel well prepared academically and felt his minimal efforts in his previous education put him at a disadvantage. He didn't feel his Btec prepared him well and he was given credit too easily and this didn't prepare him for the expectations and practice of university. He was diagnosed with dyslexia in the first year of university and now has support in place. He didn't feel like he engaged well in the first semester academically and was distracted by the independence of university and the social aspects. There was misalignment between his university expectations (from TV programmes and movies) that he would be partying all the time, and the realities of university and the academic aspects. He learnt the rules of the game in his first year. He has transformed his grades from failing to achieving grades in the 2:1 bracket. His first semester involved very heavy drinking and socialising and he was shocked at the volumes of drink he was encouraged to drink. His drinking affected him on nights out and the following day so struggled to engage. He's been very social and made lots of friends. His experience of year 2 social activities changed. He lived with 10 lads and found there were lots of distractions as someone always had something going on. His social life still involved nights out but his drinking was more moderated. He feels that he's made really good relationships across the

university due to its small size and has positive relationships with his lecturers. He's really enjoyed meeting new types of people, he finds it hard to put into words how different some people are and this has widened his horizons and experiences. He has a girlfriend from back home who has had some serious mental health issues and he's found this challenging to his own mental health. University has provided the opportunity to take a step back to get some respite from these pressures. He's also had to manage pressures from his mum who has missed him and he feels pressure to see her and spend time with her. He's highly valued the independence university has given him to find himself and create a new life. He has valued the experience for its own sake as well as getting a degree to improve his qualifications and employment prospects. His identity has always been tied to football, there was a shattering of illusion when his ambition to be a professional footballer didn't work out. He's invested now in his education, something he did see as important when he was at school as he was convinced he'd make it as a pro. His identity in football is woven into the degree he took, his professional aspirations, his hobby, and his part time work all revolve around football. Financially things have been tight for him but he manages to survive by eating very cheaply. In year 2 he had to take on more paid part-time work and works up to 18 hours per week coaching football. This puts pressures on the time that is available to study, this along with the challenges of his relationship has negatively impacted upon his studies and his grades. He has had to overcome the challenges with his girlfriend and his own subsequent mental health, and his dyslexia. Both issues were supported by his house mates who suggested he get tested for dyslexia and who recommended him to go for counselling. His story is one of overcoming adversity and broadening his horizons beyond his local circumstances. He talks about working overseas after university.



## **Daisy**

Daisy sustained an injury during her A'level / Btec studies at college and this affected the grades she had. She had always wanted to go to university for the experience but had been unsure what to study. The injury and rehabilitation process made gave her a passionate to want to work in rehabilitation and therapy. She didn't get the grades to go into physiotherapy and wasn't sure she wanted to work in a hospital environment and selected 'sports therapy' as a relevant degree. She was located in the midlands and had lots of local university choice but wanted to move a long way from home and to study by the sea. Part of her planning involved an visit to an Open Day and a separte visit with a friends to sample the night life of the city. She wanted the independence of university what she describes as a 'free pass' to live in, and experience and new city and a new lifestyle. Moving away to university was 'doing it properaly'. She had a clear idea of a 'student experience' with strong social aspects and living with 'no money'. Part of her independence a moving away related to leaving the restrictions of home and experiencing a freedom in her social life (including freedom to be away from her parental home and the sexual liberation of this). She loved her first year of university living in halls and embracing the social aspects of university where she made lots of friends in her halls, on her course, and via sports teams. She was interview first at the end of her second year and then again at the end of her third year. In year 2 she lived in a private rental student house with her ex-halls mates to keep a separation between her course mates and old halls mates. She got a boyfriend in year 2 and felt torn / restricted by this as she felt time pressures socially and academically to fit everything in.

Academically she always had the best of intensions to improve her work and fully commit to study but always felt she never really lived up to these ideals. Her approach to assessment is to 'hit the word count' rather than to produce her best work. Generally her expeirences and relationships are all positive with the exception of her programme

leader who she has a poor perception of and a placement supervisor where there relationships sowers in a year 3 placement which has quite a devastating effect on her evaluation of her competence, and the programme, and her future career aspirations. She values having a degree for its own sake and sees this as a marker of distinction above those without degrees. She strongly values the opportunity to 'get away' to university despite this going against the family doxa of living locally and getting a job and working your way up from the bottom. The sports aspects of university and playing a new sport has helped to make the uni experience for her. She has loved her university experience but by the end of year 3 is ready to transition back to home and is taking steps to find a graduate job that pays well near her home town and get on with 'real life'. There has been a shattering of illusion after her investment in sports therapy doesn't appear to be a viable career in terms of employment or graduate pay so despite her heavy emotional investment in this due to her injury pre-university she was shocked at the limited career prospects and the salaries on offer after spending three years of her life at university to become qualified. Following a few negative comments on placement she has really taken very badly she has questioned the value of her degree and knowledge, but later asserts that she is competent. She externalises the 'blame' for feelings of doubt, yet elsewhere acknowledges she took a fairly superficial approach to her studies. There has been a strong 'anti-university' doxa by her parents and brothers who don't value a university education. Despite his reservation her dad has supported her a lot financially so she hasn't had to work whilst at university. She knows he'll support her financially but has craved a bit support beyond just finance that her family have been unable to provide. She feels like her dad is starting to 'get' how challenging university is after he read her dissertation. She feels she wants to break the family mode and be a role model for others to come to university. She always saw her course aligned to her future profession so the shattering of illusion is related to both her course and her

future profession. She felt she had 'decided' on her career when she embarked on university. She felt that broader subjects, such as English, left career decisions until after uni. Her transition to year 3 was very difficult and she had a panic attack that meant she stayed in her room for a few days fearing the challenge of year three. She talked to a tutor about quitting but was glad to have lasted the course. The story is about freedom and discovery, freedom geographically from her parents, but she is supported by them financially. She sought – and had – the 'traditional student experience'.

### **Daniel**

Daniel went to a grammar school but at around the age of 13 started to rebel against school and started to be late, his attendance wasn't good and he acted up to entertain himself and his class mates. He had lots of after school detentions and was on report even in 6<sup>th</sup> form. His school was very academically focussed and he didn't generally fit the mold. They were focussed on getting students into Russell Group universities and he felt he was abandoned by them when he said he wasn't interested in university. He felt his transition from his primary school where he was the cleverest and sportiest was difficult as he went from feeling like a big fish in a small pond to swimming in a pool with lots of big, and bigger fish. He was used to being the best and this wasn't the case at university. He partially dropped out of 6<sup>th</sup> form taking an extended summer break working in a supermarket. He liked having the money but once his dad intervened and charged him rent returning to school seemed like a better option. He worked in a supermarket for 2 years after sixth form and got a low level supervisory role. His friends went to university and they'd come back and share their stories about university and he felt a little lost. It was a combination of his dad intervening and suggesting he went to uni to sort his life out' and his brother moving out of their shared house and the prospect of returning to live at home that prompted him to apply to university. His dad suggested he used his talent for writing and his love of sport and follow a journalism

course. He selected universities on the basis that they had to be at least 2 hours from home and that he knew know one there, and that offered journalism. He applied to 5 universities and was rejected by 4, the 5<sup>th</sup> offered him a place in April and he started in September. He had his own criteria for the university as he wanted the opportunity to start again where he wasn't known for his past identity and have expectations to behave in certain ways and to be the 'joker' and get knocked off course and was keen to embrace the new experiences independently from home. He is passionate about the transformatory potential of university. He was concerned about being 'older' having taken two years out and had quite close friendship group at home and was concerned if people would 'get' his sense of humour. He has enjoyed the academic and practical elements of his journalism course. He achieved better grades for film making so has selected modules on the basis of this to avoid written work as much as possible. He claims not to be able to write an essay to save his life, despite getting a 2:2 grades for this. He compared his work to that of a fellow student who had a 1<sup>st</sup> and rather than seek to improve his written work he has avoided it as best he can. He claims the demand of academic writing stifle his journalistic writing style. He along with other students in this group were all told that 'the first year doesn't count' toward his degree and therefore changed his approach he quoted another student who said '40% is the new 100%'. He has had positive comment on the films he's made from his student peers but struggles to take praise, claiming to have had lots of experience dealing with criticism but not much with taking praise. He like praise from lecturers whose opinion he values and they are 'above him'. He has been very social at university and embraced all opportunities that came along. He has taken on social roles for the SU as 'rep' encouraging first years to integrate, in his second year he was social sec. and he worked as a Senior Resident student living in halls as a 3<sup>rd</sup> year student which was a pastoral role. In his final year he stood for the SU President and was elected after putting 1

month into campaigning and putting his final year study 'on hold' for a month. He has really enjoyed meeting new people at university and becoming friends with people that he'd never have even spoken to back at home. He feels like he lived in a bubble at home and he's broadened his horizons through university. He had a girlfriend during his second year but this wasn't a serious relationship, he liked the ability to spend more chilled out social life away from the party lifestyle. His dad has been a significant influence upon him, he thinks he's flourished in the university and is encouraging him to stay to do a Masters degree. His dad seems reluctant for him to leave at all suggesting that he complete a masters degree, becomes a lecturer or even the VC! He has really valued the transformation he's had from uni, firstly growing in confidence and the separation he experienced earlier in the experience between his home identity and his uni identity has become dominated by the new identity feeling unified so he doesn't feel like he's got a persona for home and a different one for university. He now understands how universities operate. He's gone from not know what as SU was to the president of one in 3 years. Taking 2 years out before university has given him the confidence to fully embrace university, he sure most student don't embraces as much as they could and he feels he'd not have embraced it as much if he had come as an 18 year old. He has always fitted in at the university and it's felt like home, as a WP institution it 'champions the underdog' and this strikes a chord with him. He feels like he's broken out of the family doxa, his dad didn't want him to follow in his footsteps having little qualifications and working his way up. Most of his family have lived and worked in the same county their whole life – moving away to university and getting a degree is a break from this family doxa. His dad has been supportive without being pushy and strongly believes that you need to find your own way, they have been emotionally supportive but not financially supportive. He is funding his lifestyle by working in the shop on campus and working over the summer to get his overdraft back to zero. Overall

his story is very tranformatative and progressive, from summer market self stacker to SU president.

### **8.3 FEC**

#### **Richard**

Richard is studying a FdA at a large FE college and progressed from studying Btec and stayed as the same institution as a HE student. He studied A'levels and Btec and preferred the more applied Btec courses. He did some limited research on HE and felt geographically limited which in turn limited his choices. This was partly as he didn't subcribe to the dominant doxa of moving away to university. This felt alien to him and his local connections made more sense. His Btec tutors worked as Associate Lecturers on his FdA and they promoted the local course but also provided good informations on 'alternatives'. Lots of his Btec peers went to other universities but he percieved university to be theoretical and 'academic' and felt staying in a FE environment would offer more of an applied approach. He is at the end of his FdA at the College he has quite a mature approach to his studies and his life. He has moved out of the family home to get a bit of distance and independence. He has a very committed work ethic, he says at college he isn't here to study but to 'work' and the group he is studying with a mixed in age and are not a 'typical' student demographic. The media based degree focusses on applied skills and projects with increasing indepedence for students. It feels like he's doing the job of a journalist already rather than studying to become one. His HE experience is related soley to his course and his course mate. They have a social one evening a week which is the equivalent to a 'drink after work'. There is no real HE culture within the FE college beyond the course. Although he says he is here to work he clearly values the knowledge and skills he's developed throught the programme and has a deep appraoch to his learning, he is achivieing high grades but he does not appear grade focussed. He is assignment driven, but related to the 'work' of a journalist with

projects and deadlines. Through his FdA he has made connections with industry and is building a portfolio of work. The FdA is structure over only a few days so he feels like a part-time HE student part-time working journalist. His identity isn't aligned to that of being a HE student. He thinks the lack of wider HE culture at his FE college plays a part in this and his identity is more aligned to his planned future profession as a journalist. He plans to complete a progression programme and by the second interview he has completed this year at a university in the neighbouring city. He felt it was important to get a 'respectable degree' – a full degree, from a university, as the FdA from the FE college might not be well understood by employers and not particularly well regarded. Through this transitions he quickly recognised and responded to the changing demands and the more 'academic' focus on level 6 work and reduced the amount of outside volunteering he was doing in order to focus on the degree. The programme still allowed quite a degree of independence and he selected some independent study modules. He feels that being at the university for the 'top up' is the 'real thing' and this suggests that he doesn't feel like his FdA from FE was 'real HE'. In his third year at university he travelled for over 1 hour to get on to campus, this felt like his 'work base' and being at this place was part of his purpose aligned to the course. He didn't always need to come on to site for practical reasons, it was being on the campus for it's symbolic value to him. There seemed to be an epiphany in the difference between is 'project / work focussed' approach to his FdA and the more academic style of university. He was positive initially about his FdA experience but evaluated this slightly less favourably once he was in a HE environment. He still however highly valued the practical skills he had learnt from his FdA so still valued his time doing this qualification in the FE environment. His place of study for university work. He has had very little paid work whilst at university but has built up a large portfolio of media projects through his FdA. He has had worked published in an international sports publication as a paid contributor

for £50 per article. His approach has been very 'professional' in many respects but he's not secured many paid assignments. He hasn't taken on any supplementary work and leads a very frugal lifestyle spending as little as possible on transport costs by being very organised and planning ahead and he also spends very little on food or social activities. Through this approach he has managed to save money whilst at university for his student loan. By the third year he is exploring how he might turn a student project of an online magazine into his own publication and is beginning to think about funding from the Prince's Trust. His second option is to try to pick up work as a freelance journalist. He seems very realistic about the prospect of either being viable as he is acutely aware of the competitiveness of securing enough paid work as a journalist. His story is one of singleminded determination. The wider social experience of university was not something he sought, nor particularly valued. He was very focussed on his future career aspirations of becoming a working journalist and had applied himself consistently to the applied and academic elements of his HE programmes to try to achieve this.

### **Kate**

Kate is a 26 year old mature Sports Therapy student. She had just completed her first year at large FE college. She enjoyed college and was focussed at this age on a career in fashion photography and shared a passion with her step-dad. When this relationship broke down with her mother and her dad was made redundant as a photographer this career option became less appealing and she didn't pursue her interest onto university study. She is the first to study a HE qualification in her close and extended family. Her mum doesn't really value a university education and believes you should just 'work your way up' in your career. She is someone who seeks new experiences and went travelling and then returned to the UK and spent time working in riding stables, teaching riding, and around Polo clubs. She returned home in the past few years and lives with her mum and worked in clothing retail. Through this and her other hobby of



rowing she became interested in Sport Therapy. Her previous grades didn't allow her to access a medical route through physiotherapy but she was able to get on sports therapy courses. After looking online she became aware that the course content was similar so she didn't feel it really made a difference where she studied. She selected the local FE provider as it was the most local and convenient provider. Staying local meant she could keep her job in retail, stay living at home, keep up with her passion of rowing and be in the same town as her boyfriend. She had moved away previously and was happy with her local life now she had returned and didn't want to move away to study. Her transition to year 1 was generally positive. Her college life is compartmentalised into 2 full days of study and she feels she has a very part-time mentality to her full time FdA. The structuring of the course seems to promote this mentality. She then works in retail 3 days a week (first year, 3 to 4 days per week second year) out of financial necessity, and has quite an active social life through her rowing commitments and therefore experiences time pressures to engage with independent study outside of the course. She is generally achieving grades in 60's and has learnt the rules of the academic game in terms of referencing. There is no social dimension to the HE experience and the whole experience is that of the course, in the classroom and the therapy clinic with her 8 fellow students. Her transition to year 2 changed her positive perception of year 2 into something quite negative in year 2. In year 1 she didn't speak as if she had a consumerist approach to her learning. At the end of year 2 she complained that all the assessment seems to be stacked towards the end of semester B with little assessment being completed in semester A. This put significant stress and time pressures on her. She was also very disappointed by the lack of learning in class. The lecturer seemed underprepared and the classes lack clear objectives, and sometime little to no content. She didn't feel like she was learning much at all and questioned the competence of the teaching staff teaching her degree. When she wasn't learning she used a more

consumerist lens and questioned what she was actually paying for when she felt she wasn't learning. She became disillusioned with being treated the same as a 19 year old by her lecturers. Despite being close to their age and with only 7 other students in the class there was no attempt to differentiate or recognise her wider life experience or to personalise or individualise their approach. The way she was treated at work also changed. As a full time member of staff she was given additional responsibility potentially with a view to her going into management. Once she was a 'student' and parttime they treated her differently and she was sidelined. She felt returning to study was a regression and longed to be '27 again'! She initially valued the knowledge she was gaining and the access to industry placements the course gave her to pursue her interest in sports therapy. She values being a university student as is proud to be studying HE. She feels like a university student in year 1 but by year 2 the college environment is eroding this sense as it is very 'young' person orientated. By the end of year 2 when the second interview was undertaken she is regretting that she studied the course in a FE setting and wished she went to a 'proper' university. She has lost confidence in her FdA course and the lecturers. One of her lecturers only teaches one module, runs her own private sports therapy clinic and is currently doing her Masters. She feels like she has too much on outside of the course and isn't preparing for the classes. She was initially pleased about the option to study locally in the FE college but now feels 'sad' about how things have turned out in practice and this is making her question her decision as a career although she still enjoys the practice of treating people. She has applied to Top up at a university in the next city and is looking forward to that as she has a perception she can start 'doing it properly' and get back on track with her career plans to be a sports therapist. Her story started out full of optimism in at the end of year 1 but declined as she after her negative experiences of year 2. She is optimistic she might get back on track in year 3 topping up at the university but her experience has

made her question her course choice and to some extent the career choice to be a sports therapist.

### **Stephanie**

Stephanie is a 46 year old single mother to four children. Her narrative is one of transformation through the HE experience. She was first interviewed at the end of her FdA and again at the end of a BA (hons) progression programme. She has had a troubled relationship with education and she was unaware until she recently returned to education that she had dyslexia, she also became aware of her own mother's severe dyslexia and the reason this created a family culture not to value education. She is very reflexive about her own negative experience of schools and the impact this has had on her self-image in education and the limiting effect it has had on her career. She left school early and had her career ambition limited due to her lack of qualifications. She wanted to be a nurse and when she was young assumed you could be 'trained up' on the job. Realising her qualifications limited this ambition she took work in care and 'wrote off' education for a long time. She came from a family that had always worked hard and were able to provide, you got on in life through hard work, not through education. She worked in relatively low pay work and it wasn't until she was in her 40s working as a support worker in a school that the Head Teacher encouraged her to do an NVQ in Child Care. She found the NVQ very easy and realised she was much more capable than she realised. She had actively resisted education that involved writing but had always been happy to maintain so far of training that didn't involve written work. She enrolled on her FdA by chance as she attended the FE college to support her daughter and her daughter's friend. She didn't have maths or English at level three but after chatting to the tutor she applied for a course on the spot as a direct applicant. She had recently supported her daughter to apply for university so was familiar with student finance. She was familiar with the FE college as her daughter attended there. She settled into the

programme and found the transition smooth and supportive. She is studying with a small mixed age cohort who have been supportive and respectful of each other and she has enjoyed excellent relationships with tutors. She has worked hard and achieved grades in the 70s and although 'terrified' of writing found that word processing her work helped. She only got formal support with her dyslexia in the second semester of year 2 and has found the software very beneficial for picking up silly mistakes. By the second interview she had completed a BA progression programme. She was critical of the hit and miss quality of the teaching. She felt that the teachers weren't qualified to teach at this level as they also taught across level 3 and had a 'college' rather than HE mentality and approach. There had also been a change in staff, one of the better tutors got a job in a university and one dropped down a level to teach 6<sup>th</sup> form. The quality of teaching undermined her own confidence. She achieved grades in the high 80s, but as she didn't rate the teachers she questioned whether her work was actually of this standard. She said that there were only 12 students in her cohort, although there were only 3 students of traditional HE student age, and others in their 20s, 30s and 40s it felt like a college, rather than HE environment, although they are treated very much as adults. There was a social dimension with some friendships made across the programme with the group meeting for lunch and coffee and celebrating birthdays or other special events.

She is planning to do a Masters Degree at a local university and needed a maths qualification. She lacks confidence in maths but this is an entry criteria for the Masters. Her partner is now taking a maths class with her so he can support her. He is good at maths and this improves his own qualification. He also proof reads her work.

She strongly values the confidence that she has gained through the FdA and the BA top up. Being enrolled on HE qualifications has given her confidence and symbolic capital to be able to apply for, and get, promotions in her work. She has aligned her HE work to her professional experience through assessments in quite a strategic way. Paradoxically

she strongly asserts that the degree and qualifications are really for her, and she strongly values this intrinsic reward. She rejected the attending graduation ceremonies for both the FdA and BA as she'd feel silly. Her son will graduate in the same year and she feels he's gone to a 'proper university' and done a 'proper degree' (where she hasn't done this). She feels she will attend the Masters graduation as she'll have 'earned that' – or that it will feel more like the end of her academic journey. She has a bit of a hang up doing an undergraduate degree but feels lots of adults do Masters later in life. She has strongly valued her own education and her children's education that is running parallel to this as a couple of her children as also at university. She is proud of herself and her children. She is adamant that she's not changed (as if this is a transgression from her working class roots) but it is clear that he has changed the conversations in her family with her and two children at university and her youngest son planning his college and potential university. Study at the FE college seemed like a safe option at the start of her journey, at this stage she'd never have set foot on the campus of a 'big university'. Through the growth in her confidence and understanding of the field she is now confident to attend a large university for masters study. Financially bringing up 4 children has been a struggle at times but she values the fact that education can help her earn more money and develop her career. She is comfortable with student finances, she is continuing with her Masters degree straight after her BA programme as she still has a dependent son living at home so the extra financial support available is an additional incentive to progress directly to Masters study. Gaining a Masters degree in Social Work will improve her ability to secure a senior position in Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS). She is aspirational that her Masters degree will lead to improved career prospects and improved earning potential and this coincides with her youngest child not being dependent so she can work full time. The MA provides access to a 'professional qualification', she became aware that her FdA and BA

weren't seen as 'professional qualifications'. The MA is about gaining a professional qualification rather than it being at Masters level. She has balanced part time work with her studies. The FdA in the HE environment had a condensed timetable for 2 days per week, the Progression programme only required attendance on 1 day per week. Both these factors were significant in her managing her ability to work along side her studies.

### **Yvonne**

Yvonne is a 27 year old mother to her daughter who she had at 18 years old, she lives at home with her parents and has a long term partner. She had her daughter at a young age and has never felt that it should hold her back in life, her parents have been very supportive. She is studying a FdA in Early Years. She was born deaf and has always felt she needed to battle in education. She had very negative experiences of school and hated it and her teachers. She works in child care and was encouraged to return to education by one of her colleagues. She had a previous unsuccessful attempt to reengage with education. Prior to starting her FdA she enrolled on a history diploma with her sister. Her dyslexia was picked up during this course as verbally they were on a par but their writing was very different. She has DSA support from the college and has a support tutor who she has an excellent relationship with as he also taught her English during her history diploma, she also has software for her laptop but avoids using it. She is fiercely independent and wishes to do as much as she can without support. At the first interview she projects academic aspiration in terms of her future qualifications, saying she wishes to 'top up' to BA honours, then do a Masters and then a Doctorate plus an English literature degree and Criminology. She lacks clarity in her future career direction but projects huge enthusiasm to continue with education beyond her current course and into the long term. As a mum with a young child she felt her study options were quite limited and studying locally in FE via the condensed delivery mode made working, studying and being a mum possible. Despite selecting the local FE college to

study she understands the HE fields and recognises that her institution isn't prestigious. She claims she'd love to apply to Cambridge University, and to be offered a place on a psychology degree. She wouldn't accept the place but she'd like to be able to tell everyone that she'd been offered a place for its symbolic value and to enhance her cultural capital. The story acts symbolically to demonstrate she understands field and that she is academically capable – as she has no intention of actually going through this application process to Cambridge in real life. The story is used to representatively only. She gets lots of support with child care from her parents and auntie, living and studying locally maintains her existing support network. (Key issue for those with dependents). She has loved the transition from her diploma to the first year of the FdA. Her transition to her second year of the FdA was challenging. The modules were unbalanced and she had two modules in semester A and 4 in semester B which caused significant stress. She recognises that the learning resources are limited in the FE environment and makes the effort to travel to the validating university (located in the next city) for long study days with her friend. She has found working in groups challenging and stressful as her peers don't work to the same standards as she does, she is reflective that this could be evidence of her 'controlling' behaviours. She has valued the improvement that she has seen in her academic work from getting grades in the 50s to grades in the 60s. Her course is small with only 10 other students. They 'get on' well and have formed a number of smaller friendship groups. There is no real social interaction beyond the course days in college. Her sister is studying locally too, but at the university and she contrasts their two HE experiences with her lack of social life compared to her sister who is out all the time. She did not seek this wider social experience from her programme and as a mum and a partner to her boyfriend doesn't feel she'd have the time for this anyway. Her daughter is 9 years old and she has pushed the school to ensure she is supported as she too has dyslexia and she passionately wants her to avoid

the issues she had at school. Her relationship with her sister is a key aspect to her narrative about her educational experiences. Her sister was always the 'clever one' however through her studies she feels her sister is treating her more as her academic equal and they discuss complex issues in depth where before her sister would haven't have engaged with her on such a level. Her narrative focusses on the positive relationships with tutors who treat her with respect and with her class mates. She says she strongly values these relationships and the confidence she has taken from reengaging with education. She strongly values all the support she is getting and feels the smaller FE environment is conducive to this, and this isn't something she'd get at university. She is using her own experience in education to encourage her daughter and her boyfriend to engage with education, she is encouraging her boyfriend to take a computer course. She is proud, that her parents are proud, of her returning to education. She is looking forward to the symbolic nature of graduation and the ceremony to mark her achievements so far. Heather is only in college for 2 days per week on her FDA and 1 day a week for her BA progression programme. Even though she is physically 'a student' on a relatively small proportion of her week being a HE student tends to dominate her identity. The newness of HE being it is more 'consuming' on her time and energy and she works hard to stay on top of her education combined with working and her family. She has gained significant self confidence through returning to HE and has taken on the role of HE rep for her cohort. Her work colleagues have also commented upon her increased confidence and she says that previously she wouldn't have volunteered to be part of this research project, but her new found confidence meant she was happy to take part. She has strongly valued education and is keen that her daughter sees that with hard work through education that you can build a 'good life' – she is very conscious that she is a role model in education for her daughter. She came from a very supportive family, her parents are very proud that their daughters are at



university but haven't pushed them towards this, they have supported her through her attempts at HE and let her find her own way. She has had some frustrations studying in the FE environment that feels no different to when she was at college. In the first interview she was irritated at the lack of dedicated HE space and having to deal with the 16 year old children in a 'young environment'. By the second interview she says the college have addressed this and they have their own dedicated HE classroom. She felt her year 2 experience on the FdA that she 'hadn't really go into it' yet, although the interview took place in April so there were only a few weeks left.

She has been working in an early years setting along side her studies and has been promoted to 'deputy' and is the acting SENCO. She has felt a total integration between her role in Early Years and her Early Years qualification. She doesn't 'need' the FdA for her role but wants to study anyway. By year 2 she is feeling the impact of her promotion to 'deputy' that she mentioned had just happened during the first interview. She works 3 days per week and needed to bring work home to complete all the paperwork and spent on average 10 hours working at home on work related paperwork. This had a slight negative impact on her ability to put time aside to study her BA. Throughout her narrative there are several stories she deploys to demonstrate that she is will overcome challenges and prove people wrong, there are 'heroic' qualities to her stories about the course and life examples she uses to illustrate the 'type of person she is'. She has had some bad headaches and now wears glasses – but this story is framed that 'this course put me into hospital, and I've had brain scans'. She tells a story that she had an injured foot, yet despite medical advice she summited the highest mountain (Snowdon) in Wales and injured pain to prove that it could be done. Her reference to multiple different degree courses from undergraduate, to Masters and Doctoral study, all demonstrate she understands HE and serve to illustrate that she will overcome her challenges and strive to achieve the highest outcomes and standards. She tells a story

that her gran died and told the nurse that her grand daughter would do something special, this adds to her sense of ‘aspiration and achievement’.

### **Donald**

Donald is 33 years old at the first interview. He had just completed the first year of a Foundation degree in Football coaching and development. He is married and has a 9 year old son from a previous relationship and a young daughter. Donald moved around when he was younger as his dad was in the army and he lived in Germany until he was 12. He returned to the UK but didn’t feel like he fitted in that well at school and concentrated on this through trying to make people laugh and by playing sport. He considers that he was a very late developer with his interest in the academic aspects of school and really didn’t try or revise for his GCSEs. He worked as a greenkeeper since he left school and really enjoyed the social aspects of this but in his early 30s he didn’t see this was a job he’d continue with later in life. He returned to education at the age of 31 studying a sports diploma full-time and this would give him the academic credit to get onto a Foundation Degree in Football. He had been coaching his son’s football team and something just ‘clicked’ that this was what he was meant to do and he saw a future career working in football. He had explored his options of gaining entry to a Football course at a university but didn’t meet the entry criteria so had to do a level 3 course, GSCE equivalents in maths, english and IT and he did this at the college where he eventually enrolled on his FdA. The university had franchised the football course to this college so he felt the course was the same anyway. Studying at the college was also practically convenient as his wife also worked in the city so they could travel in together. He recalls the interview he had for his course and being so nervous returning to education that his voice went shaky. He found he was ‘busier’ at level 3 balancing his sports based diploma and this maths english and IT and there was a noticeable drop in workload when he began his FdA. He found his return to education totally

transformational. He said he'd never read a book previously to studying and now he has a huge appetite for knowledge reading academic journals, academic texts, and books for pleasure. He recognises the steps he's made since his level 3 diploma in the depth of what he is able to engage with. He's developed very positive relationships with his course tutors and has been used for prestigious events at the college when they are 'showcasing' facilities and this has boosted his confidence that they think highly of him. He has done well academically in the first year scoring 4 firsts and 2:1's, is has paired up with a young guy who has a good attitude to studying and who has a background in A'levels. He considers there to be a difference of attitude between himself and his study partner and the rest of the cohort that did Btec. He is very engaged academically and has a deep interest in the subject. He has given up work to study so isn't having to adopt superficial approaches to his study to free up time for paid work. Before returning to education he worked as a green keeper on local golf courses and as a young man thought it was a fantastic job and enjoyed the camaraderie of the job and the 'banter' with his colleagues. He has missed the social aspects of giving up work to return to study, there has been no replacement of these friendships in the college environment where his social interaction is limited to his attendance at timetabled activities. There is no wider social element and his peer group are all 18-19 year olds so he doesn't seek this social dimension from his studies. He gave up a £17,000 salary to return to education and was encouraged to do this by his wife 'before it was too late'. He committed heavily to the course as he felt like this was his last chance in education. Financially things have been a little tight living off just his wife's salary and his student's loans. His parents have also been very supportive and have given some financial help when they have needed it. Football has brought together his son, who he coaches, and his dad, who also supports the coaching of the team during mid-week training and Sunday matches. Studying football is applied on weekly basis and has

brought the males in the family closer together around a shared common interest. He shares some academic articles with his dad and gets him to read some of his work. He has really valued the knowledge he's got through the course and there is clear integration between his home life and his voluntary role in football, his academic and practical study of football, and his future career aspiration to work in football. He considers that he is valuing this far more as a mature student than he would have if he had studied when he was much younger. He is reflective about his life prior to his return to education where he 'drifted' for a decade and asks 'what was I doing in my twenties'? His return to study has become a 'family affair' and they all take great pride that he has returned to education to undertake a 'university' qualification. The process of returning to education has been transformative. He feels differently about himself and his wife and family have commented that he's changed for the better. He feels he has developed his academic confidence and has a much more critical mindset. He is focussed on learning through the process but also achieving the award means his credential can 'never be taken away' from him. He was very keen to study a BA progression programme to achieve a BA honours award. However, having had a year out to take the access course on a full time basis, plus the two years of the FdA he can't afford to be not earning a salary for a further year so his ability to progress to the BA has been stopped for financial reasons. His return to education was 100% driven by his ambition to change career. He is aware of the challenges of achieving employment in football and is open to the idea of further study if needed and the potential to work as a PE teacher. Since his return to education was driven by his career aspirations he is committed to making a success of his credential by working in sport in the future.

## Appendix 9: Table 4. Summary of approach to planning and issues influencing HE choice

	Participant pseudonym	Age at first interview	Course at the first interview	Programme stage	Approach to HE planning	Key issues to influence HE choice
	<b>University</b>					
<b>1</b>	<b>Will</b>	22	BSc Sports based	1 <sup>st</sup> interview, 1 <sup>st</sup> year	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Online only – out of the country in America precluded university visits.</li> <li>2. 2<sup>nd</sup> time of planning for university. He had looked in the past and applied for prestigious universities but was not offered any places.</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Spoke to a friend of his dad who advised to avoid early specialisation and suggested generic sports science degree.</li> <li>2. Taking a Sports Science course would keep his options open for working in sport.</li> <li>3. He wanted to be less than two hours from home</li> <li>4. Wanted to get away to university for a full student experience</li> <li>5. He was away in America which limited opportunity to visit and consider practical issues such as accommodation.</li> </ol>
<b>2</b>	<b>Hannah</b>	20	BEd Teaching	1 <sup>st</sup> interview, 1 <sup>st</sup> year	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Significant effort and some confusion in understanding difference in courses and institutions.</li> <li>2. Online and University visits</li> <li>3. Parental support with visits</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Long-term desire to be a Teacher.</li> <li>2. Key issue was gaining a Professional PE Teaching qualification.</li> <li>3. Getting away from home but within relatively close proximity.</li> <li>4. Wanted a full university experience.</li> <li>5. Limited support from College</li> <li>6. Unable to utilise Auntie's expertise (university lecturer).</li> </ol>
<b>3</b>	<b>Student X</b>	19	FdA Sport based	1 <sup>st</sup> interview, 1 <sup>st</sup> Year	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Limited consideration of other options beyond the university and the one course.</li> <li>2. University and course research online and through Open Day visit</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Getting away from home but within relatively close proximity.</li> <li>2. Interested in studying a Football Degree and working in football.</li> <li>3. Support by BTEC tutor – suggested just this option.</li> <li>4. Influenced by peers who had attended the university and recommended it.</li> <li>5. Wanted the full university experience.</li> <li>6. Reference points came from American TV/Films</li> </ol>
<b>4</b>	<b>Daisy</b>	21	BSc Sports Therapy	1 <sup>st</sup> interview, 2 <sup>nd</sup> Year	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Online research</li> <li>2. University visits</li> <li>3. Parental support with university visits.</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Personal injury influenced interest in Sports Therapy to see this as a potential career.</li> <li>2. Limited grades (related to injury affecting A'levels meant she was unable to access Physiotherapy degrees.</li> <li>3. Lived in Birmingham and wanted to be a long way from home for independence and unrestricted lifestyle.</li> <li>4. Being near the coast in the South West was appealing.</li> <li>5. The university had a nice feel and good facilities.</li> </ol>

	Participant pseudonym	Age at first interview	Course at the first interview	Programme stage	Approach to HE planning	Key issues to influence HE choice
						6. She checked out the nightlife on a weekend visit to the City before making her final choice.
5	Daniel	22	BA Journalism	1 <sup>st</sup> interview, 2 <sup>nd</sup> Year	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Applied to 5 universities</li> <li>2. An online search using his idiosyncratic list of criteria.</li> <li>3. Did not visit universities just looked online.</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Dad intervened to get him to 'sort his life out' as his career was 'stuck'.</li> <li>2. Wanted a chance to re-invent himself.</li> <li>3. Wanted to be over two hours away from home but not too far that made it too difficult to return.</li> <li>4. Wanted to be in England</li> <li>5. Focus on Journalism Courses</li> <li>6. Did not want to know anyone from home</li> <li>7. He only received one offer from the five universities</li> <li>8. Wanted a full university experience.</li> <li>9. Limited support from school</li> </ol>
	FE College					
6	Richard	20	FdA Media	1 <sup>st</sup> interview, 2 <sup>nd</sup> year	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Limited approach to planning</li> <li>2. Only seriously considered the FEC and the one course.</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Wanted to work in Journalism.</li> <li>2. Was familiar with the FE setting and progressed straight from BTEC within the FEC.</li> <li>3. Wanted to study locally</li> <li>4. Wanted to study Journalism.</li> <li>5. Considered that the FD was practical and he needed practical skills to be a Journalist.</li> <li>6. Thought University would take a very academic, non-practical, approach to the subject.</li> <li>7. Was not interested in the wider social opportunities of university.</li> </ol>
7	Kate	26	FdA Sport Rehab	1 <sup>st</sup> interview, 1 <sup>st</sup> Year	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Limited approach to planning.</li> <li>2. 2<sup>nd</sup> time planning for university. Looked at different courses (photography) when she was 18 at different universities but decided not to go.</li> <li>3. Looked online at Sports Therapy Courses. Due to Professional Body Accreditation they are very similar.</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Connected her hobby of rowing to sports rehab and a future career.</li> <li>2. Considered that all Sports Therapy courses would be the same regardless of HEI.</li> <li>3. Wanted to stay locally.</li> <li>4. Had travelled and worked internationally and wanted to stay at home.</li> <li>5. Liked the condensed course delivery so she could continue to work in retail alongside study.</li> <li>6. Was not interested in the wider social opportunities of university.</li> </ol>

	Participant pseudonym	Age at first interview	Course at the first interview	Programme stage	Approach to HE planning	Key issues to influence HE choice
8	Stephanie	46	FdA Health and Social Care	1 <sup>st</sup> interview, 2 <sup>nd</sup> year	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Very limited pre-planning.</li> <li>2. Had considered HE but the decisions to sign-up on the day was slightly serendipitous as she attended the Open Day with her daughter and her daughter's friend.</li> <li>3. Only considered one course and one institution.</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Needed a degree to progress in her career.</li> <li>2. Was familiar with the FEC. Progressed internally from Diploma to FD.</li> <li>3. Had significant issues at school due to undiagnosed dyslexia which affected academic confidence.</li> <li>4. She only considered the local option</li> <li>5. She was familiar with the FEC and the staff.</li> <li>6. She had doubts about her academic ability and was not prepared to move institutions as well and managing the academic transitions from Diploma to FD.</li> <li>7. A single mother with family commitments. The more local option supported balancing these commitments.</li> <li>8. The condensed delivery enabled her to work part-time alongside her FD.</li> </ol>
9	Yvonne	27	FdA Child Studies	1 <sup>st</sup> interview, 1 <sup>st</sup> year	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Very limited planning</li> <li>2. Only considered one course and one institution.</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Only considered this option</li> <li>2. Familiar with the FEC and the staff progressed from Diploma</li> <li>3. Her dyslexia support worker within the FEC suggested staying at the college and taking this course.</li> <li>4. She had doubts about her academic ability.</li> <li>5. Lived at home with her parents and had a Primary School aged daughter, so the local option felt like the only option.</li> <li>6. The condensed delivery enabled her to work part-time alongside her FD.</li> </ol>
10	Donald	33	FdA Sport based	1 <sup>st</sup> interview, 1 <sup>st</sup> year	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Initially applied for the W.P University but did not hold entry qualifications.</li> <li>2. Initially considered the University as his best option as it was relatively local, had a good reputation and was linked with a professional football club.</li> <li>3. Did not consider any other options until rejection by the University</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Wanted to study and then to work in football.</li> <li>2. Did not hold an Access qualification so was guided to the FEC to take a Diploma by the University Tutor.</li> <li>3. Studied Diploma Full Time and built relationships with staff at the FEC.</li> <li>4. Took the FD at the FEC as he was comfortable in that environment and felt loyal to continuing with them rather than re-applying to the university.</li> <li>5. His wife worked in the same city as the FEC so was able to share transport.</li> </ol>

	Participant pseudonym	Age at first interview	Course at the first interview	Programme stage	Approach to HE planning	Key issues to influence HE choice
	<b>Sixth Form College</b>					
11	<b>Roger</b>	30	FdA Sport based	1 <sup>st</sup> interview, 2 <sup>nd</sup> year	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Only considered the local option.</li> <li>2. No university provision available locally.</li> <li>3. Used College support services to consider the financial implications of studying and how the family would manage financially.</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Was focused on becoming a PE Teacher and the FD was the first qualification along this journey.</li> <li>2. Had significant issues in past education that affected academic confidence (diagnosed with dyslexia during the first year of FD).</li> <li>3. Wanted to study locally to minimise disruption to the family.</li> <li>4. Worked part-time alongside study and condensed delivery supported this.</li> <li>5. Recognition that the Sixth Form had started running a Level 6 progression programme meaning he could achieve an Honours degree locally was a significant issue in his long term planning.</li> </ol>
12	<b>Jake</b>	21	FdA Sport Based	1 <sup>st</sup> interview, 2 <sup>nd</sup> year	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Failed to achieve what he considered was his full potential at A*Level.</li> <li>2. Despite having grades that would have allowed access to HE took a year out.</li> <li>3. Missed the standard UCAS process and deadlines.</li> <li>4. Received a letter for College via FD Course Manager 'selling' the benefits of the course and studying locally.</li> <li>5. Applied directly to the course and College.</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Focused on becoming a PE teacher.</li> <li>2. The FD was the first step on this journey.</li> <li>3. Desire to stay locally and maintain local life</li> <li>4. Although relatively young he is not particularly interested in the social aspects offered by university.</li> <li>5. 'Reduced' tuition fees of £6,000 were appealing.</li> </ol>
13	<b>Jessica</b>	33	FdA Business and Admin	1 <sup>st</sup> Interview, 1 <sup>st</sup> year	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Serendipitous approach</li> <li>2. Little to no planning beyond what was available in the Sixth Form where she was employed full-time.</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Took a new job working in the Sixth Form and became aware of her 'difference' by not being a graduate.</li> <li>2. A Business and Leadership award seemed generic and appealing and would improve career prospects.</li> <li>3. The part-time option was important to be able to balance study alongside a full-time job.</li> <li>4. She was able to APEL some of the First Year which reduced the study 'burden'.</li> <li>5. Had taken lots of 'training' courses through career but not considered HE qualifications.</li> <li>6. Having an internal option was appealing</li> </ol>



	Participant pseudonym	Age at first interview	Course at the first interview	Programme stage	Approach to HE planning	Key issues to influence HE choice
14	Tom	19	FdA Sport based	1 <sup>st</sup> interview, 1 <sup>st</sup> year	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Had not given HE much thought until FD Course Manager 'promoted' the course to his BTEC group.</li> <li>Applied late in the application cycle.</li> <li>Only applied for this course and this institution.</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Liked the idea of progressing to HE study with his friends from the BTEC group.</li> <li>Was attracted by the condensed delivery so he could work on days he was not in College.</li> <li>Identified how he could stay in this 'comfort zone' at the same institution, with the same students and the same teachers.</li> <li>Did not plan for university so there was very limited horizons of choice.</li> <li>'Reduced' tuition fees of £6,000 was appealing.</li> </ol>
15	Louise	19	FdA Sport based	1 <sup>st</sup> interview, 1 <sup>st</sup> year	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Gave lots of consideration to a variety of courses and universities.</li> <li>She was not focussed upon one subject area. Rather she was interested in programmes that could be useful in becoming a Primary School teacher.</li> <li>She conducted online research and visited a number of universities with the support of her parents.</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Connected with long-term plan to teach</li> <li>Despite all her planning she felt paralysed in thinking about moving away.</li> <li>There was no local university.</li> <li>She did not consider the local Sixth Form option until late in the standard UCAS cycle.</li> <li>She could not visualize herself moving away to university successfully.</li> <li>She was fearful of leaving home and the familiarity of her home setting and particularly her immediate family. The death of two grandparents and her only child status, made her feel like her family was diminishing. She wanted to stay locally to be near her remaining grandparents.</li> <li>She focused on how she could stay 'at home' locally and her programme and institution was one of a very number of limited option.</li> <li>Condensed delivery seemed appealing so she could work alongside her study and maintain a very comfortable local lifestyle.</li> </ol>

Table 4 Summary of approach to planning and issues influencing HE choice

## Appendix 10: Table 5 Response to direct question “what have you most valued about your HE experience?”

Student	Most valued theme		Most valued quotation
<b>Mature Students (FEC and SFC)</b>			
<b>Kate (FEC)</b>	Value in learning <b>applied knowledge</b> aligned to <b>career</b>		The opportunity it has given me to learn something that I probably otherwise wouldn't have done. I don't know, I have never taken that for granted, I don't think. I have never thought “oh it's just uni”. It's always “what's going to be learning today”. And having that opportunity, those people there that have all this knowledge and they are just willing to give it to you. Definitely that. The opportunity to work in places that otherwise I'd probably never would have got into. I am doing a placement with [names Rugby Club] next year and doing the summer. I would never have got into that unless I'd come here. So definitely that, yes. Just the opportunity to do something that I am really passionate about and really, really want to do.
<b>Stephanie (FEC)</b>	Academic <b>confidence</b> and <b>self-esteem</b>		Probably gaining confidence in my ability to put pen to paper, or put fingers to keyboard and I mean finger to keyboard. So yeah, probably confidence, self-esteem.
<b>Yvonne (FEC)</b>	<b>Support</b> from home and FEC		The support. Just support from every aspect of life [college], here, home, everything. Without the support I wouldn't have been able to do it and even if I didn't get the support from home, I would get it here and if I didn't get it here, I would get it at home. Between the two, that's what I value the most and that's what I love the most about this course being here and not being at university. That even if you're not supposed to have any time with your tutor, they will give you time and that meant a lot to me this year.
<b>Donald (FEC)</b>	<b>Confidence</b> and <b>ambition</b>		I think, not so much... any sort of value, what is on the course, what it's given me, just given me, is that confidence. It's like a new beginning really, that thirst for knowledge is probably the biggest thing I've had through it, just wanting to know more about more. That's honestly been the best thing. It's sort of reignited my fire, ambition, I don't know really. It's made me ambitious, more ambitious.
<b>Roger (SFC)</b>	<b>Support</b>		I would say that because it is so, the groups are small, I'm not in a lecture theatre with like forty different people and I can have a quick five minutes with having a

Student	Most valued theme		Most valued quotation
	Personal transformation, <b>belief for self and family</b>		<p>quick discussion at the end just with a, I don't think that you'd be able to do that with sixty/eighty or I don't know how many people you have in a normal lecture theatre down at [names university]. I don't know. I just think that this is a plus, that's an extra bonus I think and also with having the support and obviously from ... the support worker. I think that's helped massively. I don't know, all the experience and the practical experience and stuff we get as well, that's massive. Yeah.</p> <p>Wow, what a question. It's given me... just the way I look at life. I just, it's given me, I don't know. That's really tricky to... before I was just ticking over, just happy doing what I was doing and it was just like, right okay and it's given me belief. Belief and hope and shown me that I can achieve and just being able to picture how I've done and how far I've come in such a short amount of time, what that's going to open up for my boys and what they're going to then be able to achieve and go on to do. So, yeah.</p>
<b>Jessica (SFC)</b>	<b>Support</b> from tutor and <b>depth of knowledge</b>		<p>I would say the support from my tutor. He's been brilliant</p> <p>What have I valued most? Hard one? I think it is just the experience of doing it and knowing, understanding like academic higher level. I think I value that most in term of, you know, in terms of the research and, you know, exploring the different views of other people and how that changes as well I suppose over the years historically.</p>
<b>Young FEC/SFC Students</b>			
<b>Richard (FEC – then University)</b>	Linking <b>skills experience</b> and <b>knowledge</b> .		<p>It's quite hard to pin point one thing, but, if you bring them all together it's the fact that they do link together. Individual skills lead to abilities, to experience, to work. So I think the kind of process that has taken place, more than anything across two years.</p> <p>I think what I've done has been the best for me personally, to get a bit of both sides. I mean I really enjoyed my time at FEC. There's better facilities there than there is at most FE colleges. But I think definitely I wouldn't likewise change that I've done the third year here. I think to do a bit of both is the best, it's been the best.</p>

Student	Most valued theme		Most valued quotation
<b>Tom (SFC)</b>	<p>Accessibility and <b>support</b> from lecturers</p> <p><b>Critical mind-set/life skills</b></p>		<p>The fact that every lecturer's quite easy to go to when you need them. There are, you know, the majority of the lecturers are actually, I think they're very good and the fact that I'm doing well probably sways my thinking of that.</p> <p>What have I valued most...? Good question. I would say just the kind of change of mind set. It gets you to, it's obviously been drilled into us to be more analytical and don't take things on face value. So, it kind of, I think it changes your kind of mind set and perceptions towards different things in life I guess in general. And, yeah, it's just stuff like communication with other people and just stuff like that kind of more life skills, rather than just academic kind of skills. Yeah, I guess it's kind of helped in those ways in kind of building your life skills, rather than just making you better academically.</p>
<b>Louise (SFC)</b>	<p>The symbolic <b>value</b> of the degree</p> <p><b>Career related experience</b></p>		<p>Probably just getting the degree and being able to get passing every year and things like that. Yeah that's all I want. I'm not bothered about the rest of it, I just want that piece of paper to be able to get on to the next stage.</p> <p>I think it's just gaining all the experience and actually being able to go into schools and different industries to see how they teach and things like that. I think if I hadn't have done the course, I wouldn't be going into schools and I wouldn't get as much experience, because if I'd have just done something like an apprenticeship, I'd have been in one school and that's it.</p>
<b>Jake (SFC)</b>	<p>Symbolic achievement and value of <b>degree linked to career</b>.</p>		<p>Probably the process of getting the degree, if that makes sense. Starting off, getting GCSEs and just the whole process of education I suppose. Yeah, to me it's all about the end goal as I've said. If I get that First, obviously I'll really value that because I've put in a lot of effort. Even if I get a Two One, I'll still value it. I'd be a little bit disappointed but that's just personal value I suppose but yeah.</p>
<b>Young University Students</b>			
<b>Will</b>	<p>Combined <b>academic</b> and <b>social</b> experience</p>		<p>I think all of it combined really. It's kind of, the academic side of it has made me realise that maybe I can push myself further than I thought, which is good because it has made me realise that the goal that I set myself before I came here, are genuinely achievable.</p>



Student	Most valued theme		Most valued quotation
<b>Daisy</b>	<b>Independence</b>		Probably the fact of living with your friends I think is the main one and kind of you can have, like I say parties and stuff, but there's no... You're still living in like a home environment of a house and you've got a living room and your own bedroom and stuff like that but the fact of there's no one there telling you to move your shoes. Little things that pester you at home, like if you leave your shoes in the kitchen 'Faye you've left your shoes in the kitchen', 'Mum I've been home for two minutes, kind of give me a break sort of thing'. There's like no one on your back. Like you know yourself what you need to be done, what needs to get done, when it needs to get done by? You know you need to, say, have your dinner or you need to clean up your mess but there's no one on your back to do it so I think the relaxation of it I think, of having your own space. Yeah, at the end of the day you're there because you want to be there. You come up to Uni for your lectures because you want to come to Uni for your lectures or you know, go out because you want to go out. It's kind of very, very independent which I think, I love it.
<b>Daniel</b>	<b>Reinvention, maturity and confidence.</b>		Oh, that's a tough one. I don't want to say there's only one thing, it's just a collection of, I suppose like in a weird way it's just like who I became, because I've changed a lot in sort of maturity, confidence. Just generally all round I became a much-improved person. You know, if you compare me now to when I was like eighteen, I'm hugely different and in a better way.

Table 5 Response to direct question “what have you most valued about your HE experience?”

## Appendix 11: Table 6 Students' orientation towards academic, social, or employment domains of HE.

Key: - **Strong focus**, **Moderate Focus**, **Weak Focus**

	Academic Focus	Graduate Career Focus	Social Focus
<b>Mature Students (FEC and SFC)</b>			
<b>Kate (FEC)</b>	Functional approach to academic engagement, constrained by part-time work and outside social focus.	Partial focus on career orientated activity. Limited to achieving hours for Professional recognition. Retail work to pay for lifestyle.	Good relationship with peers and course staff. Poor second year experience with staff. Social opportunities not available, nor desired.
<b>Stephanie (FEC)</b>	Strong academic focus. Important to her renewed academic identity. Identified as dyslexic during FdA.	Strong connection between study and work. Part-time paid work aligned broadly to future career. Postgraduate study in Social Work.	Limited social engagement through the programme.
<b>Yvonne (FEC)</b>	Focussed on academic achievement tied to renewed academic identity. Identified as dyslexic during Diploma prior to HE study	Very strong alignment between course and paid part-time work.	Limited social activity through course. Busy with outside commitments not focussed on social aspects.
<b>Donald (FEC)</b>	Exceptional focus on academic achievement tied to renewed academic identity.	Return to education tied to future career however he deliberately did not work, to focus on academic aspects. Some course facilitated work experience, little planning for post HE career.	No social opportunity through programme. Missed social engagement since he left work. Strategic alliance with students who supported his academic focus.
<b>Roger (SFC)</b>	Strong focus on academic achievement tied to renewed academic identity. Identified as dyslexic during first year of study.	Strong focus on career orientated paid work and course facilitated work experience.	'Fitted in' with young course peers. No social aspects.
<b>Jessica (SFC)</b>	Strategic approach to assessment. Limited time for reading or thorough academic engagement.	Worked full-time managed part-time study. Course in Business only generally aligned to existing job.	No time, nor inclination, for social activity. Spent no time with peers beyond formal classes.

	Academic Focus	Graduate Career Focus	Social Focus
<b>Young FEC/SFC Students</b>			
<b>Richard (FEC – then University)</b>	Moderate to strong focus on FD in FEC	Very strong focus on career orientated work experience in FEC.	Very limited focus on social aspects through the courses at FEC and University.
	Focussed more strongly on academic aspects in Year 3 through university-based progression	Managed withdrawal from work experience in Yr3 due to stronger academic focus and strong experience on CV.	
<b>Tom (SFC)</b>	Relatively weak and strategic approach to assessment. Getting through - limited time or enthusiasm for thorough academic engagement.	Over-worked to fund lifestyle. Recognised importance of EVA to improve CV.	Transition from BTEC to HE with a small group of friends. No wider HE social opportunities available.
<b>Louise (SFC)</b>	Strategic focus on academic assessment to gain access to PGCE.	Very strong focus on career in teaching. Paid work and course-based placement highly valued.	Very limited social engagement. Felt isolated due to small cohort.
<b>Jake (SFC)</b>	Strategic focus on academic aspects to support competitive career choice in teaching and access to PGCE.	Exceptional focus on career. Course placement led to yearlong paid employment in school.	Strategic social relationships through course and career orientated experience. No social opportunities.
<b>Young University Students</b>			
<b>Will</b>	Torn habitus between academic focus and social alignment with Rugby Club peers led to programme withdrawal.	No career focussed work. Worked long hours in restaurant to fund lifestyle.	Over focus on social aspects of Rugby Club leading to withdrawal from university.
<b>Hannah</b>	Strong focus on academic and applied aspects of teacher training programme.	Very strong focus on career as PE teacher. Multiple placements via course.	Social relationships were important, particularly in year 1. Less focussed on socialising for 'fun' beyond year 1, but sport participation was important.
<b>Student X</b>	Moderate approach focussed on 'passing' rather than excelling. Identified as dyslexic through study.	Moderate focus on employment and earning whilst learning. Employment was connected to career.	Strong focus on socialising in year 1, balanced in years 2 and 3. Some important opportunities for independence and peer support and broadening social horizons and self-conceptions.



	Academic Focus	Graduate Career Focus	Social Focus
<b>Daisy</b>	Moderate approach – unable to commit to full academic engagement, strategic approach to get through assessments	Limited work connection beyond requirement of course. No part-time working during the academic year.	Very strong focus on personal relationships (socialising with friends) strongly orientated to the socialising aspects of the university experience
<b>Daniel</b>	Moderate engagement in academic study. Recognised the value of a 'good degree'.	Worked in university shop to earn money to fund university social activities.	Strong commitment to voluntary roles in SU. Paid sabbatical role - SU President.

Table 6 Students' orientation towards academic, social, or employment domains of HE

