DECLARATION

This work has not previously been accepted in substance for any degree and is not being concurrently submitted in candidature for any degree.

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STATEMENT 1

This thesis is the result of my own investigations, except where otherwise stated. Where correction services have been used, the extent and nature of the correction is clearly marked in a footnote(s).

Other sources are acknowledged by footnotes giving explicit references. A bibliography is appended.

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I hereby give consent for my thesis, if accepted, to be available for photocopying and for inter-library loan, and for the title and summary to be made available to outside organisations.

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ABSTRACT

The Robbins Report (1963) championed the idea that higher education (HE) should be available to all who might benefit. Consequently, fair access and social inclusion have become central to the UK and Welsh Government’s lifelong learning and widening participation agenda. However, not all policies facilitated this. For example, in 1999, the Labour government set a target that 50 per cent of 18 to 30 year-olds should experience HE by 2010 and commentators, such as Gorard and Rees (2006) and O’Shea and Stone (2011) suggest that the 18 to 30 target has led to an emphasis upon this age demographic, leaving older learners either ignored in literature or portrayed as problematic and vulnerable. Additionally, within the educational literature there seems to be a limited understanding of the ways in which relational social processes can act as motivations and barriers to learning across the lifespan (Fuller and Heath, 2010).

The present study seeks to address these gaps. HE students, aged 30 years and over, were asked to reflect upon the ways in which such processes influenced their initial decisions to participate in HE and continued to influence their actual HE experience. A phenomenological, qualitative approach was employed with six adult learners who were either at the end of their Foundation Year or at the end of Year 1 of degree level study at a HE Institution in South Wales. A ‘bolder’ design (Smith, Flower & Larkin, 2009) was developed, which combined interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) with auto-driven photo elicitation (APE).

Findings suggested that past and present relational social processes were multifaceted and complex, influencing and shaping each individual’s decision to participate and their ongoing engagement. Participants likened their HE experience to a journey, leading them from a powerless to powerful state of personal and academic growth and development. This study challenges and expands on current literature regarding traditional motivations and barriers to learning. Furthermore, it highlights that participation in HE takes place at any age and is not reserved for those under the age of 30.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my grateful thanks to my Director of Studies Dr Jenny Mercer for her unflinching help and encouragement throughout this process. Grateful thanks are also extended to Dr Mark Connolly and Dr Sian Rhiannon Williams.

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The support and friendship of other PhD students within Cardiff Metropolitan University: Research House has also been invaluable.

Finally my gratitude is extended to Cardiff School of Education for the PhD scholarship without which full time study would not have been possible.
DEDICATIONS

This thesis is dedicated to my late mother and father, Catherine and Thomas Healan who believed in the richness of learning. I also wish to dedicate it to my parents’ in-law Sylvia and Bobby Elmi who, sadly, did not live to see the completion of this thesis but whom I know would be very proud of the achievement.

As is the case with my research participants, I have undertaken my academic work in combination with a demanding family life and, like many of them, I have relied upon a network of support to make it possible for me to do so. As such, I extend a big thank you to my sisters who have supported, loved and encouraged me through the highs and lows that accompanied this process of researching and writing a thesis.

Last, but certainly not least, I am especially grateful to my husband Robert and my five children Jack, Lewis, James, Ben and Ella for their unconditional love and support who have without question or quibble accepted that I have needed to engross myself in my academic work for much of the time.

For Matt
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ABBRVIATIONS

APE - Auto-driven Photo Elicitation
BERA - British Education research Association
BSA - British Sociological Association
ESRC - Economic and Social Research Council - ESRC
HE - Higher Education
HEI - Higher Education Institution
HEFCE - Higher Education Funding council for England
HEFCW - Higher Education Funding council for Wales
HESA - Higher Education Statistics Agency
IPA - Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis
LLL - Lifelong learning
NTAS - Non-traditional Adult Student
OECD - Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
SSI - Semi structured interview
UNESCO - United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization
WAG - Welsh Assembly Government
WG – Welsh Government
WP - Widening Participation
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Chapter 1: Introduction

This study explores the impact of past and present relational social processes when entering higher education (HE) post 30 years of age. In doing so it fills a gap in widening participation (WP) and mature student discourse and literature.

In order to contextualise the motives behind the current study this chapter begins by briefly highlighting the policy and discourses that have influenced and led to the neglect of this older student cohort and this area of research. This is then followed by a description of the research focus and a section which outlines the structure of the thesis. The chapter concludes with the research aims.

Policy context

Diversity, access and equity are key concepts in WP policy, discourse and debate. The aim of WP as offered by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE, 2009) and the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW, 2012) is to address the large discrepancies in the take-up of higher education opportunities between different social groups. Different or underrepresented groups include those from low socio-economic backgrounds; individuals with disabilities; or those coming from particular ethnic, gender or age groups.

The importance of adult learning and the pivotal contribution it makes to develop a cohesive society has long been recognised (Jarvis, 2004, 2011a). The theoretical genesis of lifelong learning and lifelong education can be traced back to the writings of Dewey and Yeaxlee in the early twentieth century: Dewey, for example, proposed that schooling was designed to promote continued human growth and development (Jarvis, 2011b). In the 20s Yeaxlee (1929) championed a need for lifelong education for all members of society regardless of socio-economic class or gender emphasising the potential benefits of lifelong education to the personal and social world of the individual. Although the 1920s was a
decade that demonstrated increased provision and political interest in adult education and training, the interest was marginal as the main focus of government and educators was the socialisation of the young; thus emphasis was placed upon initial education (Field, 2006).

WP and lifelong learning gained prominence in the 70s becoming a primary topic of debate of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) adopted the topics as a result of the influential Faure et al. (1972) report which emphasised a humanistic approach to learning. The report recognised formal, non-formal and informal learning emphasising that it should be for all people throughout the whole of the lifespan (Faure et al., 1972). In 1973 the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) adopted a more economic approach to lifelong learning conceptualising it as ‘recurrent education’ which would enable individuals’ to experience phases of paid work, leisure and learning (OECD, 1973). Recurrent education was viewed as a policy strategy that would establish a flexible link between education and training on the one hand, and education and work on the other (Centeno, 2011).

The models of learning put forward by UNESCO and OECD coupled with the economic unrest and rising unemployment in the UK, prompted UK Government into appointing the Russell Committee (DES, 1973). The purpose of the committee was to advise and create a number of different lifelong learning pathways and include for the provision of basic literacy training (O’Grady, 2013). The latter part of the 70s brought further concerns regarding industrial and economic instability, which led to greater emphasis in the UK on up-skilling the workforce. This developed into a tradition of advanced skills and part-time learning involving workforces, predominantly men, attending college on a day release, or through distance learning.

Thus, there is an extensive array of literature, policy documents and initiatives that have led to our contemporary understanding of the concept of WP which have subsequently
influenced UK governments’ views. Yet, the discourse thread that runs throughout current policy and research is the contribution that higher education can make to employability and economic growth, with much less emphasis being placed upon higher education’s contribution to well-being at an individual and societal level (Field, 2006).

When research for this study began in 2009, The New Labour government was in power. From the start of their administration in 1997 they directed their attention in policy making toward WP and fair access. Ironically, their WP ideology was heavily influenced by a report originally commissioned by the previous Conservative government; the Review (1997), formally known as the report the National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education. This was the most detailed and comprehensive review of the structure and function of higher education since the Robbins Report in the 1960s.

Following Dearing’s (1997) recommendations, New Labour set their target: 50 per cent of 18 to 30 year olds should experience HE by 2010. Thus the government’s inclusive framework focused upon the under-representation of young people in HE. As a result of this target, policy makers, academic researchers and HE providers ‘fixated’ on achieving New Labour’s target (Fuller and Paton, 2006). The preoccupation with learners up to the age of 30 years resulted in an extensive array of research literature, government initiatives and strategies related to this age group. Consequently, those individuals partaking in educational pursuits who fell outside this age bracket, received comparatively less interest in terms of research, WP discourse or policy initiatives (Gorard et al., 2006; O’Shea and Stone, 2011; Mercer and Saunders, 2004; Blair, Cline and Wallis, 2010; Pascarella and Terenzini, 2005, O'Donnell and Tobbell, 2007; Deggs, 2010).

This lack of research evidence is more than problematic as the cohort of adult learners over 30 years makes up a substantive and increasing portion of the student body worldwide in
the United Kingdom and, more specifically, in Wales where the current study has been carried out.

Currently in Wales the number of adult learners aged 30 years and above in higher education continues to rise; in 2008/2009 there were 23,155 (rounded numbers) students enrolled in Welsh HEIs (HESA, 2010). The latest statistics show that this number had increased in 2010/2011 to 32,360 (rounded numbers) students aged 30 years and over enrolled in Welsh HEIs representing just under 25 per cent of the student body in Wales (HESA, 2012).

**Research on Mature students**

The research that does focus upon mature students, however, appears to cause further issues and dilemmas rather than giving a positive forum to this neglected group of students. The terms that are used within research literature include ‘non-traditional’, ‘mature student’ and ‘adult student/learner’. ‘Non-traditional’ is a term which refers to those whose characteristics (for example, age, socio-economic class, gender or race) position them outside the typical ‘traditional’ student category (that is predominantly viewed as middle class, 18-21 year old and undertaking full time HE courses, HEFCW, 2010, Taylor, 2005); and ‘Mature student’ and ‘adult student/learner’ are terms which apply to all students in the UK over the age of 21 years (HEFCW, 2010). Such nomenclatures are applied arbitrarily within the literature, often lacking precise definitions.

Adding to the confusion is the way in which world wide policies on HE categorise the age of mature students. For example, in the USA the term refers to students over the age of 25 years; in the UK a mature or adult student is classified as someone who is aged 21 years or older upon enrolment into HE (HESA, 2012). If one observes the legal age of adulthood in the UK as 18 years old then all individuals from this age should also be classed as mature students. The ambiguity of the differing nomenclature and age categorisation often results
in ‘mature’ or ‘adult’ students being identified as a single homogeneous group. Thus, it could be argued that this ‘one size fits all’ adult learning offers little understanding about possible individual differences, motivations and barriers in adult learners from across the life span (Richardson and King, 1998; O'Donnell and Tobbell, 2007; Deggs, 2011).

A further issue is that much of the mature student research simply draws comparisons between older and younger students rather than looking at mature students in their own right (Donaldson and Townsend, 2007). To illustrate my point: non-traditional and traditional student’s capabilities (Crozier et al., 2008; Garratt, 2011) cognitive differences between traditional and non-traditional students (Justice and Dornan, 2001); motivation, interest and positive effect in traditional and non-traditional undergraduate students (Winn, 2002; Seifert, 2004).

Finally and particularly pertinent to the impetus for this study, there is little attention given to the individual patterns of participation in HE; or as Fuller and Heath (2010) maintain the personal and collective nature of decision making in terms of education further across the lifespan. This stands in direct contrast to the array of literature that focuses on the patterns of participation and the motivations and barriers to learning for younger students (Gorard et al., 2006).

The reasons behind why an individual engages in education are complex and multifaceted and are inevitably influenced by past and present relational social processes, that is, social networks (partners, dependants, family members, peers); early educational experiences and social status. Although much of the research in the area acknowledges this point, it mostly offers a homogenous viewpoint, rather than individual perspectives (Bowl, 2001). As a result, within mature student literature there is little recognition or understanding of the lived and unique contexts of the ‘older’ student experience.
Thus, the apparent gap in literature referred to earlier can be identified. It seems there is a call for exploration, understanding and attributing value to the unique social roles, responsibilities and experiences of adult learners aged 30 years and over. From the individual perspective of each of the participants, this study offers insight into the individual motivations for and barriers to learning. Therefore, this study demonstrates that both decision making and engagement with HE is embedded in a social and historical context.

**Researcher profile**

This research has a particular intrinsic value for me, as the education culture of which I became and still am a part of, has affected my interest and desire to undertake this study. I am a postgraduate student who completed an honours degree in HE at a ‘non-traditional’ time. Thus, I have experienced, first hand, the influences of past and present relational social processes when entering education post 30 years.

There is a common assumption in qualitative research, that is, the researcher will influence the study (Smith, 2008). As such, I acknowledge that my unique context may aid my understanding of those of the participants’ in this study, yet, my experiences may also have a biasing effect on their responses and the interpretation of the same. Being aware of, and considering how one’s position as researcher may impact upon the knowledge produced is termed, reflexivity.

Langdrudge (2007) notes, that this potential, contextual difficulty can be circumvented by adopting a reflexive approach at the beginning, middle and end of any study. Following the advice of Langdridge (2007), the process of reflexivity begins in this chapter; in order to offer background and context to my researcher position, I present a personal vignette. I engage with reflexivity again, in Chapter 5 where I offer a more detailed discussion of the relational social processes that influenced my HE experience. Here, I also consider how
my experiences that intersect with those of the participants, and, my position as researcher might influence the study findings. At the end of this study, in Chapter 7, I include a final reflection.

The following paragraphs, offer the reader, a reflexive, descriptive snapshot of the researcher, further, it maps neatly onto the participant profiles that are presented in Chapter 5. My demographic details are listed, followed by a brief overview of my early educational experience. The final paragraph outlines when I first started thinking about university.

Clare

Self-defined as:

Irish/Welsh, working class

Female, age 46 years

Married, five children aged: 22 years; 16 years; Twins, 13 years; 7 years

BA Honours Educational Studies and Psychology

I grew up in a supportive, Catholic, working class, extended family environment and was the youngest child out of six. My earliest memories of compulsory education are, overall, happy ones. I did not struggle with any element of learning and continued along in a relatively stress free manner throughout most of my compulsory schooling. I say relatively, because my stress free state changed at about 14 years, at which time I was told that the only exam level available to me, in Tier or Set 2 were CSEs and not O levels as I had anticipated.

Whilst this in itself, may not merit the sense of disillusionment that I felt at that time, it was the accompanying dialogue from my English teacher that really affected me. She stated in no uncertain terms that my test scores to date, had demonstrated that I was
working at a level higher than some students in the tier above and I was more than capable of engaging with O levels. She continued, unfortunately due to my parents’ limited engagement with my education I had been placed and kept at a level which misrepresented my academic ability.

My sense of disappointment here was twofold: Firstly, I was confused that my parents were perceived as being neglectful of my education. In direct contrast, they valued and respected education and learning, holding those who facilitated learning in high esteem. What was perceived as ‘neglect’ by the teacher, was, in fact my parents’ trust and belief in the education system. Further, their working class dispositions meant that they would not have questioned any educational decisions made by education ‘professionals’. Secondly, at the age of 14 years I understood that the education system, of which, I was part was not fair or equitable but could be manipulated by who you were and where you came from.

Although I left school in the end with 8 CSEs and an additional 6 O levels (that I achieved by staying at school for another year), I felt I had been let down by my education. What is more I realised that participation in HE at this time, would not be an option, as I did not have the appropriate qualifications.

The above, I hope gives some understanding of my early educational experiences, the intention of the following paragraph is to outline when I began to think again, seriously about participation in HE.

After a series of jobs, I became a Learning Support Assistant (LSA) and gained temporary positions in several primary schools in South Wales. Before the birth of my fifth child I was given a permanent post, as an LSA, in a school environment that believed in and promoted staff development. Here, I was encouraged repeatedly, to participate in HE in order to achieve qualified teacher status.
In, August 2005 my daughter was born. Whilst on maternity leave from my LSA position I began to think seriously about returning to learning. A number of factors were influencing by decision: This was definitely going to be my last child; my husband had recently become unemployed; I felt, for some reason, it was my time. I enrolled in a South Wales HEI in 2006, and graduated with First Class Honours in 2009. I was right it was my time!

**Research focus**

In answer to this call and in order to contribute to the existing literature, the current research captured and explored through a qualitative, more specifically through a phenomenological approach, students’ lived experiences of engaging with HE. The research focused on students aged 30 years and over. It explored through the experiential accounts of the individuals how past and present relational social processes influenced their individual decision to participate and have also influenced their engagement and participation with HE.

The six participants for the present study all attended a South Wales HEI that offered foundation courses designed to filter into undergraduate courses. The typical entry requirements for the Foundation Course are five GCSEs including Mathematics, English Language or Welsh First Language plus one of the following: 2 A levels at an appropriate standard for entry into Higher Education at Year 1 but fail to meet the entry requirements for the particular chosen programme or 2 A levels at an appropriate standard for entry into Higher Education at Year 1, but in subject areas that are not relevant for the particular chosen programme.

Individuals who do not meet any of these requirements have the opportunity to be considered on an individual basis. As the institution’s website suggests the intention of this course is to widen access and participation for ‘return to learning’ students who wish to
embark on an honours degree programme. This flexible approach to learning is particularly pertinent to all of the non-traditional, mature adult students who are the focus of this study.

The participants were all enrolled on the Health and Social Care BSc programme. Three were coming to the end of Year Zero (Foundation Year), the remaining three individuals were coming to the end of Year 1 of degree level study. Successful completion of the Foundation Course enables entrance onto a degree. This could be considered similar to an Access Course, typically offered within further education establishments. A more descriptive profile of each of the participants in this study is offered in Chapter 5.

My choice to explore students at these particular learning levels was influenced by two factors. Firstly, whilst research exists about experiences of learners on access courses (e.g. Evans and McCulloch, 1989; Reynolds, 1996; Tight, 1996; Reay et al., 2002; Brine et al., 2004), there seems a paucity of literature on preparatory courses such as the Foundation.

Secondly, research that has focused upon mature students’ transitions into and across higher education found that the key transition points were the access course year and the first year of the degree. These were the periods where participants were first faced with negotiating challenges such as doubts about academic ability, conflicts between home and college life and developing relationships with peers. Although they adopted strategies for doing so, the most salient times of challenge and growth seemed to be at these stages (Mercer, 2003, 2007). Influenced by these findings, I therefore decided to collect data at similar points as it appeared that they might be fruitful periods to explore the aims of this study. The foregoing described the context, rationale and focus of the current study. The following paragraphs explicate the structure of the six chapters that follow.

**Thesis structure**

Chapters 2 and 3 review the literature from the related areas. Chapter 2 is an investigation and consideration of the theoretical concepts and policies that are intended to promote and
increase diversity in the student population of higher education. The chapter establishes the complex yet interlinked characteristics of adult education, informal and formal learning, the learning society, lifelong learning all of which are encompassed by the term WP. At first glance the notion of WP appears to be straightforward. However, within the rhetoric that surrounds education research and policy the term is commonly used but not always clearly defined (Field, 2004). Therefore, a further important aim of this chapter is to offer some clarity to the notion of WP and its associated terminology. Furthermore, chapter 2 is the underpinning of this thesis as it illustrates the WP initiatives that led up to and influenced the UK government’s ‘fixation’ of 50 per cent of 18 to 30 year olds participating in HE by 2010.

Chapter 3 focuses on literature and research relating to mature students. The important thread that runs throughout this chapter is the ambiguous nature of the term ‘mature student’ with the definition and age range varying from study to study. On the literature which identifies the substantive barriers to participation literature here I will draw upon Cross’s (1981) theoretical chain of response model before I offer an in-depth discussion of the multiple barriers and challenges faced by adult learners.

Chapter 4 presents a full account of the methodological standpoint of this study and the methods used to achieve the research aims. In the first part I offer a rationale for using a phenomenological qualitative approach. Here I give details of my chosen methods, interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) which originated in the field of psychology (Smith, Flower and Larkin, 2009) and auto-driven photo elicitation (APE) a prominent approach in the field of social anthropology (Banks, 2007). These methods have not been utilised together in educational research, therefore they offer what Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009) refer to as a ‘bolder’ design. Here an explanation is offered as to why these methods were most appropriate for the phenomena under investigation. The research
design itself is then outlined with a detailed description of the data collection methods employed in the study and how they were utilised. Finally, the IPA sequence of analysis is described in order for the reader to gain an understanding of how the final write-up emerged.

Chapters 5 and 6 present the results of this study and reflect the overall themes. In keeping with the IPA method, these chapters are substantial and discursive. The chapters consist of participant transcript extracts and my detailed analytic interpretation of the text (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009). At the end of each result section I offer a discussion of the findings in relation to the existing literature.

In Chapter 5 I begin with a detailed discussion of reflexivity and validity, where I again, give recognition to my role as researcher and the co-production of the knowledge. This is followed by detailed snapshots of each of the six participants. The remainder and most substantial part of this chapter reveals how past and present relational social processes impact upon the individuals’ transitions onto and engagement with HE. The emphasis here is on the perceived sense of transformation and reclamation that each of the individuals experienced through participating in HE.

Chapter 6 explores the participants’ perceptions of being a student in HE. Here they make sense of how their personal and student worlds come together. They describe a divide between themselves and the younger students in terms of, for example, academic performance and commitment; also a sense of invisibility compounded by the institutional ethos and the sources of support that they receive.

The thesis draws to a conclusion in Chapter 7 with a summative discussion of the findings in relation to the study’s aims. Here the significant findings are positioned within wider theory and research. This chapter also draws upon a contemporary psychological model of lifespan development to make sense of the individual transitions of each participant.
Further, I build upon a traditional model of ‘barriers’ to participation (Cross, 1981) in order to accommodate the alternative view of barriers to participation highlighted by the participants in this study. Chapter 7 also considers methodological issues. A commentary is offered which explains the benefits of using bolder design in any research that aims to elicit and capture the experiential accounts of its participants.

Although the presentation of this thesis follows a logical order, it is important to note that the research process itself was far removed from a linear approach. The IPA approach to research is malleable and cyclical (Langdridge, 2007). Knowledge emerges as the researcher visits and revisits the data. Similar to the hermeneutic circle, IPA encourages a non-linear style of thinking. It has to be said that conducting research with this method can be challenging and, at times, complex, but as Smith, Flowers and Larkin state it is also a “uniquely interesting, insightful and rewarding process” (2009, p.80). The authors’ positive observations have certainly come to the fore for me in this research process, as the chapters that follow will illustrate. This chapter now concludes with the specific research aims of this study.

**Research aims**

From the foregoing it can be concluded that the three aims of the present study are:

- To examine how adult learners aged 30 years and over make sense of past and present relational social processes and the ways in which they have influenced their engagement and participation with HE;

- To explore the perceived motivations and barriers identified by such students as they navigate HE;
• To develop a ‘bolder’ design that incorporates both Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis and Auto-driven Photo Elicitation to capture the experiential accounts from each participant;
Chapter 2: Widening participation

There is a substantive body of literature and official discourse that focus upon the areas of WP, adult learning and lifelong learning. Yet despite being key elements within research and policy at a governmental and university level these various terms are not always clearly defined.

In an attempt to unpack these theoretically dense concepts and provide some clarity to these ubiquitous terms, the following chapter will be divided into three parts. The first part will interrogate key terms that have informed adult learning discourse: these include: ‘adult education’, ‘informal and formal learning’, ‘learning society’ and ‘lifelong learning’. The second part of the chapter considers the various policy strands that inform contemporary understandings of WP. However, the section does not encompass all of the under-represented groups recognised in WP policy: for example those from low socio-economic backgrounds; individuals with disabilities; or those coming from particular ethnic or gender groups. As there is a need to set parameters I intend only to highlight the WP initiatives that led up to and influenced the UK government’s target of 50 per cent of 18 to 30 year olds participating in higher education (HE). The chapter will conclude with a brief synopsis of post 2010 initiatives.

Defining adult education

The importance of adult education and the pivotal contribution it makes to developing a cohesive society has long been recognised (Peters, 1966; Knowles, 1973; Jarvis, 2004). Yet, according to Tight (2004), the field of adult education is a complicated area, which is broad, fractured and amorphous. What is more the term is viewed and defined in different ways in different countries.
Defining the term ‘adult’ is particularly contested within the field of adult education, as the definitive point at which one becomes an adult is inherently complicated (Jarvis, 2004, Field, 2006, Tight, 2004, Morgan-Klein and Osborne, 2007). Knowles (1983, 1980, 1973) defined an adult as an individual who behaved as an adult and perceived themselves as such. In many ways Knowles’ definition raises as many problems as it solves and illustrates the vagueness of the term. Jarvis (2004) accuses Knowles of being tautological since he defines ‘adult’ by being ‘adult’, thus Knowles is not defining what it means to be an adult, he is merely repeating the term.

For Rogers (1996) the term ‘adult’ referred to a stage in the life cycle of the individual accompanied by acceptance into society. To continue with this idea, in the UK transition into adulthood occurs at the age of 18 when an individual is given the right to vote. Although, Tight (2004) sensibly points out many aspects of adulthood are carried out before the age of 18 such as marriage, childbirth, membership of the armed forces and taxation. Conversely, aspects of adulthood such as self-reliance are delayed by situational and economic factors as more and more individuals post-18 years depend upon parents, for example, to house and financially support them. In agreement with Tight (2004) the term ‘adult’ cannot be directly connected to age, rather it is related to what happens to the individual as he/she grows older in terms of status and self-image.

Defining the nature of ‘education’ has also been a topic fiercely debated by policy makers and practitioners (Peters, 1966, Jarvis, 2004, Tight, 2004). Peters (1966) argued that the complexities of the concept made it extremely difficult to define the term in a concise manner. Nonetheless Peters does attempt to do so as he proposes that ‘education implies that something worthwhile is being or has been intentionally transmitted in a morally acceptable manner’ (1966, p.25). From this it appears that Peters views education as an
intended and purposeful activity rather than something which happens by accident, implying that what we learn incidentally cannot be counted (Matheson, 2008).

The terminology that Peters uses in his approach such as ‘worthwhile’ or ‘morally acceptable’ has raised questions such as “who decides what is worthwhile, for example, the learner, the teacher, the institution, the employer, the state?” (Tight, 2004, p.16). Similarly Matheson (2008) addresses the term ‘morally acceptable’. He argues that defining what is morally acceptable is particularly difficult in present society in which moral values are continually challenged. The issues that Tight (2004) and Matheson (2008) refer to serve to highlight and reinforce the complex nature of education; although as Tight points out, Peters’ (1966) account serves to identify and set boundaries for the key questions that need to be addressed in order to ‘satisfactorily define a concept like education’ (2004, p.16).


Tight (2004) proposes that the key phrases in the UNESCO definition are ‘organised’ and ‘sustained instruction’, thus implying that there is involvement from an educator and an institution in contrast to learning which does not necessarily involve instruction. He follows by suggesting that these terms explicitly distinguish between education and learning, a factor he argues that was not made clear enough in Peters’ proposal. However Tight (2004) concedes that making distinctions between education and learning is not as clear cut as it seems as they are not polar opposites as one would believe; the terms can be used interchangeably as there are instances that could be described as either learning or education.
Within the UK adult learning outside of the university sector was provided by a wide range of contributors including churches, trade unions and temperance organisations. As state support developed, funding was given to organisations such as local education authorities, pre-1992 universities’ extra mural departments and the Workers Education Association, whose aim was to provide learning opportunities for adults. These more formal organisations were presented as the field of lifelong learning or adult education (Edwards et al., 1998) whereas more informal and less institutionally focused lifelong learning activities which took place in the home, the workplace or in local clubs became insignificant when compared to learning taking place in these organised settings (Field, 2006; Edwards et al., 1998).

The rationale behind these adult education initiatives was to support those individuals who had been let down in some way by initial education and to introduce individuals to a liberal education of the arts, humanities and social sciences which was considered to promote social autonomy and empowerment (Edwards et al., 1998). Jarvis (2004) proposes that the term ‘adult education’ is particularly viewed in the UK currently as liberal education and more often the pursuit of the middle-classes, whereas traditionally it was a working class movement: the author continues that the term implies that the adult’s education has been completed and through leisure time they continue to broaden their existing knowledge, skills or hobbies.

It is this association with leisure that has resulted in the marginalisation of adult education, according to Jarvis (2004). As adult education is mostly carried out in leisure time there is a common belief that the education gained is for enjoyment rather than vocational purposes and it is often equated to creative pursuits rather than academic learning. This is especially evident in an era where vocationalist justifications of education dominate. It could be argued that contemporary research (see Connolly, Rees and Furlong, 2008) has proved that to undervalue the intrinsic benefits of adult education is a serious mistake: for example
adult learning can substantially improve confidence and give the individual a sense of empowerment and satisfaction as they begin to develop their knowledge and learning skills.

**Informal and formal learning: definitions**

Tight (1996) asserts that learning is comparable to breathing thus it occurs as an unconscious action; as the individual physically and mentally develops they are influenced and informed by their surroundings. Sometimes this occurs subtly, at other times it is more obvious; from the time we take our first breath and expel our last, as human beings we continually learn. Yet this fundamental process that is attributed to living, and being human, lies at the heart of fierce debates. Underpinning many of the debates is a need to categorise different types of learning: fundamental to this are distinctions made between formal and informal learning which is key to how adult education is theorized (Eraut, 2000).

Gorard and Rees (2002) use a broad definition of informal learning, whereby it is seen as a process that is non-taught, thus it includes any learning that takes place outside formal participation; ultimately Gorard and Rees argue that informal education can be gained consciously and unconsciously through work or leisure. Similarly Field (2006) comments that informal learning spreads through our lives so prolifically that it is an almost unquestioned activity that is not thought of as learning. In contrast, formal learning takes the form of “institutionalised, accredited participation in formal education or training” (Gorard and Rees, 2002, p.106). It can also be characterised as teacher focused rather than learner focused, thus suggesting that the learner has less influence over what is being learned. In addition Morgan-Klein and Osborne (2007) argue that this type of learning is often inaccessible to certain types of learners due to situational or financial barriers.
Much of the discourse about participation in learning focuses mainly upon formal education (Fryer, 2005) and casts formal and informal learning as contrasting concepts, thus ignoring that learning in many situations comprises of both types. As McGivney asserts: “It is difficult to make a clear distinction between formal and informal learning as there is often a crossover between the two” (1999, p.1).

Furthermore, the many definitions of informal and formal education put forward assumptions as to the value of informal learning compared to the value of formal learning; thus the emphasis within the definitions is on their differences rather than their similarities. It could be argued that focusing on the differences simply serves to polarise the two types of learning (Morgan-Klein and Osborne, 2007; McGivney, 1999). Placing informal and formal learning as polar opposites only serves to widen the value gap between these different types of learning, instead it would be wiser to view them as interdependent, one informing the other, inextricably linked rather than distinct concepts.

The focus should be concentrated on blending the terms rather than segregating them. Learners engage in learning in and outside the classroom and as such this needs to be recognised as something that should be prized rather than contended. As Coffield states in this vivid metaphor:

> If all learning were to be represented by an iceberg, then the section above the surface of the water would be sufficient to cover formal learning, but the submerged two thirds of the structure would be needed to convey the much greater importance of informal learning (2000, p.1).

Here Coffield (2000) does not simply espouse the importance of informal learning, he illustrates that informal learning is the actual underpinning to all of the educational pursuits that an individual embarks upon.

Thus, there is a call for equal emphasis on both informal and formal learning as they are inextricably linked rather than distinct concepts; the focus should be concentrated on
blending the terms rather than segregating them. Understanding that these types of learning are not dichotomous is seen by Coffield (2000) and others (Tusting and Barton, 2006; Gorard and Rees, 2002) as a valuable insight which should be heeded by employers, practitioners, researchers and governments as they reason and reflect upon participation in learning.

**Lifelong learning and the Learning Society: definitions**

According to Centeno (2011) (see also Morgan-Klein and Osborne, 2007; Gorard and Rees, 2002, Coffield, 2000) ‘lifelong learning’ and its theoretical corollary ‘the learning society’, are two of the most extensively researched concepts in the field of education and policy debate. Despite, or perhaps because of this, they remain intensely contested and, for some, problematic concepts (see Ranson, 1992; Crowther, 2004; Jarvis, 2004): Baptiste, for example, (1999, p.95) dismisses them out of hand, claiming that they are a form of distraction from ‘the ethical responsibility of the adult educator’; while Smith (2000) points out that while the terms can seem profound on close inspection they are largely vacuous phrases (this, according to Smith, is especially true in the term’s facile utilization within policy).

It is the elasticity and ambiguity of the terms which often makes it attractive to policy-makers: as Field observes ‘Isn’t lifelong learning rather a loose and all-encompassing term, stretching way too far to have much purchase on reality?’(2006, p.2). Field goes on to blame educational researchers as well as policy makers for the ambiguous nature of the term: he argues that they produce literature that refers to lifelong learning in the title but which fails to deliver any focus on, or analysis of, the idea in the text, thus rendering the term intellectually worthless. However, a contrasting view is that the indistinctiveness of lifelong learning is actually one of its strengths (Bagnall, 2009). Preston (1999) explains
that the way in which it defies definition is part of its attraction, arguing that the multifaceted nature of lifelong learning is its unique selling point.

Preston’s (1999) celebration of the ambiguity within the terms is dismissed by many other academics. Greenbank (2006), for example, argues that the theoretical latitude within the concept has resulted in it being appropriated within political rhetoric without any meaningful policy outcomes. In his detailed analysis of the uses of learning society and lifelong learning within policy, Greenbank (2006) highlights how the terms are presented in various guises: at times they are objectives to gain individual development and improved quality of life; at other times they are used to stress social cohesion and promote social equality; more commonly within current policy the terms are used to promote enhanced productivity and national competitiveness. In a similar vein to Greenbank, Jarvis (2011) argues that the enduring and individualistic nature of lifelong learning is largely ignored within contemporary literature and policy, usurped within what critics such as Baptiste (1999) argue are increasingly narrow and technical understandings of learning (discussed below).

Despite these debates there are some fundamental understandings that are shared by most academics and policymakers with regards to lifelong learning. At a fundamental level, lifelong learning is underpinned by the idea that learning and living are integrated across the lifespan and involve all aspects of a person’s life that is family, work, and leisure time. It is concerned with focused learning pursuits be these incidental or subtle, such as informal learning or more obvious such as formal learning (see for example Faure et al., 1972; Hutchins, 1970; Husen, 1974; Coffield, 1994; Su, 2007).
Lifelong learning and the learning society as a policy priority

Tight (1998) proposes that the concepts of lifelong learning and the learning society first emerged in the 1960s, promoted within a course of discussions by a variety of international organizations. Others suggest that the marrying up of the terms lifelong education, lifelong learning and the learning society occurred in the early 1970s (Moreland, 1999). Whilst there may be some debate about the birth date of lifelong learning and learning society it is clear that the 70s was the decade in which there became a growing interest in lifelong education.

The debates of the 70s proved to be influential and wide reaching, although Field suggests that for the main, the discussions regarding lifelong learning were confined to ‘educational specialists meeting in the framework of intergovernmental bodies’ (Field, 2006, p.13). In the same period lifelong learning became a primary topic of debate for the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (Borg and Mayo, 2002, Crowther, 2004). The debates from UNESCO and OECD led to two initiatives which had a major impact upon how lifelong learning came to be theorised and utilised within policy.

The former of these initiatives derived from an international committee of experts from UNESCO who promoted lifelong education through their seminal report, ‘Learning to Be’. Chaired by Edgar Faure, ‘Learning to Be’ generated global intellectual ferment. Faure et al. (1972) argued that learning should be continual and should develop across the lifespan for all members of society this was a similar ideology to that of Yeaxlee (1929). Faure et al. (1972) conceived of a society which provided a flexible framework for learners to develop throughout their life course which, in turn, would benefit society in terms of knowledge, social cohesion and economic growth. Although Faure et al. envisaged the social and the economic being equal, it is the latter which has come to predominate in contemporary understandings. Field (2006) argues that the Faure et al. (1972) report gave
rise to an optimistic phase in education with the thrust of education being humanistic and focusing on the fulfilment of people.

Faure et al’s. (1972) vision of a learning society was not unique in its time and there were many theorists who endeavoured to develop the idea. Hutchins (1970), for example, argued that a learning society was essential as education systems were no longer able to respond to the demands made upon them as society was rapidly changing and individuals were experiencing more free time due to economic decline and unemployment caused by technological innovations.

Husen (1972; 1974) also stressed the need for a learning society; he proposed that in order to achieve a learning society, knowledge and information would have to lie at the heart of all activities. The author optimistically predicted that by the year 2000 social status or inherited wealth would be less significant in society “To a growing extent, educated ability will be democracy’s replacement for passed-on social prerogatives” (Husen, 1974, p.238).

The author also stressed that changes with the formal context of education should be meaningful and relevant and the process should take on a more informal character as it becomes more accessible to individuals. Husen’s (1974) vision of a relevant educational system included education being a lifelong process, a continuous flow, thus corresponding with the ideologies of Hutchins (1970) and Faure et al. (1972) which viewed education as an activity that could not be segregated from other areas of life nor confined within certain hours, places and at certain stages of the lifespan of an individual.

The latter of the initiatives came from the OECD (1973), whose interests were in educational equality. The OECD supported the concept of recurrent education, the most significant feature of which was that all individuals had a right to formal education beyond compulsory schooling; furthermore, it could be taken at any stage of their lifespan (Jarvis, 2004). The main thrust of the OECD’s recurrent education work was to provide policy makers with the strategies that would help them to organise and finance lifelong education.
There is a broad consensus that both of these initiatives from UNESCO and the OECD had a major impact upon how lifelong learning came to be theorised and utilised within policy (Centeno, 2011). The frameworks offered by these organisations served to move lifelong education from an educational arena into the worldwide political arena. Although this may sound like one of the most pivotal moves in the history of education, Field (2006) offers a contrasting view and suggests that the OECD (1973) and UNESCO’s (1972) models of learning fuelled intellectual debate, but in practical terms they offered and achieved relatively little.

By the latter part of the 1970s the lifelong learning debate was overtaken by government concerns regarding industrial unrest and rising youth unemployment. In the United Kingdom Callaghan’s’ 1976 Ruskin College speech called for greater attention from educators to prepare young people for work. According to McGivney and Sims (1986) as unemployment spread from younger members of society to the adult workforce, adult education also suffered as a direct result of local authority spending cuts on non-statutory services. The consequence of this, as authors such as Field (2006) and Crowther (2004) illustrate, was the progressive marginalisation of the humanistic concerns of education which were gradually being substituted by an increasingly instrumentalist and vocationalist interpretation of education and learning termed ‘new vocationalism’. Lifelong learning policy discourse had begun to work against the very concerns and interests that had prompted and underpinned UNESCO’s 1972 report (Field, 2006).

The vocationalist thrust within educational policy was intensified with the economic downturn of the 1980s (see, Field 2006, Hodgson, 2000, Crowther, 2004, Schuller, 2011) with the policy priority of government being the implementation of structural change and tackling the employment crisis (Schuller, 2011). This increasingly vocationalist orientation of lifelong learning policy discourse within ‘new/knowledge economy’ thesis can be seen in European policy papers such as the Delors White Paper on ‘Growth, Competitiveness
and Employment’ (European Commission, 1994) and the European Commission paper on the learning society ‘Teaching and Learning — Towards the Learning Society’ (European Commission, 1995). These papers promoted an integrated approach to education and explained that lifelong learning should be the responsibility of all national education communities.

The vocationalist approach to education policy was increasingly framed by neoliberal economic policies: a clear example of this was within HE which within policy texts was seen as a means to enhance employability, entrepreneurship, economic competitiveness and flexibility (Burke and Hayton, 2011; Burke and Jackson, 2007).

A key element within the vocationalist interpretation is the alignment of lifelong learning with human capital theory. The OECD (2001) defines human capital as “the knowledge, skills, competencies and attributes embodied in individuals that facilitate the creation of personal, social and economic well-being” (p. 18). Thus human capital theory works upon the assumption that individuals will seek to undertake education and training to maximise their opportunities and economic position (Gorard and Rees, 2002). As Field (2006) asserts, much of the discourse of lifelong learning centres upon this narrow range of economic reference points, avoiding social and cultural concerns. He comments that the policy-led definitions of lifelong learning have sought to underestimate the extraordinary levels of change that occur in the individual other than economic changes. Knowledge was seen as a commodity something to be measured and valued on the basis of its economic return. Lifelong learning had become the key component within a vocationally orientated education system, which saw learning as a means to achieving the much sought after ‘knowledge economy’: Crowther (2004, p.128) uses a cuckoo metaphor to claim that the vocationalist has kicked the humanistic element out of the lifelong learning nest. Individual choice and other humanistic values associated with adult and lifelong education
were being replaced by a more vocationally orientated interpretation within ‘lifelong learning’ discourse:

Corresponding with Crowther’s view of lifelong learning, Field (2006) suggests that it was not surprising that adult educators’ responded with reservation to the expanding policy interest over lifelong learning in that its reduction of learning to vocationalism excluded the humanistic element which many were committed to:

On one hand lifelong learning was posed to rescue adult education from the boundaries of education policy; on the other hand lifelong learning dominated by economic and vocational concerns threatened the very essence of adult education (Field, 2006, p.22).

Field’s account is borne out by theorists who argue that rather than promoting a cohesive society, lifelong learning policy now serves to actually control individuals (for such criticisms see Tight, 1998; Martin, 2001, 2003; Coffield, 1997, 1999; Crowther, 2004). Lifelong learning has therefore been labelled as a mode of social control, ultimately a ‘deficit discourse’ which positions the responsibility for both economic and political failure with the individual rather than the system (Crowther, 2004). In its present form lifelong learning has therefore lost its progressive orientations within a humanistic approach, it is now seen as a tool that makes an individual adaptable and compliant; ready to enter the workplace (Field, 2006). It could be argued that the current structure of lifelong learning reduces and undermines the transformational nature of education. What is more, this argument is illustrated in WP discourses where the social benefits of education, such as raised self confidence, empowerment, personal motivation and self worth are seen as the wider benefits, the ‘by products’ of learning. In fact some policy discourses go a step further by introducing the wider benefits of learning as: ‘The development of personal “soft” skills and attributes such as self-efficacy, self regulation and social and communication skills’ (DfES, 2006, np).
The above has considered the ubiquitous nature of the terms that have informed adult learning. The second part of this chapter will focus on the policy strands that have influenced WP and adult participation in HE.

**Widening participation: definition and aims**

While lifelong learning is defined as access to all forms of learning both formal and informal throughout the life course, WP is concerned with equality of opportunity for all social groups to tertiary education. WP according to Thomas (2005) is a concept that includes a comprehensive range of issues such as ethnicity, gender, disability and age. The author describes how there are two main thrusts behind the process: the economic thrust which is the perceived need of government to hone in on human capital to develop a knowledge society to ensure global market success. The second drive is non-economic and is the desire for social equity (Thomas, 2005).

Layer (2005) comments on the explicit policy commitment to WP and identifies that even though there is overt interest in the concept much of the debate focuses on trying to identify what WP actually means; as Layer (2005) states, “As is always the case when reflecting on the evolution of educational systems, there is a contested history of how we got to where we are and why” (2005, p.2). Thus the concept is often accused of being ambiguous and malleable and is as heavily challenged as the term lifelong learning; Maringe and Fuller (2006) offer a possible explanation for this and suggest that the indistinctive nature of the term can explained by the multiple and varying meanings that are embedded in its range of purposes. In other words, as a concept maybe WP attempts to do too much; as trying to widen and increase participation has the potential to be both confusing and challenging to both adult education practitioners and policy makers alike.

Maringe and Fuller (2006) argue that increasing and widening participation in HE in the UK has been a longstanding aim and policy objective for the main political parties,
although the focused attention on WP by policy makers is not confined to the UK, but spreads throughout most developed economies as the correlation between adult learning and sustaining competitiveness and economic growth has been acknowledged (Connolly, Rees and Furlong, 2008).

The drive for economic growth that has become associated with WP policy has been fiercely criticised (see Williamson, 1998, Edwards, 1997, Greenbank, 2006). Critics argue that lifelong learning debates centred on globalization, economic, individual and societal change have led to detrimental changes to WP policy. For example, the focus of WP is upon those who are not participating and thus removing a barrier for them becomes important. On the one hand this can be viewed as a positive step in the direction of equity and inclusion. Conversely, the way that WP discourse, similar to lifelong learning discourse anchors itself to the ideas of individual responsibility and global competitiveness has resulted in, as Hodgson (2006, p.54) puts it, a ‘no excuses’ or ‘zero tolerance’ attitude towards those who do not participate. In effect then, the non-participating individual could be held to blame for their own social and economic position; responsibility is shifted from the state to the individual (Tuijnam and Bostrom, 2002; Hodgson, 2006; Casey, 2012).

**Key changes in HE and WP policy in the UK**

Irrespective of the debates that surround WP, it, like ‘lifelong learning’ and the ‘learning society’, is a longstanding educational concept. The genesis of WP can be traced back to World War II, whereby education and equality for all members of a post war society became the focus of political and social discourse. Yet, just as society has rapidly evolved and transformed since the 1940s so has the idea of WP.

There have been several pivotal policies that have changed the dimensions of WP. The first of these came in the form of the 1963 Robbins Report which championed the idea of adult education being made accessible to all, especially those from lower socio-economic
groups. Within the report, Robbins (1963) advocated growth or WP by suggesting that all higher education courses should become available to all those who had the ability, qualifications and desire to participate. However, Blackburn and Jarman (1993) point out that Robbins’ idea was by no means novel as there was already a growth in student numbers; the authors suggest he was merely justifying an expansion that was already underway.

Greenbank (2006) supports the argument made by Blackburn and Jarman regarding the extant growth in student numbers, however the author suggests that Robins’ argument was constructive in as much as he was concerned not just with expansion but also with making better use of under-utilised ability, especially among those from lower socio-economic groups, thus setting the tone for equity within HE. This period saw significant expansion in the area of participation, more even than Robbins had anticipated (Ross, 2003).

Throughout the 70s there was a gradual rise in participation rates particularly in the 18-23 age bracket. However, as Blanden and Machin (2003) keenly point out the increase in numbers was not so much to do with widening access but more to do with increasing access for those individuals classed as traditional students.

In the latter part of the decade a Conservative government was elected which encouraged individual responsibility, competitiveness and entrepreneurial attitudes (Ball 1997, Greenbank, 2006, Loxley and Thomas, 2001). Ross (2003) points out that at this time WP discourse and its concerns for equality for all were in the main missing from government policy and discourse.

The student population continued to rise throughout the 80’s to the beginning of the new millennium (Blanden and Machin, 2003). Between 1988 and 1994, the number of young people participating in HE doubled from 15 to around 30 per cent. Here again the increase in the student population came from the younger age groups (Parry, 2006). The increase
may have been a result of the revised policy on WP that came in the form of the 1987 White Paper *Higher Education: Meeting the Challenge* (DES, 1987), the focus of which was to make higher education accessible to a wider range of individuals in order to raise participation rates. Fuelled largely by a projected demographic decline in school leavers (Mercer, 2010), the paper recognised three routes into higher education: academic qualifications, vocational qualifications and access courses for adults. The paper also acknowledged that individuals should be able to participate in HE without any formal qualifications if they demonstrated to the institution that they had potential to benefit (David *et al.*, 2008). Referring back to the third route, Access Courses were developed in further education institutions (FEIs) and became the basis for entry onto the first year of higher education programmes of study (Bird, Crawley and Sheibani, 1998).

Commensurate with the Access Course is the Foundation Course/Year executed in the institution at the heart of this study. The aim of this course is to provide for those individuals who seek to enrol on a degree programme but do not possess requisite formal qualifications that are relevant to the chosen discipline and degree programme. An additional intention of a Foundation Programme is to widen access and participation for those individuals who wish to return to education but lack the necessary qualification (Sanders, Daly and Regan, 2011).

This type of programme can be a central part of certain degree programmes; in effect a year zero is added to the existing course thus the full-time degree takes one extra year to complete. Foundation Courses/Years are in line with HEFCE and HEFCW initiatives to widen participation; more specifically they relate to the *For Our Future: The 21st Century Higher Education Strategy and Plan for Wales* (DCELLS, 2009) agenda of the Welsh Assembly Government (WAG), where emphasis is placed upon greater diversity and flexibility in programme design and delivery. I return now to the key dates of WP policy changes.
The late 90s brought the newly elected New Labour government to power. It has been argued that throughout their 13 year long administration WP gained momentum and dominance within education policy generally and in HE in particular (Burke and Hayton, 2011). As previously stated, WP as a policy priority was initiated by the 1997 Dearing report, commissioned by the Conservatives and accepted by the New Labour government in a revised version.

New Labour took into account the Committee’s recommendation that government “should give priority to those institutions which can demonstrate a commitment to widening participation” (Dearing, 1997, p.14) and increase participation rates from under-represented groups.

Slowey (2007) offers an astute analysis of the report. She suggests that even though part-time funding issues and the challenges faced by mature students in FE and HE were given lip service in the report, further analysis of these issues appeared to be ignored in political, public and organisational arenas. This, she suggests, lies in direct contrast to the “extensive public and political debate and lobbying associated with higher education by school leavers”. She concludes, “It is not surprising therefore that it is the latter voice that tends to get heard” (Slowey, 2007, p.150)

**Over 30s - the negated generation**

The emphasis on younger full time students that Slowey (2007) refers to is nowhere more evident than in New Labour’s target to achieve 50 per cent participation among 18-30 year olds by 2010 (HEFCE, 2003). Credit should be given to the government here as they were attempting to foster greater social equality (Archer, 2007) by focusing on closing the social class gap (David et al., 2008). Yet it is important to emphasize that as they attempted to close one gap they were opening up another. Focusing on a specific age range meant that New Labour were in effect discriminating against a group, those aged 30 years of age and
over, that are also categorised as non-traditional and therefore entitled to the same representation within WP initiatives.

It can be argued that this report with its focus on the 18-30 age range negated the idea of learning throughout the lifespan as championed by UNESCO in the 1970s. As a policy it is explicit in its rejection of older students, leaving those individuals post 30 years of age redundant and invisible from central policy. Many suggest that as a result of this target older students, who are equally entitled to fair access, have been pushed to the peripheries of participation, mostly neglected by government and providers whilst their younger counterparts are given priority (Schuller and Watson, 2009; Moissidis et al., 2011; Maringe and Fuller, 2006).

Subsequently, in 2006 the Leitch Report, *Prosperity for All in the Global Economy – World Class Skills* (DIUS, 2007) recommended that more than 40% of adults should be qualified to Level 4 (HE level) by 2020; a broad definition of adult in this case is those between the ages of 19 and 65 years. Whilst there is an encouraging acknowledgement here that learning should take place further across the working lifespan, why stop at 65 years of age? Currently in the UK retirement age which was formerly 65 years of age has been phased out giving individuals the option of working for as long as they want. Indeed for some, continuing to work is not an option but a necessity as state pension age can be between 61 and 68 years of age, depending upon when someone was born or their gender (Gov.UK, 2013). It could be argued that the 65 year old upper limit, emphasized by the report negates the idea of learning right across the lifespan and by doing so, it negates the idea of learning for learning sake. The ideology behind the Leitch Report is inextricably woven with ideas of economic gains and reviving the importance of adult higher level skills. Fuller and Heath (2010) suggest that this shift in focus towards learning further across the lifespan was due to the projected demographic decline of younger people. Fuller and Heath’s (2010) point seems plausible, as much earlier Tight (1993) offered a
similar argument; he suggested that WP was a reactive recruitment exercise by government and educational institutions to the falling birth rate in the 1970s. He suggested that economic necessity and social justice debates certainly contributed to the changing attitude of government toward adult entry to higher education, but it was the potential damage to the economy caused by the fall in application numbers to institutions that was most concerning. Thus it seems that older students are considered to be valuable commodities in times of economic uncertainty and declining birth rates.

**Developments post - ‘2010’ target date**

Since the start of my research the UK has seen the formation of a new Coalition government in 2010. The coalition government business secretary Vince Cable publically stated in July 2010 that he did not want to commit to the previous government's target of 50 per cent of young people going to university. It could be argued that we are currently at a critical turning point in education due to the coalition government’s disassociation with the previous administration’s target and their announcement of substantial cuts in public expenditure amounting to at least 25 per cent over the next four years (Hart, 2010).

Contributing to the instability is the rise in tuition fees proposed by The Browne Review (2010).

However evidence suggests that since the Browne review there has been an unexpected increase in those applying for undergraduate courses, although the patterns of under-representation of certain groups of individuals continues to persist (Burke and Hayton 2011). There is a certain degree of irony in this situation, as expansion in student numbers which would have been welcomed by the previous administration, is coming at a time where the coalition government is attempting to reduce the expansion and supply of HE (Nelson and Wilkinson, 2010, Elliott and Asthana, 2010). There has also been a slow shift from what Fuller and Heath (2010, p.133) refer to as the ‘old widening participation focus’
where those individuals over the age of 30 years were for the main ignored, to a current position where they have become, as the authors note, “central to government’s competitiveness and new widening participation goals” (2010, p.133). Indeed new WP policy, reports and initiatives do appear to take more interest in participation across the lifespan.

For example the Hughes Report (2011) emphasises social mobility across the life span by taking a comprehensive, life cycle view of access. One of the general approaches that the Hughes report aspires to is an education system:

Which supports the decisions and aspirations of young people from primary school through to university or college admission and on to employment, and which continue to prompt in adulthood those who did not have or did not take the opportunities which post-school education or training offer (2011, p.8).

Although the narrative above is encouraging, as it promotes WP, fair access and social mobility across the lifespan; on closer inspection the Hughes Report like so many reports before it, places a great deal of focus on individuals up to the age of 19 years. Where there is emphasis on ‘mature students’ or ‘older students’ there is no reference to actual age. So one is left to consider whether the opening statements by Hughes, part of which are quoted above, is largely vacuous rhetoric. Is this WP thrust, again targeting the 18-30 year age bracket under the guise of the ‘mature’ student label?

**Conclusion**

The aim of this chapter was to examine the ubiquitous concepts and terms that constitute WP. This has been achieved by drawing upon the various policy strands that have come to inform contemporary understanding, as well as being integral to the UK government’s target of 50 per cent of 18- to 30- years-olds participating in higher education (HE).
To conclude I draw upon the work of McNair who sums up the thread of this chapter succinctly. He refers to inequities that are present in HE, he states: “The last great unfair discrimination: discrimination on grounds of age” (2007, p.94). Even if, as Fuller and Heath (2010) speculate the government has come around to the idea of including individuals over 30 years old in their WP vision, I argue that within government discourse and policy the term ‘mature student’ is still used ambiguously, or used intentionally to describe individuals up to the age of 30. Government and policy initiatives are not being explicit enough in their definition of mature student. More disturbing is the ambiguity that surrounds the term and that the intentional use of it to represent individuals under 30 years has been absorbed into much of the ‘mature student’ ‘non-traditional student ’ research literature, as will be illustrated in the next chapter.
Chapter 3 – Mature Students in HE

‘Non-traditional’/ ‘traditional’ student

The attempt to widen participation in HE in the UK, has led to a rise in the number of students entering from non-traditional backgrounds. The term ‘non-traditional’ is extensively used in literature (see Bowl, 2003; Bye, Pushkar and Conway, 2007; Newbold, Mehta and Forbus, 2010; Reay, 2002; O’Donnell and Tobbell, 2007). Yet, as previously noted, ‘non-traditional’ has been criticised for simply being an umbrella phrase that negates the individual differences between learners and positions those who fall into the category as ‘different’ (Bowl, 2001, 2003). Baptista (2011) discusses the vagueness of the expressions ‘non-traditional’, ‘adult’ or ‘mature student’, suggesting that the ambiguity surrounding the terms originates from the ways in which they are viewed and utilised differently across country, context and the academic culture in which they are used.

Therein lies a problem, since in researching this area it is extremely difficult to find a common definition of a mature student. Researchers set their own definitions according to the purpose of their research and the information that is open to them. Thus the age at which an individual is defined an ‘adult student’ varies between studies. For example when Bye, Pushkar and Conway (2007) researched motivation and interest, in traditional and non-traditional students they defined non-traditional students as aged 28 and over. Newbold, Mehta and Forbus (2010) in the remit of their research posit that non-traditional referred to students aged 24 and over.

Similarly, the age of ‘adult’, ‘mature’ and ‘non-traditional’ student differs in HE policy according to location. In the United States any one of these terms can be used if the student is over the age of 25 years; in Portugal the non-traditional adult student, referred to in policy as NTAS are aged 23 and above (Baptisita, 2011) whilst in the UK a mature or adult
student is classified as someone who is aged 21 years or older upon enrolment into HE (HESA, 2012). However, in many countries including the UK, the legal age of adulthood is 18 (in some countries it is even less), in which case even traditional college students come under the category of adults. The definitive point at which one becomes an adult is inherently complicated.

The complex nature of the expressions often results in ‘adult’ or ‘non-traditional’ students being identified as a single homogeneous group; although it is acknowledged that adult learners may have characteristics in common such as age, dependents or socio-economic class, they vary greatly in regards to how such factors are individually experienced (Richardson and King, 1998; Richardson, 2005; O'Donnell and Tobbell, 2007; Deggs, 2011).

In the case of homogeneity Gorard et al. (2006) highlights the problematic nature of identifying non-traditional students as one group. The authors conclude that adult learners learning experiences are individual and shaped by early life determinants such as gender, family background and early educational experiences. It is argued that all significantly impact and predict lifelong “learning trajectories” (p.5). In effect Gorard et al. (2006) are emphasising the importance of viewing non-traditional students as individuals rather than a collective. In their study of later life learners, Finsden and Formosa (2011) are equally concerned at the tendency for older learners to be grouped together as though they share common characteristics emphasising that “each student emerges from unique circumstances” (2011, p.88).

It could be argued that although the term ‘non-traditional’ is useful in as much as it publicises an individual’s right to education (Findsen and Formosa, 2011), within the research field it is used arbitrarily, lacking precise definition. Within this chapter the terms
Research themes

The literature on adult education and adult students is substantive and broad. Covering areas such as work based training, community based education and evening classes for enjoyment. Yet there appears to be less research into the growing number of adults undertaking higher education. The apparent lack of research in the area has been commented on by many academics (see Bowl, 2001; Mercer, 2003; Pascarella and Terenzini, 2005, O'Donnell and Tobbell, 2007; Deggs, 2010). Not only is there a comparative deficit of research into this group, the research that is carried out is often deemed repetitive in nature, focusing on comparisons between adult students and their traditional peers (Donaldson and Townsend, 2007).

Research on the topic has been accused of exhibiting negative attitudes towards mature students, viewing them in terms of their needs rather than what they can bring to the learning environment. Mercer (2003) highlights the work of authors such as Newstead et al. (1997) who put forward pejorative observations of adult learners, claiming, for example, that they have weak study skills leading to underperformance, and require more pastoral care than their younger peers. Other articles position adult learners as difficult and challenging. For instance, Lynch and Bishop-Clark (1994) positioned adult students as disruptive especially in classroom routines. The authors advised institutions to avoid treating adult students differently to younger students. However, the authors were not offering this advice to ensure adult student inclusion; their concern was with the younger students and the fact that they may be disturbed by the differential treatment.
Even in literature that sets out to promote the position of adult students in FE, the discourse used suggests that non-traditional students are a delicate or vulnerable demographic. In this vein Crossan, Field, Gallagher and Merrill (2003) explore non-traditional adults’ learning pathways and note that they are ‘contradictory’, ‘volatile’ and ‘fragile’. Such adjectives lead to the assumption that all adult learners experience these negative outcomes. It could be argued that rather than promoting adult learners the message seems to be that they are problematic for the institution because of their age.

Given these claims Donaldson and Townsend (2007) investigated how higher education journals between the periods of 1990 and 2003 portrayed older undergraduate students. The purpose of their study was to determine their prevalence and how they were depicted in the scholarly discourse. Findings highlighted the limited attention that the journals gave adult learners, only 41 of the 3,219 articles studied referred to adult undergraduate students (Donaldson and Townsend, 2007). Furthermore of all 41 articles the authors found within the scholarly discourse only nine articles appeared to ‘embrace’ adult learners; for example valuing them for what they bring to an institution; 19 articles exhibited an ‘acceptance’ of adult learners where the discourse focused on, for example, the contribution that adults make to enrolment numbers; the remaining 13 articles were termed as ‘acknowledging but undervaluing’ adult learners, where for example, the discourse focus was on the problematic nature of adult students compared to traditional aged students (Donaldson and Townsend, 2007).

It appears then, that even though adult students are an increasing demographic in HE, the attitudes of researchers are slow to change. It could be argued that limited research into and the often negative discourse around adult learners denotes that this group is less relevant in the field of education than their traditional student peers.
The research literature that does incorporate adult learners focuses on performance indicators such as: persistence (Bradley and Graham, 2000, Brown, 2002); retention and recruitment strategies (Schofield and Dismore, 2010; Roberts, 2011); student motivation (Winn, 2002, Seifert, 2004); non-traditional and traditional students’ capabilities (Crozier, et al., 2008; Garratt, 2011) and cognitive differences between traditional aged and non-traditional aged students (Justice and Dornan, 2001). This literature serves to draw comparisons and highlight differences between mature and traditional aged students.

**Predictors of HE success**

To elucidate the point made above one can look at the literature that addresses the area of motivation, academic performance and persistence in the HE student. For example, Winn (2002); Seifert (2004); Murphy and Roopchand (2003); Carney-Crompton, and Tan (2002); Roberts (2011); Bye, Pushkar and Conway (2007). Whilst these studies position adult learners in a positive light by validating their strengths, they have done so by measuring and comparing the older student to the younger student. This first becomes apparent by observing the titles of the studies.

For example, Bye, Pushkar and Conway (2007) investigated ‘motivation, interest and positive affect in traditional and non traditional undergraduate students’. Three hundred participants were paid ten dollars each for completing a battery of questionnaires. Conclusions revealed a trend for non-traditional students to exhibit more motivation overall. Furthermore, age and interest were seen as significant predictors of intrinsic motivation for learning in undergraduates.

Similarly, Murphy and Roopchand (2003) carried out research that examined ‘intrinsic motivation and self-esteem in traditional and mature students’. The study measured by means of questionnaires intrinsic motivation towards learning and levels of self-esteem.
The researchers concluded that mature students experience higher levels of self-esteem and intrinsic motivation than traditional students, and these were seen to be key to attaining and sustaining academic performance.

Further studies which investigated sources of motivation concluded that for older students, motivation may be associated with an aim to change some aspect of the self; a change from a negative self-concept to a more personally fulfilling one (Walters, 2000, Carney-Crompton and Tan, 2003). It has also been noted that for many mature students motivation comes from enjoyment of and achievement in the learning experience; this is in contrast to younger students who are described as being motivated by extrinsic factors such as gaining a formal qualification or gaining approval from their family and peers (King 1998; Bye, Pushkar and Conway, 2007; Winn 2002). Bye, Pushkar and Conway (2007) note that as such, the intrinsically motivated student is more likely to be an autonomous and self initiated learner, in contrast to the extrinsically motivated student who is more comfortable with instruction-led learning and who seeks approval as an external sign of worth.

Similarly, Justice and Dorman (2001) investigated the ‘meta-cognitive differences between traditional age and non traditional age college students’. Findings showed that age and gender caused no significant differences in course performance; older students achieved the same academic levels as the younger students. In terms of academic performance other research suggests that non-traditional students, in contrast to their traditional peers, often have better academic performance despite having fewer sources of support (Carney-Crompton and Tan, 2002). Similarly, in an Australian comparative study of the academic experiences and achievement of traditional and non-traditional university students, Cantwell, Archer and Bourke (2001) concluded that older students performed better academically than younger students - age was seen to be a significant predictor of academic achievement.
Newbold Mehta and Forbus (2010) carried out ‘a comparative study between non-traditional and traditional students in terms of their attitudes, behaviour and educational performance’. Their findings concluded that despite some differences between non-traditional and traditional students in all of the areas being measured, there appeared to be no significant differences in stress levels or levels of satisfaction with the college experience.

The overall purpose of the studies reviewed above was to investigate the factors that facilitate the retention and academic success of adult learners. The research findings establish that mature students are as capable and able as their traditional student peers, in some cases more so. As such they do not appear to align with much of the negative discourse that portrays non-traditional adult students as more stressed, anxious and vulnerable than their younger counterparts. Yet while these studies position adult learners in a positive light, it could be argued that comparing older students with younger students and highlighting the differences between them has the potential to polarise the two groups. A discerning observer might view this type of comparative research as a means of justifying the inclusion of older students almost to prove that they are worthy of their place in HE.

**Barriers to participation**

A further area that is extensively researched in adult education is the concept of ‘barriers’ to participation (McGivney, 1990, 1993, 1999; Bowl, 2001; Archer, Hutchings and Ross, 2003; Gorard *et al.*, 2007, 2006; Fuller *et al.*, 2008). The research focus in this area is primarily concerned with the stages leading to participation; the decisions taken and processes through which adults go when considering whether or not to embark upon a university course.
The literature presents ‘barriers’ as obstacles which influence whether a non-traditional student makes the decision to participate in HE. Cross (1981) researched the area of decision-making and created the influential ‘chain of response’ model (see Figure: 1 below).

![Chain of Response Model](image)

**Figure 1: Chain of Response Model (Cross, 1981. p124)**

Cross (1981) puts forward six stages labelled A to F that need to be navigated by the participant before they feel ready to participate (G) in HE:

*Stage A –* Self-evaluation of ability and confidence. If the participant feels secure in both these areas they are likely to move to next stage.

*Stage B –* Attitudes about education. Attitudes come from past educational experiences and, indirectly, from attitudes of family and peers. Participants are more likely to proceed to the next stage if they have experienced positive educational experiences.

*Stage C –* Importance of goals and expectations that participation will meet goals. As the model depicts, this stage flows in two directions. Low expectations may impact upon self-
esteem and attitudes resulting in non-participation whereas the adult who has high expectations and wants to achieve is more likely to consider participation.

Stage D – Life transitions. Gradual or dramatic changes in life such as bereavement or divorce may trigger hidden desires for education.

Stage E – Opportunities and Barriers. At this point the model suggests that decision to participate depends on many personal factors in the individual’s life. One factor could be childcare responsibilities and it is the way that the individual chooses to deal with this potential barrier that influences their decision to participate. For some individuals this commitment may feel insurmountable; for another it may be viewed as doable.

Stage F- Information. Receiving accurate information is essential, if not critical if a motivated learner is to become linked to the appropriate opportunities and overcome potential barriers.

A limitation to this model, as Cross (1981) herself points out, is that she has ‘overemphasised the linearity of decision making in order to illustrate the cumulative nature of the forces for and against participation’ (1981, p.129). It could also be argued that the model does not take into account that all of these stages continue to exist beyond participation.

Drawing upon authors such as Cross (1981) and McGivney (1993), Fuller et al. (2008) suggest that the most commonly reported barriers are: situational (for example financial cost, time, lack of childcare, location and the factors that are relevant to an individual’s circumstance); institutional (for example, timetabling, mode of attendance) and
dispositional (for example individual attitudes to learning – which often relates to previous educational experiences and personal motivation).

The research above considers the barriers that exist prior to the decision to participate; it is therefore narrow in its focus. This issue is discussed further by authors such as Deggs (2011), Burton, Golding-Lloyd and Griffiths (2011) and Gorard et al. (2006) who argue that there is a weakness in the barrier evidence as to how the barriers are perceived by the participant and how they may continue to exist throughout the students engagement with HE.

Therefore, research needs to look at initial participation and beyond in order to gain a greater understanding of how barriers manifest and affect the life of the adult student (Deggs, 2011; Burton, Golding-Lloyd and Griffiths, 2011). What is required is an exploration into the specificities and the commonalities of the barriers to learning.

An enhanced understanding of the personal, familial, social and institutional pressures that impact upon adult learners as they engage with higher education has the potential to assist institutions in developing and transforming the initiatives and programmes that are currently in place that aim to embrace diverse groups of students and provide environments for growth and development (Jarvis, 2011). It is only through this improved understanding, Deggs (2011) argues, that institutions will be able to offer support services that will assist adult learners in becoming successful learners.

**Barriers confronted by mature students**

Evidence suggests that family and early schooling are two of the biggest determinants of an individual’s educational trajectory and can have continuing and even permanent effects on an adult’s participation in education (Bourdieu, 1990; Gorard and Rees, 2002; Gorard et al., 2007; Waller, Bovill and Pitt, 2011).
In addition, there is an extant body of research that highlights the substantial challenges faced by mature students as they enter and participate in HE. Ball, et al. found that for mature students ‘being a student meant something entirely different from the conceptions and experiences of the younger students’ (2002, p 10). This point is reflected throughout much of the adult education research literature where it is acknowledged that many mature students may have differing and multiple personal world commitments in contrast to their ‘traditional’ peers; all of which can make participation in HE complex and often difficult (Donaldson et al., 2000; Tett, 2004; Chapman, Parmar and Trotter, 2007).

It is acknowledged that for many adult students these factors individually or combined make participation in HE extremely complex and difficult, resulting in individual states of conflict or vulnerability as they attempt to manage the transitions that accompany participation and engagement (O'Donnell and Tobbell, 2007).

The following seeks to offer an overview of the many commonly researched ‘challenges’ that adult learners have to negotiate throughout their learning trajectories. This is by no means an exhaustive list of the literature but it does illustrate how adult learners are viewed and placed within the scholarly literature.

**Parents and early education**

The effects of early-life determinants are frequently acknowledged within adult participation literature (Edwards, 1993; Gorard, et al., 2007). It is commonly reported that a parent’s social class, their expectations for their children and indeed their own experiences of education impact upon a child’s early educational attainment (see Feinstein, Duckworth and Sabates, 2004; Blanden and Gregg, 2004; Vignoles and Crawford, 2010).
By extension, these key factors continue to influence an individual’s educational performance in secondary education and beyond (Stuart, 2005)

Disadvantaged social class background is habitually associated with inadequate and often negative schooling. Gorard and Rees (2002) explain that social class not only interacts with failure in compulsory education but it can also directly affect the chances of an individual carrying on with further education. Plummer (2000) also argues that social class and the inherent financial implications that typically accompany it are responsible for hindering many individuals’ educational progression; family pressures, such as the need to take on caring roles, or needing to become financially independent have the potential to hinder an individual and prevent them from realising their educational potential.

Research into participation by Bowl (2001) highlighted a strong correlation between parental attitudes and an individual’s academic achievement. Bowl noted that the individuals in her study who came from working class, ethnic minority backgrounds felt they had been restricted or hampered throughout their education by their parents’ ‘outsider status’. Bowl’s analysis revealed that parents’ negativity towards the school environment and their own lack of educational achievement meant that they were unable to offer constructive educational help and guidance to their children. In a similar vein, a study by Brooker (2003) concluded that variances in children’s educational experiences were resultant of their home communities and in particular, their parents’ own concepts of childhood and their theories and beliefs regarding knowledge and instruction.

The above studies focus on individuals from working class communities, and share a common conclusion that the cultural values and the social class of a parent can significantly affect an individual’s educational attainment. What is being described is not simply based on wealth, it is also to do with the degree to which a parent is able to navigate
and understand the education system and the degree to which they can pass on through
generations the social skills, characteristics and behaviours that will allow an individual to
find their own way through an education system that holds middle class values. It is to do
with a parent understanding and relaying to their off-spring the codes and meaning of
education which would allow them to be confident, self assured and even assertive within
the educational environment; in other words giving their children the skills to ‘play the
game’ (Crozier et al., 2008).

This corresponds with cultural capital thesis (Bourdieu, 1973, 1990) which offers a social
explanation for the differences in educational aspirations. According to Bourdieu, cultural
capital is defined as the characteristics, values or orientations that are acquired from
parents and early schooling; a bank, of cultural qualities and attributes, that may be utilised
within the education system to elicit a positive educational experience. Bourdieu
(1973,1990; Bourdieu and Passeron, 2000) suggest that in contrast to working class
children, their middle class counterparts enter education already in possession of cultural
attributes that have been handed down to them from their parents. They know how to sit,
how to speak and behave within the schooling environment; they are also taught the
importance of success. All of these attributes place them in a more advantageous position
than their working class peers. Furthermore, the authors posit there is a snowball effect to
cultural capital in that it accumulates as the individual proceeds through the different levels
of education; thus, at the end of compulsory education the individual is expectant and
primed for continuing education.

It has been established that the characteristics, values, occupation and class of parents are a
key determinant in an individual’s compulsory education which, in turn, directly affects
and shapes an individual’s higher education experience (Gorard, 2007; Crossan, Field,
Gallacher and Merrill, 2003).
Effects of early-life determinants

Many authors hold unfavourable prior educational experiences accountable for a negative sense of self in the individual and feeling of almost being an imposter in the HE environment. Whilst these states or feelings are commonly associated with working class students they are also directly associated with adult students (see Waller, Bovill and Pitt, 2011; Lehmann 2009a, 2009b; Reay, 2005). Ramsay (2004) suggests that lack of previous educational success becomes a challenge to many adult students; the author suggests that early-life failures become a facet of their personal identity. They feel that their personal lack of ability is responsible for their social and economic circumstances, rather than recognising that their circumstances are, in fact, socially constructed.

Not fitting in

Bamber and Tett suggest that negative early education experiences left their participants with a feeling that HE was ‘not for them’ (2000, p.67). The issue was described as a crisis of entitlement which was derived from internal and external factors. Deeply embedded cultural values and orientations were seen to have a significant effect upon the students. In the author’s own words “Deep-rooted feelings can therefore set up a significant psychological barrier to a student engaging fully and openly with a course in HE” (2000, p.67). A subsequent study by Waller, Bovill and Pitt (2011) also discusses the concept of entitlement and how it is constrained and structured by class position. This study also concluded that due to the lack of expectation in both parents and their early schooling, HE was deemed by many to be something that was outside of their sphere; as a result, many of the individuals who did participate felt that they were ‘frauds’ or ‘imposters’ in the HE world even though they were successfully completing the programme.
Evidence also suggests that students who feel that they do not fit in are in danger of experiencing isolation which may affect confidence and, ultimately, completion of their course (Gorard et al., 2007). Factors commonly associated with adult learners such as personal priorities and financial challenges have the potential impact upon the amount of time that the student has to spend with their peers and in the physical environment of the institution. Studies suggest that factors such as these can result in individuals feeling disconnected and on the periphery of their cohort (Kember, Hong and Ho, 2008; Kember, Lee and Li, 2001). For the mature students in Redmond’s study in 2003, lack of time and finances hindered any possible social interactions with peers; not only this, the findings also suggested that detachment from the social side of university life left many of the mature students unable to cultivate a sense of belonging, often feeling conspicuous in the social areas around the campus.

**Choice of HEI**

A number of studies have also indicated that intrinsic factors such as feelings of ‘belonging’ or ‘fitting in’ not only act as a challenge to individuals, they consistently affect an individual’s choice of university (see for example, Reay, 2002; Forsyth and Furlong 2003; Reay, Ball and David, 2005) (These studies are concerned with non-traditional students as a whole and are not specific to older students). Conclusions drawn from these studies indicate that an individual tends to select those universities where they feel they will be accepted and which already embrace individuals similar to themselves in terms of class, age, race gender and so on (Tett, 2004, Chapman, Parmar and Trotter 2007).

Whilst much of the literature emphasises the interplay between internal factors and institutional choice, external factors can also play a hand in influencing an individual’s selection of HEI. Research by Johnson (2003), Tett (2004) and Morgan-Klein (2000) argue that institutions limit personal choice. The authors suggest that there is a growing differentiation between the types of universities that encourage and accept non-traditional
students, with the more elite establishments recruiting students who fall into the ‘traditional’ student category. The authors assert that students who have not met the ‘gold standard’ of traditional school-leaver qualifications are often seen as a potential threat to academic standards and are thought to require more resources because of their perceived needs (Reay, 2002). It could be argued that what the authors above refer to is an example of HEIs succumbing to the negative discourse about such groups. Therefore, even though non-traditional students and more specifically, older students make up a significant proportion of the HE sector, they are not evenly distributed across it and are more likely to be found in less prestigious institutions (Mercer, 2003).

Adult life challenges which are discussed further in the next section also influence choices of HEIs. Literature that has explored older learners’ selection or choice of HEI’s (see Darab, 2004; O’Donnell and Tobbell, 2007) suggests that situational factors such as personal responsibilities and commitments heavily influence their selection process. As Lazarte, Elliot and Brna (2009, p.106) state ‘Decisions about what, where and when to study, and geographical, financial and time-related constraints can become primary considerations for those who have other major commitments’. Conclusions drawn from these studies indicate that for adult students, ease of access between their homes and the institution influences individual choice of HEI. Older students who have often gained an array of adult responsibilities and commitments felt that they could not sustain their previous obligations if they chose establishments outside their locale.

The above has provided an overview of the influence that families and early schooling have on an individual’s learning trajectory. It is acknowledged within the literature reviewed that such challenges manifest themselves from very early on in an individual’s life. Yet rather than simply disappearing, they form an integral part of a person’s identity which continues to exist throughout their learning trajectory.
Adult life challenges

The transition to higher education is alleged to be a problematic process for many students and, as such, is a commonly discussed area in academic literature. Unsurprisingly, O’Donnell and Tobell (2007) insist there has been significantly less focus on the transitions of adult students. The research that has focused on transitions for non-traditional students suggests that it is likely to be a fraught process, characterised by uncertainty and vulnerability (Gorard et al., 2007, O’Donnell and Tobell, 2007).

As Bowl (2001, p.143) astutely states, “mature students’ family lives and concerns are not merely the background against which their educational careers develop, but are integral to their experience of higher education study”. Edwards (1993) and Gouthro (2005) also discuss family and education and explain that both areas demand an extraordinary amount of physical and emotional attention from the adult student. It is this increased expenditure of personal time, effort and organisation that leads many adult students to withdraw from their studies or simply to decide not to study at all (Reay, 2003).

Literature in this area suggests that some of the challenges are gender specific. For example, balancing study and home commitments were reported as particularly difficult for women students as they were inherently more accountable for the family responsibilities (Darab, 2004; Edwards, 1998). In support Morgan-Klein and Osbourne (2007, p.109) suggest that there is an extensive array of literature addressing the challenges that women students experience but very little research into the ‘familial issues faced by men’. This lack of literature, however, should not be seen as an indicator that male students are immune to the challenges of juggling home life and study, it may simply be that the metaphoric ‘juggling balls’ are different. Edwards (1993) in a feminist interpretation, explains that men are also associated with what she describes as the private sphere, but their involvement is more transitory as they move between this sphere and the public sphere where they are more commonly positioned. This Edwards argues lies in contrast to the position of women, where the home and family has traditionally been seen by society
as their realm. Further, it appears that little has changed in contemporary society, particularly for working class women. More current research from Reay (2003, p.306) suggests that “women are clearly caught up in contemporary processes of individualisation”: this can be seen by women entering the workplace and participating in HE. However, she continues, that such processes are fraught with conflict as they attempt to reconcile their search for a sense of ‘self’ with their family commitments.

Evidence suggests ‘time’ or, more specifically, lack of time, acts as a significant challenge to adult learners, and their considerable time constraints are derived mostly from the pressures of family responsibilities and studying (Gorard et al., 2007; Blair, Cline and Wallis, 2010). Abroms and Goldscheider (2002) suggest that participation in education for those with dependants and or partners was particularly difficult and even more so if they were female. Both types of relationship were perceived to reduce learning time.

**Caring for children**

Children and the associated care-giving responsibilities are recognised as a key mediator of mature students’ experiences of education; yet even though caring commitments are framed within the literature as major challenges to adult learners, Alsop, Gonzalez-Arnal and Kilkey (2008, p.623) assert that “the policy lens on care is narrow and economistic”.

Similarly Jarvis (2011) points to the economic thrust of policy discourse when he suggests programmes which aim to encourage parents back into education emphasise the vocational aspects of learning but largely ignore the problems and challenges that many students with caring responsibilities face as they engage with HE. From this it could be understood that there is a limited understanding of the risks and personal cost of participation for those students with care-giving responsibilities. What needs to be acknowledged in policy and explored through research is how such costs are experienced by the individual and what impact they have on their wellbeing.
As Alsop, Gonzalez-Arnal and Kilkey (2008) argue, there is a need for exploration into the lived experiences of student parents or carers and how their dependants influence their role as a student. Conversely, other authors observe the lack of exploration and understanding of the ways in which a parent’s participation can impact upon the home and their dependants (Feinstein, Duckworth and Sabates, 2008; Feinstein, Duckworth and Sabates, 2004; Wainright and Marendet, 2010). These observations suggest that there needs to be a greater understanding of the effect of family lives on education and vice versa. This enhanced understanding would bridge the gap between what policy rhetoric perceives as the challenges of caring responsibilities and the actual lived reality of participation and engagement for students with caring responsibilities. If social mobility is indeed a serious aim for governments then they need to pay more attention to the factors that impinge upon a parent’s access and retention in HE (Wainright and Marendet, 2010).

The limited literature that has focused on the ‘lived realities’ of adult students with caring responsibilities has highlighted the ‘risks’ that are involved in making the transition to HE; what is more it is working class women and single mothers in particular that were seen to be more at risk of feeling the pressures and tensions of trying to be all things to all people (Alsop, Gonzalez-Arnal and Kilkey, 2008, Reay, 2003, 2005; Archer, Hutchings and Ross, 2003).

The reasons behind the increased sense of pressure in working class women cannot be attributed to one factor alone. However, Coser and Coser (1974 cited in Edwards 1993) note that the constant loyalty that is commanded from the ‘greedy institution’ of the family meant that women felt guilty if they did anything less than completely fulfil their caring roles. More disturbing than this the Cosers suggest that beyond the physical actions associated with the individual’s roles, guilt could be evoked by not focusing one’s full mental attention to the institution. More recently Reay (2003) offers another clear perspective, although she comes at it from an economic viewpoint. She posits that
multiple caring and domestic tasks are seen as the lot and sole responsibility of the working class women, but in middle class families, economic capital lessens the load for woman and mothers as it allows for what Reay refers to as ‘the everything’ such as childcare and housework to become delegated to cleaners, nannies and child-minders.

One would anticipate that after the initial transition period into HE, the challenges faced by many mature students might become easier. For example, the pressures of finding adequate childcare provision to meet the demands of a HE timetable would probably be reduced as the student became fixed in their learning. Yet a recent study by Blair, Cline and Wallis (2010) highlighted that this was not the case. Findings from their study suggest the permanent nature of personal world responsibilities. Within this study it was suggested that feelings of guilt and anxiety associated with the perceived neglect of family responsibilities remained with many, and became worse for some participants as they engaged with their learning. All of the individuals in Blair, Cline and Wallis’ 2010 study reported feeling a sense of conflict between their personal and student roles and described feeling as though they were neglecting their families which led to a state of anxiety; many also reported feeling as though they did not have sufficient time to perform well in either their personal or student worlds. The findings from the study support the notion that the challenges that are often associated with mature students are not merely due to physical practicalities but they run far deeper and are also associated with embedded feelings, standards and expectations that are socially constructed (Edwards, 1993). These feelings are part of the individual’s identity, part of their make-up and they do not simply disappear.

As previously noted, the feelings of guilt and anxiety that Blair, Cline and Wallis (2010) refer to are certainly not uncommon in mature students and are often heightened or evoked as they attempt to fulfil the responsible role of parent/carer and do justice to the student role at the same time (Coser and Coser,1974 cited in Edwards 1993). For many adult carer
students the inimitable cost and pressure of becoming a student means that they physically
and mentally have to negotiate and balance caring roles and time demands in both their
private and public worlds on a daily basis. This sense of conflict, according to McGivney
(2003), is one of the biggest problems that adult learners are likely to experience.
Bamber and Tett (2000) noted that mature female students in particular were more likely
than male students to describe how they constantly felt as though they were juggling home
and academic life. Edwards’ (1993) study remarks on the pressure felt by women to
achieve success in both their private and personal spheres. She notes that the qualities
which are required and associated with competent performance in one sphere could be seen
as detrimental and inappropriate to the other sphere. To elucidate the point Edwards draws
on the work of Robinson (1980) who proposes that higher education values qualities such
as all-encompassing objective commitment which is given freely and without question
from the traditional student who is predominantly white and middle class. Yet there is little
place for objectivity in the family sphere. Instead attachment and subjectivity are required
whereas objectivity could be construed as selfishness, detachment, or even aloofness. In a
similar way, total commitment to the student role is not an option for those students with
family responsibilities. In effect what is being suggested here is that those women, who
attempt to fulfil the role of student as commanded by the institution, stand potentially to
fail or be accused of being selfish in their personal world. It is the constant pressure of
having successfully to deal with the multiple roles associated with being both a parent and
a student that often leaves adult students in a state of conflict in both worlds.

It is little wonder that older students may perceive the risks as outweighing the benefits of
HE. For some this means never attempting to participate within education and for the ones
who do decide to engage with education, their journeys are potentially fraught - even
lonely. Reay (2002, 2003) carried out research into the risks and costs involved with the
transition to HE and, in a similar vein, indicated that the gargantuan efforts to return to
education are for many students largely unrewarded. Lack of adequate support and resources meant that almost half of the participants in her study were unable to manage the transition to HE, despite being dedicated to learning.

It is argued that these perpetual feelings of angst and conflict and the substantive amount of personal and academic effort adult students, particularly females, have to expend in order to do justice to their families and the institution, leave the individuals feeling mentally and physically spent. From the literature it appears that there is a palpable pressure for women in particular to achieve success in the demanding dimensions of home and university. ‘Cultural mandates’ (Coser and Coser, 1974 cited in Edwards, 1993, p.63) insist upon full commitment from women to their families even when they are engaging in other pursuits (Alsop, Gonzalez-Arnal and Kilkey, 2008; Reay, 2005). In a similar way Bamber and Tett (2000) and more recently Blair, Cline and Wallis (2010) refer to what could be termed as ‘institutional mandates’ that demand the same level of commitment from mature students with responsibilities. Although it is difficult, albeit not impossible, to change cultural and socially constructed attitudes it may be somewhat easier to change institutional attitudes. Not simply easier but morally correct, if indeed, the government rhetoric of fair access for all is to be believed.

**Multiple roles**

The above highlights the competitive, conflicting and stressful nature of being a student with parental responsibilities. While many of these studies focus on the risks and costs of engaging with education from the perspective of women with children (Edwards, 1993; Bamber and Tett, 2000; Alsop, Gonzalez-Arnal, and Kilkey, 2008), it is acknowledged that mature female students who do not have dependants and male mature students also experience the stress and conflict of maintaining personal world roles with student world roles.
For many mature students financial responsibilities and extended family responsibilities are seen to impinge upon their time. Younger students may also have financial responsibilities but it is more likely that individuals further along the lifespan will have more established responsibilities such as having a mortgage to maintain or caring for elderly parents or grandchildren (Mercer and Saunders, 2004).

**Spouse/partner relationships**

It has been established that the individual costs to a student with caring responsibilities are indeed high. Archer and Leathwood (2003) assert that there is often a further price to pay for those students with partners; that is the potential of serious cracks, tensions and divides between the student and their partner. Evidence suggests the effects and outcomes of attempting to balance multiple personal responsibilities with student responsibilities can evoke a sense of crisis which can be detrimental to close relationships (Brine and Waller, 2004; Waller, Bovill and Pitt, 2011). As Norton et al. (1998, p.77) state ‘Crisis points in any relationship can have the effect of either drawing a couple closer together or driving them apart’.

Choosing to participate and engage with HE can bring about significant changes to a marriage or partnership. Waller, Bovill and Pitt (2011) reported that participants discussed at length how their relationships had altered since they had become students. The changes however, were not always positive in nature and, for some, resulted in separation. The participants in Waller, Bovill and Pitt’s study explained how the overarching experience of participating in education resulted in them scrutinising their relationships and identifying negative and detrimental aspects.
As stated above much of the literature that focuses on the impact of education on spouses and partners addresses the problems faced by female students (Edwards, 1993; Waller, Bovill and Pitt, 2011). In 1998 Lin et al. drew attention to the ‘relatively little research on the problems faced by adult men in long-term relationships who return to full-time study’ (1998. p.76); this could be because men are not expected to put as much emotional energy into relationships as women. This may be, as Edwards (1993, p.67) explains, that women are not just positioned by society as responsible for their children ‘they are often regarded as responsible for the conduct and success of their relationships with men’. The above highlights the tension and an overlap between private and public world roles, however, the literature discussed also indicates that these tensions are potentially more harmful and difficult for women thus it can be understood that such tensions are gender specific.

Having reviewed the literature, it appears that little has changed in this respect. The limited studies that have addressed this from a male perspective suggest that males receive more support from their female partners generally, even if they had been breadwinners before going to university (Maynard and Pearsall, 1994). A later study by Askham (2008) noted that female partners were reported as being enthusiastic and supportive of their male partner’s academic pursuits. Participants described their wives in this case as ‘sounding boards’ and ‘sources of information’. It could be suggested from these studies that female partners are very much involved, if not in a physical way, then in an emotional way, in their male partner’s pursuits.

In striking contrast to the findings above, O’Shea and Stone (2011) concluded that for the majority of women students living with male partners, there was limited involvement from the man. Yet even though there was little practical support the women perceived the lack of involvement as being ‘supportive’. As O’Shea and Stone note, “the women living with a male partner received little support from him in a practical sense. Nevertheless, it appeared
that as long as a woman’s partner did not actively object or interfere with her studies she described him as supportive” (2011, p.282).

Evidence suggests that if the female in a relationship becomes a student they are more likely to experience personal problems and breakups. Research suggests that male partners were less likely to cope with the potential changes to the woman’s identity (Wainwright and Marendet, 2012). This may be down to the male partner viewing any type of change as a threat to the female’s traditional role of housewife, partner and mother.

Edwards (1993) also maintains that male partners are more at risk of feeling threatened by their partners’ choice to return to education. Based upon her participant’s accounts the author pinpointed what she describes as three perceived threats that might cause conflict within partner relationships:

**Violating the home as separate and private:** here Edwards (1993) describes how students’ partners viewed their homes as a separate sphere. Bringing education home on a physical and mental level was seen to violate the private world.

**Lack of time for attention:** the author describes how studying is a pursuit that takes up a significant portion of an individual’s time that ordinarily would have been used to service their partners both domestically and emotionally.

**Women’s success and independence:** Edwards found that partners were threatened by the women achieving educational success. She attributed this to the fact that partners were concerned that the women could gain as much or greater knowledge than them and/or become financially independent.
Although Edwards 1993 study could be considered dated, the three main threats she describes resonate through more current literature that addresses relationship conflict. For example, in their research Brine and Waller (2004) concluded that the women’s desire to change themselves posed a threat to family and friends. The authors continued that this becomes yet another barrier for the student to negotiate, one that may result in tensions or even the possible loss of existing relationships.

It could be argued that Edwards (1993) and Brine and Waller (2004) are describing learning as a potentially metamorphic experience for individuals. As students become more involved in developing their student identity they begin to examine and even change their fundamental assumptions and views; for many this impacts upon their social and class identity (Bamber and Tett, 2000; Brine and Waller, 2004).

Waller, Bovill and Pitt (2011) argue that the noticeable changes in learner and class identity may be perceived by family and friends as getting ideas above one’s station or ‘airs and graces’ (Tett, 2004). Further studies point out that this may not simply be an opinion of friends and family; indeed the students may themselves feel ‘superior’ (Baxter and Britton, 2001). However ‘superior’ is a somewhat harsh adjective. Developing a different identity, doing something for oneself and gaining new knowledge is an accomplishment. Therefore, it may be that the perceived loftiness is simply pride in one’s own achievements. However, irrespective of whether it is superiority or pride in one’s achievements or the outcome of both these interpretations can potentially harm and even destroy longstanding relationships. As the literature suggests, partners may become uncomfortable, negative and ultimately withdrawn from the ‘student’ partner. In turn, this leaves the student without the channel of support that one would expect from close relationships, leaving them isolated and unable to talk about the changes and challenges that they face as they participate in education (Brine and Waller, 2004).
‘Barriers’ or ‘challenges’

Much of the literature reviewed above could be accused of painting a less than positive image of adult learners’ experiences. Children, spouses/partners and the commitments that ensue are viewed as barriers that hamper and distract students from being fully committed to their studies (Vaccaro and Lovell, 2010). What appears to be neglected in the literature is that the multiple and sometimes major commitments that mature students carry with them to HE are not necessarily ‘barriers’ to the individuals. In many circumstances personal world responsibilities serve to motivate and prepare the adult student for HE. For example Reay, Ball and David (2003) illustrate how children inherently described as barriers to learning were, for the mature students in their research, actually motivators for learning; the authors state ‘…parents saw themselves as passing on their education to their children in a variety of ways. In particular, they saw themselves as role models for their children’ (Reay, Ball and David, 2003, p.11). This was also true of the findings in Vaccaro and Lovells (2010) study in which they noted that family became the participants’ inspiration to remain studying irrespective of the many obstacles they had to face. The authors concluded that ‘Earning a degree and, more importantly, family pride were strong motivators to invest in education’ (2010, p.168). Gouthro (2005) also offered a refreshing contrast to the literature that views family and dependants as a one sided selfish environment. Rather than devaluing home connections the scholar positioned the home as a positive environment in which the participant felt a sense of community, solidarity and shelter.

In a similar way those with care giving and employment responsibilities are often reported as struggling with lack of time and having to constantly juggle their many commitments. However, in contrast to this view there is a body of research that has acknowledged that the multiple roles that many mature students have to contend with can and do prepare and provide them with the tools for success and overall sense of personal well-being (Carney-Crompton and Tan, 2002). Whilst personal world responsibilities have the potential to
make life very difficult for adult students, a contrasting view is that multi-tasking and time-management often comes as second nature to such individuals. For example, Trueman and Hartley (1996) developed a self-report scale for time management to use with students. They concluded that students who were aged 25 or over at the time of their entry into university made more use of time-management strategies than the traditional students and even those students classed as ‘adult’ but aged between 21 and 24 years. Sewell (2000) also found that the myriad of commitments that are usually associated with many adult students and described in terms of barriers can actually promote enhanced time management skills in the individual. Such research is a positive and welcome change to much of the negative adult learning discourse. It stands in opposition to much of the literature which seems to position adult learners as for the most part hindered by caregiving responsibilities, vulnerable, problematic and deficient in terms of the necessary skills needed for effective studying.

Thus one can interpret from drawing together the contradictory elements of the literature that the concept of barriers is two dimensional. The negative dimensions of barriers may be stressful during the early transitions to HE; yet the motivational aspects and the bank of life skills and knowledge the adult learner inherits from their personal world challenges and responsibilities also serve to drive them forward and potentially assist them in their learning journey. I suggest that it is this point that needs to be acknowledged to a far greater degree in adult learning discourse.

Given these many challenges to participation and engagement with HE, one could ask the questions: ‘what is that drives an individual to participate when they have already have so many responsibilities to fulfil?’ and more to the point, ‘is there any gain for their pain?’ The answer to these questions are clearly complex, however research literature does offer some insight into them.
Triggers or catalysts that drive an individual to participate

Studies that focus on this area put forward many reasons for adults returning to education. Personal factors such as depression, illness or changes in personal relationships are often positioned as drives to participate. Crossan et al. (2003) contribute other factors to the debate such as critical incidents and self-assessment of life and gender roles (also see Edwards, 1993). Baptista (2011) suggests that one of the reasons adults participate is for ‘escape purposes’. Thus, many of these theorists are suggesting that ‘crisis’ or ‘conflict’ are directly related to the need to change an aspect of one’s life.

If, as the literature suggests, returning to education has the potential to be life changing then as Mercer (2007, 2010) notes it is probable that this substantial life change will contain elements of conflict or crisis. However Mercer points out that the terms ‘crisis’ and ‘conflict’ should be treated with caution as they carry negative connotations. It can be argued from this, that the research that terms ‘conflict’ and ‘crisis’ as reasons for wanting to change are in some ways responsible for contributing to the negative aspects of change rather than considering the positive aspects of the process.

Csikszentmihalyi (1990) clarifies this point as he discusses the concept of ‘accepted’ and ‘discovered’ roles where an individual can either accept and follow the path that life dictates or actively choose to seek and set out along a new path. For example, the breakdown of a long-term relationship may be termed as a ‘life crisis’ and it may be ‘accepted’ but if it compels an individual into engaging with education a ‘discovered role’ then the negative or ‘crisis’ element of the break up becomes a positive ‘stimulus’ (see also Mercer and Saunders, 2004).
Any gain for the pain?

Evidence points to education as a metamorphic process. Research in the area considers how for many adult learners’ participation and engagement with HE brings about individual ‘change’ in terms of the self and identity (Quinn, 2003; McGivney, 2003; Mercer, 2010; Connolly, Rees and Furlong, 2008).

Drawing upon some of the findings from NIACE (2010), Aldridge and Tuckett suggest that learning is viewed by a substantial proportion of the population as ‘enjoyable for its own sake’ and, a pursuit that can ‘have a positive impact on your child’s chances at school’ (2010, p. 11). In their study of ‘later life’ learners Findsen, McCullough and McEwan (2011) found that a number of students reported that one of their motivations for engaging with learning was to ‘increase their level of social connectedness’ (p.538) that is, engaging with others to alleviate feelings of loneliness and helping others in the community.

Overall, the HE experience has been celebrated as a cathartic and liberating experience, especially for those individuals whose prior experiences of education and learning was for the main negative (Wainright and Marendet, 2010).

Transitions of any description can be potentially fraught with anxieties and tensions and it would be naive to simply present the research literature that reports the beneficial properties of change. Furthermore, as has already been pointed out, periods of conflict and crisis often lead to more favourable outcomes, such as personal development.

Yet as Mercer and Saunders (2004) perceptively note, within much of the literature there is not enough exploration into how such personal development occurs. Mercer and Saunders continue that the multi-dimensional process of change evolves from periods of conflict, imbalance, loss and gains and it by no means occurs in a ‘neat linear fashion’. What Mercer and Saunders (2004) highlight here is the almost one dimensional even cursory
approach to ‘change’ that is taken by many of the research studies. To gain an accurate understanding of the motivations and barriers to learning and the specific needs of adult learners we need to explore how the individual learner experiences and absorbs changes to the self and to their identity and how they negotiate their way through these constructs that are complicated, fragmented and often contradictory (Askham, 2008).

The more explorative literature in this area has identified that changes in self or identity are commonly accompanied by feelings of anguish and pressure. The previously discussed ‘pushes’ and ‘pulls’ that can occur from trying to juggle differing sets of responsibilities that is home and university, have the potential to threaten or confuse the existing and new identities of adult learners. In their study Blair Cline and Wallis described how personal worlds were seen to prevent the female adult students from their study from being ‘fully able to embrace the identity of ‘student’ (2010, p140); furthermore the participants attributed their lack of control over their learning to the competing factors in their lives.

Similarly Brine and Waller (2004) describe the conflict experienced by many female adult students. Their study suggests that mature students with children perceive their roles as student and mother to be in conflict with each other. The changes that accompanied the adoption of a new student identity left participants often feeling confused and in direct opposition to their roles as mother. The participants were also keen to discuss the problematic nature of combining a new student identity with their existing personal world identities and the changes to their home lives that ensued.

For the women in the aforementioned studies the negative aspects that can accompany change appear to be connected to the home world. In contrast to this, other evidence suggests that male adult students also experience conflict during transitions, but that the anguish is mostly derived from societal attitudes. Male non-traditional students have to
contend with and attempt to overcome masculine working class culture, which as Marks 
(2000) posits, rejects education as boring and effeminate - not real work. The author 
accuses and holds responsible school experience and culture for propagating these deeply 
seated and often negative values within working class masculinity.

Thus, the anxiety and conflict experienced be male mature students as changes occur have 
been related to their perceptions of their class and male identities being challenged. 
Research by Archer and Leathwood (2003) focused on male non-participants and 
participants in HE. Findings suggest that HE was often associated with negative and 
undesirable images of masculinity. Male students in the study felt that they were often 
perceived as socially inadequate individuals because they enjoyed learning. The study also 
highlighted that HE culture was seen as predominantly middle class and incompatible with 
working class male identities. For those males who were participating they felt that they 
had to protect their identities from being changed by the HE environment.

It is clear that the participants in the studies above did not simply take on ‘change’ (Archer 
and Leathwood, 2003), neither did they reject it. For example many of the male students in 
Archer and Leathwood’s (2003) study continued to participate despite the perceived threat 
to their male and class identity. Blair Cline and Wallis (2010) describe how, in spite of the 
difficulties associated with transitions, participants continued with and personally benefited 
from the changes to self and identity. Similarly Brine and Waller’s study focused on eight 
participants and commented that all ‘bought in to the aspirant discourse and are negotiating 
the risks associated with it’ (2004, p.110). Thus, suggesting that ‘change’ carries both 
negative and positive outcomes. Crisis and conflict, it seems, are essential parts of a 
transition process. Mercer goes as far as to say crisis ‘is an essential prerequisite if change 
is to take place, and therefore necessary for development to proceed’ (2003, p.82).
For those individuals who negotiate the risks and conflict associated with change, learning has been described as a process that promotes self-development, increased confidence and empowerment (Brine and Waller, 2004). Unlike so many of the other studies that have researched this area O’Shea and Stone (2011) explored the personal realities of returning to university for participants who were aged 30 years and above. Findings suggest that participants experienced considerable positive changes to self-esteem and confidence in spite of substantial financial, emotional and temporal changes that came from balancing home and university life. In conclusion, O’Shea and Stone (2011) suggest that as a process education not only provides knowledge; it is a means of recovering one’s former self or indeed creating a new sense of self or identity.

Blair Cline and Wallis (2010) posit that all of the participants in their study described embarking on a degree course as a major life transition, fraught with conflict. However, the outcomes of such change were positive as all of the participants reported that they felt valuable and useful, able to do things that they initially felt were beyond them. Participants also reported feeling as though they were doing something for themselves. This in itself promoted feelings of self-governance in the individuals, something that they felt they had lost sight of before they engaged with learning. Thus, education can be viewed as a means to take control or even regain a sense of control and command of their destinies.

The evidence reviewed suggests that the self-changes discussed in terms of increased self-confidence, empowerment and having a greater sense of belief in one’s own performance define or change the way that mature students view themselves and present themselves to those in the academic world and beyond. Findings from Mercer and Saunders’ (2004) study highlighted that increased self-confidence meant that participants were able to speak to ‘professional college people’ and speak in situations in which they would previously
have felt intimidated or unworthy. Building upon this O’Shea and Stone (2011, p.281) also concluded that the inner self transformations resultant of engaging with HE gave participants a sense of ‘worthiness’. Participants in this study perceived that the increased feelings of self-worth and belief allowed them to feel as though they belonged or were worthy of being in the academic environment. Both of these studies correspond with Bourdieu and Passerson’s (2000) thesis of social and cultural capital. The participants in the above studies were no longer in deficit of the cultural attributes associated with middle class students. Changes to the self meant that they had the skill and confidence to deal with academics (Mercer and Saunders, 2004).

To conclude, it is without doubt that one can argue that engaging with education is transformative. However, the process of change is complex, evolving, and fluid. The conflicts and struggles associated with change are suggested within the literature as an integral part of the process (Mercer and Saunders, 2004), and are not necessarily a barrier.

**Thirty years and above – the ignored student demographic**

With the exception of a few studies for example, O’Shea and Stone (2011); Mercer and Saunders (2004); Blair, Cline and Wallis (2010); the literature referred to in this review either refers to adult or mature students without giving specific ages, or brackets mature students as being between the ages of 21 and 30 years. As previously ascertained there is a substantial body of literature that focuses on traditional students – aged 18-21 years - so overall the literature gives substantial weighting to the 18 to 30 year age group. Fuller and Patton (2006) attribute the excess in this area to the fixation by the previous Labour government to ensure that half of the population between the ages of 18 to 30 years experienced higher education by 2010. Yet even though the Labour government are no longer in office and, at the time of writing, we are currently two years past their 2010
target, it is apparent from researching current literature that the spotlight is still on the 18-30 year age range.

This focus on 18-30 year olds has culminated in little research exploring the personal and individual nature of participation further along the lifespan (Fuller et al., 2008), and the ways in which relational social processes such as family and wider social groups can impact upon initial decision making and moreover impact upon an individual’s continuation of education in HE.

It has been argued that the paucity in literature on the over 30s is not simply an oversight; it has been accused of signifying a hidden agenda in policy and research discourse (Mercer, 2003). Further to this, literature in this area has been described as isolating and discriminating against older students. As Taylor (2005) points out that the cultural, government and policy assumptions that students are largely middle class, 18-21 year olds in full time HE courses is nothing short of prejudice. It is this generalised view that serves to negate a substantial part of the student population.

There is another possible reason that higher education literature focuses on the 18-30 age bracket. Research indicates that the integration of older and younger students on HE programmes can be problematic as their teaching and learning requirements are different. It is probable then, that it would require thought, time and finance to satisfy the needs of both groups (Trotter and Cove, 2005). A more discerning observer might suggest that concentrating on 18-30s is taking the easiest option, playing it safe by pleasing the majority. If equal focus were given to older students then programmes of study would have to incorporate diversity and differentiation into their teaching and learning. This has been criticised by some writers for example Bishop-Clark and Lynch (1994) as being disruptive to what they describe as ‘normal’ classroom routine. In addition to this view Dogra et al.
(2004), noted that staff development in WP is weak. This, combined with limited understanding of the needs of adult learners, resulted in a lack of knowledge and uncertainty about what actually constituted ‘diversity’ or ‘differentiated’ teaching and how it should be delivered.

Hence the apparent gap in the literature has resulted in a failure to capture the diverse nature of this cohort. Furthermore the lack of exploration suggests there is still limited understanding of how students aged 30 years and above really ‘experience’ higher education. Consequently, the identities and varying responsibilities and priorities that accompany learners at this life-stage are being wrapped up within the research in a universal, ‘one size fits all’ fashion. Learners 30 years plus are left to negotiate an education system that is tailored largely for younger students. This issue has also been commented on by authors such as Chapman, Parmar and Trotter, (2007) and Pusser et al. (2007) who strongly position the need for undergraduate programmes that are flexible and fit in and around older students’ other commitments. If, as Fairchild (2003) suggests, HE institutions struggle to provide suitable services and support for adult learners then surely gaining a first-hand knowledge and understanding of how existing roles and relationships may impact upon an individual’s learning trajectory would prove to be immensely valuable to academics, practitioners and the institutions that are involved in WP and challenged by issues of retention.

A more flexible approach to programmes of learning would be both morally and economically beneficial: morally as it would address ‘fairness’ and ‘social mobility’ that the previous and current coalition government allegedly subscribe to: Economically because as Maringe (2006) proposes, an enhanced understanding of the reasons behind why applicants choose particular universities and courses of study is crucial to developing institutional positioning in an increasingly competitive HE environment. Within the current
highly marketised and competitive environment of HE (Soutar and Turner, 2002) it seems somewhat errant to neglect the significant, portion of students that are post 30 years.

It could be argued that to gain a greater knowledge and understanding of the social processes and stressors that may impact upon adult learners a qualitative approach is needed (Giancola, Grawitch and Borchert, 2009). More specifically there is a call for phenomenological research into the experiences of learners’ post 30 years whose accounts seem to have been largely overlooked. Lack of understanding of the intricacies of this group requires detailed ideographic analysis that acknowledges that the quintessential meaning of an experience will be and can only really be revealed through an individual’s dialogue and reflection (Rossman and Rallis, 2003; Giorgi, 1995). Informed by this, the current study will attempt to buck the trend by adopting a methodology which positions the voices of adult learners aged 30 years and above at the heart of the research.

Therefore the aim of this research is to capture and explore through a qualitative, more specifically through a phenomenological approach, the students’ lived experiences of engaging with HE. As Waller’s study demonstrated using this approach shows how ‘experiences are too complex, diverse, and individually situated to be meaningfully understood or accurately represented otherwise’ (2006, p.116). This study will seek individual perspectives from a group that are under-represented in the literature and explore how they as individuals understand and make meaning of the social relational processes, the lived experiences that impact upon their learning trajectory.
Chapter 4 - Methodology

Introduction

This chapter is divided into two parts. The first details my methodological position and offers a theoretical rationale for the approach I have chosen and why it is appropriate for the phenomena under investigation. The second part concentrates on the design of this study. Within this second section I describe how the participants were chosen and offer a detailed account of the data collection methods employed in the study and how they were utilised. The sequence of analysis is given here in as much detail as possible to help the reader understand how the final write-up emerged.

Part 1 - Methodological position

To retain the integrity of the phenomena that I was studying, I needed to adopt an approach that would allow me to immerse myself in the participants’ experiences in order to fully understand how they navigated their way to, and through, their learning journey. Therefore I decided that this research should be carried out using an interpretive approach thus allowing me to place the participants at the core of the research. In contrast to the positivist stance, which, as Atkins and Wallace point out is “Usually typified by a relatively objective style and approach, and searches for ‘facts’ which can be generalised” (2012, p.22), the interpretive stance recognises the benefit of depth rich rather than wide exploration in research terms (see for example, Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2007; Cousins, 2009).

The purpose of this research was to explore, describe and analyse the meaning of being a non-traditional learner currently participating in higher education to unravel the complex strands of the mental and social worlds that each learner inhabited. My aim was not to merely ask why they had entered education post - 30 years of age: I wanted to explore their
individual experiences, struggles, feelings and thoughts in order to gain a deeper understanding of the decision making and relational social processes that can motivate or de-motivate an individual as they engage in what can be described as a major experience in their life (Mercer and Saunders, 2004; Butoon, 2003; Mercer, 2007). However, it was not my intention to put this thesis forward as a ‘rational edifice’ (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2007) or a nomothetic account of individual and social behaviour; if this had been my intention I would have subscribed to the positivist school of thought. Instead, my intention was to present a study that was idiographic as it acknowledged the particular, the multifaceted manifestation of human behaviour (see Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2007, Smith, 1996, 1995; Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009; Osborn, 2002). I was conscious that I needed to adopt a qualitative approach to my research, employing a tradition that would allow me to focus upon the participants’ lived experiences. To this end I decided to use a phenomenological qualitative approach, phenomenology being the philosophical study of experience.

**Phenomenology**

Phenomenology can be defined as a humanistic research approach focusing on what it means to be human. It seeks to deal with human existence as we live it (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009). Human behaviour is viewed as being determined by subjective experience rather than by external objective forces (English and English, 1958). The phenomenological perspective is committed to the individual’s point of view, and their behaviour and actions are viewed as the outcome of their understanding and interpretation of their world (Giorgi, 1995).

Husserl (1927) is often regarded as the founder of phenomenology. He believed that reality is independent of context, a principle that was in tune with traditional science. In an attempt to make phenomenology a rigorous science Husserl believed that reality or real
meanings could be abstracted from the lived experiences (Lopez and Willis, 2004). He expressed the idea of radical autonomy whereby humans are free agents who are responsible for influencing their own culture and environment, rather than culture, society and environment influencing the individual (Cohen and Omery, 1994).

Husserl (1927) was concerned with questioning the established ‘taken for granted’ assumptions of life. He argued that as we engage and experience the world through everyday activities we have a tendency to take for granted the underlying essence of them; to be phenomenological we need to look beyond the activity, and engage with the ‘taken for granted’ assumptions of life. In order to do this Husserl put forward a ‘back to the things’ course of analysis, whereby we look beyond the minutiae and detail of everyday life to the very heart of the experiences. Husserl, initially established and emphasised the substance and value of focusing upon experience and perception, although as individuals this is not always an easy process. This is due to our partiality for meaning and order which can result in us fitting things into our pre-existing categorization system. To alleviate this predilection and develop a phenomenological attitude, one should focus on each and every particular thing in its own right.

This approach to research concentrates on identifying the core of the phenomenon through epoche. Epoche is an attempt to refrain from believing or second guessing that something is true before there is proof for it. Fundamental to this method in the context of research is the suspension of one’s own suppositions, holding to one side or bracketing one’s preconceptions in order to be receptive and reflective to the participant lived experiences (Drew, 1999). The Husserlian idea of transcendental phenomenology is often a contested, misunderstood process; the conflict arises from the idea that epoche demands that the researcher strips themselves of their own assumptions, schemas and attitudes derived from their own lived experiences. Husserl’s (1927) work was developed further by philosophers Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, and Sartre. They challenged the idea of being able to achieve
epoche, questioning whether it was possible to truly bracket off one’s preconceptions (Langdridge, 2007). Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, and Sartre viewed the individual as surrounded and immersed in a world of objects and relationships, language and culture, projects and concerns (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009). Central to these philosophers’ understanding is the belief that one makes meaning of the world, by actively engaging and reaching out to any or all of the above.

These divergent beliefs have caused a fissure within phenomenology; followers of Husserl subscribe to transcendental phenomenology whereby epoche is achievable. In contrast, existential phenomenologists who follow, for example, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty and Sartre believe that one should aim to achieve epoche, but at the same time, understand and acknowledge that it is not possible to bracket off all presuppositions. These differing schools of thought have led to two philosophical approaches; the first is descriptive (eidetic) phenomenology. Proponents of this approach believe that the description of things as they appear is a sufficient method. In contrast there are those who subscribe to interpretive (hermeneutic) phenomenology, advocates of which believe there is a need to employ specific methods of interpretation (Langdridge, 2007).

**Hermeneutic Phenomenology**

The dissatisfaction with eidetic phenomenology led to an approach that was more interpretative, more psychological. Heidegger (1927) a student of Husserl, adapted and built upon the philosopher’s work and proposed that one’s existence should be viewed through an historical and cultural context and therefore context was important. Heidegger believed that all understanding involved interpretation, to simply describe was not enough. As Langdridge (2007) explains, Heidegger was still espousing a phenomenological method but for him the emphasis was on interpreting the meaning of the phenomena from a position that was grounded in the things themselves, rather than focusing merely upon the
essence of the phenomena. Langdridge (2007) termed this development as the birth of the hermeneutic revolution in phenomenology.

Hermeneutics is a method of bringing forth and exposing what is generally hidden away in human experience and relations. Importance is placed upon the individual’s narrative and what is being implied about their everyday lived experiences (Lopez and Willis, 2004). Therefore, hermeneutics is a method that goes beyond description to explore the entrenched meanings of an individual’s life world.

Heidegger’s premise was that the relationship of the individual to their life world should be the ultimate focus of any phenomenological research enquiry. Life world according to Heidegger was the notion that individuals’ realities are continually influenced by the world in which they live, thus contrasting Husserl’s radical autonomy theory. The idea that individuals are influenced by their life world, was developed further by Heidegger and became the important concept that he termed ‘Dasein’ translated as ‘being in the world’ to express and emphasize that an individual is unable to distance themselves from the world; lived time and engagement are central to the idea of ‘Dasein’ (Smith, Flower and Larkin, 2009).

In accordance with Husserl, Heidegger understood phenomenology as being concerned with the ‘taken for granted’ or the essence of the phenomena or thing. However, in addition to Husserl’s understanding of phenomenology, Heidegger believed that the exterior manifestation of the phenomena or thing was of equal importance, as both the latent essence and the external expression of the thing, according to him, are inextricably linked (Burrell and Morgan, 1979).

Within hermeneutic phenomenology, the hermeneutic circle is a commonly discussed idea (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009) and is concerned with the marrying up of the part and the whole at a series of levels. The concept of the hermeneutic circle emphasises the value
of, for example, the single word (the part) and the sentence that the word is in (the whole). Hermeneutic researchers, therefore, place equal value on both facets.

Although often accused of being illogical due to the circularity of its nature, in analytical terms the hermeneutic circle encourages a non-linear style of thinking. This, it could be argued, is essential to identify themes within any research data that sets out truly to capture and reveal the lived experiences of research participants (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009).

‘Descriptive’ or ‘interpretive’

My role as researcher was to get close to the participants’ personal world. In order to achieve this I had to decide which of the two approaches descriptive or interpretive, would allow me to understand the person from within. As a descriptive phenomenologist I would need to ask a general question like “Tell me what it is like to be a mature student participating in HE?” This would be followed by questions that would allow me to arrive at common themes that were vital parts of the experience of being a student participating at a particular life stage.

However, as I have previously stated, the aim of my research was to explore the relational processes and the lived experiences of my participants, to this end I consciously decided that the interpretive research tradition would be the more feasible to use. I felt that if I followed the Husserlian descriptive approach, the focus would move away from the idea that relational processes, context or history had a bearing on the experiences of my participants as they undertook their studies in HE, thus this would negate the premise of my thesis.

My intention was to investigate context and history, in order to do this I needed to ask the participants to describe, for example, their early educational experiences, their interactions with family and wider social circles, their experiences and feelings of being a non-
traditional student, and their feelings regarding the time and place they were currently occupying. The second part of my role as researcher was to then ask myself questions about the participants such as what was this person actually saying? What was the person trying to tell me? Do I see something in their narrative that they are unaware of? This idea of trying to make sense of what the participants are trying to make sense of has been expressed by Smith and Osborn (2003) as a double hermeneutic.

I understood that the answers to my questions would not be readily transparent in the text, so making sense of someone else’s mental and social world would be no easy feat. Thus to do justice to my participants I sought to adopt a research method that would encompass ‘the dual aspect of analysis’ (Smith, 1995, p.18). I felt that this could be achieved by using interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), a form of interpretive phenomenology developed by Jonathan Smith (1996).

**Interpretative phenomenological analysis**

Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) is a research method rooted in phenomenological psychology (see Smith, 1996, 1995). It is an approach that translates well to any study that is concerned with meaning making and is committed to understanding the personal perspective of the given individual. The semi structured interview (SSI) is the ‘exemplary method of data collection for IPA’ as claimed by Smith (2008, p.59), although he concedes it is also possible to gain information by using other tools such as diaries or personal accounts.

IPA is particularly suitable for the study of a multi-faceted phenomenon where the individual interrelates with a range of physical and relational social processes; it is the significance of these experience and processes which is important. Although IPA is dedicated to the participant and their dialogue, it also acknowledges the link between an individual’s story, their cognition and physical state, thus IPA identifies itself with
mainstream social cognition theories. It subscribes to the view that cognitive processes are not set or permanent but multifaceted and malleable, continually evolving as the participants try to make meaning and sense of their own story and communicate it to the listener (Osborn, 2002; Langdridge, 2007).

As a method IPA sets out to interpret rather than describe, and, as such, draws closely upon Heidegger’s theory of hermeneutic phenomenology. IPA is concerned with the person’s private and personal experiences, the role of the researcher is to make sense of these. In order to achieve this, it is necessary for researchers to immerse themselves in an interpretative process that allows them to excavate, bring forth and make sense of the phenomena, through analysed accounts (Osborn, 2002). The idea corresponds with Heidegger’s (1927) notion of ‘appearing’, whereby there is always a phenomenon ready to be revealed. Central to IPA and Heidegger’s theory is the listener, as their role is to explore, to try to understand and make sense of how the event or process has been understood by the participants themselves; hence the interpretative process. Here, the researcher is dedicated to bringing to the forefront, the participants’ personal experiences and developing a perspective that encapsulates how the individual processes and makes meaning of their experiences.

Interpretation involves two aspects: the participant’s perception of the experience or event under discussion and the researcher’s interpretation of what the participant is saying (the double hermeneutic). To accomplish this, IPA requires the researcher continually to engage with the text and offer their own interpretation of the same (Smith, 1996, 1995; Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009; Osborn, 2002).

A further and equally important influence upon IPA is idiography, a commitment to the particular. The analysed accounts that are brought forth are considered idiographic rather than general. This is a refreshing contrast to the majority of psychological research that often makes nomothetic claims at the group or population level which results in general
laws of human behaviour (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009). IPA’s concern with the particular can be observed on two levels. The first level is the depth and detail of the analysis; consequently, analysis is both meticulous and methodical. The analysis starts with the detailed examination of the data generated from one participant. When one feels that a level of saturation or closure has been achieved the time is right to move on to the next participant or case and start the process anew (see Smith, 2004; Langdridge, 2007; Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009). When all of the data has been analysed in this manner, a cross case analysis is carried out in order to bring forth the converging and diverging themes that have been unearthed in the analysis process (Smith, 2004). The sheer volume of detailed analysis involved with IPA invariably requires that it is carried out with small numbers (see Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009 for discussion on sampling). Smith (2004) points out that this is the only way to achieve detailed nuanced analysis.

This method of analysis is repetitive. Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009) suggest that it is a process that demands the researcher to move back and forth in a variety of ways when thinking about the data rather than viewing it as a method that is completed step by step one after the other. This non-linear technique compares to the hermeneutic circle which is concerned with ‘the part’ and ‘the whole’. One cannot be understood without understanding the other. Smith, Flowers and Larkin explain:

> The meaning of the word only becomes clear when seen in the context of the whole sentence. At the same time, the meaning of the sentence depends on the cumulative meanings of the individual words (2009, p.28).

Translated to my study, IPA allowed me to understand the text at different but nonetheless interrelating levels. For example, one participant used positive, descriptive words such as ‘lovely’, ‘bright’, ‘colour’ these were ‘the part’ and yet the paragraph in which the words were embedded ‘the whole’ was about life passing her by and her feelings of not amounting to anything. As researcher I had to show unity between the part and the whole through interpreting what the participant was saying.
As previously noted, this method maintains an idiographic focus. Thus it is recommended that studies are carried out using small sample sizes due to the meticulous and nuanced analysis that is associated with IPA (Smith, 2004). Similarly, Reid, Flower and Larkin (2005) argue that ‘less is more’ in IPA studies suggesting ten participants should be considered the high end in terms of sample sizes. For this research six participants were used, each of whom gave two interviews. Twelve detailed transcripts allowed me to develop a detailed and multifaceted account of the participants’ experiences.

‘Bolder’ design

Carrying out more than one interview with each participant is considered by Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009) to be a ‘bolder’ design. However, I decided that in order to capture the very essence of the participants’ experiential accounts I would have to push the boundary and make the design even bolder. I chose to enhance my approach by combining a visual method with IPA. Holm (2008) reminds us that traditionally photographs were seen as capturing truth and reality. Holm draws upon the work of Gibson (2005) who asserts that it not possible for images to be neutral and therefore suggests they do not portray truth but an understanding that is co-constructed between the producer and viewer. This process of co-production of knowledge and understanding is synonymous with IPA so it seemed apt to adopt a visual method in order to gain an even deeper insight of the participants’ experiences and social worlds. A more detailed discussion of this will be offered in the final chapter, where I give a detailed discussion of the benefits of using ‘bolder’ designs in research. The following paragraphs, however, offer a methodological context to visual methods.

Visual methodology

Harrison describes visual methodology as any research design that uses any form of visual evidence (2002a, 2002b). Items such as paintings, diagrams, sketches, drawings, signs all
commonly occur in visual research with photographs or video clips being the most common.

Using photographs alongside interviews is by no means a novel concept; as the roots of visual research in the social sciences lay in the images of Bateson and Mead (1942) and Evans Pritchard (1940, cited in Emmison and Smith, 2000). Using images to provoke a response became known as photo elicitation, a term first coined by Collier (1957, see Harper, 2002 for a detailed account) who introduced it as a valid method for collecting data (also see Becker, 1974, 1978; Wagner, 1979; Harper 1984; Heisley and Levy, 1991).

Visual methods that use researcher generated images are often referred to as photo elicitation or photo interviewing; in contrast, participant or subject generated visual methods are often referred to as the auto driven photo elicitation method or reflexive photography (Heisley and Levy, 1991, Harrington and Lindy, 1998). More recently the method has been debated in books and journals alike (see Banks, 2001, 2009; Harper, 2000; Emmison and Smith, 2000; Pink, 2001; Dicks, Soyinka and Coffey, 2006).

However the term, photo elicitation (PE), is fiercely debated. Possibly this debate arises from authors using the term PE irrespective of whether they are discussing researcher generated images or participant generated images, therefore not distinguishing between two very different approaches. For example, the word elicit means to extract, draw out or obtain, therefore one could assume that there is information within the participant that needs to be released; the term photo elicitation, suggests that the participant’s response is provoked or drawn out by the picture (Pink, 2001). It could be argued then, that PE, stands in contrast to more inductive approaches such as auto driven or reflexive photography yet these approaches are also commonly labelled as photo elicitation methods.

At its most basic level, photo elicitation refers to incorporating a photograph into a research interview. Harper (2002) offers a more thorough explanation of photo elicitation,
arguing that images evoke deeper aspects of an individual’s consciousness than words alone. Harper concludes that this may be the reason that the photo elicitation interview does not simply bring forth more information; instead, it evokes a different type of information. Irrespective of whether the images are selected or produced by the researcher or by the subject, the aim of PE is to elicit as much valuable information as possible; this is often achieved as the image brings back a memory, a particular time, place, event or person (Holm, 2008).

Traditionally, visual methods have been used less commonly in social and psychological research. Banks (2001) reasoned that this was because the social sciences are word disciplines that do not acknowledge the value of images; equally, traditional psychology has a predilection to data that is either numerical or verbal. However the area of visual research is rapidly increasing, as more researchers across the disciplines seek out alternative methods for interpretation and representation (Mitchell, 2011). Visual representations have been used successfully to explore areas such as attitudes (Gates, 1976); constructions of self (Croghan, Griffin, Hunter and Phoenix, 2008); memory retrieval (Aschermann, Dannenburg and Schulz 1998); experiences of cancer and using chemotherapy (Frith and Harcourt, 2007); understanding the visual but hidden curriculum that shape everyday activities in education (Prosser, 2007) and exploring responses to disasters (Goatcher and Brunsden, 2011).

**Benefits of visual methods**

Liebenberg states, “When research participants actively re-construct their reality through images in the research process, they use a powerful medium to help the researcher understand their reality” (2009 p.445). This is supported by earlier research using the auto-driven method (see Heisley and Levy, 1991; Harrington and Lindy 1998; Berman *et al.*, 2001; Jorgenson and Sullivan, 2010) which indicated that the method allowed the
participant an increased involvement in the proceedings. Furthermore, it provided distance for the participant to see familiar things in an unfamiliar way.

Collier and Collier (1986) consider the idea of detachment in the photographic interview suggesting that the method can alleviate tensions experienced by the participant especially when discussing personal, often intimate matters. The participants respond to the images in much the same way as if one were looking at a family album (Schwartz, 1989), although Schwartz refers not to detachment, but averting the strangeness of the interview situation. As one of the intentions of the semi structured interview is to put the participant at ease, so they feel able to discuss personal matters, combining images, particularly participant produced images, increased the ‘comfortableness’ of the interview situation, thus producing richer, more in-depth accounts.

Similarly, the idea of empowerment frequently occurs in visual discourses. Clark-Ibanez (2004) points out that visual methods ‘empowers the interviewees to teach the researcher about aspects of their social worlds otherwise ignored or taken for granted’ (p.1524). It can be argued from this that the process of taking a photograph is intentional, a photograph freezes a moment in time. Thus, asking the participant to capture and bring to the table their ‘intentional’ ‘frozen’ moments in time, is an opportunity for them to highlight their most salient thoughts, feelings and desires and bring attention to the things that could potentially go unnoticed in the interview situation.

**Possible limitations of using a visual method**

There were aspects that I needed to consider before I attempted to use a visual method. Emmison and Smith (2000) point out that the visual method has its limitations, especially if the interview is driven by a researcher who has selected their own set of photographs, or if they have guided the participant in the selection process of their own images. The authors are referring here to power relationships between the researcher and researched.
With regards to this project I aimed to break boundaries by using the auto-driven method where all images were participant generated. The participants were solely responsible for composing the images, selecting which ones were to be used and in what order.

However, the limitations of using visual methods are not confined to the idea of researcher/participant power relationships that Emmison and Smith (2000) refer to. Logistical matters can also be restrictive and limiting in any visual research as the method can become very costly. As Banks (2007) advises, the budget should be well thought out at the beginning of any research that utilises a visual method. He argues that financial considerations should take into account the consumables (film, digital cameras, data cards); distribution (postage costs returning photographs to subjects) and photographic reproduction costs.

In addition to the above I also had to consider whether the participants would actually get around to compiling the images? If they did not have access to digital photographic equipment would they get around to developing the images? Would the images be of a reasonable quality? Finally, and of equal importance, I had to ask myself the question, would the images actually prompt dialogue? These questions are answered in the final chapter.

**Image analysis debate**

The above espouses the rewards of using a visual methodology in research. However, the analytic uses of images attracts substantial debate and is often a subject of fierce contention (Pink, 2001, 2007, Emmison and Smith, 2000, Dicks, Soyinka and Coffey, 2006). There are differing analytical approaches to the use of visual images, for example, content analysis, psychoanalytic analysis and discourse analysis, detailed descriptions of the aforementioned can be found, described in detail by Rose (2005).
I acknowledge that the foregoing is no more than a cursory mention of differing types of visual analysis, however, as already ascertained; the methodology of this research is not solely visual. The auto-driven method is an adjunct to the semi-structured interview research method used. The images were used as a trigger, a tool to enable the participant to talk and, as such, do not form part of the analysis. The photographs were subjective representations of the participant’s perceptions and only made sense to the outsider when accompanied with participant dialogue. It is this discourse that is presented as the foundation of the final analysis (Middleton and Edwards 1990, cited in Reavey, no date). Therefore the participant was the meaning maker in this research, not the researcher. To illustrate my decision not to analyse the photographs I have incorporated an image from Akila below. Attempt to interpret or analyse the image, then read the accompanying dialogue.

“The third picture is motivation and an obstacle [] It’s a picture of my family, umm boy two girls and my husband. There’s no help as in, helping me with the house chores
so I can have some time for myself and my husband is a typical male... saying he doesn’t do any work at all in the house,... he used to pick up Georgina from school but all of a sudden he doesn’t want to do that because it crosses with his work... ‘no you do it yourself, you do it yourself, try to fix something’, because we do a school run with Georgina’s friend’s and the friend’s family. He says “Oh no I can’t do that anymore” in the middle of the school year, study year”.

One could be excused for thinking the image portrayed a close knit supportive unit, happiness, closeness or free time. Yet the accompanying text paints a very different image. That is not to say that all of the positive feelings that are derived from looking at the image were never there at all, perhaps at the time when the image was taken happiness and unity were very much present for the participant. But for the time and place of the interview the image was presented to symbolise a fractured family unit.

The foregoing describes the research methods chosen for this study and offers a detailed account of their benefits and limitations. However before I could implement the methods in the study there were a number of ethical issues that I had to consider. The following paragraphs illustrate some of these issues and describe the ethical guidelines that were adopted to help circumvent them.

**Ethical issues of present study**

Fundamental to ethical concerns should be researcher awareness of the possible implications that their research may have on the participants. For a phenomenological researcher whose main concern is exploring how the world appears to another person, this should not be restricted to the analytical process, but should also be seen as relevant when considering invasions of privacy or any other ethical concern (Langdridge, 2007).

My first ethical concern was the well-being of the participants. Although I anticipated that the SSI experience would encourage reflection and positivity in the participants, to some
individuals the experience might have been problematic. It would have been naïve to
neglect the fact that reflecting upon one’s life may result ultimately in change. Although
the experience had the potential to be cathartic for some, it could equally be a means of
returning to painful events. Goodman and Sikes (2001) point out that whilst remembering
painful events may be part of every day life for some people, for others, the experience
may be shocking and unexpected.

Similarly, using images in particular photographs in a research situation demands
additional attention to the ethical issues of reproduction and anonymity. In this study
participants were given carte blanche to present any image that they felt represented the
phenomenon under study. Therefore, many of the participants presented object
representations such as a roller coaster to symbolise their turbulent life experiences;
however, others presented images of family members such as parents, partners, children
and lecturers and peers. Herein lies the complicated issue of ethics and using visual
methods. The following paragraphs provide an overview of the ethical guidelines to which
I adhered. However, my aim is to revisit the topic of ethics in the final chapter. The
rationale behind this format is that, having completed the research, I will be able to give a
more comprehensive discussion of the ethical challenges which are unique to this research
methodology.

**Ethical guidelines**

As a foundation for ethical practice in this thesis the research proposal was first submitted
to the institution’s research ethics committee, whereby approval was granted. Ethical
guidance was also taken from British Education Research Association (BERA, 2011) and
this source was consulted throughout. However, this ethical framework although thorough,
was of a general nature, and not specific to the use of visual methods, therefore I also
followed guidance offered by visual research literature (see Pink, 2007, Banks, 2001), the
British Sociological Association (BSA, 2006) and the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) framework regarding visual ethics.

To comply with the ethics framework, at the outset of the interviews, written informed consent from the participants was obtained (see Appendix: 2) and each participant was made aware that they had the opportunity to withdraw from the interview or terminate the research if they felt uncomfortable regarding any of the matters that were raised (see Appendix 2 and 3). Anonymity was achieved by anonymising data, through the removal of any identifying descriptors. All participants were given culturally appropriate pseudonyms. Furthermore, photographs containing facial images were obscured.

The previous sections set the methodological standpoint of this study. They also offered a justification for choosing to combine a visual method with the IPA method. The intention of the remaining sections is to describe the research design of the present study. Below I will summarize the participant sample, the data collection instruments, the interview process and the detailed process of analysis.

**Part 2 - Research design**

The study concentrated on the experiences of a sample of adult learners over 30 years of age who had recently returned to full time education. Whilst research existed about experiences of learners on access courses (Tight, 1996; Reay et al., 2002; Brine and Waller, 2004), there seemed to be a paucity of literature on preparatory courses such as the foundation programmes which are located on a higher education campus. Further to this Mercer’s (2003, 2007) work on mature students’ transitions into and across higher education found that the key transition points were the access course year and the first year of the degree. These were the periods where participants were first faced with negotiating challenges such as doubts about academic ability, conflicts between home and university life and developing relationships with peers.
As the most salient times of challenge and growth seemed to be at these stages I decided, therefore, to collect data at similar points as it appeared that they might be the most fruitful periods to explore the kinds of issues that were the focus of the study.

To this end the research was conducted with adult learners from a higher education institution in South Wales who were either at the end of their Foundation Year or at the end of Year 1 of degree level study. The sampling procedure employed was a purposive one, thus, it involved the selection of participants based on criteria pertaining to their relevance for the specific topic and question (Goodson and Sikes, 2001).

I gained access to students coming to the end of their first year at degree level via the Programme Director; her intervention resulted in three volunteers. Further to this I was given the opportunity to attend a Foundation Year lecture to introduce myself and the research to the students. This resulted in six individuals offering to partake in the research. The participants’ in this research were interested in telling ‘their’ story and all were keen to participate in the research. Therefore the participants’ were self-selecting to some extent.

Although the initial sample size was nine participants, two participants failed to respond to any attempts at contact and a further participant failed to attend any of the interview dates arranged for him and other participants. The final sample was reduced to six; three females who were at the end of their Foundation Year and one male and two females who were at the end of their first year at degree level. There was a degree of homogeneity as all of the participants shared a common experience; all had returned to education via the Foundation route and all were over 30 years old. A snapshot profile of each of the participants can be found at the beginning of Chapter 5.

**Data Collection**

The collection instruments used in this study were semi-structured interviews (SSIs), and auto-driven photo elicitation. Each method will be discussed separately.
Semi Structured Interviews (SSIs)

It is acknowledged that interviews can be classified as structured, unstructured or semi structured. In his discussion, Langdridge, (2007), suggests, that the structured interview which he compares to a ‘guided questionnaire’, is inappropriate and need not be considered for a phenomenological study. He continues that the “closed response options” exclude any possibility of deep exploration whereby an ‘understanding of meaning emerges’ (Langdridge, 2007, p.65). In direct contrast, to the structured format, an unstructured interview offers the potential to gain a greater understanding of an individual’s lived experiences. Yet, as Langdridge points out, the unstructured interview can be difficult to manage. He continues, without structure there is a “…a greater likelihood of failing to achieve the aims of the study” (Langdridge, 2007, p.68). Informed by Langdridge the chosen interview method for this research was the semi structured interview (SSI) as previously mentioned the ‘exemplary method for IPA’ (Smith, 2008, p.59).

The SSI method encourages the researcher and researched to engage in a process that is driven by the participants’ thoughts, feelings, and experiences. Thus by using interviews of this kind, I was able to explore the interviewees’ own views, attitudes and feelings, rather than to impose an externally constructed framework on the interview (Osborn, Gallagher and Crossan, 2004). The schedule was designed to elicit as much information as possible from the participants (Langdridge, 2007) and facilitate the interviewees in reflecting upon their life experiences and the relational social processes that have impacted upon their engagement with and participation in higher education setting.

Employing this method allowed me as researcher to facilitate and manage the interview process, rather than closely guide it, as would be the case if I had chosen to conduct a structured interview. The interviewees dictated the direction of the interview, introducing myself as researcher, to issues that had not previously occurred to me; they were the
‘experiential experts’ on the topic (Smith, 2008, p.59, also see Langdridge, 2007). Consequently using SSI’s kept the power dynamic with the participants rather than the researcher.

**Constructing the SSI schedule**

In keeping with the nature of IPA, I acknowledged that the SSI was a co-established process between the researcher and researched. However the importance of producing an interview schedule in advance cannot be overestimated. Firstly, it encourages clarity regarding the areas that need to be covered in the interview; furthermore it prompts the researcher to consider how the terminology and the potentially sensitive nature of the questions may be encountered by the participant (Smith, 2008). Developing an interview schedule beforehand enables the interviewer to devote their full and undivided attention to what is being said by the participant during the interview, rather than hoping and wondering whether what was being said would actually be of value to the phenomena being explored.

I initially began to reflect upon the SSI schedule by considering the topic under exploration. Identifying the themes of the topic brought forth a conceptual set of themes or areas that I thought relevant to the topic (Langdridge, 2007). The interview schedule was developed over a substantive period of time, and evolved through in-depth discussions with my research supervisors and by reviewing related literature. My intention was to develop a schedule that would prove to be explorative and insightful whilst at the same time keep the interview focused and contained within the framework of the research aims.

The schedule of questions produced was configured into what was the most coherent order. I anticipated that doing this would allow the interviews to flow smoothly. Langdridge (2007) suggests that at this point one might consider putting more emotive or difficult questions towards the later stages of the interview; this he argues, allows time for the
participant to settle into the interview process rather than being bombarded by complex questions at the outset. Equally as a rapport develops between the parties the participant would, it is hoped, feel more at ease answering more difficult questions. At this stage I also reflected upon useful advice from authors such as Langridge (2007) and Robson (1995) regarding the flow of the interview, my aim was to structure an SSI schedule that allowed the interview to flow from a warm-up stage to the main body of the interview and then to the closure of the process. Having carefully considered the wording and the relevant ordering of the questions, I finally held a list of questions that would be asked over two interviews.

Two SSIs were to be carried out with each of the participants over a period of up to three weeks, with each of the interviews lasting up to an hour and a half. My decision for conducting more than one interview was influenced by my aim to create a ‘bolder’ research design (as previously mentioned), logistical matters and what I saw as the distinct agendas that needed to be addressed in this study. The first interview concentrated on the participants’ life journeys from early education and work experiences prior and up to HE. The second interview focused on their individual experiences as they participate in HE.

The following are examples of the questions formulated: How old are you? Do you have any children? Can you tell me about your family? Can you tell me about your early educational experiences? Consider your expectations of HE, reflect on the realities, have they met your expectations? Where does your main support come from? Is your degree seen as an end in itself or a means to an end? (See Appendix: 1 for full interview schedule) Rubin and Rubin (2005) refer to these types of questions as ‘toub’ questions, not only do they elicit as much information as possible they are a useful way of getting the participant to guide you through specific experiences.

The wording of each of the questions was carefully considered. Using phrases such as: ‘can you tell me’ and ‘consider your expectations’, meant that the questions were open
rather than closed questions, encouraging expansive, unrestrained answers rather than a simple yes or no (Langridge, 2007). Similarly Smith discusses gentle questioning rather than using more explicit and leading questions; he states that although ‘this feature of the methodology runs counter to most of the training received for more orthodox psychology methodologies a query does not need to be loaded in order to elicit a response; a question simply needs to be of a sufficient strength to alert the participant to the area of interest and for them to recognise that they can contribute something to the area’ (Smith, 2008, p.61).

SSI logistics

Before I embarked on the interview process I had to consider the practical decisions involved with SSIs, such as deciding how to record the data and securing a venue that would be suitable for the process. Regarding the venue, having taken advice from my supervisor it was decided that the most suitable place would be the institution at the centre of this study. There was a quiet room, readily available, pertinent features for SSIs, as they have a propensity to be intense and last for a considerable length of time. Using a room that was quiet and could be booked for a substantive period meant that the interviews could be conducted without fear of interruption. I contacted the participants regarding location and times; all agreed that it would be convenient to carry out the interviews at the institution. Although it is important to add, if the location was not approved by any one of the participants, I would have been open to venues that they suggested.

When facing the decision of how to record the data, I followed the advice of Smith (2008) and Langridge (2007) who both espouse the benefits of using good quality (not necessarily expensive) recording equipment that offered a good level of sound and, importantly, software that would facilitate the painstaking task of transcription. Smith (2008) argued that it would not be possible to undertake the type of in-depth interviewing required for IPA without using a tape recorder; if one chose to write down all that was
being said in the interview one would only capture the gist, potentially missing all of the important nuances. Furthermore, constant note taking might have affected the researcher/researched rapport, an essential part of IPA.

**Auto-driven photo elicitation**

Auto-driven photo elicitation, self-generated or participant produced images (see for example Ziller, 1990, Warren and Karner, 2005) are most often used by those coming from an interpretative standpoint as this allows the researcher an inside view of the lives, communities, or rituals of the participants. Karlsson (2001, cited in Liebenberg, 2009) argues that subject produced images allow the researcher access to the participant’s private worlds that ordinarily would be inaccessible. A further advantage to using participant produced images is that I was able to access via the images the private and social areas and worlds of the participant, which would have been difficult or even unethical to enter in person (Frith and Harcourt, 2007).

I chose to use this method not to satisfy some fanciful need to create a research project that was ‘out there’ in terms of research methods; I chose this method because visual information is central to how we as individuals organise our social lives. Banks (2007) discusses the ubiquitous nature of images and posits that some consideration of visual representation can potentially be included in all social studies. In fact, Banks argues that:

> No matter how tightly or narrowly focused a research project is, at some level all social research says something about society in general, and given the ubiquity of images, their consideration must at some level form part of the analysis (2007, p.3).

Before I decided to incorporate a visual method, I asked myself the question, would the images actually add anything to the interview process, that could not be achieved by using the SSI method alone? Pink (2007) posits that images should not necessarily replace words
but should be regarded as having equal standing within research. She continues, that although they may not be used as the main method, by combining them with other elements “images and visual knowledge will become of interest” (2007, p.6). Similarly, deciding that the images should be participant generated was not a decision I came to lightly. After a great deal of desktop research into this method I felt that if I were to present the participants with images that I had taken I would be imposing my own perspective onto them. This I wanted to avoid at all costs as the very purpose of the study was to give this under-researched group of individuals a forum, a voice of their own.

**Auto-driven photo elicitation logistics**

Using this method for the first time I had, understandably, concerns regarding its implementation. Would the participant agree to take the photographs? Would they give informed consent for the images to be reproduced? Would all participants have access to a camera? Should they print them out or was it easier if I took on that responsibility? Would they take the photographs in time for the second interview? My interest in these questions resulted in a period of detailed preparation before the interview to circumvent any of these potential problems.

The informed consent form constructed for this research (see Appendix: 2) clearly stated that the photographic evidence could be printed in the thesis and any future related academic publications. In signing the form participants were giving me the right to use the visual representation and any accompanying spoken word.

In terms of equipment I felt sure that most of the participants would have access to a camera even if it was on their mobile phone. However as a contingency I purchased some disposable cameras. I also intended to inform the participants within the first interview that I would incur any cost for printing or indeed print the images myself if for any reason they were unable to.
I felt that the minimum two week period between the interviews would be sufficient time for images to be collated. Allowing for this time lapse was as much as I could feasibly do in this situation, whether the participants produced the images or not was entirely down to them and I accepted that I would have to wait for the interview to find out.

In this preparatory stage I knew that I wanted images to be of motivations and barriers and I planned to ask for five images of objects, places, or people that the participants viewed as motivations to their participation in HE and five images that acted as barriers to their participation and learning process. However, after much deliberation I decided not to ask for a specific number of photos to be taken as I felt that the participants should make the decision on exactly how many images they would take. I felt it important not to put any restrictions on the participants’ artistic licence. More importantly I did not want to impose my role as interviewer on them; who was I to say how many motivations and barriers different individuals would have?

**From pilot study to data collection**

To discover the strengths and to circumvent potential weaknesses in my research tools I decided it was essential to do a pilot study. This would allow me to test the design of my SSI schedule and check the appropriateness of APE for this study.

I hoped that responses from the participant in the pilot interview would allow me to fine tune the SSI questions, that is the relevance and sequence of the questions could be evaluated. Marshall and Rossman (2011) point out that such pilot studies are not only useful to try out one’s approach, but they also have the potential to support your argument and rationale for the strategies employed. As previously noted, the questions were based on the interest of the study. I constructed a list of areas that I wanted to cover in the first and second interview. The pilot study also allowed me to develop a set of potential prompt questions and comments, such as: That must be difficult, can you tell me more? Or then
what happened? My prompts were developed to fill in any gaps that occurred in the conversation and to clarify points that might have been somewhat confusing.

The pilot interview process was informal and flexible. I believe that the positive atmosphere was induced by using the SSI schedule. It began with a discussion about early educational experiences. I used a couple of prompts such as ‘you clearly liked the teachers in primary school, now tell me about your teachers in your secondary school’ to bridge gaps in the conversation, although on the whole the participant seemed totally at ease with the interview process and kept a good conversational flow. This observation was substantiated by a comment made by the participant regarding the informal manner of the interview where she stated; “I have felt very comfortable throughout, I really felt like I wanted to talk”.

The photographs taken by the participant acted as a good stimulus within the process and generated dialogue, alleviating immediately any minor doubts or concerns I had had regarding this matter. The pilot participant seemed very confident when she was discussing the photographs, it was clear that she had thought about the subject and she pointed out that it was “A great opportunity to really reflect upon things that have acted as motivations and barriers to my learning process”. Moreover, she suggested that having the visual stimulus in front of her allowed her to focus during the interview and prevented her from forgetting the points that she really wanted to get across.

As stated, in preparation for using the APE method I considered the number of images that the participants needed to produce and decided, eventually not to ask for a specific number. Yet the pilot revealed to me that I needed at least to put a minimum number of photographs to be taken. The participant involved in the pilot interview took four photographs although I felt that the interview would have benefited greatly from at least twice this amount of photos. Therefore I planned to ask for at least eight photographs to be taken by the participants.
Having discussed the series of actions involved with preparing for the SSIs and APE method the following sections explain the actual data collection process.

**Data collection**

As previously stated, the interim period between the first and second interview was to be utilised by the participants to compile their images which would then be presented within the framework of the second interview. The time lapse between interviews was also an opportunity for the individuals to reflect upon their personal journey into HE and a chance to understand and collate their thoughts before the second interview commenced.

**Interview 1- Procedure**

In the first interview I introduced myself and the study to the participant. In keeping with reflexive practice (Langdridge, 2007) I acknowledge that introducing elements of my personal and public world (mother and older student) may have a biasing effect on the responses of the participants. Yet, I also felt that revealing my unique context could also enhance the rapport between myself and the participants. Furthermore, I was confident that the participative and empowering approaches which I employed for this research would prevent any threat to the validity and trustworthiness of the data generated (Hobson and Townsend, 2010).

Within the initial stages of the interview the participants were presented with detailed information sheets regarding the project (see Appendix: 3) and informed consent/permission to use data forms (see Appendix: 2). I explained that the interviews would be recorded and asked whether they had any objections to this. Thankfully they all consented.

The visual method was also introduced to the participants in this first meeting. I took this opportunity to explain to the participants what was expected from them regarding producing the images and what they could expect of me in terms of printing and so on. I
requested that at least eight images of motivations and barriers to their learning should be produced. As previously noted, I had initially intended to ask for equal numbers in their representations of motivations and barriers, however after, conducting the pilot I chose not to impose this framework on the participants. This decision was influenced by the pilot study which highlighted to me a crucial point that I had not predicted beforehand. Motivations and barriers were not mutually exclusive. The pilot participant produced an image which she termed as a motivation to study but continued to state that it also acted as a barrier or challenge, thus highlighting the complex and interweaving nature of the phenomena being explored.

Although this first part of the interview was relatively detailed, it was useful in as much as the informal nature of the verbal exchange appeared to relax the participants. In order to maintain the relaxed state I began to ask the participant a few generic gentle questions regarding details such as age, nationality and social class. These questions allowed me to gain a detailed account of the participant’s demographic details, and also put the participant at ease. The remaining and major part of the first interview focused on the participant’s life experiences, encompassing areas such as social networks, early educational and work experiences and the catalysts that may have hindered them or contributed to them thinking about participating in higher education (see Appendix:1).

The first interview proved to be a comfortable situation, where the participant felt at ease and able to talk freely. At times they addressed issues that I had planned to broach at a later stage, yet I was flexible in this respect, mindful of advice given by Langdridge (2007, p.69) that ‘maintaining a steely grip on the proceedings will only lead to tension’. However, on occasion, several of the participants digressed from the subject entirely; at this stage I gently prompted them as to the nature of the question. This was enough to refocus the participants.
The initial efforts invested in creating the SSI schedule meant that questions progressed through a series of stages, from warm up questions to more detailed enquiries through to cooling down questions (Robson, 1995). This resulted in an interview that flowed well and came to a comfortable and natural closure.

**Interview 2- Procedure**

The second interview concentrated on issues that were relevant to the participants’ current status as undergraduate students. This was also the occasion upon which the participants presented and discussed the images they had produced, utilizing them as prompts or enablers to discuss their motivations for and the barriers to their participation in HE. Four participants printed the images themselves and brought them to their interviews. The remaining two participants e-mailed the images to me in advance as they were unable to print them. With regard to the two sets of images that were emailed to me, I did not print them out until the day of the interview, and even at this point I avoided looking through them, although I admit I was sorely tempted to do so. I avoided viewing the images in order to bracket any pre-suppositions before going into the interviews, thus keeping in line with the principles of IPA.

The first part of the interview was defined as a warm up with reflections on some points that had been raised in the first interview before progressing towards some deeper questioning regarding the participants’ perceptions and the realities of being an adult learner in HE.

The remaining and substantive part of the interview was dedicated to the visual representations. I was conscious that there were long pauses between the discourse and more displays of visible emotion within this meeting as a result of the presence of the photographs. However the images appeared to focus the participants’ thoughts and the pauses appeared to be simply times to think.
The silences and the brief displays of emotion did not make me uncomfortable, and more importantly, did not appear to make the participants uncomfortable; rather, they added to the intensity of the experience and reiterated further the importance of the individual’s experiences, events and state, all of which are central to an IPA study (Smith, 2008).

By giving the participants a relatively free rein in deciding what pictures to compile, I was rewarded with a variety of images that were personally meaningful to each participant. After all, I was not primarily interested in what the participants depicted in their images; my interest was in the discourse that explained why they had chosen the image and the personal relevance of them. By allowing participants to take, for example, symbolic or abstract pictures they were able to capture and disclose at a much deeper level their motivational and challenging experiences. As with the first interview the second progressed through a series of comfortable stages before closure.

**Transcription**

As explained, the twelve interviews were recorded with consent from the participants. Due to the length and detail of each of these meetings recording the process by hand was clearly not an option. However, I did make a few notes throughout the process that served as an ‘aide-memoir’ (Connolly, Rees and Furlong, 2008) and helped me to focus during the transcription process. Armed with a substantive corpus of data my next task was to transcribe the interviews word for word. This was obviously a lengthy and laborious task, as I transcribed all of the interviews. However immersing myself in the data allowed me to develop a deep familiarity with it.

**Sequence of analysis**

The section will articulate the detailed step by step process that I undertook to analyse the data generated from each of the six participants in this study. Due to the idiographic nature of IPA each individual case was analysed in its entirety. The detailed analysis focused on
the verbatim transcripts of the participants’ interviews, thus placing each of their accounts and experiences at the centre of the analysis.

Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009) present a detailed guide to the stages of IPA, yet they also emphasise the considerable room for manoeuvre within these strategies and suggest that their recommendations are guidelines rather than permanent prescriptions. With this in mind I followed strategies offered by the authors but made adaptations to their model in order to organise the data in a way that made sense to me and fitted with the methods used.

In summary, the analytic process consisted of the following seven stages:

1. Reading and re-reading an individual transcript
2. Making initial notes – consisting of descriptive and linguistic comments
3. Developing emergent themes
4. Identifying emerging themes
5. Analysis of other transcripts
6. Looking for patterns
7. Interpretative commentary

The following is a description of the process of analysis. In discussing the process in a transparent and detailed manner it is hoped that the reader will understand the process in as much depth as possible.

1. Reading and re-reading an individual transcript

Initial familiarisation with the text began during the transcription stage. In order to immerse myself further in the data I had to read the transcript a number of times. At this stage I also found it useful to listen to the audio-recording at least once. This I found rewarding as it allowed me to recall the participant and the interview experience. I also found it useful to refer back to my observational notes that I had made in the interview at this stage of the analysis as they prompted me to re-construct, mentally, the kind of
rapport that was present between the participant and myself. For example, I had made notes on whether the participant was relaxed or appeared uncomfortable in the interview.

2. Making initial notes – consisting of descriptive and linguistic comments

As I read and re-read the transcripts I began to make initial notes in the margin. Initially I began to do this by hand but soon realised that the sheer volume of data (approximately 50 to 60 pages for each participant) would need a more efficient method. For this purpose I used the electronic comment review facility in Microsoft Word. All initial notes were made in comment boxes on the right hand margin, thus the beginning of my adaptation of Smith Flowers and Larkin (2009) IPA strategies of analysis, who suggest that initial notes should be made in left hand margin.

At this early stage of analysis and being a novice at IPA, the notes were more descriptive than interpretative and appeared to be almost verbatim of the participant’s own words. However the descriptive comments although painstaking were invaluable as they reduced the often lengthy participant’s sentences into more manageable units and allowed me to become more and more familiar with the text.

When I had finished this part of the note making, I went back to the beginning of the same transcript and started to read again. This time I began to make comments on the use of language by the participant. For example, I commented on such things as whether the participant was emotional or hesitant as they spoke, or if there was an abundant use of adjectives, how the participant used a term in repetition and even the use of metaphor. The linguistic comments served to emphasize the presentation of the participants’ words.
3. Developing emergent themes

When I reached the end of the transcript I returned to the beginning and began to read again. At this stage I began to see the benefit of the repetitive nature of the method as I was now starting to look beyond the words of the participant. My focus at this point was not on the participant’s exact statements; instead my attention was directed to making sense of what the interviewee was trying to make sense of. At this stage I asked myself three questions: what was this person actually saying? What were they trying to tell me? Do I see something in their narrative that they are unaware of? The process of trying to understand what the participants are trying to make sense of, has been expressed by Smith and Osborn (2008) as the double hermeneutic, a fundamental aspect of IPA.

4. Identifying emergent themes

The following example of the initial noting stage illustrates how the interpretation and, hence the emerging themes began to develop. I started to write key words that, I felt, encompassed the essence of what I found in the text, although I did not view them as final; in fact I revisited them on many occasions and often changed them. Yet I saw them as invaluable, as they added coherence and clarity to the concept that was being explored. An example of initial notes and emergent theme (in bold type) is shown below.

| I’m not saying we have forgotten that side of us but as well we will talk about more realistic things. Ummm like out there today when we were in the Café, first we talked about our normal little bits and pieces that have happened since we last saw each other, and we talked about …oh God I have forgotten her name now, umm Sue Smith, talking about her celebrities. |
| Concerned with change  
Still reluctant for complete change. ‘now I’m not saying we have forgotten that side of us but as well we will talk about more realistic things. Important to keep old with new. |

Figure 2: Initial noting from participant transcript and emergent theme

I continued with this process to the end of the transcript. I worked through all of the data line
by line, paying no more attention to one statement than another. At this stage the whole of the transcript was viewed as potential data.

On a separate sheet I began to list all of the themes from the transcript. I also added the page number and the line number so that I could easily access the theme in the transcript when required. See Figure 3. As the whole list of themes is lengthy I have only given part of it here to illustrate the process. It is presented in chronological order, as the themes emerged.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Meg 2&lt;sup&gt;nd&lt;/sup&gt; Interview</th>
<th>Page no.</th>
<th>Line no.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Peer influence</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>13,15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self confidence</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feeling of achievement</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proving to oneself</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education opens up the mind</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal growth</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 3: List of emerging themes from one participant in the thesis**

Not all of the themes were kept at this stage. After carefully considering all of the themes on the list, I proceeded to identify those that, I felt, captured and revealed the lived experiences of the participants. I also considered how relevant they seemed in relation to my aims and whether they were recurring throughout the transcript.

Looking back at the linguistic comments was particularly useful at this stage, as they often signified the personal importance of the participant’s statements. Similarly, I retained those themes that I felt would enhance my own knowledge of this area, and those that were pertinent to the aims of the study.
5. Analysis of the other transcripts

Having finished the first transcript analysis, I moved on to the next participant account and started the procedure again. As far as I was able, I attempted to ‘bracket’ or keep separate my thoughts, perceptions and the themes that had emerged from the first script, which was in keeping with IPA’s idiographic commitment (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009). Yet, it was inevitable that some of the ideas that came through in the previous analysis were going to be present as I engaged in the second case. However, I did endeavour to do justice to the new data, and this was made easier by following the systematic and detailed process of analysis.

6. Looking for patterns between individual transcripts

The following is an in-depth description of the process which I undertook in order to identify recurrent themes. To aid the description of this substantive process, it is broken down into four parts so that the reader can follow the non-linear nature of this stage of analysis, in a coherent way:

**Part 1**

At this stage I found it useful to write each of the themes that had emerged on the transcripts on to separate small pieces of paper. As I did this I identified that many of the themes were similar and some repetitive, so I set those aside. I laid out the remaining pieces of paper and began to group them. Although this process was time consuming the kinaesthetic action of doing this helped me to organise the themes into a visual and spatial representation (Smith Flowers and Larkin, 2009). Equally the process allowed me to distinguish similarities between the themes.

As there were so many emergent themes at this stage, I initially grouped them under three general headings:
Part 2

Working through one group at a time, I clustered the emergent themes and began to develop new names or super-ordinate themes for each of the clusters that formed. The process of identifying patterns between emergent themes and developing a sense of the super-ordinate theme is termed by Smith, Flower and Larkin (2009) as ‘abstraction’.

Following the interpretative process right through to this stage resulted in a list of super-ordinate themes under each of the 3 general headings. (See Figure: 4 below).

![Diagram of super-ordinate themes under personal heading]

**Figure 4: General heading: personal – separated into seven super-ordinate themes**

Part 3

I then listed the clusters of emergent themes under their super-ordinate headings and proceeded to cross-reference this list with each participant’s individual lists of themes.
Colour was used to identify each participant’s contribution to the theme. This visual representation provided a clear instant account of how many quotes were relevant for each sub-ordinate theme and where in the transcript they appeared. An example of the list is given below in Figure 5, as the whole list is substantial only a small section has been given. (abbreviations: J2.14.454, J2 = participant initial -original participant initial used at this stage, names were changed in thesis for anonymity and 1st or 2nd interview, 14 = page no, 454 = line no).

**Unfulfilled**


Pre University life rock bottom G1.8.277, A1.8.246

Pre University unhappiness/ unfulfilled J1.5.207, G1.8.285

Negativity G4.4.130

Let down by employment as employee C1.7.205, C1.9.272 G1.2.95 G2.10.553

**Figure 5: Super-ordinate and ordinate themes**

**Part 4**

The list of themes was still too large to work with. As I repeatedly scanned through the themes it appeared that many referred to the same experience. Again I used the process of abstraction. Further patterns evolved, and new clusters developed. As a result, higher level super-ordinate themes started to emerge (Smith, Flower and Larkin, 2009).

Ultimately I was left with two super-ordinate themes. See Figure 6 below for the final list of super-ordinate and ordinate themes, (super-ordinate themes in bold).
Education the transformer - Powerless to Powerful

- Powerless
- Genesis
- Powerful

Participation – the experience so far

- Older and younger student divide
- Overlooked by institution
- Sources of Support

Figure 6: Final list of Super-ordinate and ordinate Themes

7. Interpretative commentary

The final stage was dedicated to creating an interpretative commentary where the focus was on understanding, representing and making sense of each of the participant’s experiences. This was produced by providing different levels of interpretation combined with verbatim statements of those in the study. The transcription notation that is apparent in some of the statements is taken from Osborn (2002) they are as follows:

… - Pause

[] – Omission of text

[text] - Clarificatory information.

Having to articulate the themes led to further refinements, for example changes to theme names. The participant statements presented were selected because they provided the most insightful, coherent expression of the given theme.
This chapter has outlined my methodological position and described my data collection instruments and how they were utilised. Further, it has provided a step by step description of the sequence of analysis.

I now move on to the IPA ‘write up’. Having taken the advice of Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009) I will show the reader what I have found by presenting the results of this study in a comprehensible, systematic and persuasive narrative account.

My results are presented as two distinct chapters to reflect the overall themes. Each chapter is presented in two sections. The first, Part One: Analysis, offers a description of the data in a way that remains close to the participants’ accounts. The second, Part two: Discussion, discusses the findings in relation to the existing literature.

However, in order to communicate the findings from the present study in a coherent and transparent manner I begin Chapter 5 with a discussion of reflexivity and validity. I anticipate that in doing so the reader will see and be able to understand the personal and methodological influence I have had on the production of the findings. Furthermore, here, I also introduce the participants of the present study in a more detailed way.
Chapter 5: Results

Reflexivity revisited

As previously noted, reflexivity is crucial in any qualitative study (Langdridge, 2007; Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009; Hartas, 2010), as the role of the researcher has the potential to impact upon the data that is generated. Qualitative researchers acknowledge that their own role and behaviour can affect data collection, analysis and the participants’ responses, thus ultimately influencing the direction of findings. Therefore, in order to champion the trustworthiness and the integrity of their research, it is important for researchers through reflexivity, to understand how their own subjectivity and position can influence their research (Finlay, 2005).

Yet, engaging in reflexivity is not easy and it is often viewed as an unclear process which can result in some researchers becoming embroiled in a process of excessive self-analysis, or alternatively, avoiding the process altogether (Finlay, 2005). According to Langdridge (2007) a crucial part of the reflexive process is to inform the reader of the researcher’s position within the topic, in doing so the researcher acknowledges how their position shapes and informs the study. Having done this in Chapter 1, (where I introduced myself and described my early educational experiences) the following paragraphs are the second step of my reflexive analysis; they build upon my initial reflections and develop further the social and relational processes which I view as salient to my own participation experiences.

As a working class woman who made the decision to participate in HE in her late thirties, I experienced the push and pull of family life and the guilt of doing something for myself rather than devoting my complete self to my husband and children. One of my personal experiences of participating in a three year university degree course was a sense of detachment between my home life and my university life. This perceived distance, at times made me feel as though I was in limbo - I often felt that I did not belong in my
personal world, that I needed to break away from my past, yet, I did not feel as though I entirely fitted in with what was my present HE world.

Throughout my degree I experienced many factors and relational social processes that impacted upon my academic studies. The processes were multifaceted and, at times, acted as both motivations and challenge to my learning process. I did not enter HE with ‘baggage’ in terms of being deficient, needy and vulnerable as some writers suggest (Bishop-Clark and Lynch, 1998; Lynch and Bishop-Clark, 1994). I had entered HE carrying an array of rich life experiences, yet I felt that prior experiences and life roles were not valued or acknowledged within the environment.

I recognise that my own multiple identities intersect with the participants in this study and have undoubtedly influenced my approach. Equally it must be acknowledged that the overlap of experiences between researcher and researched cannot be discounted when considering the interpretative commentary that follows. Yet, as previously noted, this is in keeping with IPA and the hermeneutic tradition whereby researchers are encouraged to bring their own experience to the analysis.

To illustrate, in the first interview I elected to tell the participants something about my own background. I described some of my own demographic details such as age, class, number of children. I also explained that I had been a non-traditional HE student. By describing my own circumstances, I feel that a sense of rapport was achieved between the researcher and the researched. The participants appeared to be comfortable and at ease with me throughout the interviews, and often used phrases such as ‘you know what I mean’ or ‘you understand’ thus indicating a belief that I was able to understand their circumstances, points of view, feelings and thoughts. They appeared to view me as one of them, somebody that they could relate to; the commonalities between my self and the participants, I believe,
enhanced their disclosures. Yet, I am also aware that the same commonalities may also have a biasing effect on the participant responses and the interpretation of the same.

Whilst the above acknowledges the potential effect and influence that my previous position may have upon this research, the following section regarding validity outlines the criteria I adopted to evaluate the quality of the work.

Validity

Holliday (2002, p.8) comments on validity and suggests that in qualitative research it is like ‘showing one’s workings’. Akin to doing a maths problem, in qualitative research one needs to describe the process of why and how; simply giving an answer is not enough. Yet, identifying appropriate criteria in order to judge a qualitative study is not an easy task, due to the many and varying approaches and methods that are adopted in qualitative research. However difficult the task may be, the importance of finding and using some common criteria to illustrate the validity of a qualitative study cannot be overestimated. Using validity criterion, allows the researcher to demonstrate that their work is rigorous and their findings are valuable (Yardley, 2000).

The ways in which validity of qualitative research can be assessed has been outlined by Yardley (2000) amongst others (also see Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009; Guba and Lincoln, 1989). Yardley (2000) presented criteria for evaluating the validity of qualitative research, which she divided into four areas:

- Sensitivity to Context
- Commitment and Rigour
- Transparency and Coherence
Impact and importance

Yardley’s criteria (2000) have been complimented for their broad range, and the description of the various ways one can establish validity in research. Yardley has also been praised for attempting to offer criteria that can be applied to a qualitative study irrespective of its theoretical orientations (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009).

For this reason the measures taken to ensure validity during the research for this thesis are described below in relation to Yardley’s (2000) guidelines:

*Sensitivity to Context:*

This is illustrated initially, in the preliminary chapters. The substantive literature allowed me to formulate the research aims and orient the study; equally, the theoretical literature was the foundation for the research method I chose.

Because interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) centres upon the idiographic and the particular, the analysis process highlighted sensitivity to context. That is, it was carried out in a way that placed value and importance on the participants’ spoken word as they offered their descriptions of their lived experiences. Equally, care was taken in the discussion section to evaluate the conclusions in relation to the extant literature and relevant policy discourse.

This research also demonstrates sensitivity to the participants’ perspectives by using methods that were emancipatory to the individual. Combining auto-driven photo elicitation and SSIs allowed the participants’ to reveal their lived experiences to the researcher in an unconventional way, through both language and image.

*Commitment and Rigour*

Exploring how adult learners, 30 years plus experience higher education, and my own positioning in the research illustrated my personal commitment to the topic area. I was also
a student who entered higher education post 30 years. I felt it necessary that all of the participants’ were made aware of my position as I considered this crucial if I were to build rapport and empathy within the interview process. The degree of attentiveness that I relayed to the participants in both the interview process and the analysis that ensued was a further testament to my commitment to the research. The level of care and commitment that I exhibited throughout the study was not only an expectation of the research method I chose, it was also evidence of the rigour of the study.

Rigour was equally exhibited by using triangulation in the study. Yardley (2008) points out that triangulation can be achieved by corroborating the accounts of one individual by using the accounts of others. Similarly Flick (2011) argues that triangulation can be achieved by viewing the issue in question from two or more vantage points. This was achieved in this thesis by viewing the different perspectives of each participant. I showed evidence for each emerging theme by using the accounts of different individuals rather than depending on one person’s perception. Furthermore, the thoroughness of the analysis process ensured that at any point the themes could be traced back to the transcripts. This was aided by keeping a paper trail of the analysis.

Triangulation was also achieved by using more than one research method. Marshall and Rossman (2011) suggest that combining more than one method can illuminate, substantiate and even elaborate the issue in question. My aim was to marry up methods that were complementary to each other and facilitated the exploration of complex issues. To this end the use of the research method auto-driven photo elicitation and the semi-structured interview seemed well allied. Liebenberg argues that situating visual methods into a phenomenological paradigm improves the contextual accuracy and relevance of data whilst “heightening validity of the data analysed” (2009, p.442). The depth rich data that emerged from the process were enhanced and made more relevant and promoted an in-depth understanding of the personal perspective of the given individual.
Additionally, purposively selecting the group of participants contributed to the thoroughness of the study. The selection was based on their relevance for the specific topic and question. This also established homogeneity as all of the participants shared common experiences, for example all had returned to education via the Foundation route and were aged over 30 years.

*Transparency and Coherence*

The transparency of the research was achieved in part by offering a detailed, in-depth coverage of the analysis process. The format of this allowed the reader to trace the process from the initial comment stage through to the final stage of interpretative commentary. Similarly, a detailed account of the design of the interview schedule was offered adding further to the transparency of this project.

Throughout the analysis process I collaborated closely with my supervisor to ensure that the process and interpretative commentary were both transparent and coherent. This collaboration occurred during the analysis process where the emergent themes were looked at and discussed and at the end of each of the results chapters.

Discussing the process throughout the initial stages with another person allowed me to clarify and refine the emergent themes before the next stage of analysis proceeded. Further to this initial audit my supervisor read through each results chapter and gave detailed feedback on each of them. The purpose of such a close inspection was to monitor the coherence and strength of the chapters, and the degree to which the themes that I put forward were logical and evident in the chapters.

*Impact and Importance*

This research builds upon the array of literature that focuses on how higher education is experienced by 18-30 year olds, in terms of barriers and motivations. Primarily, it highlights those students who are predominantly excluded from research literature and
have become invisible from government policy. Equally this research offers a unique insight into the ways in which relational social processes influence an individual’s transition onto and engagement with higher education.

It is also hoped that the innovative use of methods will have an impact upon further research projects. Participants that are encouraged to integrate images into the research process are in possession of a powerful medium that offers the researcher a greater understanding of their life world.

Using a visual method with the SSI method is a unique and innovative way of gaining greater understanding of any topic that is concerned with exploring complex issues, as the ‘invitation to view’ extended from participant to researcher can circumvent any important aspects of the phenomena being ignored.
The Participants

The following table summarises the profiles of each of the participants in this study; it also demonstrates where homogeneity is established.

**TABLE 1: Profile of Participants**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant’s stage of study</th>
<th>Numbers</th>
<th>Gender Distribution</th>
<th>Characteristics in common (basis of homogeneity claim)</th>
<th>Different Characteristics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Foundation (end of year of study) | 3       | F=3                | Age  
All aged over 30 years.  
Learning Trajectory  
All completed their foundation year or their first year of degree level study having come from the foundation year.  
Place of Study  
All attended the same university  
Children  
All had dependents | Marital status  
4 married  
1 co-habitating  
1 single  
Socio-economic Class  
5 self-defined as working class  
1 self-defined as middle class  
Ages of children  
varied considerably from age 6 years to 29 years |
| First Year of Degree Level (end of year of study) | 3 | F=2  
M=1 | | |
In the introduction of this thesis I introduced myself to the reader. Here, corresponding with the researcher profile layout, I offer descriptive snapshots of each of the participants in this study. These provide the reader with some further background information for each participant in order to facilitate a broader context within which to present their experiential accounts.

Each participant profile is labelled with their changed name, for the purpose of anonymity. Their demographic details are listed, followed by a brief overview of their early educational experience. The final paragraph is the transcript response to a question asking them to outline when they first started thinking about university.

**Meg**

Defined herself as:

Welsh, working class

Female, age 44 years

Single parent, one child aged 22 years

BSC Honours Health and Social Care (end of Foundation Year)

Meg thoroughly enjoyed compulsory education. She stated: “it was a good experience school, I did absolutely love it”. She grew up in a supportive family environment and was the fifth child out of six. She considered learning, particularly reading, as a pursuit which afforded her some “solitude” in a bustling family. Her father passed away when she was 13 years old which by her own admittance caused her to ‘regress’. Although she felt capable of continuing on to HE, she had to leave school at 17 during the first year of her A’ levels because of her family’s financial situation.

When did you start thinking about university?
“I became unemployed over Christmas which was a bit of a blow but I thought I’ll enjoy Christmas and New Year and look afterwards. I got myself a little temporary job while I applied here and then I got here and I thought I’m away and I haven’t regretted anything. I can’t put food on my table, that’s fine I’ll go and eat at my daughter’s it has been unique, you’ve got to put that down to here but it was circumstance everything happened at once so I thought this is it. Something was telling me this is my time”.

Lynn

Defined herself as:

Welsh, working class

Female, age 43 years

Married, three children from previous relationships aged 21, 13 and 12 years

BSC Honours Health and Social Care (end of Foundation Year)

Lynn, the sixth child out of seven had an extremely negative experience of compulsory education: she stated: “Oh I hated school, hated it”. So intense were her feelings towards early education she viewed it as a “punishment”. Lynn’s family travelled around the country extensively to follow employment opportunities. As a result, Lynn lost out on a year of early education which she attributes to her lack of early academic attainment, “I always felt that held me back”. She revealed a lack of parental support towards her education and left school at 16 years old with no qualifications.

When did you start thinking about university?

“My friend she started going to uni [] and she said ‘go to uni’ and I said ‘I don’t think I can do that’. She said ‘you can’ and she told me for 3 years. She finished her course and she said ‘do it, go for it, you can do it’. I said ‘I don’t know I can’t remember my exam
results’ and I would put barriers up [] Yes the door was open a little bit and I saw the crack and I went for it [] I got to the point where I felt my kids were of an age where they wouldn’t be too much trouble for me to go and study so that was it, it seemed the right time.”

Akila

Defined herself as:

Egyptian, middle class

Female, age 47

Married, three children aged 23, 19 and 8 years

BSC Honours Health and Social Care (end of Foundation Year)

Akila was educated in Egypt in a private school. Her experience of early education was positive one she stated: “I enjoyed every minute of it” “I had fun”. Although her family encouraged her to continue into HE, she left school at 16 years to do a two year secretarial course.

When did you start thinking about university?

“I always wanted to go to university…uhh I always regretted that my father didn’t push that hard that he gave up easily but I was very strong minded but I always wanted to. I’ve always wanted to further my education and I did not want my children to think uhh…of not going to university that was not even to be talked about”.
Chris Defined herself as:

Welsh, working class

Female, age 34 years

Married, two children aged 6 and 8 years

BSC Honours Health and Social Care (end of Year 1)

Chris, an only child “loved” her early educational experiences particularly primary school. She attributed her love of learning to her parents who encouraged learning in and outside the school setting. However her enthusiasm waned somewhat in high school and she puts her disaffection down to a family relocation between primary and secondary school. She left school at 17 during the first year of her A’ levels she admits that she wanted to go out and socialise with friends.

When did you start thinking about university?

“Umm when we all went to [] Road, a group of us all met, we did Counselling and then we did Child Psychology and then obviously adverts came up for the uni taster so we thought try that and then me, Sandy, Trish and Suzy, we thought, ok, we’ll go for the Foundation so it’s more of a natural progression. Starting off, I think my youngest was three when I started the Foundation, so he was just starting school nursery and I have got to be fair …[] Road, is very good you can pay for After School Clubs, or you can pay for the afternoons in nursery. Because usually it is only mornings, so I thought by the time I finished this process they will be a bit more independent so we can work it out, so I can go out and do what I want to do, but you know I will still be there for them but, you know.…”
John

Defined himself as:

Welsh, working class

Male, age 48 years

Married, 3 children aged 26, 25, and 20 years

BSC Honours Health and Social Care (end of Year 1)

John, one of two children, experienced a disjointed, negative and disturbing primary school experience where, in his own words, he was “bullied like hell physically and psychologically”. He moved from his initial school at seven years which alleviated the trauma he had previously experienced thus resulting in a happier primary experience. In secondary school John became more academically adept but admitted that he did not “apply himself”. Secondary education lost relevance to John’s life and he left school at 17 during the first year of his A levels due to peer pressure: he states “all my friends were earning money and I thought, umm discovered girls,(laugh) so I went and got a job, academia wasn’t for me”.

When did you start thinking about university?

“I had hit rock bottom in my world even though I wasn’t out on the streets on a bench or whatever…. I had hit rock bottom and I knew I was unhappy. Engineering… I hadn’t been happy in Engineering for the previous 10 -12 years [] I realized this was part of my drink problem, my anxiety and my depression. But in that May my father died, we had paid our mortgage off on the house anyway and my son at 18 had started in (university name) so really a lot of life’s responsibilities had been removed. No mortgage, both parents dead and my youngest child was 18 and in higher education but I was hitting rock bottom, [] I was
looking for a change … where can we go from here. [...] basically a lot of my responsibilities had been removed and I was looking for a way forward then.”

**Sandy**

Defined herself as:

Welsh, working class

Female, age 60

Recently divorced living with new partner, twins aged 29 years

BSC Honours Health and Social Care (end of year 1)

Sandy experienced a positive enjoyable compulsory education experience she states: “I just loved every minute of school from infants’ right through to secondary”. She described herself as an above average student in both primary and secondary high school. Although she perceived that she had HE potential her family’s socio-economic status meant that she had to leave school at 15 years to financially contribute to the family unit.

When did you start thinking about university?

“Well unfortunately, I had to retire, I was working for AA and that’s the Automobile Association and not Alcoholics Anonymous… (laugh)... At the time I had to retire because of ill health. I had heart problems and I had a delayed nervous breakdown because I lost twins 31 years ago[...] and 20 odd years later I really went downhill, so I had to give up work, umm my marriage broke down. [...] I thought I really must go to Night School, I must go and do something with my life and this one day the paper came through the door, …you know the Night School things [...] so I thought I’ll give this a shot and it was just the push I needed(laugh)”.
Part one: Analysis

Super-ordinate theme: Education the transformer - powerless to powerful

This super-ordinate theme seemed to capture most strongly the participants’ descriptions of how past and present relational social processes had influenced their individual transition onto and their engagement with HE. The individuals described their life experiences and explained how they had felt for most of their lives, unable to define their own destinies.

‘Education the transformer - powerless to powerful’ evokes the sense of journey the participants’ experienced as they progressed from childhood into their mid-life. All believed that they were reclaiming their lives as their own which they attributed to participating in higher education.

Within this overarching theme there are three ordinate themes that highlight the linear progression of the journey:

The first ordinate theme ‘powerless’ contains four sub-ordinate themes that depict feelings of lack of personal control and autonomy experienced by the participants pre-participation. These were resultant of, for example, social networks and or socio-economic factors.

The second ordinate theme ‘Genesis’ describes the transitions experienced by the participants as they engaged with HE. The five sub-ordinate themes describe the conflict and desirability of the changes experienced by all of the participants.

The final ordinate theme in this section is ‘powerful’ containing four sub-ordinate themes. Here the participants described the ways in which education had given them a sense of self-belief and empowerment within themselves and within their social worlds.
Ordinate theme: Powerless

All of the participants referred to feelings of low confidence and existing for others, rather than for themselves, prior to participation. They discussed how social processes determined and governed their lives, which resulted in them feeling powerless. For some the feelings of being constrained and restricted by family circumstances and responsibility had been experienced as early as childhood and adolescence. For others, adulthood had brought with it a different set of responsibilities that were equally restrictive. Overall, there was a perception that the situations or obstacles that had arisen in their lives were beyond their control and had became barriers, hindering and preventing them in some way, from realising their potential.

Sub-ordinate theme: Lack of confidence

The participants made sense of their pre-participation feelings of low confidence and attributed them to a number of past relational social processes. Below Lynn describes the difficulties and humiliation that she experienced in compulsory education which she perceived to have contributed to her negative state:

“It all depends what teacher you get. I had a lovely teacher for the first two years. Oh lovely Mr Smith, all dead lovely sweet and then I went into Mr Williams class and he was a tyrant. He was making me read in front of the class and at that time there was no ‘pc ness’ about you know making people who have trouble reading um… ‘cause I said to you I missed a year out and he would say come and read in front of the class and I was reading this story and I always remember… something about boats in the quay and I said it as qay you know you read it as qay and he pointed out to everybody listen to (participant’s name) she is saying qay and he punished me for that and he made me feel that big in front of
Lynn’s low self-confidence began to develop in early childhood. Negative early educational experiences significantly impacted upon her self confidence. Note the use of adjectives she uses to describe her first teacher compared to those used to describe the teacher who held low expectations of her. Being humiliated in front of her peers by an authoritarian teacher left Lynn feeling insignificant as she described herself as only feeling a couple of cm’s tall as she stood in front of them.

She also felt that her parents had contributed significantly to her state:

“We were taken out of school for about a year when we lost our house
[] I didn’t go to school for a year and I was about 8 or 9 then and its quite a crucial time.... like before High School and that and I always felt that held me back a bit”(L1.132).

Her mother’s lack of enthusiasm for education and her low expectations regarding Lynn’s academic abilities de-motivated her in her early educational pursuits. Observe Image 1 and the following statement:
Image 1. Mum

“She didn’t give me any ambition that I could go on if I wanted to go on,... uhh go to uni, just to get a better education, I don’t think her era relied too much on education” (L2.656)

When Lynn produced the image of the word ‘mum’ in the second interview she introduced it by saying: “Photo 9 is a barrier and sadly that’s my mum”. The image and the accompanying text illustrated the strength of her feelings. Lynn perceived that her mother’s low expectations of her, combined with socio-economic pressures were responsible for her academically opting out of her early education and treating school solely as a social pursuit rather than an educational one.

At this point I began to ask Lynn the question “Do you feel if you had more push from your parents….”? She keenly answered before I could finish,

“Yes of course…Yes I would have loved to have been going to uni at 17 or 18...19” (L1.232).
Lynn’s low confidence was derived from a number of factors, early education and lack of motivation from her mother but, her fractured paternal relationship seemed to be the most significant:

“My father’s comments when I was 10 or 11 was umm you’ll end up working down (street name)]. I didn’t understand at the time, but when we moved back to (city name) and I knew what (street name) was, then I was shocked, it was for prostitutes so my father basically said to me I’ll end up a prostitute at 10 years old[,] I don’t know ...., you will end up like a scrubber. [,] he didn’t say it to my other sisters just me. [,] I didn’t understand when he said it[,] I didn’t get offended by it until I grew up and I thought why did my dad say that about (street name) but he’s dead now, what can you do.....”(L2,680).

There is a sense of resignation in Lynn’s extract. Although she was unsure of what the deprecating comments meant at the time, as she entered adulthood she argued that she became disturbed by the innuendo and began to question why her father would make such comments about her. The lack of resolution in this scenario left Lynn with impaired confidence. Both male primary teacher and Lynn’s father singled her out amongst her peers and siblings respectively and made her feel worthless and insignificant.

For John, the negative experiences of early education such as bullying and failure by practitioners to recognise his learning difficulties were exacerbated by negative employment experiences later in life. In this first extract he discusses his feelings of despair and unhappiness; the opening lines depict just how desolate he felt:

“Ummm....at that point I had hit rock bottom in my world even though I wasn’t out on the streets on a bench or whatever[,] I was devastated at the time I had been sacked I sort of suffered with stress and depression
throughout my life at various points and that was probably an all time
low [] Yeah I would be 45 then so first of all devastation and then sit
down and think right, I was drinking more than ever by then, umm I
started self-medicating feeling sorry for myself no light at the end of the
tunnel you know”(J1,139).

He described how dark his life had been previous to participating in HE. The emptiness he
experienced was a culmination of going through intermittent periods of disillusionment
and unhappiness in his life, and ultimately, the termination of his occupation in
engineering. This resulted in extremely low confidence. In his second interview John
presented an image of deflated balloons, a visual representation of how empty he was
feeling pre-participation.

**Image 2: Balloons**

“I thought pictorially it represented how I felt, self-esteem, self-
confidence, the whole embodiment of how I felt and then I sort of
thought one picture how will I do this and deflated balloons just have
skin and nothing inside and that was how I was feel for a number of
years. That was how I felt um I had given up spirits [...] and even though I was feeling better physically and mentally over the years I had been left that... I was basically as the balloon suggests nothing left, skin on the outside and nothing inside” (J2,520).

The cumulative effect of the balloon image and dialogue was a vivid depiction of his pre-participation state of mind and body. The extreme struggle that John went through is apparent as he describes contradictory physical and mental states. Although he admits that giving up alcohol left him in a better state of mind and body than he had been for years, it also left him empty and unfulfilled.

**Sub-ordinate theme: Beyond their control**

Meg reflected upon the lack of autonomy that she experienced prior to participation. See Image 3 below and the accompanying dialogue:

**Image 3: Rollercoaster**

“I think previous to HE I always considered my life to be a little bit like a roller coaster ride you get on there no control at all over where you
are going, you don’t even have control on where you get off, someone pushing your buttons for you and I think my life was a little bit like that so I would say it’s a barrier, insofar as I did feel trapped in the life I was in previously” (M2.127).

Note the use of metaphor in the extract. She uses terms that illuminate the degree to which she felt incapacitated. She describes mechanization and machinery components, for instance, “roller coaster ride”, “buttons” and “car” indicating that she as a person felt automated and controlled by others “someone pushing your buttons for you”. The extent of the control led to Meg feeling confined in a life that was not of her own making. She carried on:

“I wouldn’t have changed it, but as I say I had to leave school when I didn’t want to, for family reasons and then from then on it was like my life wasn’t my own, literally it’s like getting in a car and somebody is driving you” (M2.132).

This is a statement loaded with contradiction. She is unhappy about having to leave school earlier than anticipated, she again refers to having no autonomy or self-governance, yet she points out that she would not have changed any of it.

“No input at all it’s like it took me, and it took me on a path was so... so that’s photo 1 really. And as I say that was a bit of a barrier but obviously I should say the roller coaster has stopped now I’m in uni and I managed to get off” (M2.139).

In the extract above she moves from the idea of ‘someone’ controlling her to ‘something’ controlling her, she uses the pronoun ‘it’ indicating that she is unclear of what was controlling her. Meg’s whole description epitomises her feelings of being ensnared in a life
that she did not self-govern. Yet her overarching belief was that through her engagement with HE she had become liberated and more in control.

While Meg gives a general description of how she felt controlled by others and powerless in her pre-participation life, Sandy is more specific:

“My mum was a cleaner and my dad was a milkman.

Ok (interviewer)

Hence, the reason I didn’t go to university in 1966”[I] my parents couldn’t afford it, because in those days, it was paid up front, you know ....you had to have money to go to University (S1.128).

She proposed that it was because of her parents’ financial circumstances, that she missed out on the opportunity of going to university at a traditional age.

Sub-ordinate theme: Filial responsibilities

Many of the participants discussed filial responsibilities as a contributing factor to their feelings of powerlessness pre-participation. Looking after elderly and infirm parents was seen by many of the participants as another role to fulfil. It could be argued that this predicament or duty, to care for parents, was a consequence of the participants’ life stage and social class position where buying extra help and care for aging parents may not be an option.

The impact of the emotional and physical strain that this role placed on some of the individuals was evident in their statements. John described the intensity and individual responsibility of looking after his father:

“With all of life’s responsibilities not purely money, family, house mortgage, my mother died suddenly but my father had Parkinson’s in
the latter stage if he wanted a bath I would have to go over to assist him” (J2.592).

So if anything went wrong he would call and I would go over there. Knowing you were on call 24 hrs a day and that things were going to get worse you didn’t want to take anything that would take your time up because at any time ...”(J2.632).

Here John refers to multiple responsibilities yet for all of the commitments he held it was the role of carer that seemed to take up the majority of his time. It appeared to place John in a personal limbo or indeterminate state. Devoted to caring for his father it was the uncertainty of how long the situation would continue that rendered John powerless, unable to pursue or explore new avenues or ventures in his life.

Lynn’s story was similar to John’s as she also described the onerous task of caring for her mother.

“Nobody does it apart from me, I’m always the chief carer its always been put on me and I have the most kids... and you know didn’t have a husband, ....my sister did, I was on my own three kids no money, a little banger....., they would be living closer to my mother,... loads of money, cars coming out of their ears, loads of cars on the drive my mother would phone me” (L2,585).

Even though both Lynn and John had extended family structures, the responsibility of care was solely down to them. Within the extracts there are similar stories and struggles as they both identify the intensity of their position “chief carer it’s always put on me” (Lynn) “on call 24 hours a day” (John), and they both speak of their other responsibilities such as children or financial burdens. The culmination of their own responsibilities and the added burden of looking after a parent made their lives difficult and restrictive.
It is inevitable that the issues mentioned above will cause a difficult dilemma in mid-life. As already mentioned, it is likely that these dilemmas, particularly elderly parents unable to care for themselves, would be unique to this life stage. For John in particular, the situation rendered it impossible to consider participating while his father was so dependent upon him. It was only upon the death of his father that he gained the freedom to make life choices. See Image 4 and his supporting statement:

Image 4: Money

“When he did die, it did enable me .... you know we did get money through, yeah (,)but the other thing it was a big responsibility and then relief knowing that he didn’t require any more assistance. My parents passing gave me leeway financially for 12-18 months or so, but I had a part time job, so financially definitely an assistance” (J2,604).

Upon the death of his father John gained financial security and personal and emotional freedom to make decisions about his life.
Caring for a parent to such a degree would impact upon making any major life decisions; this would apply also to the decision to participate in HE. Yet, for Lynn and other females in the study, whilst they acknowledged their time consuming filial responsibilities, they made the decision to return to and continue with education in spite of them. This may have been down to the fact that they were used to juggling multiple caring roles and had created coping strategies to deal with the pressure that ensued.

**Sub-ordinate theme: Being a mum just isn’t enough**

Being a parent was a commonality of all of the participants. Prior to participation the female participants felt that their lives lacked purpose or external meaning. A common theme that ran throughout their dialogue was that the role of being a mother was not enough. Nearly all of the female participants were dismissive of the motherhood role using language like “you know just a mother” and “I was always wanting something else”.

The participants alluded to the role of motherhood as being one that was undervalued within society. Yet the participants themselves appeared to have little respect for their maternal role, a role that demanded most of their time and energy. This theme is illustrated in the following extract from Chris:

“I enjoyed being a stay at home mum, but I didn’t want them seeing that was the only thing mum could do and all that sort of thing (laugh) and I have always wanted to do something positive for the world” (C1.205).

Note the sense of conflict that Chris experiences as she verbalises her thoughts. She starts by saying she ‘enjoyed being a stay at home mum’ but then carries on to suggest that to do this is not enough. The statement suggests that her conflict lies between her private world in which she is a mother and her standing or position in the public world. Chris’s insight into the role of motherhood is resonant of many of the participants. See the following from Akila:
“Yes um well I proved to myself and my family that I can do something, its not just cook, iron, wash work, come back cook, iron, wash, you know just a mother” (A2.68).

A need to ‘prove’ to themselves and others, suggested existential conflict within the women, provoked by becoming a mother. Although motherhood was a valued and cherished experience amongst the participants, it appeared that the role was responsible for planting seeds of discontent in the women. For many of the participants, in order to become content they felt a need to prove to those in their private world and those in the wider world that there was more to their nature or character than being ‘just a mum’.

Admitting that motherhood was not enough appeared to make the women feel guilty or even disloyal to their children and often they followed up with compensatory statements, for example, “I can go out and do what I want to do, but you know I will still be there for them” (C1.190).

The participants’ sense of disenchantment with motherhood did not come from being fed up with or tired of their children, it was about losing their individual selves and trying to create a new improved version of the person they felt they wanted to be.

All of the above themes appeared to be exclusively connected to being a mother. Note the contrasting theme that emerges from this statement from the male participant, John:

“As I said before as well, they have always had faith in me my children, even when I didn’t have any confidence um because I brought them up with my wife… so they knew what my mind was like they knew my capabilities and so they would say you can do it [] they always believed in me” (J2,422).

He appeared to be totally at ease in his patriarchal role and had a positive view of how his children saw him as an individual. Although he admits that his family have seen him at his
lowest in terms of confidence, he never experienced any crisis regarding proving himself to his children or spouse.

However, he did have an increased need to specifically prove himself to his lecturers:

“If I get that far and I get my degree, I will walk up to (lecturers name) and remind him, can you remember a telephone conversation you had with a man who said he was an ex drinker? and I’ll thank him and say I was that man” (laugh)”(J2,266).

Many of the participants spoke of motherhood and the sacrificial commitment that it demanded. The following extract from Lynn suggests sacrificing her own needs for the needs of her son:

“I was desperate to do something, I wanted to go into umm... the special police force just do voluntary, part time, and I thought he’s only got me, I would have had to have left him over my mother’s and my mother lived five miles away and I really wanted to do it but I couldn’t because he was too young, so I let it go”(L2.447).

The age of her child and the fact that she was solely responsible for his care meant that Lynn had to sacrifice any plans that would take her from her private world into the public world. From the statement one can see that from very early on in her mothering role, Lynn frantically wanted to do other things. The feelings were so strong that it didn’t really matter what it was. She continued:

“I was always trying; I was always wanting something else I dunno, because I only had him at the time” (L2.454).

This sentence indicated her desperation and need to achieve something else, but it also substantiates her uncertainty as to what she felt she needed to achieve.
For Meg, sacrificial commitment was connected to loss of self:

“I think when you have a family you lose your identity you become, my daughter’s mother, my mother’s daughter you’re never really you, when you’re the mum but now I am, well even though I am still the mum”

(M2,52).

She recognises that she was many things to different people and laments the loss of her own self, yet the term ‘never really you’ suggests that she had never known who she was. Again, suggesting that it is not so much about reclaiming the self as much as creating and finding out whom the self is. The guilty feelings previously mentioned are highlighted again in this statement as Meg feels it is necessary to clarify that she is “still the mum”.

**Ordinate theme: Genesis**

The participants spoke of ways in which they experienced and anticipated personal change during the transition into HE. It was acknowledged by most that change, or the expectation of change, began as they began to shift from their established social roles to their new role as student. Furthermore all of the changes, for example necessity to regain a previous more assured self or moving forward to a more autonomous self, were outcomes that could be related to the particular life stage of this group of individuals. Examples of the changes that occurred were increased feelings of autonomy and freedom, greater self-control over their own destinies and increased self-confidence.

**Sub-ordinate theme: A changing sense of self**

It was noted that change was not instantaneous but occurred as a gradual and continual process, initially acknowledged as the participants prepared to go from the end of the Foundation Year into Year 1 and from Year 1 into Year 2.
“Yes one thing I have changed immensely this year I cannot wait to see what I will be like at the end of the next year” (C2.75).

As they became equipped with increased knowledge and understanding so their confidence started to increase.

The increases in confidence that were seen to be directly linked to participation allowed most participants, in part, to exorcise the feelings of negativity and pessimism they had carried from childhood into adult life. This is not to say that they all experienced a euphoria that was a permanent, or even an immediate state, but all spoke of increased levels of positivity and confidence regarding themselves and their futures.

For some, the benefits derived from participating were not instantaneous but were gained through a gradual process that evolved throughout the Foundation Year and first year of their degree “through education, like I said every year something different is happening slowly” (C2,625).

Yet for others, confidence and optimism, started developing as soon as they were accepted onto the Foundation Course, as supported by the following extract from John:

“\[\]I thought I’m here for 3 years so my self-confidence is down below zero but having been accepted on Foundation Course, .... I thought I’ve been accepted and been truthful and told them I had a drink problem and you know it sort of bolstered me a bit and I thought, oh brilliant, maybe a degree might not be out of the equation so then [] was taking all details at intake....... whatever I thought in for a penny in for a pound go for BSc Hons, so confidence at an all time low but something drove me along” (J1, 257).
The mere acceptance on the Foundation Course was enough to lift John’s confidence. Acknowledging that he had a drink problem played a significant part in his elevated state, and it allowed him to move forward rather than stagnating in his emotional quagmire.

All of the participants believed that education was the undeniable catalyst for their increased positivity. Yet, increased positivity meant different things to each of them. See the following extract:

“If you have studied and you have an educated background and you go to work in this field I think you are much more competent in dealing with situations, especially in this field where there are lots of regulations and rules and you are dealing with human lives,... so to be educated in what to do and how to do the things, I think it is much better than just going at it as if it is a job, ‘cos it’s not a job at the end of the day”(A2.234).

Um it has given me more knowledge ....but for me for myself... I have gained more confidence for myself, its obviously never going to be a disadvantage never,... but an advantage in my life, its an advantage that I have confidence in myself.... that I am going to work in something that I love, and I am going to be able to deal with people in a way I want to, helping people, while working”(A2,332).

There is a great deal going on in this extract. Akila’s increased knowledge base gave her a greater sense of competency, which she felt was an essential asset to take into the workplace, one that would allow her to communicate and deal with others in a more professional manner. In addition, Akila viewed her improved self confidence as a personal benefit that would enhance all areas of her life.
Sub-ordinate theme: Accepting change

Increases in self-confidence allowed most participants to exorcise the feelings of negativity and pessimism they had carried from childhood into adult life. For Lynn, however, breaking down the negativity of the past was a much harder ordeal. When asked if participating had made her more confident she replied:

“Not really, I’m happy when I get a good grade but there is always the next one and always trying to keep it, and no, I do that and I’ll get a B and a D, what’s all that about, you know I managed it last time but I don’t know. I think I can do things well I thought that with the work I handed in. I think (lecturers name) marked it very leniently and I got a B and I thought, Oh my God, I put a bit of work together that flowed, that had the right elements in it, you know I completed it and I wrote 1500 words on a subject that I didn’t know much about a few months ago”(L2,89).

So did that raise your confidence? (interviewer)

“Yeah, but not for a long time because I am very, I don’t think I’m going to do well Umm I’m very pessimistic sadly, it is one of my downfalls, my husband hates it. I’m always a glass half empty” (L2,104).

Although she did experience a greater sense of confidence in her academic ability at times, it appeared to be short lived as exemplified by the above statement, where there is an abundant use of negative language. Even when Lynn achieved a good grade for a piece of work she put it down to lenient marking rather than a development in her academic ability.
When asked if her life so far was responsible for her lack of confidence her reply was both poignant and inspiring. Even though pessimism was a forerunner in Lynn’s present persona, there was a sense of optimism as she described the ‘little glimmer’

“Yeah... definitely it’s what makes you in it, experiences. I’m working on it I’m not...majorly... I do worry about it and Meg will tell you and she says ‘shut up, shut up will you, you know stop thinking like that’ but I do think like that, but I know there’s a little glimmer in the back of my head saying I can do it, if I try hard enough”(L2,117).

Lynn clearly stated the correlation between her earlier life experiences and her negative self-esteem. Yet in the interview she presented an image of herself as a ‘barrier’ to her studies. See Image 5 and accompanying dialogue:
“That’s me, I’m a barrier, I was going to take a photo... lack of self-confidence or lack of self-belief but I just thought I would shove that in there.

So that picture of you Lynn, is a barrier? (interviewer)

Yes lack of confidence, always thinking I can’t do it I’m not brainy enough, there you go, we’ll see” (L2.510).

She explained how she held herself mainly responsible for her feelings of low self-confidence. Note the way she uses the term ‘shoved that in there’, she is talking about a picture of herself in a very deprecating manner.

The legacy of pessimism that she had carried from childhood, caused by negative social and educational experiences, made it impossible for her to harbour positive emotions. Early negative relational social processes were the greatest contributor to her lack of confidence in her academic ability.

Similarly, the following extract from Lynn is another illustration of how acutely her self-esteem had been affected by early educational experiences:

“Because of my lack of confidence it’s always at the back of my mind.....failing. I don’t make a song and dance about passing.... I'm happy but that is at the back of my mind will I pass again? Have I got it in me to do this? But that’s just me, lack of confidence. Everybody around me says you can do it but I’m hoping I can but I think I may fail. (laugh) (L1,436).

Even though she had successfully completed her Foundation Year in HE, her confidence in her ability to learn was still in question as she uses negative terms such as ‘failing’ and
‘can’t do it’. Similarly she stresses that her doubts are ‘always at the back of my mind’ thus suggesting a fixed state to her negative mindset.

**Sub-ordinate theme: Changing relationships**

All of the participants expressed a sense of excitement and anticipation about the transitions that were taking place. However, they also explained other realities of the changes that had occurred that for some were more problematic.

Changes in attitude and interests were not restricted to influencing immediate relationships. Many of the participants experienced changes in their attitude towards members in their pre-existing wider social relationships:

“I am more on the same level of ...conversation, with the people I am in uni with as opposed to friends who didn’t have a lot of schooling or education and I find what I was discussing before was ....really quite boring, as to what I am discussing now and that is the difference I think” (S2,269).

The extract from Sandy illustrated her ease with the transition from her established friends to her university peers. She suggested that her education had taken her to a higher level of discussion, one that excluded her friends who ‘didn’t have a lot of schooling or education’.

She points out how pre-established friendships now bore her.

However for others the move away from pre-existing friends was a fraught process causing feelings of disloyalty and conflict. See the following from Chris:

“Oh yeah ...That's one of the things our lecturer said to us, in the Foundation Year, she said that “you will have different friends and different networks by the end of the Foundation Year and the way you
In contrast to Sandy, Chris exhibits an element of crisis or guilt towards her old friends caused by her ever expanding knowledge base. She discusses how her lecturer forewarned the students of potential changes in social relationships and how she rebuffed the idea, indicating the degree of discomfort she experienced. The participant continued:

“Well that’s was slightly misleading...you know. In that you don’t necessarily change your friends but yer network opens out more. You know what you are interested in, and although you talk to your friends who have been there for years, they are the same but in a lot of ways it’s like they are other people!” (C2.75)

The extract above exemplifies the conflict experienced by Chris as she acknowledges her changing interests have caused distance between her and her pre-existing friends. She is referring to individuals who had been constant in her life but were now like strangers to her.

[] “Like I said things we talk about now from when we were in the community centre,(laugh). When we were outside talking it would be just general, stuff, even though we were doing child psychology at the time it would be just a general chat, and to be honest you could get on to the blue side with all of them! If you know what I mean, (laugh). Whereas now I’m not saying we have forgotten that side of us but as well we will talk about more realistic things” (C2.97)

Above she refers to conversations she had with peers as she started her transition into education. The language she used suggested that she was concerned with change as she
introduces two selves. Pointing out that she had not forgotten her other side, indicated that she was reluctant for complete change and did not want completely to give up on her previous persona. The way she discussed the previous and present person suggested that there was internal conflict regarding the ever evolving Chris. Additionally, she used ‘we’ throughout rather than ‘I’ suggesting that the conflict experienced was not solely her own but shared by her peers who were going through the same transitional changes.

“[I] We were talking about the experiment they are doing now with older people which is my area. Whereas before at the start we wouldn’t have talked about that we would have been alright, talk about our first love, wrestling!! (laugh) or we would have talked about daily monotonous things you know all the time, whereas now although we talk about those things as well we talk about other things and you are more confident about talking about what you talk about, that’s not very good English to be honest is it (laugh) but I know you know what I mean” (C2,113).

Although she appeared to be reluctant to give up previous persona, she began in this extract to trivialise the discussions she would have had by using language like ‘little bits and pieces’ and ‘daily monotonous things’. In contrast, ‘relevant’ was the term she used to describe the type of conversations she experienced as a result of her intellectual status.

**Sub-ordinate theme: Revitalised sense of self**

Equally, John observed the upward trend of self-worth that he had experienced through participation.

“[I] I’m doing a degree! and the confidence, I was thinking to myself on the bike coming here today, yes, I did a quick assessment of myself, I’m confident, I’m happy, content so yes it’s all sort of increasing... my knowledge, new circle of friends, improved self-confidence, and all of
that actually has lowered my stress levels because I used to be quite an anxious person and it’s given me new drives as well, new goals, ambitions” (J2.93)

Even though he had completed the Foundation Year and the first year of his chosen course there was still an air of disbelief and pride at the fact that he was actually doing a degree course. This is demonstrated in the mental checklist he does. His enhanced mental state is also down to the fact that he feels that his life has purpose.

where I used to be a drinker ... no confidence without it whatever, the more I see I can do things, not that I miss alcohol anyway... but if you like, the more reason I’ve got not to drink and you know there are so many different positives to it I know what I have to lose but I also know what I’m capable of yeah... does that make sense? (laugh). It’s almost like the thing that alcohol made me feel at times initially that is... before it made me feel bad... the initial buzz of the alcohol is replaced by what the education has given me now” (J2.93).

Although the statement above is a description by John of his increased positivity, it was not a detached statement, it suggested that he still struggles with alcohol dependency but education seems to be a source of support that offers him coping strategies and reasons not to turn back to alcohol.

If a problem turned up with anything... you know medically or superficial, anything the bank the law... you know bodies that normally people would get nervous with or feel a bit anxious with I wouldn’t be able to face it without a drink... but now I embrace the challenge [...] So yes self- esteem, confidence, I just look at it now and think bring it on (laugh)” (J2.116).
As the description of his experiences unfolded it was apparent that he had become confident in his personal value resulting in individual happiness, contentment and reduced stress levels. Learning replaced the ‘buzz’ of alcohol and steered John towards new goals and ambitions in his life; it gave him improved strength of character allowing him to deal with and embrace issues that previously he would not have had the vigour to handle.

In the following extract John describes how he perceives that his social self has also changed:

“And there is another added factor you go in and you’ve got your leathers on (participant rides a motor bike) and you think they make assumptions they categorize you and all of a sudden it’s different. I remember being in (name of department store) and …..asking for some posh cheese and they looked at me and said (laugh) …Oh I’ll go and ask my supervisor, you get the element of surprise as well. They label me as though I know nothing and a biker and then all of a sudden they see I am a mild mannered semi educated person (laugh) Yes… yeah…totally different person”. (J2,125).

He uses the collective term ‘they’ and describes how ‘they’ made ‘assumptions’ and ‘categorizations’ about him. John’s belief that there was a ‘collective’ that he perceived to be passing judgement on him indicated just how low his sense of self-worth was.

The statement also exemplifies the change in his sense of social self because outwardly nothing has changed in John, he still wore his biker leathers so under his own assumptions ‘they’ would still see him as an uneducated biker. Thus illustrating that pre- participation it was John himself that categorised and judged himself. With an increased level of self-esteem it was now John himself who recognised the ‘mild mannered semi educated person’
The following extracts are further examples of the profound affect that education had on most of the individuals in the study. Meg reflected upon the ‘new me’ that had emerged since she had returned to education,

“I think even my daughter has recognised I am not going to be at her beck and call and I suddenly have this life of my own which is separated but interconnected with home life because you have to interweave between home and study as you would with home and work but yes, so I think I have grown on all levels” (M2.54).

In this extract she describes her previous self, one that existed solely for her daughter. She described personal growth and an independent life that gave her autonomy. These new found merits did not separate her however, from her existing role as a mother instead they gave her the capabilities to ‘interweave’ her new life with her pre-existing life.

“It’s like being reborn almost, so this is like the new me and whereas I used to be quite rigid in that I had to know exactly what was going on, what I was going to do next I am quite happy now to sit back and think I am going to do this finish this to the best of my ability and then see where I want to go from there.” (M2.91).

The use of the term ‘reborn’ emphasises the significant effect that education has had on Meg’s life. Through participation she felt that she had become a more fluid, less controlling individual. The new Meg had cast off her past legacy of always having to be organised and in command of her life. Education had given her a sense of freedom and release from her established roles as daughter, mother and employee and, as a result, she began to gain a more realistic and less critical view of her capabilities.
Additionally, Meg alluded to the evolutionary nature of the changes that had occurred, “I don’t think this is an end for me, definitely a beginning”. Similar to Chris in the previous extracts, Meg viewed the changes as a positive and ongoing process.

**Sub-ordinate theme: Change to a desired Self**

As previously indicated, pre-participation there was a sense of loss of ‘self’ or struggle with sense of ‘self’ amongst many of the participants. This became more and more evident as the data emerged, and it was particularly evident with Chris who presented a makeover self-portrait image in the second interview. This was an image that had been taken at a professional studio, whereby the participant had been stylised:

![Image 6: Make-over Self-portrait (Lynn)](image_url)

“It’s a sense that this person looks confident, this person looks put together, that is what I saw in the picture, I want to be this person like I
was... say when I was 20 or so. I want to be this person, confident, outgoing” (C2. 614).

The participant discussed her image in second person which immediately increased the distance between who she had been and who she felt she had become. Chris described how she felt as a person fragmented, and her aim was to regain the previous self she described:

“This is the person I want to be again, through education, like I said every year something different is happening slowly I don’t say I am totally going to be this person by the time I finish this degree but my education is moving towards the person I want to be. []I want my personality that I had when I was younger, ok it’s going to be changed, it’s going to be modified I’m not going to be the age I was, that’s not my expectation it’s just the joy for life and all that, that sort of thing, that’s what my end goal is. Ok I might not attain it until I’m 60 (laugh)” (C2,624).

On presenting the stylised image she began to talk about how she would like to become this woman again, although she is contradictory as she describes that she might never become this person. Her description depicts the transition or progression from her current self to the self she wants to become. She observed that it was going to be a slow process and one that may not achieve all of her wishes, but she emphasises that she wants to regain a joy or zest for living, and she anticipated that education would be the tool to help her achieve her aim.

**Ordinate theme: Powerful**

The universal belief of all of the participants in the study was that participating in higher education had a dramatic effect upon their lives. As it afforded each of them a sense of empowerment and satisfaction as they gained increased control over their own destiny.
Sub-ordinate theme: Awakening

Education offered the participants a sense of certainty and validation regarding their personal identity and their positioning in the wider social world. There was a sense of growth and awakening of the ‘self’ amongst all of the participants. I used the term ‘awakening’ because greater analysis of their descriptions indicated that there was a sense of dormancy amongst all of the individuals. Participation promoted self-development, Meg succinctly articulated this in the second interview:

“Oh it has definitely changed me I think I’m going back now to the person I wanted to be, I always felt I had it in me to do this and yes it has definitely proven to me that I can do it and I am the person that I thought I was, and I am actually now evolving into the person I wanted to be” (M2.31).

Meg created a narrative here that allowed her to make some sort of sense of the changes that were taking place. However the terms she uses highlight a number of issues. She is definite about the changes that had taken place, yet she suggests she is going back to a person that she wanted to be rather than who she was. For Meg, awakening of the self does not refer to the old self, for her it is a first chance at being someone that she believed she could be. An awakening of a self, that was within her, lying dormant until she took the steps to participate.

Akila described her own sense of growth and awakening:

“I think it open doors for you not uhh, beside job wise, but it broadens your uh prospects, thoughts, space, you understand more” (A2.90).

From this extract one is able to gain a good understanding of the substantive changes that occurred in Akila. She suggests that her whole outlook on life has been changed. It is as though through education her figurative net can be cast over a much wider range, to engulf
the benefits such as greater understanding and outlook on life that so many of the participants have referred to. Similarly John and Meg both used the word ‘broadened’ to describe the growth in their mental processes that were a direct result of participation.

There was also a belief amongst all in the study that they had become more tolerant and less judgemental of others. They expressed how they had an enhanced outlook on the world, and they believed that education was the lens through which they viewed it

“Just looking at things differently I always ummm... my lecturer is always saying you will change, this will change you... not who you are on a basic level, but how you think about things, it just teaches you to have a different look on things and she was right and I do”(L2,75).

“Really proving to myself that this was always going to be a route I was going to take. Alright it’s taken me 20 odd years more than it should have done but I think I’ve grown as a person [] Yes my outlooks have changed, my eyes are more on what is going on in the world, I think you get very sort of insular you sort of enveloped yourself in your life and don’t see much beyond that”(M2,31).

The extracts above describe the somewhat limited way in which the participants involved themselves in the public world pre-participation. All of the participants were surrounded or ‘enveloped’ by varying relational social processes, many of which were resultant of their life stage. Only when they stepped outside of their personal worlds to participate, did they begin to see the big picture of the public world.

**Sub-ordinate theme: New beginnings**

The feeling of increased control and autonomy that education offered all of the participants appeared to enhance their capabilities to make decisions about their personal or their direct dependents’ circumstances. For Chris, education was seen as a tool that would allow her to
remove herself and her children from the life she was living. She saw it as a way of breaking the legacy of alcohol that ran throughout her husband’s family, a chance to change harmful patterns for her children.

“Like I was saying, my husband got the alcohol problem, ... so if I didn’t do this, then that wouldn’t benefit him anyway because I wouldn’t be able to potentially get a better job and all that palaver (laugh) ummm ...” (C1.259).

As she spoke the initial premise of being the provider and getting a ‘better job’ to benefit her husband evolved into one that was focused on supporting herself and her children and potentially moving away from the husband.

“I think in the back of my mind sometimes, ...I think one of the motivations for doing this is ...if in a couple of years when I finish like, I will have the means then to do it on my own you know go off and support myself and the kids.. And that’s one of my motivations if I’m honest, because I don’t want my boys growing up and seeing him drinking and drinking, because we have had that in the family. ‘Cos his father was an alcoholic and his brother was.... so I don’t want my boys going that way” (C1.262).

Education has become the motivation for Chris to potentially start afresh. She felt empowered, by gaining a bank of resources that could rid her life and her dependents’ lives of the self-fulfilling prophecy of alcoholism.

John also discussed how education had enhanced his capabilities in dealing with life issues, as a functioning alcoholic he drank to deal with stress and his over developed lacklustre for life. See Image 7 and the accompanying dialogue:
Image 7: No need for alcohol

“Yes I always said I can’t see anything making me go back to the bottle and even the loss or death of my wife it would be a maybe, I would still have my knowledge to hang on to. Although I would probably share a bottle of scotch with her and go on to the Netherworld with her. (laugh) ....With the activities of the education I find I don’t need alcohol. I don’t crave it. Education is an outlet, alternative not a pastime but when I drank I was stressed bored something to do. But now I can literally think through it.....Now I don’t need it. I don’t get bored” (J2,472).

Through education he became better equipped and able to cope with life issues without returning to the bottle. In this extract he has taken ownership of his education, the extent to which John sees knowledge as saving him from his previous alcoholic life is seen here as
he suggests that he would always have ‘knowledge to hang on to’. The new beginning for
John is the ability to rationalise and think through things without using an alcoholic crutch.

**Sub-ordinate theme: Breaking the cycle**

All of the participants believed that education would afford them financial independence
and a successful life that would they could filter down to their dependents.

“Yeah I want to better myself really and be working. I mean there’s
nothing wrong with working in Asda and Tesco but I wanted to have
uhh a better job, better life maybe, and I want to better myself and
hopefully have a make a better life for them if it’s not too late, because
they will be out working before long(L2,340).

Lynn believed that participation would enable her to improve her social status by
embarking on a different career. Yet inner conflict regarding her past and potential future
social status was apparent as her statement went from wanting to better herself, to
defending shop work, then again referring to bettering herself. Her tone became more
urgent, as she described her perception of a small window of opportunity to achieve this, as
her children would soon be in a position to self support and her role of provider would be
redundant.

Improving the family’s financial situation was particularly important to each of them, as all
had experienced finance related struggles in their early and adult lives. As already
established, most of the participants had little or no opportunity of attending university at
the traditional life stage due to their socio-economic class. For example Sandy commented
that even though she felt that she had the academic capability she could not consider
university in her younger adult years, because of her family’s financial status. Economic
capital was still a serious concern for Sandy. See Image 8 and her accompanying
statement:
Image 8: Cash Machine Sign

“Ok ....right and last but not least, this is definitely a barrier, this is a picture of the cash machine.... because (name) was self-employed, and back last year when we started having all that trouble with the economy, he’s a plumber, he couldn’t get work, then he had the stroke, so he still hasn’t been able to work, so we virtually lived off what little savings we had, ....So of course I can’t wait for the 27th now because that is all we have to live off, only my student’s grant, so that is a big barrier but I am not going to ever let it stop me learning, I’d go without rather than stop.....”(S2,406).

Hampered by financial challenges earlier in life meant that Sandy felt deprived of higher education. The inability to realise her learning potential earlier in life meant that Sandy was even more determined to continue with her education in her present life stage. Although financial struggle and worries were still very much present, she was not prepared to allow them to come between her and her studies a second time.
Sandy also believed that education would allow her to gain a better standard of living via employment. Interestingly she was the oldest participant in the study, aged 60. At an age that many people would be considering the option of retirement and winding down their careers, education had given Sandy a second chance at a career. She spoke of being ‘marketable’ especially in the health and social care field, an area that she was particularly interested in.

Meg was equally committed to her education as exhibited in the following extract:

“I thought I’m thinking of not getting a job and going to University and my sister said “well can you afford to do that?” and I said “well at this minute no, I’ll have to work as well”. And that’s when she said she was moving to (names town), and she moved to (names town) and I hadn’t actually considered.... but my sister gave me a room for a while so I stayed there until I found a place of my own, nice little one bed roomed... two minutes from my daughter and I thought well blimey I can do this. I can go to the family for meals I’ll be a scavenger and yeah within, lets see, it was Christmas, I became unemployed over Christmas which was a bit of a blow but I thought I’ll enjoy Christmas and New Year, and look afterwards. I got myself a little temporary job while I applied here and then I got here and I thought I’m away and I haven’t regretted anything . If I can’t put food on my table, that’s fine I’ll go and eat at my daughter’s it has been unique, you’ve got to put that down to here but it was circumstance everything happened at once, so I thought this is it. Something is telling me this is my time”(M1,288).

So determined was she to enter university after losing her employment, Meg initially had to experience a serious decline in her independent finances. Even though Meg had always
been a financially independent self-sufficient woman, she was not deterred by these events; instead she became encouraged and felt able to call on the help of others to help her in her pursuit. The description that she gives, whilst powerful, also suggests the humbling effect that participating in HE had on her.

**Sub-ordinate theme: One chance and one chance only**

Equally the age and life stage of the participants added to their sense of urgency and determination to complete their HE journey. A common thread that ran throughout was that they would only have one opportunity to participate in higher education;

“*Because its like basically, it is your last chance, I mean some people like the younger ones, they can go back later in life whereas, you know at my stage of life it is like either now or never sort of thing (laugh)*” (C2.193).

“I’m 43 now and if I fail this time I won’t be able to come back and do it another time, you have to realise, this is my last shot because learning you go on, but what I want to do, what I want to achieve I have got to do it now, no messing around, no late nights, no out drinking, partying, focus, do the job and you know and I will be happy then” (L2.151)

The statements again emphasize the importance of life stage on participation. They are also representative of the perceptions of many of the participants in the study, that younger students would have the opportunity to participate again later in life if they failed or wanted to simply withdraw from their course, whereas, they would only ever be permitted one chance at studying due to their age. Note the use of language such as ‘*now or never*’ (C2.193) and ‘*you have to realise, this is my last shot*’ (L2.151) it denotes a sense of finality.
Sub-ordinate theme: New communication patterns

Participants described how a broadened outlook on life also led to increased inner calmness or contentedness which enabled them to deal with confrontations and setbacks as a normal course of events rather than viewing them as personal failings, for instance:

“I am a completely different person I seem to take absolutely everything in my stride. Like with my daughter, we have never had major problems but we can sit for hours and talk now whereas going two years ago the pressures of work and everything else ...I don’t think there is anything that you can throw at me now, I will take it in my stride” (M1,229).

Meg described how communication patterns had changed between her and her daughter. Pre-participation, her statement suggests that life pressures often made the task of talking to her daughter problematic.

Similarly for Chris changes in attitude to life and particularly to her spousal relationship allowed her to articulate her viewpoint in discussions rather than kowtowing to her husband as she had previously done:

“Umm I have always been like someone who will challenge things but as I said before my husband is like, an alcoholic, and although I am quite quiet around him to a certain degree because when he drinks he talks a load of rubbish mostly, whereas before, I would be ‘alright love’, or ‘ok love’” (C2.130).

Although Chris may have previously been the type of person to question and stand up for herself, this part of her had clearly been affected, by living with her husband who was alcohol dependent. Because he was often under the influence of drink she felt that it was easier to placate him rather than challenge him.
“But now there have been times when we have been talking about social stuff, and he would be adamant that he is right and I know I’m right these days, and I will argue to a certain point and then think it’s not worth arguing, it’s not getting through to him, but at the same time, I know I’m right, its ok you know, but I know I’m right (laugh ’’(C2,135).

Note the new found sense of self-certainty and confidence that she now experienced as she states over and over that she is ‘right’. Her communication pattern with her husband had changed from one that was submissive to one that was more assertive and self-assured.

Additionally, participants described how changes to the ways in which they communicate had enhanced their close personal relationships that had previously been in a state of decline.

“It’s funny she’s interested in very similar things to me now, never used to be. It has brought us together yeah umm physically and mentally. I am spending more time with her not working shifts I worked nights and days so physically I am spending more time together, we don’t argue, very rarely do we have disagreements but mentally prior to uni there are things we would never have discussed before, but now we do, quite in depth conversations as well” (J2,444).

John’s relationship with his wife had become more involved since his participation in HE. He refers to physical closeness and also mental compatibility brought about by his new interests, what is more the quality or level of conversation between the couple has deepened.
Sub-ordinate theme: Be(com)ing an inspiration to the kids

For most of the participants their children and/or grandchildren were seen as motivational contributing to their desire to successfully participate. See Image 9 and the accompanying dialogue:

"I wanted to make my kids proud you know [] Photo 4(Image 9), is my kids, I have put them motivation and barrier because I want to do something they will be proud of"(L2.214).

Lynn believed that gaining a higher education would elicit pride from her children. She stated that the children were both motivations and barriers to her studies:

"She’s pretty full on (names child) is, she is my oldest daughter but she likes to be mothered a lot, she wants my attention, every minute of the day”(L2.408).
The children motivated Lynn in as much as she wanted to raise the social status of her family and be seen as a positive role model. Yet, they were also a barrier to achieving her goals because of the amount of energy she had to invest in them.

All of the participants viewed their education as their own venture, but all, like Lynn, acknowledged that a substantial part of it was to be viewed as a positive role model by their dependents:

“My grandson – he’s my motivator, he can be a bit of both though (a barrier too) can’t he because, I want to do well for him, he’s my only grandchild, never thought I’d ever see a grandchild because my daughter was anorexic and she used to self-harm and everything, I didn’t think she would ever come out of it,…. but there you are she is happy now and she has got this gorgeous little boy and he’s my life he is, so I want to do everything for him so he does motivate me” (S2,313).

“but it literally took all my focus (Meg refers to motherhood) which has made me the person I am, but it is definitely a barrier to any form of further education, because as you are well aware, I have only got one (refers to daughter) but she’s also a motivation because I am trying to improve my life to improve the family’s life”(M2,152).

“[J] and my granddaughter, little (name) which has brought another line to things I can’t go backwards… I have to go forwards because I have someone else looking to me or whatever” (J2,420)

The extracts above also draw attention to the ways in which barriers to learning such as children or motherhood can also become the motivation for learning. Furthermore, the language that the participants use for instance, “I am trying to improve my life to improve
the family’s life” or, “I have to go forwards because I have someone else looking to me” emphasise how much accountability to others, they carry with them on their learning journey.

Chris also described part of the rationale for her gaining a higher education:

“[]but I want them to see they have options in their life, that they don’t have to just go out and go to work and things like that . ...they can you know... (child’s name) wants to be a footballer, I say fine he can be a footballer but if you want to do other things you still have to learn, for outside football, but yeah so I want them to see it as a positive, it’s like you’re going to school, I’m going to school now this is the way it is...you know I’ve got to get you to school before I go and it’s something you can do ...then as I get older whatever I do with my degree, I can say if you do this you can get success out of your life”(C2,709).

This extract illustrates that the main concern of the participant was to inspire her children she described how she wanted to prove to her children by participating, that education had the potential to give them a life with both options and success.

The burden of trying to achieve and prove to those who are dependent upon you, that education will set you apart, is a facet to study that traditional students would be unlikely to experience. All of the statements pose the overwhelming meaning of family to the participants and reflect the pushes and pulls of trying to participate at this stage of life.
Part two: Discussion of Results

Super-ordinate theme: Education the transformer - powerless to powerful

This super-ordinate theme revealed the transitional changes that took place in all of the participants in this study as a result of participating in HE. Each described feelings of powerlessness pre-participation and a changing sense of self and identity as they embraced their individual learning process.

This over-arching theme captured most strongly a sense of journey as participants described and attempted to make sense of life events and feelings from early childhood to present. The phrase ‘powerless to powerful’ also represents the dramatic personal changes that had occurred in each of the individuals as a result of participation. These transitions were by no means straightforward and participants described how they experienced conflict, anxiety and guilt as a result of the changes. However, with tenacity and persistence the participants appeared to be able to navigate their way through their multiple responsibilities and transitions, and revealed that once again, or even for the first time, they felt autonomous and empowered as individuals.

Ordinate theme: Powerless

In the ordinate theme ‘powerless’ the participants described how, pre-participation, they lacked autonomy and self-governance. They attributed their sense of powerlessness to relational social processes occurring throughout their life-span.

In this first sub-ordinate theme ‘lack of confidence’ participants described how they lacked confidence in their own abilities and experienced feelings of failure pre-participation. This area is commonly referred to in the WP discourse, with early education and family
background positioned as the most significant influences on these negative states (Cross, 1981; Fuller et al., 2008; Gorard et al., 2007). In accordance with the literature some of the participants in this study referred back to early childhood and ascribed their lack of confidence to these same issues.

Consistent with Ramsay’s (2004) findings, some of the participants described how their lack of attainment in their initial schooling made them feel like failures as individuals. Furthermore, they appeared to be unable to break free from the state negativity and feelings of inadequacy from their earliest educational experiences which appeared to have become deeply embedded within their sense of self. Gorard et al. (2007) argued that early schooling was a crucial factor in shaping long term learning identities and orientations. This observation is certainly resonant of some of the participants in this study. Yet further to this one can draw upon the idea of the self-fulfilling prophecy (Douglas, 1964) where the effect of a teacher’s attitude and behaviour is positioned as having a direct effect on the pupil’s subsequent overall adult status or identity. If you are brought up being told by influential adults such as parents and educators that you are unintelligent and incapable one would expect the individual’s confidence to be low. The perceived neglect by early educational professionals to acknowledge and act strategically and with compassion to the learning needs of their pupils laid the foundation for what may be described as a fractured, negative and enduring personal identity.

Other than early education participants also attributed lack of confidence in their own abilities to their parents’ expectations and attitudes. Some recalled instances of parental negativity and ambiguity towards education and more specifically their own child’s capability to succeed in education. This finding is in line with Bourdieu and Passeron’s (2000) cultural capital concept which indicates that family background affects children by defining their attitude to education. For these authors children from a higher class have the
power to adopt the values of the dominant culture and develop appropriate expectations and desires for schooling that are different from those coming from a lower class.

In keeping with Bourdieu’s theory of habitus (1990) and more recent research by Bowl (2001) and Waller Bovill and Pitt (2011), the narratives of some participants in this study demonstrated that family background was influential in terms of their lack of confidence and educational expectation. Low self-confidence resultant of early life determinants is undeniably a facet of many non-traditional student identities as the data from this and many other studies suggest. However, as evidence from the present study suggests it is an individual state and not a ‘blanket state’ of all non-traditional students from working class backgrounds.

Although in some ways Bourdieu’s (1990) idea of cultural capital serves to homogenise all those from working class backgrounds, it does not account for individuality within a class. Instead, it makes the assumption that all working class students lack cultural capital. Findings from this study challenge this aspect of cultural capital theory. For example Meg, Sandy, and Chris who all come from working class backgrounds described how their working class parents valued education and encouraged them from an early age to embrace it. They described parents who did not necessarily have in-depth knowledge of education themselves (which may be explained as a lack of cultural capital), yet, in spite of this they were able to generate a sense of confidence and a sense of entitlement to education in their offspring.

The sub-ordinate theme ‘beyond their control’ was derived from the narratives of the participants who had described positive early education experiences and supportive parents. For these participants it was not so much about a lack of cultural capital but more about a lack of economic capital. All admitted to being hampered by the material element
associated with their class and described being held back and restrained by their social class. They described how they lacked autonomy and control in their lives. Ultimately this resulted in non-participation at the traditional time. The similarities between the accounts support Plummer’s (2000) point that those individuals coming from a working class background are expected to support themselves or contribute financially to the family at an age where middle class individuals are traditionally seeking out HE. Similarly, Vignoles and Crawford (2010) acknowledge that children from disadvantaged backgrounds are less likely to go to university than more advantaged children. They suggest that the gap in HE participation rates between free school meal and non-free school meal pupils is substantive. Yet in contrast to Plummer’s (2000) argument, and the narratives of the individuals in this research, Vignoles and Crawford’s (2010) analysis indicated that levels of academic achievement were the biggest predictors of participation; students with similar levels of achievement in secondary school were seen to be equally likely to participate, regardless of their financial situation. However, they also found that poorer children were more likely to attend lower achieving secondary schools which were likely to impact upon their academic achievement (Vignoles and Crawford, 2010). It could be argued that Vignoles and Crawford’s (2010) study offers findings that conflict with one another. On the one hand they posit that financial status has less bearing on an individual’s chance of participating than their academic level and abilities, yet they say that poorer individuals are more likely to attend poorer quality high schools which, by their admittance can affect their attainment levels. In some ways Vignoles and Crawford (2010) are describing a ‘chicken and egg’ scenario. While the academic achievement is undoubtedly the main predicator of continuing in education this adopts a highly meritocratic conception of the education system and ignores how both material and cultural factors impinge upon a person’s chances of being academically successful.
This corresponds with the discourse of some of the participants in this study who were academic achievers in compulsory education but prevented from realising their academic potential at the traditional age because of financial restraints.

In addition to all of the factors mentioned, the participant narratives also revealed that established caring roles and responsibilities contributed substantially to their feelings of pre-participation powerlessness. For some, filial care roles and responsibilities contributed to this state. For others they were sandwiched between caring for their elderly parents and their children and partners. Daly and Lewis’ (2000) concept of care is noteworthy here. They describe care as labour, care as social and relational and care as an action that incurs both financial and emotional costs. Alsop, Gonzalez-Arnal and Kilkey (2008) add to the above understanding of care by suggesting that it also involves a moral orientation particularly in relation to the family.

There appeared to be limited interest within the non-traditional student literature related to the sub-ordinate theme ‘filial responsibilities’ and the restrictive effect this can have on the individual. This may be due to the discourse focusing on adults aged eighteen to thirty years of age and it is unlikely that this demographic would experience looking after elderly parents. However, in Mercer and Saunders’ (2004, also see Mercer, 2010 ) study it is emphasised that it is likely that older students may have more established and longer standing commitments than their younger counterparts, and caring for elderly parents could be one of them. This was certainly true of the adults in this study. Having this added responsibility left them feeling bound in their personal world and unable to undertake any new pursuits. Interestingly, it was the male participant who appeared to struggle the most. Even though he was a parent it was apparent that the care responsibility for his aged parents caused him more stress. There may be many reasons for this tied up in historical relationship experiences that one would not attempt to unravel. However, one contributing
factor may be due to the traditional roles that men and women adhere to when bringing up their offspring. For this participant it could be that caring for his parents was his first experience of the ‘greedy institutions’ to which authors such as Edwards (1993) and Gouthro (2005) refer to.

The sub-ordinate theme ‘being a mum just isn’t enough’ captures the feelings of those female participants who described the multidimensional care costs of the motherhood role. Their narratives explained these costs in terms of emotional, physical and identity elements thus complementing the research of Alsop, Gonzalez-Arnal and Kilkey (2008) and Wainright and Marandet (2010). The similarities between the participants’ accounts in this study are broadly comparable with those of other studies that explore the experiences of mature student carers, for example, Reay (2003), Edwards (1993) and Blair, Cline and Wallis (2010).

There were several elements which seemed to emerge from the narratives and all appeared to promote a sense of conflict within the participants. This state appeared to originate from attempting to do justice to their carer’s role while wrestling with a need to regain something from within. In their study, Alsop, Gonzalez-Arnal and Kilkey (2008) suggest that some aspects of being a mature student carer are deeply gendered. This was confirmed by the present research as the five women who were either partially or fully responsible for their children (the level of responsibility depended on the age of the children) alluded to feelings of guilt and conflict for wanting to pursue activities outside their personal worlds.

Analysis revealed a sacrificial element to motherhood. Participants explained how they felt that their individual needs should be set aside for the needs of their children. The abandonment of their own desires and wants left the women feeling as though they had relinquished their own identities and sense of self. This ties in with what Edwards (1993) and Coser and Coser (1974) describe as a cultural mandate which requires a woman to give
full and total commitment to her dependents. The women explained that it was unacceptable to consider personal pursuits when their children were younger and more dependent upon them, although they did not verbalise why it was unacceptable. Reay (2003) refers to the feelings above as ‘costs’ and suggests that they are commonly experienced in groups for whom self-interest is not normative. Taking into consideration Reay’s (2003) argument it explains why the women in this present study experienced guilt and distress for wanting to do something themselves.

It was simply accepted by the women that it was their obligation to be primary carer whether they were living with partners or not. This is a similar finding to that of McCune et al. (2010) and Reay (2003). These authors propose that there is an interaction between class, gender and age and the sense of duty towards dependents. The females in this study laid claim to a strong sense of duty to their children corresponding with Alsop, Gonzalez-Arnal and Kilkey (2008) who suggest that females perceive that their caring role is a duty which remains with them even when they attempt to take on other roles.

A further significant finding of this study is that the females specifically mentioned that motherhood was not enough for them. Interestingly, the participants’ children were no longer at an age where they were solely dependent upon them as their ages ranged from middle childhood to early adulthood. What the women were describing was a sense of redundancy from their role; as the children became more independent the women became dissatisfied, unsure of who they were, all of which contributed to their sense of powerlessness. This seems to be consistent with the views of Walters (2000) who argues that any changes to a role can cause difficulties resulting in feelings of uselessness.

Of all of the findings related to this sub-ordinate theme, admitting that motherhood was not enough appeared to cause the women the most anguish. It was as though the women felt
that they were betraying their offspring in some way by admitting this. The role of motherhood is a particularly deep and emotional commitment for the majority of women; it is a role bound up in cultural and societal demands and expectations and it was the desire to break free from this role that generated feelings of guilt and distress in each of the individuals. This finding corresponds with Leathwood and her colleagues (2001) who found that the women in their study spoke of feelings of guilt brought on by a sense that the need or wish to move beyond one’s position is somehow wrong. Motherhood was an important and valued role for all of the women in this study but similar to the participants in both the study above and a later one by O’Shea and Stone (2011) they also sought personal independence and freedom beyond the realms of caring for their children.

**Ordinate theme: Genesis**

The second ordinate theme which emerged in the study ‘genesis’, concentrates on the beginning stages of the profound growth and change that participants experienced when engaging with HE. Similar to the participants in Bowl’s (2001) study, the participants in this study linked learning to their enhanced sense of self and improved social status. For most it was the first time in their lives that they had experienced such feelings. For some these changes were freely accepted whilst for others there were initial feelings of unease. The sense of conflict was fuelled by having to accept or reject the consequences of change.

The sub-ordinate theme ‘a changing sense of self” described how education had made each of them feel liberated and more confident in their own abilities. This finding is congruent with research by McGivney (2006); Brine and Waller (2004); O’Shea and Stone (2011) and Mercer (2010) who have all demonstrated a link between participation and increases in self-confidence. Participants explained how they felt more competent and optimistic and all linked these feelings of well-being to their engagement with HE.
Indeed, the positive benefits of participation are reason to celebrate, however, as Mercer (2010) notes, change can also involve struggle and loss and to focus purely on the constructive aspects of participation oversimplifies the challenging nature of self-development. In accordance with Mercer’s findings (2010), the sub-ordinate theme ‘accepting change’ illustrates how transitions in the self are not always readily or easily accepted by an individual. For some, deeply entrenched feelings of negativity and pessimism derived from early and adult life experiences meant that the positive effects of academic achievement were short-lived. Lynn described how she, like her peers, experienced a surge of confidence as she proved herself academically. Yet for her the state was transitory and she quickly relapsed to feelings of personal inadequacy. Her lack of expectation to perform well superseded any positive feelings. This finding corresponds with Askham (2008) who described the phenomenon as a ‘cycle of failure’ (p.92).

Dealing with the changes to the ‘self’ caused problems at an individual level, but participants also described how changes to their assumptions and views also spilled over into their social worlds, thus affecting their pre-existing relationships. Their views were captured by the sub-ordinate theme ‘changing relationships’. Here one participant described how she felt that she no longer had anything in common with her friends. The relationship distance that had occurred left her with feelings of disloyalty and guilt, thus corresponding with findings from authors such as Brine and Waller (2004); Bamber and Tett (2000) and Chapman, Parmar and Trotter (2007). From the participant’s narrative one could interpret that as her knowledge base and confidence expanded she needed to associate with like-minded people but the pull towards her old friends still existed. Baxter and Britton (2001) refer to students experiencing feelings of superiority to their friends and family; in contrast, this participant appeared to be experiencing conflict rather than feelings of superiority. However for other participants changes to existing relationships caused far
fewer problems. One explained rather bluntly that she had outgrown her old friendships. Her increasing knowledge base and increased confidence resulted in her feeling bored with the topics of conversation she had with her old friends. This finding, in many ways, mirrors Baxter and Britton’s (2001) theory of the ‘superior’ student.

The above emphasizes the complicated and subjective nature of personal change. Although some struggled with the transitions, most embraced the contrasting aspects involved and described how participation had impacted upon how they perceived themselves. Education had become the tool to rejuvenate a self that had become damaged by preceding life events and traumas. The sub-ordinate theme ‘Revitalised sense of self’ discerns an idea that education impacted on the way in which participants perceived themselves. They felt more adept and more worthy as individuals in both their personal and social worlds. This finding corresponds with Brine and Waller (2004) who noted that positive self-development and self-worth were the reward for those individuals who negotiate the transitions that accompany participation. Findings suggested that individuals in this study experienced a renewed or invigorated existence and it was this newly found zest for life that by their own admittance had reduced stress levels and enhanced their coping strategies. Thus this finding supports the idea that education has a reparative nature (Walters, 2000).

In the sub-ordinate theme ‘change to a desired self’ the participants claimed that participation offered them a ‘second chance’. Waller (2004) and Fenge (2011) noted that many mature learners who had limited opportunities or felt they had not been encouraged in compulsory education described participation in HE as a second chance or, as Fenge puts it, a ‘second bite at the apple’ (2011, p.381). For the participants in this study ‘second chance’ meant so much more. It was not simply about fulfilling untapped academic potential; what they were referring to was a second chance at life; they wanted to re-orientate themselves with aspects of a previous self that had been altered and affected by
their life experiences. They also saw it as an opportunity to evolve and grow as individuals. This is similar to research findings of Walters (2000) who suggests that motivation for learning amongst older students can be associated with a need to change aspects of the self. The participants in the present study likened the changes taking place to a feeling of being ‘reborn’. Walters’ participants also claimed that the process was similar to being ‘born-again’, as the author states ‘it was a movement toward self-actualisation’ (2000, p.277).

**Ordinate theme: Powerful**

Moving toward self-actualisation was certainly true for all of the individuals in this study. Through education they were essentially realizing for the first time their fullest potential as individuals. The participants felt that they were becoming everything that they were capable of becoming (Maslow, 1954). This idea led to the sub-ordinate theme ‘awakening’. Participants’ narratives described a sense of dormancy in their pre-participation lives. Through education they had begun to prove to themselves that they were capable individuals and they had begun to believe in themselves. The changes that had begun to occur made them realise they were as good as the next person, thus fostering a sense of personal belief and validation. These outcomes were similar to those found by Swain and Hammond (2011). The participants’ whole outlook on life had begun to change as their attitudes and mental processes broadened. That is not to say that their capabilities and mental processes were not already in existence, but by their own admittance, they had previously been buried deep within their identities in an underdeveloped or unexpressed form.

Increased coping skills, and an increased motivation to take control of and change their personal circumstances was experienced by all of the participants. The sub-ordinate theme ‘new beginnings’ related to the participants’ perceptions of increased autonomy and self-
governance over their futures. The participants powerfully articulated how personal
development fostered by participation had a transformative impact upon their personal
worlds. Learning had entered into and begun to change aspects of their personal worlds.

Again I draw upon Walters’ (2000) notion of the reparative nature of education to illustrate
how the participants saw it as a way to solve issues in their personal worlds. Chris saw it as
a route of escape for her and her children; she felt empowered with the idea that she would
be able to financially support her children if her marital relationship broke down. More
than this she believed that her own education could potentially ‘protect’ her children by
carving a route away from life patterns and habits in her family that she perceived as
detrimental. As she put it, she would have the means ‘to do it on my own’. Similarly, John
positioned education as a ‘safeguard’ that had offered a bank of coping resources that
prevented him from returning to negative behaviour patterns that had severely damaged his
previous sense of self. Education meant so much more than academic achievement to
these individuals; it gave them the resilience and self-belief to address challenging and
difficult areas of their personal lives (Waller, Bovill and Pitt, 2011).

Education was not only reparative it was described as the ‘step up’ to a new life. All but
one of the participants in this study self-identified as working class and commented on the
absence of economic capital throughout their lives. This led to the sub-ordinate theme
‘breaking the cycle’ which explains how the individuals viewed their learner identity as a
potential route to social mobility. Bourdieu (1990) offers the concept of ‘habitus’
describing it as a system of dispositions that are developed in response to external social
conditions. Crozier, Reay and Clayton (2010, p.108) build upon Bourdieu’s concept
suggesting “Habitus is a dynamic concept, a rich interlacing of past and present, individual
and collective”. Working within a Bourdieuan framework, the participants in the present
study were attempting to transform their ‘habitus’. They were attempting to change their
own and their offsprings’ life paths, change the cards that early life and socialisation had dealt them. Such transformative endeavours have been described as ‘creative adaptation’ (Crozier, Reay and Clayton, 2010).

Empowered and motivated by participation all participants had started to envisage personal social mobility for their self and their dependants, whereby potential career opportunities would elevate them from one class to another. Leathwood and O’Connell (2003) and Wainwright and Marendet (2010) refer to such promotions as inter-generational mobility.

The narratives of the participants in this study also revealed a sense of urgency and determination which led to the sub-ordinate theme ‘one chance and one chance only’. The theme was born out of the question I asked regarding whether there were disadvantages in being a mature student. A common perception amongst all of them was that participation was a once in a lifetime, one chance opportunity to ‘make good’ and it was clear from their discourse that they would allow nothing to come between them and their goal. This finding was not exclusive to those with young children; the most senior of the participants were equally resolute. The combination of factors that led them to their ‘window of opportunity’ was varied. For some there was a sense of unfulfilment; others had experienced redundancy; other factors such as dependants reaching school age or becoming less dependent had influenced their decision to participate at this specific time. Waller (2006) argues that the precise factors that determine the right time to return to study cannot always be explained satisfactorily. This study has emphasised the highly individualised nature of the issues that motivated each of the individuals to participate at such particular times, thus substantiating Waller’s (2006) findings.

In addition to the findings above the participants also attributed changes to the way they interacted within their personal relationships to their empowered state. The sub-ordinate
theme ‘new communication patterns’ concentrates on how participants made sense of these changes. They described how increases in their personal well-being promoted feelings within them such as tolerance and inner-calm and these states had contributed to a ‘bridge building’ process between the individuals and their family members. This was particularly so for Meg and John who explained that the new found calm and confidence within had prompted new ways of communicating with their loved ones. The literature talks about the way returning to learning can threaten relationships (Waller, Bovill and Pitt, 2011) and whilst I acknowledge that this is certainly a valid point, this research demonstrates that returning to learning; also has the potential to restore and regenerate relationships that had overtime consciously or unconsciously broken down. Equally academic success and the self-belief that accompanied this, was described as the catalyst for changing the power relations in Chris’s spousal relationship. The participant made sense of the way in which the couple had previously communicated suggesting that her role was both submissive and placatory; she described how through education she had become more self-assured and challenging in her communication pattern.

The sub-ordinate theme ‘be(com)ing an inspiration to the kids’ explains how the participants, fortified and empowered with their new found sense of validity and self-worth, perceived themselves as positive role models for their dependants. All explained how they were motivated to succeed in HE by their children or grandchildren. It was established from the participants’ dialogues that there was a perceived need to be successful for their children; to make them proud. There was a universal belief amongst the individuals that their dependants would become inspired by their pursuits. This corresponds with findings from Wainwright and Marendet (2010) who explored the impacts of university learning on the self and the family. In a similar way the authors suggested that parents’ participation in HE had a perceived impact on their children in terms of raising their aspirations. Moss (2004) and Reay (2003) both acknowledged that
women place greater emphasis on becoming an inspirational figure to their children than men. This study contradicts their conclusions as this was one area where there appeared to be no gender divide; the male and the females in this study all stated that they wanted to inspire or ‘do it’ for their young.

That is not to say there was no gender divides present: for example, it was only the female participants who commented that although their children were a driving force to their participation, they were equally a hindrance to their studies because of the amount of time that they had to invest in caring for them. The women had begun a process of individualisation by making a choice to participate, but as authors such as Edwards (1993); Alsop, Gonzalez-Arnal and Kilkey (2008) and Reay (2003) conclude, the impact of family commitments leave women in a constant balancing act between studying and fulfilling their personal commitments. Thus for the women in this study individualisation was woven and intertwined with their obligation to ensure that their domestic and care responsibilities were fulfilled. It appeared then that these women had choice but did not have equality.

Overall, it was evident from the data that returning to education had been a positive experience for all of the participants and had enhanced their lives in numerous ways. The many positive outcomes that the individuals gained from their studies can be regarded as forms of social and cultural capital as championed by Bourdieu (1990). Furthermore it would appear that their decision to participate was encouraged by a number of both personal and public factors. The transitions that the participants experienced were multi-faceted and complex and were often accompanied by conflict. Yet the personal benefits outweighed the disadvantages, and participants referred to the ways in which they had grown and developed as individuals. They all described how they had begun to look at society as a whole, and their own social lives through a new lens. Ultimately, participation had stimulated and stirred the individuals, offering all of them a broader outlook, a fresh sense of enthusiasm and a greater passion for life.
Chapter 6: Results

Chapter 5 discussed the participants’ journeys from childhood to mid-life, and the ways in which, past and present relational social processes served to influence their individual transitions on to and their engagement with HE. Chapter 6 discusses the participants’ individual experiences of participation in HE.

As with Chapter 5, this chapter is presented in two sections; Part one: Analysis and Part two: Discussion.

Part one: Analysis

Super-ordinate theme: Participation: the experience so far

This super-ordinate ‘participation - the experience so far’ theme explores how the participants positioned themselves within HE. There was a common perception amongst the participants that their age, life experiences roles and responsibilities contributed both positively and negatively to the process of participation.

The first ordinate theme ‘Older and Younger Student Divide’ contains 6 sub-ordinate themes that describe the ways in which the participants from this study position themselves separately from the younger students in HE.

The second ordinate theme ‘Overlooked by Institution’ contains two sub-ordinate themes that describe the ways in which the participants felt neglected or let down by the institution itself.

The final ordinate theme ‘Sources of Support’ contains three sub-ordinate themes that explored the different sources and types of support that the participants received during their participation.
Ordinate theme: Older and younger student divide

The participants in this study all referred to more than a degree of distance between themselves as older students and their younger counterparts. This was first noted in the terms that they used to describe the traditional students such as ‘teenagers’, ‘kids’ and even ‘drinking students’. However the division between the two groups was complex and appeared to be the result of a number of factors. Equally, the analysis of the transcripts revealed that whilst participants spoke of divergences between older and younger students, they were also revealing important feelings about their own age and life stage and the development this afforded them.

Sub-ordinate theme: Motivated by life

There was a common belief amongst participants that they were more motivated to engage in the learning process than their younger peers. Whilst the factors that made the participants feel more committed to their studies varied, there was a consensus that their previous life experiences were instrumental in motivating them to learn. This is discussed by Meg in the following extract, as she describes the ‘get on with it’ attitude of mature students:

“motivation I think, just get on and do it, I can’t speak for the men but I know most of the women that I boarded with last year, everything we have gone through - all sorts - but the one common element was that university was a little bit of an a oasis apart from that hectic life” (M2.279).

She uses the term ‘boarded with’ here rather than enrolled with, the term is more commonly used when referring to joining a ship or getting onto a plane. It is as though Meg views participating as a form of transport that will allow her to travel on her higher education journey.
What is striking in this extract is the use of a powerful metaphor as she depicts university as an ‘oasis’ a place set away from the rest of her private world that she describes as ‘hectic’. She extends this belief to the other older female students in her group but negates the male students. She exhibits a view that all of her female peers have frenetic private worlds and they retreat to the contrasting sanctuary of university. Higher education, it appears is the sustenance that allows them to cope with their hectic lives.

Similarly Sandy upheld the standing of the older student:

“I think being a mature student as in jobs…. mature people will give a lot more than take, we found the younger students leave things until the last minute. We prepare, we work hard at it, because we know we have to work hard at it” (S2.110).

Here Sandy offers a generalised image of the ‘motivated’ mature student, not only by using the plural pronoun ‘we’. Throughout the extract she positions her view as that of all of her peers. She attributes maturity to dedication and hard work; while it is acknowledged that age and experience would undoubtedly be a contributing factor to an older student’s work ethic the way in which Sandy states, ‘We prepare, we work hard at it, because we know we have to work hard at it’ signifies something far deeper. It is as though she is acknowledging that she and the others have made a conscious decision to participate, as individuals they decided to go for a ‘second bite at the apple’. It seems then that the mindfulness involved with ‘taking the plunge’ back into education is also a significant contributor to their dedicated approach.

The notion of a second chance is maintained by Akila:

“Advantages …. is that you uh would know this is for you, you have made up your mind, you know the importance of education, the importance of uni and it’s not just playing to do it….. just like
teenagers most of them want to go to uni because their parents want them to go to uni or because its getting out of the house or having more money, but for a mature students it’s not like that” (A2.111).

Similarly Akila describes how maturity equals a more resolute character. The terms she uses such as ‘know this is for you’; ‘made up your mind’; ‘not just playing at it’ emphasise the magnitude of making the decision to participate. There is a sense here that the life stage in which the older students found themselves brought clarity of mind and a strong conviction that they were participating for the right reasons in comparison to their younger peers, who according to her, are misguided and nonchalant about education.

Sub-ordinate theme: Life stage and experience contribute to positive student lecturer relationships

This sub-ordinate theme explores the interactions between the participants and their lecturers. All of the individuals positioned themselves positively in these relationships; what is more, they all believed that the positive aspects of their relationships were due to their age and life experiences.

Whilst age and/or life experience were discussed and used to support the perception of a younger and older student divide, interestingly, age was seen as an advantage when the participants discussed their relationships with lecturers. All referred to excellent relationships with nearly all of their tutors and they perceived the relationships were enhanced because of their age:

“100% ...and our lecturers are amazing, we can go any time of the day... knock on their door and they will see us, ...even if they are busy, they will see us for five mins, if we have any problems at all if it’s personal or educational they will see us, and I have been amazed at the
commitment they have given us and I think they have got the commitment back from us as well, it’s amazing” (S2.143).

Here Sandy discusses the ‘open door’ policy and pastoral care that was made available to the participants. She refers to the plural ‘we’ throughout the extract, meaning herself and her peers of a similar age. She perceives that the commitment is reciprocal, just as she perceives the lecturers are happy to give extra time to the older students, the older students are dedicated to working hard.

In the following extract the participant draws a comparison between the hierarchal teacher/pupil relationships in school, and the relaxed equal relationships that the older students apparently had with their university lecturers.

“All our lecturers are so approachable. [] We walk in and as long as they are not busy you can go in and talk to them about .... Half the time it doesn’t have to be purely about uni in the sense if anything is worrying you, ok they are not there to just do that but part of the time. [] like they still are our lecturers but they are more equal than when you are in school. Umm You know you are more friends but not, do you see what I mean, you can have a good laugh but they are always there for you 100% our lecturers and any time you have a problem their doors are literally always open” (C2.1033).

Observe the way in which the speaker talks about the lecturers’ doors being always open. Chris comments on their lecturers caring and concerned attitude towards them, that reaches past university into their personal worlds. Here Chris regarded her lecturers as friends, ‘more equal than when you are in school’. It is as though her life experiences and age meant that she had more in common with the lecturers, thus putting her in a more advantageous position than her younger peers.
As previously ascertained, the participants perceived that they felt more at ease with their lecturers than their younger peers. When describing the relationships they had with their lecturers, one participant went as far as to generalise that the lecturers actually ‘loved’ mature students:

“They love a mature student, they love having mature students, yes they do, H is the same age as me and I know a lot of things she talks about, things that have happened which the youngest don’t .....And I’m the oldest of the mature students there, there is nobody anywhere near my age; I think the next one is mid 40s, so I can remember a lot more than the others can” (S2.263).

In her account Sandy emphasises age and how she was the same age as her lecturer. This and being the oldest in her group gave Sandy an apparent air of superiority over her younger peers.

Meg also believed that age and life experience brought kudos and respect to the mature student/lecturer relationship:

“Mature students (. ) Umm I don’t think (. ) umm but on a one to one basis with the lecturers definitely.. because with a lot of lecturers you get in discussions and mature students because of life experience and we have opinions right or wrong we all have opinions we voice them and I think lecturers appreciate that because even if you are wrong being mature gives you a lot of platform then to carry on”(M1.387).

From this extract one can ascertain the importance of age to these participants. For Meg it equates to being listened to regardless of whether your opinions are right or wrong. Using the word ‘platform’ again promotes non-traditional students to a higher rank or status than the younger students.
Sub-ordinate theme: Education the ‘gift’

The participants viewed both education and participation metaphorically as a ‘gift’. The terminology that they used such as ‘appreciate’, ‘privilege’, ‘working’ and ‘earning’ when discussing this point was both respectful and appreciative of education; there was a belief that they had been given a chance, a shot at education.

Many of the participants connected their age and life stage with their appreciation of education. This idea becomes apparent in the following:

“umm I think when you are an older student you appreciate it a lot more than you do than say the kids do,… because they see it as a right and we see it as a privilege more than anything” (C2.33).

The idea of education being a privilege was resonant amongst all of the participants. The following extract from Meg typifies the feelings of all:

“getting the OK from here was the best letter I have received in my life except maybe the one I’ve just had which said good luck you’re going on to your degree course” (C2.308).

She described a state of euphoria that was brought on by simply being offered a place on the Foundation Year. What she describes is acceptance and how being accepted gave her a sense of worthiness. Her jubilant state was only to be topped by being told that she could continue on to the next level. For her education was a ‘gift’ that kept giving.

Viewing education as a privilege rather than an entitlement appeared to instil passion and eagerness within the participants. Akila explained the enthusiasm she now felt toward learning:

“Uni is something I look forward to, so I really wish it was more than two days to be able to come and do work and research and be amongst
people who like the same things that you like, they want the same things that you want, so I look forward to my next year. I really do” (A2.371)

For Akila education made her feel optimistic; she revelled in the opportunity to be around like-minded people and held the belief that the best of the gift was yet to come.

Contrasting views focused on the attitudes of younger students who were portrayed as individuals who neglected to see the importance and significance of education:

“The advantages are....ummm we don’t think it’s our God given right to go from school and go to uni, we have had to work and earn our place there” (S2.110).

From this extract one can see the cracks that contribute to the sense of a student divide. The extract emphasised the divide by drawing attention to the struggles and labours that older students go through in order to gain a university place, in contrast to younger students who simply see HE as an entitlement.

Sub-ordinate theme: Divided by life

A consensus amongst the participants was that their life stage and lived experiences afforded them a level of development that exceeded that of the younger students. There was a perception that the younger students, by virtue of their age, had limited knowledge and practice within the real world and it was this that was positioned as the great divide between the two groups.

The following extracts are from Meg. This is because her narratives seemed to embody the group’s feelings:

“I think the biggest advantage is life experience because I don’t think there is anything that can be thrown at you that is as scary as the actual
The participant had experienced many personal difficulties in both her early and adult life yet she embraced them all and believed that they set her apart from traditional students. She suggested that her prior experiences and the skills that she had developed in her personal world prepared her for anything that university life demanded of her; she felt nothing could be as difficult to cope with as the things she has already dealt with. It can also be gleaned from Meg’s narrative that as a mature student she and her peers have made a conscious decision to participate ‘we are here because we want to be’ thus suggesting that younger students participate because it is the natural or expected next step from compulsory education:

“Like you know academically we are on a par, life questions we are about 70 ft above them because anything about normal life and politics and the things we are all sort of forced into knowing a bit more about, they have not got a clue. Mummy is still blowing their noses you know. Which is not a bad thing you know I’d like to keep my daughter as young as I could” (M2.341).

This extract illuminates several points. Whilst she did not feel that life experience had enhanced her academic abilities, Meg points to an academic parity between older and younger students, yet she perceived that previous encounters and challenges placed mature students at an advantage when addressing real life scenarios. The extract also contradicts her previous extract where she bestows the benefits of life experience. She uses the term ‘forced into knowing a bit more’ here which suggests that the knowledge she had gained through life was not always welcomed by her. Contradiction continues as she condemns younger students for their naivety and dependence on their parents but then says that it is something she would like for her own daughter.
Overall the discourse in both of the extracts above illustrate that the life knowledge gained by Meg is viewed by her as valuable and utilised in many areas of her academic pursuits. However the sometimes negative and often contradictory terminology that she employs suggests that she was hastened at times unwillingly into maturity.

As Meg’s interview developed her perception of a divide between younger and older students appeared to become even more fixed. She began to discuss student representatives and how the student council lacked mature student representatives:

“…and I know I did say to the lecturer once, it wouldn’t hurt to have a mature student representative on the Student Body Council, because as a mature student, I couldn’t see myself going to an 18 year old student someone who is younger than my daughter, you’re not going to do it. Because they don’t understand they haven’t got a grip of real life so when you say you have money problems they are thinking that’s money for beer while you are thinking my rent needs paying, I may not be able to pay next week” (M2.285).

There appeared to be more at stake here than the fact that younger students may not have had as many life experiences. There appeared also, to be a question of pride and dignity. Meg perceived that it was inappropriate for a mature adult to have to seek advice from someone so much younger. She questioned their understanding of life and doubted whether they were equipped to advise or help people older than themselves. Moreover she felt that her advancing years should be respected. So strong was her belief in the definite distinction between the older and younger students that she brought government and policy classification of a mature student into her discourse.

“Universities and the government class you as a mature student at 21! Even at 21 that’s not a mature person and at 30 you’re not a complete
person because you’re still learning and I think it’s I mean you know I’m in my late 40s some of us are in their 50s you know who you are at this point you have a voice you have ideas you have got life experience, that can help young students but to be a mature student at 21 year old! At 21 my daughter was still living at home and totally dependent that’s not a mature person, you know I think maybe the boundaries need to be moved. I mean lifelong learning, you can learn until you die and you are living longer now, so surely the boundaries should be moved to go with the generations for people, because a lot of people don’t get their A levels or qualifications so they have to stay on and go to college first, do what we have just done a Foundation Course but some people actually starting university life until they are 21 but they have actually only just started to learn I think” (M1.410).

She is reluctant here to acknowledge that at 21 years of age an individual should be classed as a mature adult. Meg argued that your ‘voice’, ‘ideas’ and ‘experience’ are not developed until middle adulthood. This again perpetuates the importance of age and life stage, as Meg and all of the participants perceived that it was a significant contributor to their level of development.

John also described a student divide as he set himself apart from his younger peers in the following extract. He suggests that his life experiences to date had prepared him for academic success:

“Well ... umm, the advantages... I am more sort of reliable, dependable now you see (inaudible). Being mature I am used to turning up to work on time so I turn up for uni every day, I am respectful and attentive in class and I don’t view this with traditional students..... umm I’m not labelling them but I think if you turned up to class more often if you
didn’t have a hangover if you didn’t go out last night, if you didn’t come in at 3 o’clock in the morning you would get a lot more out of it. There is that side to it where as I am attentive, reliable” (J2.144).

He perceived that reliability and conscientiousness were qualities that came exclusively with age. John is also keen to establish in the extract, that he is not ‘labelling’ younger students, yet he does categorise younger students by suggesting they are more interested in the social side of university life than the learning element. He highlights a ‘devil may care’ attitude in younger students. Note the condemnation in his tone as he discusses their ‘hangovers’, yet by his own admission drinking and alcohol dependency were a huge part of his pre-participation life. The last lines are a powerful illustration of how far John feels he has come since pre-participation days as he describes he is now ‘attentive’ ‘reliable’.

Sub-ordinate theme: Freedom of youth versus restrictions of age

It was the perception of all of the female participants in this study that traditional students experienced an abundance of carefree time due to their lack of commitments and responsibilities; a somewhat generalised view of their peers. However, it was understandable, as it was clear to see that these women were overwhelmingly the hub or centre of their family worlds, and thus responsible for the care and needs of their families.

For example:

“Oh time is always a negative or a disadvantage when you are a mature student because you can’t just….. like with younger people, they can do what they want they can just concentrate on their studies because most of them haven’t got other outside things, you know whereas when I go to uni now I’m going to have make sure the kids are OK… you know you still have got to do shopping and you know the things of family life, so you are tied and the time element is crucial when you are a mature student” (C2.167).
Chris discusses the aspect of family responsibility in the following extract. She proposes that traditional students please themselves, do as they wish; she promotes the air of freedom that they possess. In contrast she describes her life, she uses the word ‘tied’ suggesting that she is bound or imprisoned by her family duties and she emphasises the importance or lack of time she experiences by using the word ‘crucial’.

Equally, Akila felt that there was an imbalance between their roles as non-traditional students compared to their traditional student peers:

“Our disadvantages, in my case is that …umm I have my family as well and sometimes you know it’s like a balance, … who do I go with first, what do I do first, my studies or my chores… just trying to get the right balance, that’s a disadvantage I mean, although youngsters to them it’s nothing, this is their life this is what they are doing at the moment… it’s studying so they concentrate on it …or they should concentrate on it more and they get on with it. But for mature students there are other things to work at as well” (A2.118).

Again the disparity came from responsibilities in their private spheres or domains, responsibilities such as children and general household chores and tasks. The extracts indicate that as female students at this particular life stage, participation had the potential to broaden their public opportunities in life however it did not afford them equality in their private life.

All of the women portrayed a sense of conflict between their new role as student and their established roles as partners, mothers and housekeeper. Both their families and their education required a substantial degree of physical and mental attention if they were to keep order and succeed in both domains. The interviews revealed that it was a constant feat
of management and juggling on their part. The following extracts from Akila and Lynn encapsulate the sense of conflict I refer to:

“Disadvantages, in my case is that ...umm I have my family as well and sometimes you know it’s like a balance,... who do I go with first, what do I do first, my studies or my chores.... just trying to get the right balance, that’s a disadvantage I mean, although youngsters to them it’s nothing, this is their life this is what they are doing at the moment... it’s studying so they concentrate on it ...or they should concentrate on it more and they get on with it. But for mature students there are other things to work at as well” (A2.118).

“I am so busy and it’s against me all the time, things to do, when I’m doing nothing I’m laying down in bed sleeping, that’s the only time I’m doing nothing, just before I go to sleep” (L2.158).

Both passages illustrate the inherent strain that the female participants, in particular, are under. The hectic lives that they lead mean that they have to negotiate between their roles as wife, mother and student on a daily basis.

Sub-ordinate theme: Intimidation, fear and anxiety

Participants spoke of feeling intimidated by the younger students:

“Towards the end we did all gel but when it came to our last week, questions and that, we didn’t realize that the younger ones were intimidated by us older ones, whereas older ones were intimidated by the younger ones. None of us realized this until it came down to the questions at the end of the year, because we were intimidated by their knowledge, they had come straight from school” (S2.41).
The feelings of intimidation that Sandy describes, personified the feelings of all of the participants. They felt that the younger students were more academically equipped as they had only just left the compulsory education system. This acknowledgement was the first time that any of the participants suggested that younger students were superior in any way.

For others, their own age and life stage contributed to their feelings of intimidation:

“As a mature student I was a bit wary umm I was afraid as a mature student how am I going to do it. I know at this age teenagers are very iffy about old people, so I didn’t know, I was really, really worried in the first days really” (A2.18).

Akila discusses her initial transition period, where she experienced fear and anxiety. She perceived that the younger students would disregard or be contemptuous of her because of her age, she even labels herself as an ‘old’ person. Whilst many students are likely to experience nervousness or agitation in the initial stages of participation, for Akila and the others in this study, their age greatly contributed to their apprehensions regarding participation.

Apprehension regarding age was mentioned by many of the participants. For one individual age concerns were more overwhelming than whether she would be able to support herself financially. She explained that going without was something she had become used to as sole provider for her dependant; she stated “so that doesn’t scare me at all I can live quite happily as a student” (M2.173). Yet she carried on stating that her main anxiety was her age, she talks of ‘too much water under the bridge’ ‘too old’, and ‘too past it’ even though she was only 44 years of age.

The apparent divide between the older students and their younger peers should not be taken lightly. All of the participants, directly or indirectly, described distinct differences between themselves and their younger peers. Perceived differences were based on their lack of life
responsible and life experiences. Furthermore, any interaction that took place between the two groups was cursory and only occurred towards the end of the Foundation Year.

**Ordinate theme: Overlooked by the institution**

The above acknowledges a divide between younger and older students created by age and life responsibilities. The following positions the HE institution and its practices as a significant contributor to the feelings of segregation that many of the participants experienced as they engaged with their learning journey.

**Sub-ordinate theme: Feeling unwelcome**

Many of the participants described how they felt marginalised by the institution. Most felt that they had been pushed to the peripheries of the student body that constituted the university and described how they felt unwelcomed and neglected by the institution:

“*There was absolutely no welcome in the first week for the older students and it’s almost you hit 20 and you’re past it, you know unless you wanted to join ..... maybe the football team, I think it’s almost like I’m a bit old for that, what can you offer me and it was nothing, it was Freshers’ Week so I thought ok maybe there will be something in that. But if you didn’t want to dress in fancy dress and go on a pub crawl there was nothing for you in Freshers’ Week and you started thinking...., my age concerns are actually viable’*(M2.317).

Here Meg draws attention to the way in which she and other older students felt socially excluded by the institution and the students’ union in one of the most important social events of the year. As one of the aims of Freshers’ Week is to introduce students to university life the participant felt that the activities were inappropriate for older students.
and further propagated the perception of a student divide. She used the term ‘what can you offer me’ thus signifying her desire to be part of the social side of university life.

“When I came during the open day or week and they would always think I am the parent of a student here, and that I am coming with a student, that’s why we were talking to (name) about having something given just a small corner for mature students. Because when you come during opening ceremony or opening day, you will find they are all talking about youngsters, .... nothing about mature students, so I felt very.... you know...., I want to get out of here quick, get me out of here quick”

(A2.111)

Equally Akila describes how the institution neglected to include the older student body in the more formal elements of Freshers’ Week. Lack of acknowledgment by the university left her feeling isolated and wanting to remove herself from the environment that of which she had chosen to become a part of.

Furthermore, in this extract Akila describes how she and the other mature students requested to be ‘given just a small corner for mature students’, this indicates that the older students did not view integration with the younger students as an option; they wanted to develop a student identity of their own. Using the terms ‘small’ and ‘corner’ offers a strong image of how insignificant they felt as a group, a minority on the outside looking in.

Meg also perceived that older students were unseen by the institution and the younger students:

“I think the drawback is because we are overlooked and I don’t just mean necessarily from the university but from the other students. It’s almost like we are a faceless painting they sort of see us but they don’t”

(M2,285).
Meg speaks for the group as she uses the plural term ‘we’ in this extract where she questioned the physical presence of older students in the university setting. She believed that the mature student body was, in the main, ignored to the point that they were like a ‘faceless painting’. This is a powerful use of metaphor as the word ‘painting’ objectifies the physical presence of the older student, whilst the use of the word ‘faceless’ suggests that older students lack any identity within the institution.

**Sub-ordinate theme: Not belonging**

Participants described feelings of not fitting in on campus, particularly in the social areas. The student bar and the cafes were mentioned as areas in which they felt out of place:

“*I think for example if you take the bar in the format it’s in anyway, [] you walk in and you don’t feel you belong, which is a shame a real shame []I think last year as a group we missed out on it, it was all work and no play and I think that’s when strain really hits and you start to think there’s no balance, there’s no balance*” (M2.332)

This extract illustrated feelings expressed by several of the participants; they felt that the academic side of participation was the sum total of their university experience and they were missing out on the social benefits of participation. The negative expressions that Meg uses in the extract such as ‘not belonging’ ‘shame’ and ‘missing out’ are indicative of this and highlight the importance of informal social interactions and how they create balance and have the potential to help students to survive stressful periods.

Akila also discussed her feeling of uneasiness as she entered the campus cafes’:

“*You know the café....., I want to get out of here quick, get me out of here quick*” (A2,143).
The reader can sense the panic that Akila experienced in the campus social space in this extract, there is a desperate need for her to flee from an area in which she should feel comfortable in.

**Ordinate theme: Sources of Support**

The emotional and physical energy that family and education demanded often left participants feeling anxious and stressed. The tension of creating daily routines that could accommodate these demands became apparent in the interviews, which prompted me to ask the participants where their main sources of support came from.

The participants discussed varied sources of support, ranging from family members to their university peers. Equally, the type of support differed between emotional support and practical support.

All of the participants produced pictures of family and peers at this stage of the interviews, however the pictures appeared to represent different things to each of the individuals. *Not all* were presenting the images of family as their greatest sources of support; in contrast *all* of the images of peers were presented as great sources of support.

**Sub-ordinate theme: Support from family**

Most of the participants described their partner and/or children as a source of support. See the following image and accompanying passage:
“My wife number 1 [] She stuck with me for 27 years for better or for worse and probably more worse than better and I’ve never physically abused her, never strayed, even with my alcohol, I would go to sleep and maybe be a financial drain... I suppose if I was nagged to give up ...arguments or whatever I would get verbally abusive and she’s put up with me right the way through ...constantly tried to work for my better, either alcohol or whatever and now she takes delight in my achievements. She is a saint. She drives me potty but we must be soulmates”(J2.239).

For John the support he received from his wife was both emotional and practical. He referenced his behaviour frequently in this passage and appeared to be incredulous that his wife had remained constant.

Lynn also proposed that her partner was a great source of support:

“That has got to be my husband. [] he is a tower”(L2.223).

When asked about sources of support most of the participants described to some degree or another how their family members were proud of their studies and academic achievements,
or the ways in which their partners would verbally encourage them with their pursuits. Although there was a perception, particularly amongst the females, that this type of support was easy to offer and did not require too much effort.

**Sub-ordinate theme: Family gives lip service**

In the following Akila discusses the encouragement and support she received from her husband:

“My husband, I mean... he felt very proud that I am doing it and I am succeeding in it, it's not just something I wanted to do, and he pushed me, he gave me more confidence... really... to do it” (A2,71).

The extract above describes a very supportive home environment in which Akila was encouraged by her husband to participate. The use of the adjective ‘pushed’ suggests initial reluctance or resistance towards the idea on Akila’s part and also implies that her husband was highly influential in terms of her decision to participate. On a more positive note she describes her husband as also being proud of her achievements and instilling confidence in her. However upon the presentation of a family photograph Akila began to describe the reality of the extent of family support she received:
“The problem is that, we discussed it, he wanted me to, he pushed me into coming to uni, he encouraged me [] and we sat there and had a meeting with my two eldest ones, of course (name of child) is studying in [] so he is not free to come every day and take care of his sister ...and as a boy he doesn’t want to take care of his sister ...and (name of child) bless her, she is in [] so she is far away, and she is a medical student she can’t just drop everything and come and take care of her sister, she is not living with us anyway uhh... So I was telling him (the husband) that going into uni means a commitment. I asked them for the help and they said OK, we’ll do it together no problem, ....in the middle of the thing, everyone turns to their own thing and I have to be pushing through on my own ....but sometimes you just can’t keep on doing it” (A2.260).

In this extract Akila described a sense of abandonment by her family. She begins with the assertion that her participation was very much a family concern as they initially discussed
and held meetings and offered her their personal commitment in order for her to achieve a higher education. She explains how her husband ‘wanted it’ and she again refers to being ‘pushed’ and ‘encouraged’ her to participate, almost as if she was doing it for him rather than her own ends. By the end of the passage she acknowledges that she did not receive the practical support that she was promised, it was as though her family were giving lip service to her rather than ‘hands on’ support. In the concluding sentences the terms she uses such as ‘everyone turns to their own thing’, ‘pushing through on my own’ offer a palpable sense of loneliness and abandonment, and suggest that participation for her is a physical and emotional struggle.

Interestingly, Akila being an Egyptian woman had referred at different points throughout the interviews to cultural pressures and stereotypes, explaining that her position and role within the family was far more traditional than that of her peers. Yet the above extract voiced conflicting views. On one hand she was suggesting her husband whom she had already described as a ‘typical male’ and “he comes from a completely different background the woman has to be the lady and the man has to go out and work “(A1.117) needed to change and become a more active partner in the relationship regarding domestic chores. On the other hand she appeared to experience conflict regarding letting go of cultural and traditional views that it was not really the role of a male to look after children. This was substantiated by the following comment she made regarding her son, ‘as a boy he doesn’t want to take care of his sister’ (A2.265).

Similarly, the other participants initially stated that their partners or spouses were their main source of support, but as the interviews evolved they began to admit that most of their support came from the other mature students, who were in similar social situations to themselves. Although this was not the case for John, the only male participant, who made no modifications to what he had said regarding his wife being his ‘number 1’ support.
Sub-ordinate theme: Support from university peers

All of the female participants presented images of their peers as a source of support. The scope of the images was narrow as they were limited to photographs of one or other of the participants in this study, thus illustrating the closeness and dependence of the group.

The relationships that the individuals had with each other were both intense and intricate. They did not view each other as merely study companions, there appeared to be a sense of dependence amongst the peers. One participant referred to an almost physical dependence on the other members of the group as she acknowledged that there was a tendency to:

‘cling to the people that are going through it with you’ (M2.114).

Even though they had known each other for only a relatively short period of time the relationships that the participants had formed with each other had begun to surpass longstanding ones in terms of support in their academic lives and, for some, support in their personal and family life.

This is substantiated again by Meg who articulates the feeling of all of the female participants. She presented a picture of her family as her visual representation of support and motivation for participating. (See Image 12 below):
"I wish I had some photos of people who I had come through uni last year because they would have been before these they probably would have been right around the edge framing it, and keeping it in" (M2. 225).

Although Meg presented the image of family and friends from her personal world as a representation of support the above accompanying extract was contradictory as she cited that her university peers were her greatest source of support rather than those from longstanding, established relationships. She conceded that if she had images of those individuals they would have been shown before the image of the family and friends, thus emphasising their importance. From the language that was used during this part of the interview it was possible to understand the respect and high esteem that Meg had for her peers.

Using terms like ‘around the edge framing it’ and ‘keeping it in’ suggests that her peers were providing a support network or safety net that not only allowed her to function in the university setting, but it allowed her to maintain family relationships that may have suffered if she had put the demands and stresses of her education upon them instead.
“I have gone a step beyond I think academically now I could turn to Lynn or to Akila and we could talk about uni, couldn’t really do that now with close family and friends because I have gone a step beyond that and rather than sort of bore them with what is going on here, I think you do tend to” (M2.110).

In the extract above she admits to mentally moving beyond her existing social circles. Note the way she used the word ‘now’ in the first line of the following extract and ‘couldn’t really do that now’ in the second line, thus indicating that there might have been a time early on in her participation that she felt comfortable discussing academia with family and friends. Yet it appears that as she became more established in education and began to develop her student identity she felt her existing family and friends were less able to accommodate her when she needed to discuss issues or concerns. What is more, she justifies the move by suggesting that talking about academia would only bore her established social circle. She continued:

“I think academically that is really the people I have met this year, we have got quite a strong little support network and I think without them probably last year I wouldn’t have made it all the way through” (M2.103).

There is an air of dependence in this extract as she concedes that she would not have succeeded or remained in university without the others in her group. Equally, the terms she uses such as ‘strong little support network’ depicts the closeness and almost exclusivity of the group.

Other participants were more direct about where their support came from, as demonstrated in this categorical response from Chris:
“Sandy without a shadow of a doubt!! without Sandy I would have left in about January or February last year, because I went really down last year, I came that close to having a breakdown ....Umm yea probably Sandy if I’m honest, we are 100% for each other, no matter what, you know regardless, so she is one of my main supports

[]

Yeah That’s why she’s my best friend, you know we talk to each other and everything, you know we talk to each other 100% and that’s why I’d say she’s my biggest sort of person” (C2.333).

As I anticipated, Sandy stated that Chris was her main source of support; her reply was even more direct, although she did not give examples of how Chris gave encouragement:

“Chris 100%” (S2.139).

There was clearly a strong emotional bond between the participants which often reached into their personal spheres:

“Like I said in the last interview I said to Sandy, see that wall Sandy, if it wasn’t for the kids I could quite happily go through that wall there with the car... (silence) I was really in a bad place. Yeah That’s why she’s my best friend, you know we talk to each other and everything, you know we talk to each other 100% and that’s why I’d say she’s my biggest sort of person” (C2.363).

The extract above is profound and exposed how the participant’s relatively new relationship with Sandy had recovered her from the brink of desperation. She refers to being in a dire situation in her private world and although she is not explicit about what
Sandy did or said to make her feel more positive about her situation, her terminology affirms that the support was there. Akila also refers to emotional support from her peers:

“Each one of us has had dark moments, you might call it that. ... But we’ve passed through that and I think without them I wouldn’t have” (A2,158).

Akila also described her emotional dependence on her peers. The extract illustrates the power of the new-found relationships as the participant explains that as a group they guided each other through ‘dark moments’ or periods of insecurity. Ultimately she believed that her peers were responsible for her deliverance.

Participants also discussed how at times of despondency their peers would figuratively ‘kick’ or ‘knock’ until they were back on track and in a more positive state of mind. For example:

“Every time you felt you couldn’t do it somebody would kick you up the backside” (M2.231).

“[] after Christmas one of them came and said I’m working too hard, I can’t continue like that and we just put him down and just knocked his head off (laugh)...and for me after Easter time it was really tiring and I thought I didn’t do well in the exams and I thought that’s it.... I don’t care about it anymore and they just put me on the right track again” (A2.151).

Here Meg and Akila both describe the team spirit of the group, no one person was to be left behind. They took it in turns to encourage and motivate any member of the group who felt hopeless in their studies:
'And my third photo is Meg..... She’s brilliant, everything we could ever wish for, for support, help, ... I don’t know how she does it, she is a mine full of information, she is so brainy and bright and clever and a few of us do go to her for help and there is never once when she is not available, she will help all the time, I try not to because I know Akila has a lot of help from her but uhh gosh she’s brilliant, I have the utmost respect for her, and my husband he loves her to bits and he has only met her three or four times but she can’t do no wrong in my eyes, ...brilliant she helps me anytime any day no matter she is always there, I say sorry to bother you but ...... yeah she is just brilliant she is a godsend she is an angel, a lovely woman’"(L2.373).

Lynn describes Meg as an almost ethereal being she suggests she is a ‘godsend’ or ‘angel’. She puts Meg on a different level to others in her group suggesting that she was an answer to all of their wishes. Lynn’s dialogue is fervent, as she repeats how ‘brilliant’ ‘brainy’ ‘bright’ and ‘clever’ Meg is. Note the abundant use of adjectives and complimentary terms in the extract, indicating the participant’s gratitude and debt to Meg. The terminology that Lynn uses, again demonstrated the sense of reliance that the participants had for each other. Overall the extract revealed the importance of the newly established relationship formed in university.

The support that was gained was vital for the participants and demonstrated a shift for the women in particular, to like-minded people in similar situations. There was very much a need for the participants to keep their academic life separate from their private lives. The data revealed that some of the participants felt that their families were bored by university talk, or simply did not understand the difficulties of their life changing decisions, hence the separation.
Yet it was noted that Lynn did not attempt to keep her two lives separate. As stated in her last extract, her husband had met Meg on several occasions. This I found interesting but not surprising. Lynn’s relationship/marriage with her husband was also relatively new. It emerged from the data that her husband was enthusiastic and encouraging about Lynn’s education at both an emotional and material level:

“I was with him when I applied for uni and he said whatever you do, I’ll support you, so, and really he lived away for ages, he still lived in (town name) and I would be on the phone to him crying saying I can’t do it ....and he would say yes you can, don’t get worried, if I had a crap mark, its only one mark, what did you get for your other things, and he said he would always be there and he is....”(L2.522).

The supportive relationship that Lynn experienced with her husband resulted in less conflict between her home life and university life. As previously ascertained Lynn was confident in her established roles as mother and carer, but was still finding her way with her new recent roles of wife and student. She was not at a stage in her life where she felt like breaking away from old roles, rather she was ready to embrace them. Thus, it could be argued that for Lynn it was easier to interweave her two worlds.

Undoubtedly her confidence was seriously impaired when it came to her academic pursuits, so what she was seeking from her peers was the impetus, support and even the techniques, to succeed in education; she did not require bolstering from them for her private world as the back-up was already there from her new husband.
Part two: Discussion of Results

Super-ordinate theme: Participation - the experience so far

Undeterred by the myriad of transitions and costs that led to and accompanied participation the individuals negotiated their way either to the end of the Foundation Year or the first year of their degree. Therefore, this super-ordinate theme concentrates on the lived experience of being a student aged 30 years and over participating in HE.

Ordinate theme: Older and younger student divide

This ordinate theme describes the way in which the mature students position themselves compared to their younger peers. Drawing upon age and life experience as an explanation for the split between the two groups, they perceived themselves and identified themselves as a separate group entity with diverse motivations, personal qualities and life concerns. They drew attention to distinguishing features, commenting, for example, on their differing approaches to learning in terms of motivation and commitment; the inequity of free and personal time between the groups; and the fact that younger students were seen to be carefree and untroubled by personal constraints, in contrast to their own realities which were restricted by responsibilities and clock watching.

This dichotomy first became apparent in responses to a question about the advantages and disadvantages of being a mature student. All viewed their student experience as very different to their younger counterparts thus echoing much of the research that explores the experiences of mature students (Donaldson, et al., 2000; Tett, 2004; Chapman, Parmar and Trotter, 2007). Yet this study revealed a further finding; the participants’ narratives appeared to be framed by a sense of antipathy towards their younger peers. This becomes clearer in the following sub-ordinate themes.
In the first sub-ordinate theme ‘motivated by life’ the participants explained how they perceived themselves as more driven and committed to having a meaningful engagement with HE than the younger students. They drew upon life course to make sense of their dedicated approach to studying, attributing their preparedness and hardworking approach to age and maturity.

It appeared that they perceived their decisions to participate as conscious and mindful, in opposition to younger students who entered HE because it was a natural and expected progression from secondary education. They perceived that for them participation involved personal sacrifices and struggles and it was this that was seen to give them ‘the edge’ over their younger counterparts. These findings complement much of mature student research, for example, Swain and Hammond (2011) found that mature students tended to be more committed because of the sacrifices and investments they had made in studying. Further, the authors suggested that the conscious decision to study contributed to their participants’ determination to achieve in HE.

Age was also perceived to influence relationships within the HE environment. Participants explained that their enthusiastic and contributory attitude towards learning encouraged positive and meaningful interactions with their lecturers. In the sub-ordinate theme, ‘life stage and experience contribute to positive student lecturer relationships’, participants acknowledged relationships that they perceived as equal and friendly. There appeared to be no hierarchy between lecturer and student present within their discourses, although they were keen to point out that this was not so for the younger students.

In Mercer’s (2003) study that explored the transitions of mature students into and through HE, she noted that many of the participants displayed a childlike reliance on their lecturers as the assimilation back into learning took place. Although this could not be gleaned explicitly from the extracts of participants in this study there did appear to be a level of immaturity, even naivety, in the way that the individuals described and perceived their
lecturers. They personified them as accommodating friends who welcomed them at any time of the day, always having an open door for the older students. Furthermore participants described how they felt able to talk about personal world problems and dilemmas to their lecturers so, not only were they imparters of knowledge, they were seen, as pastoral advisors. All of the above were perceived by the participants as benefits that came as a consequence of their age, although it could be argued that their discourse was at times contradictory. For example participants spoke of lecturers’ fondness for older students because of the life-knowledge that they can impart in the teaching environment. They also referred to enjoying being respected as equals; yet within their stories it was apparent that they also wanted to be nurtured by their lecturers. It was as though these relationships provided them with a level of security in their new and alien environment. This finding supports the conclusions of Blair, Cline and Wallis (2010) who claimed that whilst peer support was important the influence and support of tutors was crucial to adult students throughout the transition period and beyond.

Continuing with the subject of maturity the participants explained that, in contrast to their younger peers, they possessed a more enlightened view of education evoked by maturity. The sub-ordinate theme ‘Education the gift’ in many ways speaks for itself. As opposed to younger students who were perceived as non-appreciative and possessing a belief that education was a rite of passage, they articulated their appreciation of learning which they viewed as a privilege. Learning appeared to evoke feelings of optimism and excitement within the participants thus corresponding with the findings of Mercer (2003). A sense of delayed gratification wove throughout their discourses as the struggles and costs that they had gone through to engage and participate with HE were seen as significant contributors to their education love affair. Yet one could also gather that the years and the time that had gone before they had their chance to participate, compounded their enthusiasm and gratitude for the opportunity.
The sub-ordinate theme ‘divided by life’ takes the older and younger student divide to a deeper level. It appeared that the participants felt that attributes such as life knowledge and skills, reliability and a ‘get on with it’ attitude were virtues of age and maturity. Overall, life experiences were described in terms of assets (Burton, Golding Lloyd and Griffiths, 2011) that had prepared them for the amount of work required to successfully participate. Ergo younger students, by virtue of their age, were in deficit regarding these qualities and it seemed that it was this disproportion that caused the perceived divide between the groups. The participants drew attention to the life struggles they had been subjected to and one could sense from their narratives that they took a ‘what doesn’t kill you makes you stronger’ attitude to them. From the above one is able to interpret and understand why the participants in this study felt disconnected from the younger students. Yet, interestingly, it seemed that the participants were only able to emphasise their stoic approach to life and learning by discrediting younger students. The narratives contained palpable negativity toward the traditional group as they described their peers as having dependent, immature and unrealistic natures. It was as though the participants had accepted unquestioningly into popular portrayals of the ‘traditional’ student as they openly highlighted hedonistic tendencies of partying and squandering money on drink.

The sub-ordinate theme ‘freedom of youth versus restrictions of age’ evolved from the subtext of resentment that the participants appeared to have for the younger students. There was a clear gender divide present within the narratives too. The female participants appeared to be particularly concerned with the disproportion of time that younger students were perceived to have in contrast to themselves. As the participants articulated their experiences of being students with ‘mothering’ and ‘spousal’ roles it became easier to understand the envy they felt towards their younger carefree peers.
Their caring responsibilities influenced their role as students by demanding unyielding performance at both an emotional and physical level. This finding substantiates Coser and Coser’s (1974) notion of the ‘greedy institution’ later utilised by Edwards (1993). It also supports later findings from Blair, Cline and Wallis, (2010) and Abroms and Goldscheider (2002) who posited that care responsibilities can complicate the student experience, particularly for female students. The demands that accompany carer or spousal relationships were seen to significantly impinge upon the students’ study time.

One could interpret from the participants that age, like motivations and barriers was not a straightforward phenomenon. Age and maturity were accompanied by numerous, multifaceted, negative and positive experiences and responsibilities. It is acknowledged that many of these experiences can inspire or trigger latent desires in an individual; equally, the skills and knowledge that accompany experience can be used to one’s advantage. However, it is also acknowledged that age and maturity might be perceived as a hindrance or a challenge. Although not explicitly stated, there was implicit support for this idea within the participants’ narratives. This is discussed further in the following subordinate theme which lies in direct contrast to those themes above where age is positioned as an asset. It seemed that no sooner had the participants espoused the virtues of age and development they were positioning it as an encumbrance.

In the sub-ordinate theme ‘intimidation, fear and anxiety’ the participants made sense of their position as older people in a predominantly young persons’ environment. They revealed how they felt intimidated and anxious around their younger peers and these feelings of trepidation appeared to be linked to age.

Overall, they appeared to be threatened by the perceived academic prowess of the younger students. This contradicted earlier findings in the present study where one participant positioned mature students as ‘academically we are on a par, life questions we are about
ft above them’. The fact that the younger students had progressed into HE from compulsory education appeared to stimulate elements of insecurity within the individuals. There was a perception that having entered HE directly after compulsory education meant that younger students were at an advantage as they were still in a ‘learning mode’.

The inductive nature of IPA allows unexpected themes to emerge. This seems to be the case in the following finding. It could be gathered from some participants that their seemingly matured physical appearance caused them to feel anxious in the company of the younger students. Interestingly literature emphasises the intrinsic barriers to learning yet there is little reference to more obvious differences such as physical experience. And yet, feeling physically out of place in the HE environment was a viable concern for the mature students in this study. There was no evidence within any of the participants’ disclosures that the younger students had said or done anything to them to cause such feelings. It appeared that it was the participants themselves who were positioning their age as a barrier to their learning as they described themselves as ‘past it’ and ‘old’. This was so far removed and contradictory to the earlier discourses that championed age and life experience. Yet it strengthened the idea of an age dichotomy.

The findings above revealed that age, development across the life-course and life responsibilities, served to both impede and facilitate the individuals in their learning trajectories. Participation was perceived as a far more complex journey for the older students and it was experienced far differently from their younger peers. It was this divergence that all of the individuals strongly felt needed to be acknowledged.

**Ordinate theme: Overlooked by institution**

This ordinate theme concerns itself with the ways in which the participants felt neglected or let down by the institution itself. The participants felt marginalised in the HE setting; they felt on the periphery looking in.
Crozier, Reay and Clayton (2010) draw upon Bourdieu and Passeron’s (1978) notion of working-class students as ‘fish out of water’ to explain student experience. This notion resonates to some degree with the findings in this research as participants explained that in the early stages of participation they felt uneasy and out of place in the HE setting. Yet it appeared for the individuals in this study their feelings of being overlooked were to do with their age rather than their social class. The university’s protocols and procedures also served as contributory factors.

Previous research provides valuable insights into institutional and organisational barriers to learning (Burton, Golding Lloyd and Griffiths, 2011). Further to this is the bank of research that addresses the problematic and fraught process of the transition period (see Gorard et al., 2007; Bowl, 2001). Such studies address the academic side of learning and espouse the importance of consistency for all students in terms of guidance, information and support. Authors such as Tinto (1993) also note the importance of encouraging early social integration into university in order to promote retention rates.

In contrast to research findings that suggest mature students have more problems adjusting to the academic side of university than the social side (Lucas, 1990), the individuals in this study placed less emphasis on the academic transition process but substantial emphasis on the social element of the induction process; they explained that it was a period of conflict and anguish.

It appeared that after taking the metaphoric ‘plunge’ into education the individuals perceived themselves as left to their own devices during the induction stages of participation. This caused them to feel neglected and unwanted. Thus the sub-ordinate themes ‘feeling unwelcome’ and ‘not belonging’ focused on the participants’ perceptions of being on the peripheries of the student community.
It appeared that organised procedures such as the open days and induction processes commonly referred to as Freshers’ Week contributed significantly to their feelings of exclusion. Open days are often the first point of contact that an individual has with the institution, yet the institution at the centre of this study was accused of targeting only the needs of the younger students and of failing to include the mature students. Similarly Freshers’ Week, which carries merit for encouraging social integration and adjustment to HE was perceived to be a problematic and uncomfortable time for the older students.

At an individual level, induction was accused of marginalising mature students causing them to feel vulnerable about their age. They expressed that little was done at any of the induction events to integrate older students. Induction was perceived as being exclusively held for the younger students and focused upon drinking. This directly corresponds with findings from Chapman, Palmer and Trotter (2007) study where the induction process came in for particular criticism as being ‘cliquey’ and ‘related to drink’.

At an institutional level, lack of understanding of the differing social interests and needs of many mature students could have serious implications upon retention rates. This has previously been highlighted in Yorke’s (1999, 2000) studies where unhappiness in terms of the social environment in the HE setting was seen as a key predictor of progression and retention. The participants in this study described how they felt ‘past it’ ‘invisible’ and ‘insignificant’ and for the most part wanting to retreat from the environment of which they had worked so hard to become a part of.

The feelings of segregation that the individuals experienced should not be underestimated; neither should they be viewed as ‘sour grapes’ grumblings of the ‘few’ especially as research suggest that an individual’s health and wellbeing is greatly enhanced by becoming involved in the social aspects of learning (Wong and Kwok, 1997; Connolly, Rees and Furlong, 2008). In the theme ‘not belonging’ the participants advocated the importance of
experiencing a social side to learning. The individuals explained how the physical format of the social areas on the campus made them feel out of place. They explained that the areas were predominantly set up for and catered to the interests of the younger students. As a result the older students often felt uncomfortable in these areas and frequented them as little as possible. Christie, Munro and Wager (2005) also addressed this issue and explained that adults in HE who are deprived of the social aspects of university life are at a disadvantage as they are only have a limited participation experience and are being excluded from networks where both informal and formal communications take place (see also Selwyn, 2007).

On close inspection what the participants were describing was a lack of student identity, exclusion and the strain of not having an area that they could retreat to with their peers when the stresses and conflict related to learning became too much. These students had been motivated to participate in HE only to find that they were let down by the institution at the first hurdle.

Their perceived lack of belonging and lack of student identity can be explained by drawing upon the work of Hughes (2010) who built upon Wenger’s (1998, 2002) communities of practice work. Hughes (2010) refers to ‘identity congruence’ which she explains as an experience whereby an individual’s visible social identities such as maturity, ethnicity and gender are in harmony with the other identities made available by the group or community. She continues by stating that identity congruence offers the self a logical and emotionally acceptable sense of identity in a given community of practice. However, if elements of the individual’s social identity are incongruent with the identities of the larger community the learner is likely to experience “compromised self-esteem or be confined to the margins” (Hughes, 2010. p.50). In terms of the participants in this study their student identity appeared to be incomplete, as their maturity, an aspect of their displayed social identity, was incongruent with the wider group of younger students who were socially catered for
by the institution. It could be argued that the participants only experienced a partial student identity which reinforced their perceptions of being on the peripheries of the learning community rather than at the centre of it (Wenger, 1998, 2002).

**Ordinate theme: Sources of support**

The ordinate theme ‘sources of support’ explored the different sources and types of support that the participants received during their participation. When asked the question, “Where does your main source of social support come from?” All of the participants referred initially to close family members, but the narratives were often contradictory and complex as they made sense of the support they actually received from family members. However the participants spoke with far more clarity and conviction as they explained that their greatest source of support came from their student peer group.

The sub-ordinate theme ‘support from family’ was derived from participants’ narratives in which spouses and older children were positioned as sources of support. Research that has sought to gain an understanding into this area, for example: Edwards, (1993); Askham (2008); Alsop, Gonzalez-Arnal and Kilkey (2008) and Baxter and Britton (2001) have drawn attention to gender dimensions in terms of the quality and the quantity of support that non-traditional students receive. In contrast to female students, male students were shown to experience greater enthusiasm and emotional and practical support for their studies.

The above conclusions echoed findings from this study. John, the only male participant, articulated that his spouse offered him unrelenting emotional and practical support. She was described as a sounding board, someone that he would turn to for advice and guidance. Her practical support went further than domestic duties and looking after the family; she
would also type up assignments when he was faced with module deadlines. His wife had become involved with and immersed in the studies of her husband.

In contrast, the female participants who referred to their spouses as supportive were vague in terms of the type of support that they received from them. They either referred to partners as being ‘proud’ of and ‘pleased’ by their academic achievements or made powerful, yet vague statements such as ‘he is a tower’. In many ways, what they were describing was non-committal support that took little effort and involved no personal costs or demands to the male partners. Reflecting Baxter and Britton (2011) and O'Shea and Stone’s (2011) studies, the female participants in this study were willing to contend that they had supportive partners even though there appeared to be little evidence of how that support manifested itself. The women’s accounts of the supportive husband were based around ‘neutrality’ (Baxter and Britton, 2001). They were describing a lack of opposition to their studies rather than tangible, useful support. What is more, the participants appeared resigned to the piecemeal approach that their spouses took.

As narratives developed some female participants began to question the support they received from their families. The sub-ordinate theme ‘family gives lip service’ captures the way in which some made sense of the support, or indeed, lack of support they received. Individuals reflected on the support and encouragement they received from spouses and older children at the transitional stages of participation. Again, the type of support they were exposed to appeared to be hard for them to define but it could be loosely categorised as verbal encouragement and assurances of practical help. Participants explained that, in reality, it was the practical help that was most important to them but that, unfortunately, it was a source of help that appeared to be withdrawn as they became more involved with their studies. The subtext appeared to be the ‘honeymoon period’ was over and the
remainder of their degree had to be faced alone. This subtext was also found in the work of Waller, Bovill and Pitt (2011).

Having experienced limited, ineffective or withdrawn support from family members the participants sought out support from other sources which leads to the sub-ordinate theme ‘support from university peers’. Overall peer support was described as vitally important by most of the participants; similar findings were found by Yorke and Longden (2007) in their study of first year undergraduates. Again there appeared to be a participant divide present in this study; the male participant was far less dependent on peer support and only referred to it in terms of a mutual practical backup if, for instance, transport and travel issues arose. For him there appeared to be no need to seek out external support as he received so much from his internal support network.

In contrast, the females articulated intense and dependent relationships with other mature female peers. The relationships were highly important and appeared to act as a safety net in the HE environment and buffered them also from home life pressures. This was resonant of the study findings of Blair, Kline and Wallis (2010) who suggested that for their participants peer group support, encouraged abilities that allowed them to resolve personal world and student world pressures. There was a sense of solidarity amongst the women; they had entered an unknown environment and gravitated towards those who displayed the same social identities, such as age and gender, as themselves. The sub-ordinate theme ‘emotional support from peers’ addresses the exchanges of mental buffering that took place within the group. There seemed to be a common feeling that they each was responsible for helping and supporting the others through difficult study periods. For example Akila, described having each of them as having ‘dark moments’ that they would have been incapable of dispelling without the help of the group.
In the following chapter I move to a summative discussion which considers the ways in which the research aims relate to the themes outlined here, grounds them within wider theory and research and offers the final thoughts and conclusions of the thesis.
Chapter 7: Summative discussion and conclusions

Introduction

The previous chapters offered an account of the findings of this research and discussed them in relation to relevant, selected, previous research. The aim of this chapter is to offer a summative discussion in relation to the three aims of this study. Each aim will be addressed individually highlighting the most salient findings and grounding them within wider theory and research. Taken together these sections provide the reader with an overview of the main conclusions that have been drawn from this research.

This chapter begins with a brief summary of findings mapping to Cross’s (1981) Chain of Response Model. A thorough and more detailed commentary will be presented in Aim 2 where I draw upon traditional barrier categorisations from the work of Cross (1981), McGivney (1993) and Fuller et al. (2008), to illustrate an alternative view of barriers to learning thus reinforcing the originality of this research.

As noted in Chapter 3, Cross (1981) puts forward six stages that need to be navigated by an individual before they feel ready to participate: self-evaluation; attitudes about education; importance of goals and expectations; life transitions; opportunities and barriers and information. Corroborating the work of Cross (1981), the super-ordinate theme ‘Education the Transformer: Powerless to Powerful’, incorporates all six stages. Here, each participant discussed and made sense of their lived experiences from early childhood to present. Albeit unwittingly, what they were describing were each of Cross's stages, and it was their transition through each that stimulated them into feeling ready or able to participate (Cross, 1981).
However a limitation of Cross’s (1981) model is that it emphasises the stages leading to participation. It does not take into account that all of these stages continue to exist beyond participation. In contrast to the work of Cross, the current study goes beyond the stages or journey that leads to participation. Within the super-ordinate theme ‘Participation: the experience so far’ participants identified that the impact of recognised barriers to learning do not dissipate upon participation but continue to exist. In effect what had changed was the participants’ attitude towards them. They were no longer prepared to let social processes prevent them from realising their potential. There was a common perception amongst them that it was ‘their time’ and nothing would stand in their way.

In addition, the findings from the present study revealed further dimensions to the traditional barrier categorisations. The individuals drew attention to barriers that may only be pertinent and experienced by those attempting to participate later on in the lifespan: filial or caring responsibilities of mature students for younger and older family members; one’s own attitude to age; physical appearance; institutional ethos; emerging old and new self-identities; inadequacies of social and learning spaces in HE for mature students; male and female differences, including caring roles and responsibilities, and also peer support. As previously noted these additional barriers to learning are addressed within the following aims.

**Aim 1**

To examine how adult learners aged 30 years and over make sense of past and present relational processes and the ways in which they have influenced their engagement and participation with HE.

The intention of this aim was to ‘Dig deep’ and ‘listen’ to individual stories in order to gain an understanding of how relational social processes can affect an individual’s
engagement and participation in HE. Equally, my desire was to give a voice to individuals who are part of a substantial but neglected category of higher education students, those aged 30 years and over.

The overall findings of this study suggest that past and present relational social processes combine into a complex force that influences and shapes an individual’s learning trajectory. Such processes do not dissipate as the participant engages and participates with HE. Instead they remain, in some cases becoming more complicated and influential. What this study has revealed is that the personal outcomes of relational social processes are often contradictory. At times they serve to hinder the individual yet they can also stimulate or ‘kick start’ an individual into taking specific actions. Furthermore the ‘kick start’ or catalyst that prompted the individuals into participation occurred at an unconventional time of life. Within the following paragraphs I offer a discussion of the processes that have influenced and continue to influence the participants’ individual transitions. However, as the findings from the present study have contradicted some of the classical psychological models and theories of human development, I feel it is important that I start by offering an explanation of how this is so. My intention is to then introduce a contemporary psychological model of human development, around which my findings will be grounded.

**Transitions in adulthood**

Traditional and well articulated theories of human development view change as stage based. Stages are posed as hierarchal and cumulative; as successive stages require the integration of the previous stage in order for the individual to develop.

Piagets (1952) theory of cognitive development is a classic example of a stage based model; through interaction with his/her environment the child is able to progress through stages which represent the development of logical thought and growth. Each stage incorporates and builds upon the prior stage.
Although this model is highly regarded within the fields of psychology and education, for those who are attempting to account for adult development, the age stage approach that Piaget offers is inappropriate as the stages only reach adolescence.

Theories from Eriksons (1963, 1980) and Levinson (1978, 1986, 1996) circumvent this problem. Between them these theorists look at development across the life span they also identify a sequential progression but in contrast to Piaget, the sequences are not positioned as hierarchal each one contributes equally to development.

Erikson’s psychosocial theory suggests development occurs as a result of interactions between internal drives and societal demands. He offers eight stages of development reaching from birth to late adulthood. Erikson argued that in order to develop healthily the individual must successfully resolve a crisis at each of these stages. Crises were defined by a pair of opposing outcomes: for middle adulthood (30 years to 65 years) the outcomes are ‘generativity versus stagnation’. The emphasis in this stage according to Erikson is “primarily the concern in establishing and guiding the next generation” (1963, p.267). Erikson viewed development as an organised process unfolding in accordance with a timetable (Mercer, 2003).

Similar to Erikson, Levinson (1978, 1986) viewed adult development as a process of change that took place in a sequential pattern across the lifespan. He argued that as individual enters into a new ‘season’ or sequence there is a period of transition that involves new tasks and conflicts. Levinson (1986) rejected the term ‘stage’ in his theory because of its hierarchal connotations. Instead he adopted the idea of ‘eras’ of development, each with distinct characteristics. Levinson believed that in each of these
eras which were partially overlapping tasks and conflicts had to be mastered in order for development to take place.

Levinson’s concept of the transition period causes a dichotomy between his and Erikson’s theories. For Erikson, conflict resolution is relatively straightforward. Resolution of a crisis that is - choosing between the two opposing outcomes, results in the individual moving into a different stage of development. For Levinson, however, the periods of transition between eras last for about five years; this is viewed as a time of structure building in preparation for the next era of development and a time to complete the previous era’s developmental tasks (Mercer, 2003).

In spite of the noted dichotomy, both models assume that human development is sequential and linear. These prescriptive approaches suggest that transitions occur in a chronological age related manner. It is acknowledged that Levinson’s account leaves room for individual differences, yet, Sugarman (2001) argues that even though the ages in each structure were supposed to represent averages, the fact that he only left a transition period of five to six years for individual differences between stages still gave the assumption that developmental tasks will predominate at roughly the same time in everybody’s life.

Thus these models neglect the fluid nature of human development. One only has to consider the participants in this study to see that change and development cannot be pinpointed to an age and stage. For example, John and Sandy are grandparents and students; if one attempted to apply either of the noted models to these individuals they would be seen to be straddling across different stages of development.
A theory of development that takes age out of the equation

Findings from this study point to the value of more contemporary psychological models of lifespan development to make sense of the personal transitions of each participant. Hendry and Kloep’s (2002) lifespan model challenges the idea that development is sequential, universal and age related. Rather than interpreting adulthood as a static developmental period this model takes a holistic approach to examine the fundamentals that drive human change throughout the whole of the life-course. The authors take age out of the equation and replace it with the idea of resources, challenges and risks (Hendry and Kloep, 2002, Kloep, Hendry and Saunders, 2009). Resources are described as: innate (breathing, physical growth, reflexes); learned (walking, communication); structurally determined (gender, socio-economic class) and personal or individual (intelligence). It is these resources and their interdependence with day-to-day challenges such as care giving responsibilities or more critical challenges such as divorce or bereavement that account for human development across the lifespan and not increasing maturity associated with age (Kloep, Hendry and Saunders, 2009).

This model proposes that the resource system is not static and closed; instead potential resources interact with each other potentially enhancing and/or inhibiting each other (Kloep, Hendry and Saunders, 2009). Social networks such as family can be a hugely important resource in meeting the challenge of childcare, but at the same time family can become a challenge or disadvantage as parental attitudes have been positioned as preventing an individual from realising their potential.

The authors suggest that each new challenge disturbs the status quo requiring the individual to adjust their resources to accommodate the challenge. This process can be routine and relatively painless or be a source of anxiety depending on the intensity of the challenge task. If the individual is successful in solving the task their bank of resources are
changed and increased, thus allowing them to cope with future challenges: “in other words, the individual has changed, and development has occurred” (Kloep, Hendry and Saunders, 2009, p.338).

To conclude, resources and challenges are inevitably linked; you cannot look at one without the other. Furthermore, it is the interaction of these two that influence change and development in an individual and not simply “the passing of time” (Hendry, Kloep and Saunders, 2009, p.340).

**Normative life event at off-time shifts**

This theory also introduces the idea of ‘normative’ and ‘off-time shifts’: concepts that are particularly pertinent to the participants in this study. In their pursuit of change and self development each of the individuals in this study chose to embark on a normative life event or shift at an ‘off-time’ period of life, thus challenging the commonly held stereotype of a ‘traditional’ student. Within our own and many other societies, participating in HE is a common social and cultural event for school leavers and can be considered an age related activity; thus it is considered a normative event. Engaging as the participants did with a normal event at a noticeably different time in the lifespan is described as being ‘non-normative’ or ‘off-time’.

The above substantiates the idea that development is not a linear process. Further, the findings from this study illustrate that development in adulthood is shaped by and takes place by combining such off-time events, (in this instance participating in HE at a non-traditional time) with on-time events. Depending on their personal circumstances, on-time events for the participants ranged from rearing their own children to caring for
grandchildren. In addition, several of the participants were sandwiched between looking after their own children and looking after their elderly parents. Changing social demographics such as longevity, attitudes to marriage and divorce, offspring depending on parents for longer make it problematic to typify human development by using age and stage models. To clarify my point: according to stage development one is either in one stage or the other. Translated to a participant in this study, Sandy, aged 64 years, should be settling down into late adulthood. By entering HE, an event that ‘normally’ takes place in early adulthood Sandy has demonstrated that development is a non-linear, non-sequential process.

One of the most salient findings from this study was that all of the participants irrespective of their chronological age, had entered into a new phase of adult development through education. They were defying age stage theoretical models of development by demonstrating that transition and change occurs throughout the lifespan and not only in early childhood and adolescence as many theoretical models would have us believe. Development was not an ordered process, as Erikson, Levinson and Piaget suggest, and it did not occur in a scheduled or arranged fashion. However I concede to the theorists views of crisis resolution, which is not dissimilar to Hendry and Kloep’s (2002) theory of resources and challenges, to explain that development and growth in each of the participants was a progression influenced significantly by their past and present lives and involved personal conflict and the resolution of these conflicts.

**Influence of relational social processes on the individual and learning**

The participants in this study described their pre-participation personal dispositions as ones that reflected failure and low self-worth. They explained that the relational social processes to which each of them had been exposed from an early age were hugely influential to their
negative states and rendered them with feelings of powerlessness throughout much of their adult life. Early education, parental attitudes, the lack of economic capital, caring and filial responsibilities were positioned as the most dominant restrictors. Having accepted ‘their lot’ for a substantive part of their adult life, each of the participants in this research actively sought out change and development. Lehmann (2009, p.139) drawing upon Bourdieu’s concept of habitus suggests that ‘New experiences and information, can gradually or radically transform habitus, which in turn creates the possibility for the formation of new and different dispositions’. This was certainly the case for each of the individuals at the core of this study who were seeking out personal development and attempting to break the mould of their existing social structures for themselves and their immediate family.

As with the findings of McGivney (2006) and Stone (2008), this research highlighted a number of factors/ life events such as: unemployment, illness, children fleeing the nest, difficult relationships and filial responsibilities coming to an end, that influenced the participants’ decisions and prompted them into seeking out new experiences and information in the form of HE.

The research literature commonly refers to such events as conflicts or crises. Such terms emphasise states of negativity, calamity or disaster. In Chapter 3 I drew upon the work of Csikszentmihalyi (1990) and Mercer and Saunders (2004) to explain the problematic nature of the terms ‘conflict’ and ‘crisis’. The following substantiates this point. For these participants life conflicts became the catalyst for change. They turned negatives into positives; what some might describe as transforming catastrophic events into epiphanic events. Using Hendry and Kloep’s (2002) and Hendry, Kloep and Saunders (2009) perspectives of human development these participants were utilising their bank of resources to negotiate and deal with the challenges.
Conflict and change

Even though change was actively sought it involved conflict and a series of dilemmas for each of the individuals. It became apparent from the findings of this study and from conducting the literature review that combining a previous identity with a new identity and sense of self is problematic for an individual. Yet rather than shy away from the challenges involved in change the participants embraced them, dealing with the outcomes on both a practical and emotional level. Thus, these individuals were contradicting much of the dominant mature student discourse that portrays older students as fragile and needy individuals. Their personal stories bore witness to personal life roles that were multifaceted and demanding, and what is more, they highlighted the strength and determination of each of the individuals. For the women in particular, life appeared to be a constant struggle as they attempted to juggle all their personal world and student roles. Comparable with the participants in Stone’s (2008) study, the older students in this study were managing to achieve academically in their learning in spite of adversity and personal struggles. As Archer, et al. (2003) and Reay (2003) demonstrate the personal costs of engaging and participating in HE are high and act as powerful barriers for some. Yet the participants in this study were pragmatic in the way they handled their multiple personal and student roles and responsibilities. There appeared to be an understanding amongst all that there was much to gain for their pain and it was this belief that spurred them on.

Change and development of the self was not instantaneous but gradual, and participants suggested that learning has given them feelings of power, strength, autonomy and enthusiasm for their future. A strong sense of achievement and growing sense of self-worth was palpable in all of the students, irrespective of gender. It became apparent from their words that each was absolutely determined to succeed in their educational pursuit and their resolve gave them the strength to deal with their numerous roles and responsibilities.
**Disjunction in the HE environment**

The narratives of all six participants illustrated fraught but, overall, triumphant transitions to HE. The increased feelings of empowerment that all described were evidently intense when dealing with their personal worlds and promoted healthy feelings of self-worth and self development in each of them. Yet a disjunction became apparent as the participants began to describe their experiences of being an older student in HE. The sub-ordinate themes ‘feeling unwelcome’ and ‘not belonging’ exemplify that when it came to the HE environment such feelings of empowerment became diluted.

There appeared to be several conclusions to be drawn from the findings:

The first is that personal habitus (Bourdieu, 1990) and an individual’s disposition can be transformed, but not entirely eradicated. This research demonstrated that life experiences and social processes are deeply embedded within an individual and have a vice-like grip on a person’s sense of ‘self’. It could be understood that for these participants inadequacies or insecurities that had been developed as a result of early life experiences, such as early education and/or societal expectations, lay just beneath the surface. Although they had described how feelings of increased personal power and autonomy brought on by education helped to keep many of their negative feelings at bay they were able to return at any given time. It became apparent as the participants described their individual stories of participation, that the institutional environment itself was a trigger that instigated feelings of insecurity and of ‘not fitting in’.

The notion of ‘not fitting in’ has been discussed by Reay (2003) who suggests that this type of disjuncture is particularly evident in working class students whose social backgrounds are far removed from the ‘elitist field’ of HE (2003, p.310). Similarly in this study one could ascertain from the participants’ stories that their working class habitus contributed to their feelings of not fitting in or being on the peripheries of the student body.
For these older students university education was not the norm or something that was expected. Thus upon encountering such an unfamiliar environment the sense of self they had before participation, moulded by social processes and life experiences, produced once again, feelings of insecurity and intimidation.

Yet this study revealed a further factor that significantly contributed to the participants’ perceptions of not fitting in. This finding was pertinent to the female participants; they described how their perceptions of their physical self in terms of age and appearance made them feel uncomfortable and conspicuous in the presence of younger students. It is acknowledged that knowledge, language, social skills and values contribute to the process of integration; yet it should also be acknowledged, in current culture, socialisation is very much governed by aesthetics in terms of an individual’s external image. The participants who were entering a predominantly young culture felt that their appearance contributed to their lack of integration with their peers. They also described how the HE environment compounded their age related insecurities; they perceived the social settings to be elitist and exclusively geared toward the young traditional student.

It could be argued that feeling socially excluded from the traditional students’ world contributed to segregation between the two groups. Thus the older students gravitated towards like-minded others. They positioned themselves as being very different to the younger students in terms of attitudes to learning and real world roles and responsibilities. The ordinate theme ‘older and younger student divide’ and the sub-ordinate themes therein illustrated that as a group they had a very strong older student identity that culminated in a ‘them and us’ scenario. As a mature student group they appeared impenetrable, having strength in numbers. Corresponding with research evidence that points to the importance of peer group support (see Blair, Kline and Wallis, 2010; Yorke and Longden, 2008), each of the female participants described how they drew strength and
support from their peers that superseded any type of support they received from their home
worlds.

However, it was far more difficult to interpret from their discourses whether they had
developed individual student identities. Askham (2008) illustrates the difficulties
associated with adopting a learner identity. In doing so the author draws upon the work of
Barnett (1999 cited in Askham, 2008) who suggests that, for adults, becoming a student
can be perceived as a threatening experience as it contradicts their existing adult identity.
The adult identity is perceived to be responsible and mature in contrast to the student
identity which is mostly dependent. It could be argued from this that it was easier for the
participants to group together with others who shared similar homogenous traits, that is,
maturity and personal world responsibilities. In doing so they were able to develop an adult
student identity within which the feelings of conflict and anxiety that Barnett refers to were
diffused throughout the group, facilitated by the emotional and physical support system
they had built.

The above demonstrates how an individual’s habitus (Bourdieu, 1990) and an institutional
habitus (Reay, 2003) can come together to create situations that can be intimidating,
anxiety ridden and fearful for older students significantly contributing to an ‘older and
younger student divide’. If people post-30 years are responding to the WP calls then HEIs
have a moral duty to actively avoid social exclusion within the HE setting. Institutions
must take responsibility for not only WP to HE but take responsibility for such groups after
enrolment. They need to encourage and assist older students throughout their education if
they are to participate fully and fulfil their potential. Older students cannot and should not
be made to feel as if they are on the periphery of the student body. They should not be
made to feel invisible or as Meg succinctly states:
“It’s almost like we are a faceless painting they sort of see us but they don’t” (M2, 285).

Self-development – wider benefit of learning?
In terms of the WP policy and agenda, personal transition and change are positioned as an inevitable outcome of education and commonly described as the ‘wider’ benefits of learning. This is a far cry from the Yeaxlee’s (1929) ideology that focused on the humanistic concerns of participation. It could be argued that in the current structure, lifelong learning pays less attention to the transitional nature of participation. In contrast, it is the global and economic returns of education which are juxtaposed as the central and most important benefits. This becomes evident when one considers the previously discussed pivotal policy documents that have shaped the current vision of WP. Yet each of the participants in this study testified that their perceived sense of self development was far more important than the degree itself. Rather than positioning one as more important than the other, I argue that each should hold equal ranking within WP policy and literature.

The personal outcomes of learning cannot be separated from the academic outcomes; each influences the other – they are intertwined. In agreement with Cullity (2006), policy makers and institutions need to develop an in-depth awareness of the pivotal role that lifelong learning plays in promoting personal and/or vocational well-being in an individual. In recognising the broader social outcomes of learning they will move towards achieving their central goal; economic growth. Importantly, we may as a society move closer to the type of lifelong learning that Faure et al envisaged in the 70s; a learning framework that allowed individuals to develop throughout their life course, thus benefiting society in terms of knowledge, social cohesion and economic growth in equal proportions (Faure et al., 1972)
Aim 2

To explore the perceived motivations and barriers identified by such students as they navigate HE.

This aim was driven by the extant research. A substantive proportion of mature students literature focuses on the ‘motivations for’ and the ‘barriers to’ learning. However studies that investigated the area of motivation and learning commonly did so by drawing comparisons and accentuating differences between younger and older students. Research that explored the area of barriers to learning focused upon the period leading to participation, omitting the fact that barriers continue to influence an individual throughout their participation. Equipped with this knowledge I intended to address this gap in the literature by exploring the perceived motivations and barriers identified by each of the individuals pre-participation and as they forge their pathways through HE.

Motivations and barriers - not as simple as it seems

The research offered up four significant findings relating to this aim. Firstly, the terms motivations and barriers to learning are not dichotomous; secondly barriers to learning do not dissolve upon participation with HE: the term ‘barrier to learning’ is a clumsy term. Finally the findings illustrated new barriers to learning that are a shift away from the traditional representations.

Binary nature of motivations and barriers to learning

In the first instance this research highlighted that motivations and barriers cannot be separated into two discrete concepts, they are intertwined. Commonly, studies that investigate sources of motivation do so by comparing and contrasting levels of motivation in traditional and non-traditional students (Winn, 2002; Seifert, 2004; Roberts, 2011).
Therefore it seems that the main focus of motivational research is to ascertain the differing levels of academic competencies and skills in these different groups. What is more, the motivational literature appears to fixate upon the student’s academic period paying little attention to the personal life motivators that inspired the individual into engaging and participating with HE.

‘Barrier’ literature identifies the following factors that can obstruct participation in HE for certain social groups: situational barriers (financial cost, time, lack of childcare, location); dispositional barriers (individual attitudes to learning) and institutional barriers (timetabling, mode of attendance) (Cross, 1981; McGivney, 1999, 1990, 1993; Chapman et al., 2006). These barriers to learning resonated with the mature adults in this study. Yet, interestingly, the findings showed that they were also positioned as motivational, stimulating and, at times, useful in terms of developing organisational skills. To illustrate: children were seen for some participants to be a barrier to their learning. In an attempt to do justice to their parenting and student roles the individuals described feelings of conflict and guilt and feeling like they were always battling with a lack of ‘time’. However, children were also positioned as primary motivators behind decisions to participate. They were seen to stimulate the individuals into seeking out better lives for their family. Furthermore the ‘time drain’ that accompanied the caring role meant that the participants had become competent at multi-tasking and time management. Drawing again upon Hendry and Kloep’s (2002) theory to conclude, the barriers or challenges to learning had become both barriers and motivators.

**Enduring nature of motivations and barriers to learning**

The above highlights the non-dichotomous nature of these concepts. They are not necessarily mutually exclusive. It also illustrates that as concepts they are not simply left behind at the HEI’s gate, so to speak. They continue to affect the individual to a lesser and, in some cases, a greater extent as they navigate their learning pathway (Blair, Kline and
It appears that the participants in this study took on the challenge of HE in spite of their personal barriers. Determination and a desire to succeed meant that they had to take the challenge by the horns and resolve any fallout or consequence of their actions to the best of their ability. In doing this the findings demonstrated that their reward was personal development.

‘Barrier to learning’ – a clumsy term

It is acknowledged within the corpus of literature investigating this area that financial issues, children, relationships, parental values, early education are viable concerns for those students who enrol from WP backgrounds. This was evidenced in this research particularly in the ordinate theme ‘powerless’ where participants substantiated many of these claims. It should not be forgotten however that these issues, to a lesser or greater extent, occur in the lives of traditional students also. Yet the term ‘barriers to learning’ has become synonymous with the ‘non-traditional’ name tag. Coupled together, as they so often are within WP discourse, it conjures up negativity and individual struggle. Gorard et al. also draw attention to the problematic nature of the barrier metaphor and attempt to offer a rationale for its abundant use. The authors suggest that in terms of WP it is a useful term as it accounts for ‘differences in patterns of participation between socio-economic groups and also contains its own solution which is the removal of the barriers’ (2007, p.51). Building upon this argument I argue that it does not simply identify differences between different groups it serves to polarise and set apart non-traditional and traditional students. With regard to the authors’ suggestion that the term may contain ‘solutions’ to the removal of barriers I argue that it is very difficult to see any such solutions. For example, literature habitually positions childcare as one of the biggest barriers to participation. Yet at the institution at the core of this study there are no crèche facilities or childcare ‘solution’ available for students who require reliable and affordable child minding facilities.
One could argue that the favoured and frequently used term ‘barrier’ is inappropriate and even clumsy. As an expression it oversimplifies the wide-ranging, complex experiences of adult learners. A barrier, according to the Oxford Dictionary Online is ‘a circumstance or obstacle that keeps people or things apart or prevents communication or progress’ (no page given). Due to the common use of this term within the literature, one would expect there to be few, if any, mature students participating in HE; however this is not the case as a significant proportion of the student population is made up of successful adult learners that are participating in spite of their so called ‘barriers’. It seems that barriers commonly categorised as family and personal, socio-economic, financial and institutional (Burton, Golding Lloyd and Griffiths, 2011) can be overcome by an individual and in many cases used to their advantage.

Furthermore the term is inadequate as there is a sense of irrevocability and finality attached to the word ‘barrier’. Whilst relational social processes can act as ‘barriers to learning’ and heavily influence the decision to participate at a ‘traditional’ time, the fluid and evolving nature of such means that they become less powerful and restrictive further across the life span. For example, care giving responsibilities associated with children or aging parents, inevitably become less demanding with time. Additionally, it is acknowledged that barriers to learning are both physically and psychologically demanding of an individual, yet, their challenging nature can also serve to motivate, stimulate and spur a person along in their learning trajectory. It can be argued that the participants in this study have proved that barriers to learning are not always processes that block or impede. As individuals they have not been stopped entirely, as the term suggests, from engaging and participating with HE. They are processes that can be dealt with and negotiated on a daily basis as indicated by the participants in this study,
Findings from the current study, suggests that it is time to move away from the idea of, and the term, ‘barriers’ to learning. More appropriate expressions might be ‘obstacles’, ‘hindrances’ or ‘hurdles’ to learning; such terms are less intimidating and dispel the idea of being stopped altogether from fulfilling one’s academic potential. These terms inspire one into thinking that the relational social processes that are commonly accused of ‘stopping’ an individual from realising their potential are a series of actions that can be overcome and even turned to one’s benefit.
Additional Barriers

The figure below illustrates the traditional view of barriers as positioned by authors Cross (1981); McGivney (1993) and Fuller et al. (2008). It also illustrates an alternative view of barriers to learning (highlighted in italic) derived from the findings in the present study.

**Traditional view**

- **Situational barriers**: financial cost; time; lack of childcare; location
- **Dispositional barriers**: individual attitudes to learning
- **Institutional Barriers**: timetabling; mode of attendance

**Alternative view**

- **Situational barriers**: financial cost, time, lack of childcare, location; filial responsibilities; second generation responsibilities
- **Dispositional barriers**: individual attitudes to learning; individual attitudes to age and physical appearance.
- **Institutional Barriers**: timetabling, mode of attendance; institutional ethos; inadequacies of physical environment in HE for mature students.

**Participation**

Individual can be stopped entirely or Overcoming barriers leads to decision to participate

**Barriers = Motivators**

**Motivators = Barriers**

**Resolution = Participation**

Motivation and barriers continue to exist in HE.

**Positive outcomes of Participation:**

- Self-development
- Academic development

*Figure 7: Alternative view of Barriers to Participation*
Filial and second generation responsibilities as a barrier

To date, there appears to be little evidence in WP research literature regarding the effect of extended caring responsibilities on an individual’s decision to undertake HE or on the influence of these factors as they participate. Findings from this study suggest that older students are more likely to fall into the category of having additional caring roles to fulfil. Some participants found themselves at a time in their life where their caring responsibilities extended beyond caring for their immediate children to caring for grandchildren and their own parents.

In current UK society grandparents are increasingly seen as a child minding resource for parents returning to employment; this was the case for some participants in this study. Their decision to participate had far-reaching implications as they felt that they were letting their children down. Similar to the well reported guilt that parents in HE experience (Coser and Coser, 1974, cited in Edwards, 1993; Alsop, Gonzalez-Arnal, and Kilkey, 2008), they also described feelings of conflict and a sense of juggling multiple roles as they attempted to help their children out with their caring responsibilities.

In addition, participants described how they were responsible either partly or fully for looking after their own parents. Again, what the participants described were the emotional and physical implications of the extended caring role. To illustrate: Lynn described how she reluctantly reduced the care time that she devoted to her parent, in order for her to fulfil her student role and her additional roles as mother and wife. Similarly John illustrated the extent to which these additional caring roles can become barriers to learning as he described that he was unable to consider participation until the demise of his parent.

The very fact that the participants are participating in HE demonstrates that they are dealing with these barriers, but this does not take away the fact that these added caring roles make participation more emotionally and physically complicated and demanding for older students.
Physical appearance as a barrier

As previously discussed, it was apparent from the discourses of the female participants in particular that their own physical appearance was perceived as a barrier to their learning. They described feelings of standing out and feeling physically old in a community that was predominantly youthful. In many ways this finding was unexpected as a review of the literature did not highlight this as a common barrier. Although this in itself should not have been surprising if one takes into account the 18-30 age bracket that dominates the discourse. It would be naive to suggest that younger students do not have issues relating to appearance and body image also, however, the important finding here was that the participants were comparing and differentiating themselves again. This time it was not to do with discrepancies in academic skills or commitment to studying, it was because they felt outwardly, physically older.

Institutional ethos and physical environment as a barrier

Cross (1981), Chapman et al. (2006) and others identified issues such as the timetabling of classes or lack of information as barriers to learning. These commonly referred to barriers were not highlighted by the participants in this study. Instead, the physical environment and the ethos of the institution were positioned as barriers and accused of significantly impacting upon their sense of belonging. The institutional ethos and environment was not perceived as an inclusive one but an exclusive one – exclusive to younger students.

To conclude the literature positions motivations and barriers to learning in a simplistic and dichotomous manner. This research suggests that they are processes that are both complex and individualistic. At one level a surface understanding of processes that encourage or hinder an individual is useful and offers policy makers and institutions a basis around which WP strategies and policies can be formed. Yet, as authors Burton, Golding- Lloyd and Griffiths (2011) point out, the perception of barriers at an institutional level may vary
widely from the perceptions of the student. Building upon this argument, there is a need to gain in-depth knowledge and understanding of the particular nature of the processes that affect non-traditional students and an even greater need to understand the subjective processes and experiences of older students.

**Aim 3**

**To develop a bolder design that incorporates both Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis and Auto-driven Photo Elicitation to capture the experiential accounts from each participant.**

My third and final aim sought to develop a research design that demonstrated my commitment to understanding how these particular phenomena were understood by the particular individuals in this study. To this end I used interpretative phenomenological analysis and the SSIs and auto driven photo elicitation to capture the experiential accounts from each participant. It is suggested that this represents an example of a ‘bolder’ design which Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009) encourage doctorate level researchers to employ.

The experiential accounts of older students were the focus of this study. As students over the age of 30 years are a neglected demographic within WP research, I felt that I needed to do justice to the group by giving them a voice and exploring their personal perspectives in a different and innovative way. I wanted to advance intellectual research in this area by gaining an in-depth knowledge of what it really meant to be an older student in HE. Thus, as previously noted I chose to adopt a bolder design method (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009), by incorporating IPA, an idiographic qualitative research method rooted in
phenomenological psychology together with the auto-driven photo elicitation method. Both methods are committed to understanding the personal perspective of the given individual.

Although the SSI method is seen as the gold standard for IPA studies (Smith, 2008) the value of combining a visual method with interviews is verified by many researchers (see for example, Collier and Collier, 1986, Pink, 2001, Harper, 1984, 1989, 2000, 2002). They suggest that using images can assist the process by giving a visual prompt to the spoken word which leads to rich depth data. In the present study the photographs acted as far more than a prompt, they became enablers in the SSIs, they enriched the IPA method by generating data that was more insightful and meaningful than if I had used the SSI alone.

The research literature suggests that interviews that have incorporated images have been found to yield richer, more detailed, and more reflective accounts than interviews that use more traditional methods (Ibanez, 2004; Collier, 1957; Douglas, 1998; Berman et al., 2001; Samuels, 2004; Capello, 2005). Using a visual method is seen to evoke deeper aspects of an individual’s consciousness than words alone. The reason, it is argued, is that one uses more of the brain’s capacities when processing images as well as words (Harper, 2002). Thus, a photo elicitation interview does not simply provoke more information, rather, it arouses, reminds and evokes different types of information. Furthermore, utilising APE in the interview process highlighted dynamics and interactions that could easily have been overlooked if I had chosen to solely use the SSI method.

Having conducted the research the following points explore the ways in which combining IPA with the auto driven approach enhanced the process.
Benefit of combining IPA and APE

In using IPA and APE the research process became emancipatory as it allowed the participant to reveal their lived experiences to me in an unconventional way, through both language and image. These were powerful tools that enhanced my understanding of the participants’ existence as they lived it.

Images as enablers or prompts

Equally important to what the participants said, was what they did not put into words; this is when the images came into their own – that split second before the brain engaged the mouth – the time when the eyes began the story. They pondered on the image and the image seemed to enable them to speak. As Harper reflects:

Photographs appear to capture the impossible: a person gone; an event past. That extraordinary sense of seeming to retrieve something that has disappeared belongs alone to the photograph, and it leads to deep and interesting talk (2002, p.11).

The narratives were driven by the images taken by the individual. The physical process of producing an image or collating images from other sources stimulated the participants into considering why the image was important to them. I argue that this reflective process of image gathering/generating allowed participants to articulate their conclusions during the interview process in a deeper, self-explorative and more meaningful way. The images become signposts that guided and focused the interview process.

In an IPA study the meaning of the word only becomes clear when seen in the context of the whole sentence (Smith Flowers and Larkin, 2009). In the same way the meaning of the word becomes clearer when accompanied by a visual image. Through this visual invite from researched to researcher the participants were able to contextualise and make transparent their personal experiences.
Empowerment

As the question of power is inextricably linked with research conversations and literature, using the chosen methods meant that any concerns of power relationships in this research process were alleviated to a greater extent than would usually be the case. As a consequence of combining these innovative methods, power was transferred from myself as researcher to the participants in the study. In the same way as IPA and the SSI method, APE allowed the participants to guide, focus and shape the nature of the interview.

At the heart of both of these methods is the participant, and a belief that knowledge is a co-constructed process. IPA is concerned with trying to understand ‘what it is like’ from the participant’s point of view and in order to do this the IPA researcher has to make sense of the participants as they are making sense of their lifeworld - the ‘double hermeneutic’ (Smith, 2008 p.53). Similarly the APE method reflects the participants’ viewpoint. In this study the grounding of the images in the participants’ own experiences was key and made the photographs infinitely more valuable than a set that could have been produced by myself as researcher. Had I used my own images to explore the motivations and barriers of being an older student in HE they would have simply been that – my own perception of being an older student in HE.

The reflective processes of IPA and APE allowed the participants increased involvement in the proceedings as they were able to impose their own perspectives on the topic area, thus they became empowered. Furthermore, the images acted as a porthole through which the researcher could enter into their private worlds. At this stage the participants began to educate me about aspects of their social worlds that may have been inaccessible or simply overlooked had I adopted a traditional researcher and participant relationship. The key component of this research study was dialogue; participants showed the photographs during the interview process and talked about significance and meaning. The images
supported the participants’ narratives as they taught me about their past life histories as well as their present and their anticipated future lives.

Combining IPA and APE is unique and innovative

As anticipated, uniting IPA with auto-driven photo elicitation allowed this inquiry to explore the much discussed but nonetheless complex area of motivations, barriers and participation in HE from a different angle. Previous research that has utilised auto-driven photo elicitation (Heisley and Levy, 1991; Harrington and Lindy 1998; Berman et al., 2001; Jorgenson and Sullivan, 2010) indicated that the method provided distance for the participant to see familiar things in an unfamiliar way. The findings from the current study support this idea, in combining these methods the participants were able to reflect upon and recall events that had influenced their life stories in a unique way.

The comments from the participants in this study echoed the arguments above as they reflected upon the use of the images in the interview process. Their narratives suggested that the marrying up of the methods stimulated and prompted latent memories and released emotions that the SSI alone would not have. The following are some of their comments:

“The pictures were very useful for myself and really did make me reflect on what was, what is and what will be” (Meg).

“I found using the photo's had an impact that I wasn't expecting” (Lynn).

“I have to admit I really enjoyed compiling the images that I used, and yes I found the whole process extremely reflective. It afforded me the time to look back on issues in my life with which I had just coped with and moved on but never really addressed” (Sandy).
Ethical considerations

As noted in Chapter 4 using a visual method in any research means that ethical considerations are inevitably more detailed. Although stated that it was not essential for me to publish the images, as they were not being analysed in any way. Yet, during the analysis of the participants’ dialogues it became apparent to myself and my research supervisors, that it would be constructive to incorporate the images into the analysis chapter to act as a form of signpost to the reader. Many of the images taken were of objects and places and were presented as symbols of feelings and experiences, so the issue of anonymity did not arise. However, there were also many images of close family members and friends. Although the participants legally owned the images (Wiles et al., 2008) and therefore were able to give consent for me to use them, the individuals in the images may not have given consent, or as Rose (2005) points out even if they had consented, they were unlikely to know the purpose of the research to which the image may be put.

Wiles et al. (2008) urge researchers to consider whether someone could be harmed or morally criticised if images are identifiable. I took this advice very seriously; within this research, the participants revealed emotive, often negative aspects of their social relationships. As a researcher I felt that I had a moral and legal responsibility to protect the participants and their family members and friends. In order to do this I chose to obscure facial features. This in no way took anything away from the images as it was the essence of the image gleaned from the participants’ discourse that was paramount not the representation itself.

Questions regarding limitation posed in Chapter 4

I anticipate that the above paragraphs have convinced the reader of the multiple benefits of combining these reflective methods. However, I posed several questions in Chapter 4
related to the potential limitations of using the APE method which I promised to address here. The questions were as follows:

Would the participants actually get around to taking and developing the photographs as discussed? If so would the photographs be of a reasonable quality? Finally, and of equal importance, would the images actually prompt dialogue?

Having successfully executed the methods and coming to the end of this research process I am in position to answer the questions. However, I do not feel it necessary to go into each of the questions individually, as I believe the findings generated from using IPA and APE provide the answers.

**Taking a leap**

All things considered, combining these methods took a leap of researcher faith! Yet in taking the leap the data collection process for this study became everything that I had intended it to be; idiographic and phenomenological. Combining a visual method with the IPA method is a unique and innovative way of gaining greater understanding of any topic that is concerned with exploring complex issues, as the ‘invitation to view’ extended from participant to researcher can circumvent any important aspects of the lifehistory being ignored.

Through using this ‘bold’ design method I was able to get closer to the participants and gain the in-depth understanding of the phenomena being studied. Of equal importance IPA and APE gave the participants the capacity to look back and remember past lived experiences and reflect upon how relational social processes had influenced their present their past and present role as student. It gave a sense of continuity to me the researcher and the participants as they constructed a verbal and visual pathway from their early lives to their current lives.
Final reflections

In keeping with ‘best practice’ for qualitative research, I chose to adopt a reflexive approach to this study. I engaged with the reflexivity at the beginning (i.e. Chapter 1) and in the middle (i.e. Chapter 5) of the study; in accordance with the advice of Langdridge (2007), I revisit the process again, here at the end of the study.

Many of the personal relational and social processes and experiences that were described by the participants in this study resonated with my own experiences of being an ‘older’ student participating in HE. As previously noted, being a mother, I experienced substantial feelings of guilt, even selfishness because I was ‘doing something for myself’. I, like the participants felt the pressure of juggling and doing justice to both my home and student roles.

On the other hand, the individuals also described participation experiences that were very different from my own. Their discourses revealed a complex division between their selves as ‘older’ students and their ‘younger’ peers; this was not something that I experienced as a non-traditional student. For example, they perceived their physical appearance to be a barrier to their learning. As previously noted this came as an unexpected disclosure to me. At times in the social areas around the HE campus, I felt more ‘mature’ than many of the students who chose to, for instance, parade around in flip flops and shorts, irrespective of whether the sun was shining or the ground was covered in six inches of snow. So in ways I felt older and I was often thankful that I did, but, I never thought that I looked ‘too old’ or ‘past it’ as the participants in this study described.

In addition, I did not feel to the same degree as the participants, an ‘older’ ‘younger’ student divide. I admit to, at times, pondering on the perceived abundance of time and
freedom that traditional students had. Yet, I was never envious or resentful of this so it never came to more than contemplative thoughts.

As an older student in a predominantly younger environment, I, like the participants in this study experienced personal growth and change from engaging with HE. However, in contrast to them, I feel that my experiences and transitions were enriched by my relationships with younger student peers. Equally, their experiences were enriched by engaging with an ‘older’ student. I perceive this to be so, as I have discussed the area at length with one of my closest friends, who was, one of those younger peers!

To conclude, mostly I felt great empathy with the participants in this study, identifying with many of their thoughts, feelings and attitudes. However, at times I felt greatly distanced from what they were describing to me. Through being reflexive, I understand that these variations between my own experience and those of the participants are not areas of concern but should be celebrated. After all, I embarked upon this study with the purpose of gaining unique, experiential perspectives of participating in HE post 30 years of age. Without a shadow of a doubt, by using IPA, with its central tenet of gaining knowledge from the individual’s viewpoint, this has been achieved.

**Limitation of the current research**

Idiography is an integral component of IPA, the approach adopted for this research. In keeping with the method’s concern for the particular, a purposive sample of participants was selected. The findings have emerged from the perspectives of six individuals who, in spite of personal struggle and conflict, have become successful learners in one programme in one institution. However, I acknowledge that accounts of those who participated and did
not continue to engage with their studies may make for very different reading. Therefore one must be cautious about making any generalisations.

Conclusions

Adopting a phenomenological research approach, has allowed me to explore the subjective experiences of a group of individuals who have been largely ignored in academic discourse by virtue of their age. In doing this I was able to develop an in-depth understanding of how these older students made sense and continue to make sense of the relational social processes that have influenced their path to and through HE.

Furthermore, their narratives have contradicted much of the research on ‘motivation’ and ‘barriers’ by suggesting that the terms are not dichotomous but very much interwoven with each other. My participants challenge the system further by choosing to participate at an age that falls outside the government WP agenda and, by doing so, defy tried and tested traditional models of human life stage developmental theories. This research encourages the reader to view individual growth and development as a fluid ever-evolving concept that continues throughout and across the whole life span rather than something that occurs at certain ages and stages. All participants felt they had reached a time in their life where they needed to change or retrieve a sense of a previous self or do something for themselves – and education was seen by them all as a way of achieving this.

Finally, and most importantly, the older students in this study have been given a voice. They have revealed through their individual stories the life struggles and challenges that prevented them from realising their educational potential at a ‘traditional’ time. Although they now revel in their triumphs and their personal achievements in their role as students, sadly, there is still a sense amongst them that they are on the outside. As Meg put it:
“Thank you for allowing me to speak frankly and for taking up our cause, hopefully this is one of the steps that will help us and just get people to recognise that we do actually belong here” (M2,441).
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Appendices
Appendix 1: Interview Schedule

Interview Schedule

First interview:

Where do you live?

What nationality do you consider yourself to be?

What age are you?

Do you have any children?

Can you tell me about your wider family?

Schooling – Can you tell me about your experience of school?

Have any of your family gone to university?

Did you consider going to university when you left school?

Tell me about your work experiences?

When did you start thinking about university?

Was there a catalyst that made you consider HE?

What course are you doing?
What stage are you at?

Is there anything more you would like to add?

**Second interview**

Reflect on a few points from last interview.

Why did you choose this institution?

Consider your expectations of HE, reflect on the realities, have they met your expectations?

Has participating in HE changed you in any way?

What are the advantages/disadvantages for you to being a mature student?

Is your degree seen as an end in itself or a means to an end?

Where does your main support come from?

**Photo elicitation**

What or who would you describe as your motivation for participation in HE? (photographs)

What or who would you describe as barriers to your participation in HE? (photographs)
Appendix 2: Informed consent/ permission to use data form

Informed Consent / Permission to use research data form

- I understand the nature, purpose and duration of the research.
- I understand that taking part in the research is voluntary and that I may withdraw my consent for this data to be used at any time.
- I understand that no-one will have access to the document beyond the researcher and her two supervisors.
- I understand that any personal statements made in the document will be confidential. All comments will be anonymous in the thesis and any reports or papers that are produced as a result of the research.
- I agree to the interview being recorded
- I understand that no photographic evidence will be printed in any publication without prior consent from me.
- I understand that the data from this research will be used for three things:
  1. PhD thesis
  2. Academic research papers and presentations
  3. A summary report to be circulated to all interested participants or other interested parties.

If the information you have submitted is to be published as a report you will be sent a copy. Please note that confidentiality and anonymity will be maintained and it will not be possible to identify you from any publications.

Signature _______________________

Printed name ______________________

D.O.B _____ / ____ / ____

Home address: ______________________

________________________

Tel: ______________________

Email: ______________________
Appendix 3: Research information for participants

Research information for participants

INFLUENCES OF PAST AND PRESENT RELATIONAL SOCIAL PROCESSES WHEN ENTERING HIGHER EDUCATION POST 30 YEARS: EXPERIENTIAL ACCOUNTS OF FOUNDATION AND YEAR ONE STUDENTS

Principal investigator: Clare Elmi-Glennan (PhD student, School of Education, Cardiff Metropolitan University CMU).

What is the project about?

Within Government policy and strategies within HE there has been a drive towards inclusion: this however has been focused upon under-represented groups between the ages of 18-30 years old. Whilst there is an array of literature into motivations and barriers in relation to 18-30 year olds, there remains a weakness in the evidence base pertaining to learners over the age of 30. Therefore the aim of this study is to bridge the gap in the evidence base of individual participation and decision making for learners aged 30 years plus.

Having successfully completed an undergraduate degree course as an adult learner (aged 30 plus) I appreciate that participation in higher education develops important academic skills and increases knowledge, however my own learning process was so much more than this. There were countless motivations and barriers that I had to work through before I began my learning trajectory and I soon experienced that there were many more different types of motivations and barriers to negotiate throughout my H.E.educational process.

Research Focus- Aim

The primary aim of this research is to explore the barriers to and motivations for adult learners' (aged over 30) participation in HE. It will investigate how these relational processes influence their experience of participation.

Your involvement in the project

- Your involvement in the project is voluntary. If you choose to participate we will have an initial meeting in which I will explain the nature of the study in greater detail i.e. level of commitment required from you; dates times and venues that best suit you; present you with informed consent form and answer any questions you may have regarding the research. Within this initial meeting I will also introduce the methods that I will be using in the study, a brief description follows:

- Semi structured interview- It is difficult to predict how long each session will take although it is acknowledged that this type of interview will inevitably take up more time than for example a structured interview, however as they have the potential to be intense and even emotionally draining, it is intended to let them run for no longer than 90mins.
• **Auto-driven photo elicitation** – you will be required to take at least 8 photographs (no more than 10 photos) of objects, people, places etc that you perceive are motivators and barriers to your study. The aim of the photographs are to stimulate dialogue. Research findings suggest that this method allows you, the participant, an increased involvement in the proceedings, furthermore it provides distance for you, to see, familiar things in an unfamiliar way. When translated to this study it is hoped that the photos will allow you an increased voice in interpreting your motivations and barriers to participation.

**How many meetings will be involved?**

It is anticipated that no more than 2 meeting will be required:

- First interview, opportunity for you to tell me about your past and how and why you are at this point in your life.
- This initial meeting (where disposable cameras will be given out if you do not have access to a mobile phone camera or digital camera, consent form also to be signed at this meeting) will be approx 60-90 mins duration.
- Second meeting – barriers and motivation to your study prompted by photos anticipated timing 60-90mins.

**Where will meetings take place?**

The intention is that all interactions will take place on the higher education site, however if this is inconvenient to you then mutually convenient sites will be discussed.

**Your rights**

As your participation is voluntary you may withdraw from the project at anytime without giving any reason. Although, I hope this will not be the case, should you wish to withdraw after data has been collected, but prior to any possible publication, your data will be destroyed and not included in the study.

**Rights of the researcher**

As the researcher of this study it should be clear that I also have the opportunity to withdraw or terminate the research at any time if I feel uncomfortable regarding any of the issues that may be raised.

**My responsibilities to you as a researcher**

My first responsibility to you is to ensure that there is no risk to you at any time.

Any information you disclose to me during the research will be STRICTLY CONFIDENTIAL. All names will be changed even the location of interviews or meetings will be given pseudonyms.

The recordings and transcriptions and any photographic data from interviews will be stored in a secure location and only the researcher and supervisors will have access to these. Photographs will only be published with prior consent from yourself.

A copy of the completed thesis will be held at the university. If the information you have submitted is to be published in a report a copy should be sent to you. You will be offered a
copy of your interview transcripts and provided with the opportunity to ensure they are accurate and reflect your view point.

Whilst unlikely, it is important that you are aware that I have an obligation to disclose information gained during the research process relating to unethical or criminal behaviour.

Thank you for reading this and I hope that you will be able to take part in this project.

If you feel you would like more information please do not hesitate to contact me. My details are provided below.

Many Thanks
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