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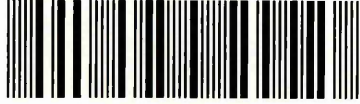
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How commencement of part-time study impacts on the lifeworld of mature students

Spurin M.J.   **Ed.D**   **2012**

Abstract

Background and aim: The introduction of higher fees within HE may well impact on part-time provision from 2012. Potentially fewer students applying for courses may mean that university income will become reliant on students completing courses and so retention will assume greater significance. At the university at the centre of this research 62% of all withdrawals on part-time foundation degrees occur within the first six weeks. This study explored how nine part-time mature students experienced entry into HE to develop knowledge and understanding of the range and nature of that experience, and the reasons why withdrawal may occur.

Design: Using lifeworld the study captured the lived experience of nine students. The participants were interviewed after they had completed six weeks of their various courses and then again six weeks into their second semester.

Results: The lived experience of these students evidences the complexity and individuality of returning to education. For some of the students, entering into study brought the present, past and future intensely into focus. Some questioned their own presence in HE while managing feelings of anxiety and inferiority. Established individual lifeworlds were challenged as integration into the social and academic communities of the university were negotiated. Enabling strategies included peer support within the classroom and securing confirmation that they were working at the correct academic level.

Conclusion: This study shows that the lifeworld experience of these beginning students is rich and diverse and cannot be encapsulated within a collective account of the student experience. For university engagement with students to be meaningful the findings of this study suggest that it needs to take account of the range of mature students' experiences including expectations, approaches to study, motivation, their past and aspirations, to develop courses that will retain students. The accounts of these students indicate that if appropriate support is given during the transitional period to enable feelings of acceptance within the social and academic environment then this can make a major contribution to retention.

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Chapter One: Introduction

Higher education in the United Kingdom (UK) is, once again, to experience major change as the academic year starting September 2012 will see full-time students paying full fees. This coincides at a time when the number of school leavers entering higher education (HE) looks set to drop over the coming decade (Eastwood 2008). Originally, the resultant shortfall in numbers was to be boosted by non-traditional students; something the British Government has encouraged for many years. In 1997, the Dearing Report set a target of 50% of 21-30-year-olds to access higher education by 2010. This was always going to be a challenge as at that time a third of the adult population had not engaged in any formal learning since leaving school (Gorard *et al.* 2006). The target was subsequently revised in 2006 by the Leitch Report: 40% of the working population should achieve a level 4 qualification by 2020. Since 2006, encouraging non-traditional students has remained high on the British Government's agenda.

> The framework makes it clear that the government will not relent on its commitment to widening participation and fair access to our universities. We recognise that, if we are to achieve the ambition set out in the 2006 Leitch Report for more than 40% of the adult population to be qualified to level 4 or above by 2020 we must encourage more adults to enter Higher Education. (Higher Ambitions 2009, pi)

The above report from the Department for Business Innovation & Skills, along with the National Student Forum (2009), recommended the improvement of opportunities for lifelong learning with a widening participation strategy of attracting more part-time mature students. This was to be encouraged by universities through the delivery of more flexible and part-time programmes; the very reason part-time courses were originally designed (Seidman 2005).

In the 2009-2010 academic year the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) identified that there were 1,914,710 students in the UK studying higher education and 29.4% of these were doing so on a part-time basis. Those under the age of 21 and who study full-time are, according to HESA, generally classified as traditional students.

Anyone outside this category is classed as non-traditional (Heery *et al*. 1996) and this, therefore, includes part-time mature students.

Part-time students may not have to pay the same fees as full-time students from September 2012; however, it is likely to be the case (after the Browne Report 2010) that they will have to pay considerably more than they do now (Rice 2011). Therefore, as universities' income will be reliant on students paying fees, there will be two challenges ahead: recruiting sufficient numbers on part-time courses in order for them to be viable, and then retaining students on these courses - the subject of retention.

Retention refers to students who stay on their course as opposed to those who withdraw. From an institutional perspective, it is the ability to retain a student from admission through to graduation (Berger and Lyon 2005). According to Hagedorn (2005), the terms 'withdrawing' or 'dropping out' mean anyone who leaves a course prior to completing it and not returning that same year; often referred to as 'student attrition'. The majority of HE courses are between two and four years in length, with most withdrawals taking place during the first year (Prescott and Simpson 2004). Although student attrition is an important mechanism on some professional courses where enrolees are ill-suited to the demands of their chosen profession, poor retention has financial consequences for institutions and this reflects "concerns about the quality of the student experience" (Wilcox *et al*. 2005, p707). Attrition and the student experience are closely linked (Tinto 1993) as a "high retention rate is an indication that an institution is meeting student expectations with regard to satisfaction" (Belanger *et al*. 2002, p219). Therefore, the focus of this study is to explore the student experience to develop knowledge and understanding of the range and nature of that experience in order to identify factors that might lead to withdrawal.

To put the aim of the investigation into context I begin in this chapter by introducing the university where the research was conducted. I then go on to define part-time mature students and, in particular, the students focused upon. Outlined are the courses that these students are on, the structure of these courses and the school

within the university that they are part of. Consideration is given to retention of students on part-time courses and how the subject of withdrawing relates closely to the experience of being a student. I then go on to establish when most withdrawals take place and claim, using institutional data, that the first few weeks of a course is a critical period for retention. I conclude by presenting the aims and objectives of this research and outline the structure of the dissertation.

The institution

The university where the research for this dissertation took place is a designated specialist higher education institution in England. It has over 7200 students with a breakdown of 70% Higher Education (HE) and 30% Further Education (FE). Courses on offer range from short craft courses and NVQs to undergraduate and Masters Degrees which are delivered on three regional sites. On average, 70% of the students are female which is higher than the national average of 62% (HESA 2012). The student population is drawn from an ethnically diverse profile reflecting that of the region. Students between the age range of 18-24 account for 70% of the total population with those 25 years and over making up the other 30%. Part-time students make up 28.5% of all HE students and of the approximate 1400 students studying on foundation degrees about 33% of them are registered on a part-time basis.

Part-time mature students

For more than a decade the role of the university in the UK has developed in order to accommodate and adapt to a mass education system. According to Rachal (2002), it is a system essentially designed for traditional students where education for mature students co-incidentally takes place within it. Yet many universities support a high percentage of older students, and the part-time undergraduate provision has increased, in recent years, faster than the full-time provision in order to accommodate them (Fuller 2007). Fuller identifies that 90% of entrants on part-time undergraduate courses are over 25, pay their own fees and are in paid work. They are more likely to come from lower socio-economic backgrounds, have left school earlier and have few qualifications on entry. These students may have had a lengthy break from education and are usually in full-time jobs with other interests and responsibilities. The return to

education on "part-time academic study is a major life decision. It involves considerable investment both in financial and in personal terms, and the journey towards completion can be long and demanding" (Gatrell 2006, p1).

McGivney (2004) also identifies common traits of mature students –

> ... many have to learn on a part-time basis, which means that it takes longer to achieve their qualification goals ... mature students are more likely than younger ones to be living at home and attending an education institution near to their home (or work). ... Depending on their age, adults' qualifications may be out of date and some may lack confidence in their ability to succeed in an education or training programme if there has been a lengthy interval since they last engaged in formal learning. (p34)

Part-time study is often an ambiguous term. It is calculated on the basis of funding and does not reflect the actual time students spend studying (Jackson and Jamieson 2009). At this particular university, part-time study is reflected in course timetables where classes are attended one day per week and students take longer to complete their course than those on full-time programmes. A part-time student is defined as studying less than 120 credits per year. The participants who contributed to this research were those starting foundation degrees at level 4.

Foundation degrees are the only higher educational route on offer to part-time students at levels 4 and 5 at the university and, at the time of writing, there were over 230 students on these courses at level 4. The majority of these students study on courses which fall within the *School of Childhood and Education*. The school runs part-time foundation degrees in *'Education with ICT'*, *'Community Family Support'*, *'Integrated Services'*, *'Playwork'* and *'Early Years'*. Each course takes five semesters to complete instead of the traditional four on full-time courses. A semester is approximately fifteen weeks, twelve of which are teaching weeks. Therefore, taking into consideration Christmas, Easter and summer breaks, students starting a course in October 2010, for example, would finish their foundation degree in January 2013. All courses have progression routes to the final year of a BA (Hons) course within each area and this progression allows students to complete the final year of the BA (Hons) over four semesters on a part-time basis (two years).

All courses run one day per week, usually 1pm to 7pm depending on the number of modules scheduled per semester. Each module is timetabled as a one and a half or two hour session with a one-hour tutorial scheduled within the timetable. Traditionally, students study three modules in the first semester, three modules in the second, three modules in the third, two modules in the fourth and two modules in the final semester. Successfully completing all modules awards students 240 credits, this then allows them to progress on to the final year of a degree. At present, these students do not have to pay for their course. The institution 'draws down' government funding and waives the fees. This will change in September 2012 when there will be no, or very little, funding to draw upon. At that time funding will be replaced by student fees as the main source of income, thus retaining students will be more important than ever before.

At present each course has an attrition rate and, according to HESA (2009), withdrawals from the courses indentified within the *School of Childhood and Education* are average when compared to national benchmarks. The problem is that HESA's statistics do not represent a clear picture as regards student attrition because not all withdrawals are included in the data they provide.

In 2009, the following statement could be found on HESA's website:

> Students may leave higher education at various times during their first year, or simply not return after the end of the year. When a student leaves very early in the academic year, there may be reasons for this, which are unconnected with the course or the institution. To allow for this, students who are recorded as leaving before 1 December in their first academic year have been removed from the figures. (HESA 2009)

This statement has since been removed although the rule still applies. This means that any student who leaves their course during the first eight weeks is not counted in the figures. They are just removed as if they did not enrol. Therefore, withdrawal figures tend to be much higher in reality than those shown in HESA's statistics.

Rationale for the research

In 2010, I examined the withdrawals of all part-time students on foundation degrees at the university between 2003 and 2008. I found that few withdrawals took place after the first year. However, the withdrawals that did take place throughout the first year were as follows (table 1.1):

Academic year	Students withdrawn during first year	Students withdrawn during first six weeks	Withdrawal rate in first six weeks
2003-2004	72	36	50%
2004-2005	69	41	59%
2005-2006	61	48	79%
2006-2007	81	52	64%
2007-2008	93	55	59%
2008-2009	78	49	63%

Table1.1 - Withdrawal Rates

From the 2005-2006 academic year courses started in February as well as in September. The figures in table 1.1 have therefore accounted for this.

The figures given do include students who had enrolled, but were not seen again or did not return after the induction. These make up, on average, 15% of total withdrawals. This leaves just over 47% of students withdrawing between week One and week Six (62% combined). They will, at the very least therefore, have probably attended the induction and the first week of their course. What is established here is that most withdrawals that take place during students' first year actually occur within the first six weeks.

The reasons for withdrawal are often not obtained by the university and those which are provided by students tend not to be a true reflection (McGivney 2004). My intention was to focus on students whilst on their course and conduct research in line with Roberts (2011):

> While it is duly noted that these students have not dropped out, in trying to better understand student retention the central concern here is identifying and raising awareness of issues that could potentially lead to negative experiences and subsequent attrition. (p184)

The data in Table 1.1 led me to consider the student experience and how entering higher education impacts on their lifeworld: the sense of self, how individuals feel physically and emotionally, how relationships may alter, their hopes and ambitions and how the past and the future plays a part in the present (Ashworth 2003a). In this way it contributes to practice by establishing a greater understanding of why the early weeks of a course are a critical time for retaining students.

The Research

Title:

How commencement of part-time study impacts on the lifeworld of mature students.

Research questions:

- What impact does entering HE have on the lifeworld of (mature) students?
- Does an understanding of the lifeworld of students identify factors that might lead to withdrawal?

Aim:

To explore the impact on the lifeworld of students within the first six weeks of their part-time higher education programme in order to identify factors in the student experience that might lead to withdrawal.

Objectives:

To:

- select and justify a methodology that will best capture the student experience.
- place the student voice at the centre of the research.
- capture the individuality and diversity of the student experience through the fractions of the lifeworld.

- critically review the literature that has focused on students returning to higher education in adulthood.

- contribute to knowledge by providing and analysing data to assess why the first few weeks are a critical period for retention.

- enable the student voice to impact on course development.

The approach taken for this research is not a traditional one and I have broken it down into seven chapters. In Chapter:

- Two, I discuss the methodology and justify the structure of the dissertation.

- Three, I present and analyse three individual lifeworld accounts using lifeworld fractions.

- Four, I review the literature that has explored the experience of mature students in higher education.

- Five, the experiences of all nine participants in the study are discussed in relation to the literature.

- Six, I introduce the conceptual and theoretical framework adopted in this dissertation and apply the data to these frameworks.

- Seven, I make my conclusions and show how the findings contribute to practice. I then evaluate the project by presenting my own reflections on the research journey.

In this introductory chapter I have identified the changes ahead in higher education and how retention and the student experience may become more important considerations for universities in the future. I have argued that the first few weeks of a course are a critical period in terms of retention and have presented the aims and objectives of the research. In the following chapter I present the methodology. I discuss the decisions taken throughout the research process and expound the structure of the dissertation.

Chapter Two: Methodology

History has shown that social science research has evolved into two schools, often referred to as quantitative and qualitative, or positivism and non-positivism. These schools are founded on different ontological and epistemological understandings and generally associate themselves with contrasting concepts and methods. Traditionally, in the positivist tradition, a quantitative approach is adopted to explain phenomena, whereas the non- or post-positivist aims to describe and explore in-depth phenomena from a qualitative, interactive, interpretive, humanistic perspective (Crossan 2003). Roberts (2002) suggests that researchers often combine the two approaches, while Miles and Huberman (1991) believe "it is getting harder to find any methodologists solidly encamped in one epistemology or the other" (p20). In fact, the choice is not the issue:

> From the point of view of the nonfoundationalist epistemology, there is little difference between qualitative and quantitative inquiry. Bad work of either kind is equally to be deplored and good work of either kind is still – at best – only tentative. But the good work in both cases will be objective, in the sense that it has been opened up to criticism, and the reasons and evidence offered in both cases will have withstood scrutiny. (Phillips 1993, p70)

However, when it comes to studying human behaviour, "a major criticism of the positivist approach is that it does not provide the means to examine human beings and their behaviours in an in-depth way" (Crossan 2003, p51). The reason for this is possibly because it often analyses behaviour from a stimulus-response perspective rather than the inner workings of the individual (Hough 2010). In light of these views, I felt a qualitative approach with the focus on individual lifeworld accounts appropriate for this study because the methodology can capture the uniqueness of individual experiences at a depth necessary for a study of this nature.

Whilst this investigation attempts to conform to the rigours and objectivity associated with any good research, the principle philosophical motives for which the research is based need to be clarified. There is a degree of subjectivity that is involved in all social

science research, the nature of which means that neither the subject nor the researcher can be totally objective. Positivists seek to ensure that the conditions under which research is conducted can be controlled and replicated. In the social sciences, it can often be difficult to achieve such conditions, if so desirable, because the social science researcher is often using the actor's frame of reference to understand human behaviour (Douglas 1976). By nature of the subjectivity involved it is important to discuss the philosophy behind the process chosen for this investigation.

Before any research is conducted the interrelationship of core components of the social research process: ontology, epistemology, methodology and methods have to be identified and set in place. It is argued that the directional relationships between these terminologies should be understood and clarified by the researcher (Hay 2002; Burgess *et al*. 2006). This is because the decisions about the process of the research have their foundations firmly set on an ontological platform and, along with the epistemological perspective, contains the assumptions of what social reality consists of – the starting point of this chapter. According to Koch and Harrington (1997), the whole journey is a reflexive exercise; therefore, the subjective issues associated between the researcher and the research will be extracted and discussed. This is followed by a justification of why a phenomenological enquiry was decided upon as an appropriate vehicle for this type of journey, and I argue why descriptive phenomenology was deemed to be an appropriate methodology to adopt. Issues of objectivity are raised within any investigation. How this was considered will be discussed with reference to the Husserlian method of bracketing and how this has determined the process, as well as the structure of the dissertation. As it is an investigation into students' lifeworlds, I go on to clarify the interpretation of lifeworld research that was adopted here. I then explain why I felt that interviews were an appropriate method to capture the student experience and how they were arranged and conducted. The participants interviewed in the sample are then presented. This leads me to confront the ethical issues inescapably attached to the investigation as I assess the power-dynamic relationship between myself, as the researcher, and those who were participants. I discuss the considerations and the steps taken to alleviate this. I then go on to discuss the issues involved with transcribing the interviews and then the procedure adopted for data

analysis using lifeworld fractions. I conclude the chapter by discussing reliability and validity in social science research and where the data stands in light of its generalisability.

Ontology, epistemology and methodology

Ontology, according to Cohen *et al.* (2000), is about the nature of existence. "We are beings in amongst and inseparable from a world of being, existences in an existing world, and it is from there that we start" (Heidegger 1962, cited in Magee 1987, p258). Heidegger's ontological philosophy is based on how human beings relate to their world. According to Dahlberg *et al.* (2008), that is what ontology is about: the science of being in general, thus embracing such issues as the nature of existence. It addresses questions such as: What is the world? What is human? What is existence? – It is, according to Crotty (1998), the study of being.

Integrated within Heidegger's ontological philosophy, that we are inseparable from the world, is the notion of social constructivism which supports Heidegger's (1962) further assumption that individual realities are invariably influenced by the world in which they live. In fact, anything interpreted and said about past events is a construction (Andrew 2004). The social constructivist ontology disputes the opposing objectivist notion that social phenomena and their meaning have an existence that is independent of social actors (Bryman 2001). Therefore, "constructivism describes the individual human subject engaging with objects in the world and making sense of them" (Crotty 1998, p83), relying on peoples' view of the world (Cresswell 2003). Here, each participant's lifeworld is at the core of the investigation and the way each makes sense of the world is as valid and worthy of respect as any other. This, I believe, falls within my ontological perspective of idealism; "that reality is only knowable through the human mind and through socially constructed meanings" (Snape and Spencer 2003, p13). Therefore, the contributions of participants are to be accepted as accounts of individually constructed existence as each has assembled his or her own meaning of the student experience. It is how individuals have made sense of their socially constructed world as it focuses "exclusively on the meaning-making activity of the individual mind" (Crotty 1998, p58).

Leading on from ontology is epistemology - the theory of knowledge and how it can be gained (Blaikie 1993). My position is that as individuals make their own meanings of their experience, the best way to access these is by being in conversation with them. For my part, I do not really know what they are going through, what they are experiencing, how they are interpreting their experience, or how it impacts on their lifeworld. I do know that it is theirs and, therefore, from a humanistic perspective, is important to them (Hough 2010).

In light of this, the study adopts a research perspective which relates very closely to the ontological perspective discussed and accordingly seeks the experiences of individual students in relation to their lifeworld. The methodology is therefore concerned with how knowledge of the social world is gained; in other words the procedure or method adopted as a means to collect data. Without consideration it can, according to Stubblefield *et al.* (2002, p150), "result in research that is ambiguous in its purpose, structure and findings". It aims to describe and analyse these methods acknowledging their limitations (Cohen *et al.* 2000). There is no single best method for social science research; "there is simply differential fitness for purpose" (Gorard 2004, p2). It is not about why one approach appeared to be the best method, but how and why this method was the most appropriate in the context and purpose of this particular inquiry (Clough and Nutbrown 2002). The methodology appropriate for this research falls within the qualitative category.

Phenomenology

Qualitative research, whether it be educational or in other fields, is often used to understand peoples' experiences of the world (Silverman 2006). This study was to understand the lived experience of a small group of individual students to develop an in-depth description of what their experience meant to them. A methodology often used and appropriate for this type of research is phenomenology. This is closely related to my ontological stance as it regards people as creative interpreters of events who, through their actions and interpretations, make sense of their worlds (Denscombe 2007). It captures attitudes and beliefs, feelings and emotions. It places emphasis on individuals' personal experiences (O'Leary 2004). It is not principally

concerned with explaining the causes of things, but provides a description of how things are experienced by individuals.

> Natural sciences operate from ideal principles in that they presuppose that objects that exist in time and space are real, that they actually exist, yet there is no evidence that objects are real; apart from our subjective experience of them. (Moustakas 1994, p46)

An objective of phenomenological analysis is to understand the phenomena better than before the research (Dahlberg *et al.* 2008), and it is derived from Husserl's philosophy that -

> experience as perceived by human consciousness has value and should be an object of scientific study. Husserl believed that subjective information should be important to scientists seeking to understand human motivation because human actions are influenced by what people perceive to be real. (Lopez and Willis 2004, p727)

The approach is about studying phenomenon. This has its origins from the Greek word *phaenestai* (to flare up, to show itself, to appear) and the word *pahino* (to bring to light, to show itself in itself). What appears in consciousness is the phenomenon (Moustakas 1994). Science is empirical and at the centre is human experience of those who engage with the world (Matthews 2006). Phenomenology returns to experience in order to obtain comprehensive descriptions. These in turn provide the basis of reflective structural analysis that portrays the essences of the experience; descriptions, not explanations (Moustakas 1994). "It is only when we return to the things themselves that we recognise how the world is a lived experience rather than an object to be studied" (Langdridge 2007, p12). At the root of phenomenology is the intent to understand phenomena through descriptions by those who experience them. For this investigation the ontological assumption (of how the world is) is that the nature of reality is the product of an individual consciousness and constructed by social beings. At the core is perception, regarded as the primary source of knowledge; a source, according to Moustakas (1994), which cannot be doubted as what appears in consciousness is the phenomenon.

Phenomenology is about consciousness, it is not something outside consciousness and as Dahlberg *et al.* (2008, p34) identify: "things that we are closest to are the things most hidden". This implies that much of our experiences are not reflected upon or confronted for meaning until possibly someone brings it to consciousness through questioning in conversation. According to Stevens *et al.* (1993), it can be said that phenomenology underpins all qualitative research because it concentrates on individuals' interpretations of their own experience. Stevens *et al.* (1993) go on to claim "that when authors write about qualitative research they are in fact writing about the phenomenological method" (p41), because essentially it is about people and how they make sense of their existence. As Crotty states (1998, p10), "it becomes a world of meaning only when meaning-making beings make sense of it". The experiences of others then enrich our own (Snow 2009). But before I discuss the form of phenomenology adopted it is important to reflect on my own circumstances and perspectives as a researcher.

Reflexivity

The tensions that are inherent between the ontological perspective and the methodology are based on the fact that the researcher or researchers already share their world with those whom they are researching and can only interpret, understand and make sense of their findings from their own frame of reference (Capurro 2000). It is impossible, as Silverman (2006) acknowledges, to escape the author's assumptions, preferences and prejudices. Any research method adopted will be very much influenced by ontological and epistemological positions initially guided by the values of the researcher (Crotty 1998). Greenback (2003) questions value-free positions and refers to Carr (1995) who believes that those who conclude that they are value-neutral are just "deluding themselves" (p792). This is because "no matter how well designed ... we are constantly carrying a baggage of beliefs, assumptions, inclinations and approaches to reality" (Anderson and Arsenault 1998, p1). The baggage is with us before we start the journey as "all research necessarily starts from a person's view of the world, which is shaped by the experience one brings to the research process" (Grix 2002, p170). It is not as if we can drop the baggage off and pick it up on our return.

Denzin and Lincoln (2003) suggest that "behind the terms stands the personal biography of the researcher, who speaks from a particular class, gender, cultural and ethnic community perspective" (p29). They go on to say that

> any gaze is always filtered through the lenses of language, gender, social class, race, and ethnicity... There are no objective observations, only observations socially situated in the worlds of − and between − the observer and the observed. (p31)

Therefore, perhaps inevitably, my research reflects my own values, beliefs and perspective. Even if a positivist methodology had been chosen, the fact would remain that behind any research "there is a human being ... simply by being there we influence the research that is being created" (Etherington 2006, p85). The challenge of this research is to put them to one side. For my part, I have to be conscious of being "reflective about the ways in which ... questions, methods and ... subject position might impact on the psychological knowledge produced in a research study" (Langdridge 2007, pp58-59). My area of interest has, for many years, been about adults returning to education. However, I cannot escape the knowledge I have in advance as I approach this subject (Hegelund 2005). I accept, and am careful of, how prior knowledge can "co-opt and corrupt our vision because we are likely to share many of our subjects' beliefs and assumptions" (Scott 1995, p151).

> On the one hand, we cannot research something with which we have no contact, from which we are completely isolated. All researchers are to some degree connected to a part of the object of their research. And depending on the extent and nature of these connections, questions arise as to when the results of the research are artefacts on the research process. For these reasons, considerations of reflexivity are important for all forms of research. (Davies 1999, p3)

I am aware of many related issues. For example, the students who take part-time courses at the institution at the centre of this research are predominately female and the ethnicity of students is traditionally mixed. The way that I introduced and presented myself and my research at students' inductions to invite volunteers had to be carefully thought out using language that did not further extenuate my position as the researcher as "we always speak from somewhere, from a position dependent on our history and culture" (Langdridge 2007, p42). However, my self-perceived empathy

and understanding of these students, I felt, could overcome to some extent any barriers that may have existed between us. Using Merlaeu-Ponty's analogy - "we can understand geography only because we know what it is to experience a landscape – we are the absolute source" (Matthews 2006, p16). For all higher education courses I have studied on, I have always done so as a mature student. I am not an isolated inquirer trying, as Capurro (2000, p80) puts it, "to reach others or the outside world from his or her encapsulated mind"; I am already sharing the world with others. Hammersley (1993) recognises that it is only those who are involved in a chosen research subject who can "truly understand it ... The argument is founded on the idea that direct experience of, or closeness to, a phenomena, gives one valid knowledge of it" (p217).

"Research as a purely objective activity removed from all politics and power is a myth" (O'Leary 2004, p42). There are many aspects I have to confront and be aware of. Social status, education, language and even my age all have to be reflected upon as much as possible throughout the process and not just at the data generation phase (Koch and Harrington 1997). Therefore, I have to acknowledge these points and aim to be as objective as I possibly can. Eisner (1993) recognises that all knowledge is construction and as we have no direct knowledge of the world there is a need for objectivity in the sense of being fair and open to all sides throughout the process. Eisner (1993) concludes that as far as possible: "We want to be objective in our views, objective in our methods, and above all to have objective knowledge ... we want to see and to tell it like it is" (p49). It was this that determined that descriptive phenomenology was appropriate for this research.

Although objectivity is impossible to achieve it is something, I believe, which should be strived for (Spurin 2011). However, Phillips (1993) emphasises that objectivity, although more rational, should not be linked to certainty and goes on to state that "neither subjectivity or objectivity has an exclusive stranglehold on truth" (p61). May (2001) argues that a goal of scientific investigation has to be objectivity, but this can only be above criticism if values are kept out. He questions whether it is possible or desirable to suspend our sense of belonging as these are fundamental to social life. If

objectivity is to be strived for then central to maintaining objectivity is the strategy of bracketing (Koch and Harrington 1997). Descriptive and especially interpretive phenomenology acknowledge the difficulty of bracketing presuppositions and although both camps believe that it is not possible to achieve totally, both stress the need to try through what they call the epoché.

The epoché

The phenomenological reduction, based on the epoché (suspension of judgments) was the method Husserl advocated in trying to return to consciousness to obtain absolute certain knowledge (Langer 1998). It is the case whereby the researcher sheds all prior personal knowledge in order to grasp the essential lived experience of those studied. It is argued that for this reason a detailed literature review should not be conducted prior to a descriptive phenomenological investigation (Lopez and Willis 2004). Adopting a phenomenological methodology means to set aside, or bracket off, the researcher's own values and preconceptions so as to present experience in its purest form. Kvale (1996) acknowledges that it "does not involve an absolute absence of presuppositions, but rather a critical analysis of one's own presuppositions" (p54). My own position on this is in line with the following quote:

> I cannot withdraw totally into my subjectivity and sever all ties with the world I am conscious of. I am not, as a subject, outside time and space. Merleau-Ponty says it is impossible to withdraw from the world totally (a complete reduction). But we can relax the ties which bind us to things in our practical dealings with them. (Matthews 2006, p17)

Ashworth (1996) acknowledges that the epoché is very difficult to perform consistently and that "bracketing is an arduous exercise but one which must be painstakingly carried out if research is to genuinely enter the lifeworld" (p16). Dahlberg *et al.* (2008) in reference to bracketing use the word 'openness' in lifeworld research. Although still going back to the things themselves it is the capacity to be surprised as well as sensitive to the unpredicted and unexpected. "It entails both assuming a stance of vulnerable engagement with a phenomenon while maintaining a disinterested attentiveness" (p99). They go on to mention about how the researcher must dis-learn habits of attention and adopt an attitude of alertness through bracketing. It is the

restraining of one's pre-understandings in the form of personal beliefs, theories and other assumptions that could mislead the understanding of meaning.

> The challenge of the epoché to ourselves, is to allow whatever is before us in consciousness to disclose itself so that we may see with new eyes in a naive and completely open manner … a process inclined toward receptiveness … rarely perfectly achieved. (Moustakas 1994, p86)

I have not found any author or researcher who believes that bracketing can be fully achieved and I am not advocating that I can achieve it where others have not. In fact, I have had a continual battle to separate myself from the topic. At times it meant constantly bringing to consciousness the thought of dissociation when examining data.

> Dissociation enables you to distance yourself from your feelings as you take on the perspective of an observer … When people are dissociated, they're apt to be analysing the experiences and thinking about what is going on rather than being involved in it. (Andreas and Faulkner 1996, pp185-186)

"The challenge is to let the things we experience appear in our consciousness as if for the first time. This freshness of vision requires us to become aware of our presumptions and prejudices" (Langdridge 2007, p19). This, however, is an ongoing pursuit throughout the research process and not just at the data collection stage as I constantly have to assess the assumptions that I bring to any given situation. How much can be truly bracketed has been extensively debated within phenomenology and I am not naïve to believe that it can be achieved fully, because I cannot be aware of all my preconceptions in advance. As Smith *et al.* (2009) identify - "I don't necessarily know which part of my fore-structure is relevant – having engaged I might know better what my preconceptions were" (p25). For me, Smith *et al.* (2009) here sum up my experience of bracketing. At times it has taken others, especially doctoral supervisors, to help me reflect on the process and see where my analysis was influenced by my own beliefs instead of the data presented before me. It meant a continual reflection on the application of bracketing and being aware of any bias (Gadamer 1975).

> The epoché process inclines me toward receptiveness. I am more readily able to meet something or someone and to listen and hear whatever is being presented, without colouring the other's communication with my

own habits of thinking, feeling, and seeing, removing the usual ways of labelling or judging, or comparing. I am ready to perceive and know the phenomenon from its appearance and presence. (Moustakas 1994, p89)

This reference confirms to me that in order to get closer to the epoché then a descriptive phenomenological methodology would aid the transparency. The quest is to find out what it is like for students starting a level 4 course and the reason for this choice of topic is because I do not know, and I do not believe institutions really know either, what the experience is like for these students. Therefore, it is about being open to whatever I am confronted with and this is at the core of the phenomenological attitude (Finlay 2008b). The process of bracketing is essential as it is intended, as Smith *et al.* (2009) highlight "to lead the inquirer away from distraction and misdirection of their own assumptions and preconceptions, and back towards the essence of their experience of a phenomenon" (p14).

Process and structure of the research

Bracketing played a significant part in the research. I was aware of literature on the subject of mature students returning to education as I had used this as a topic for a previous doctoral assignment. This helped me identify the gap in the literature. From that point the literature was not revisited before data collection or the presentation and analysis of it using lifeworld fractions had taken place. Ashworth (1999) argues that conducting a literature review early can alter the emphasis of the research by searching for the causes of a phenomenon instead of examining the phenomenon in its appearance as a human experience. Hence, the methodology and analysis of the nine applicants was written before the literature review. The structure of the dissertation therefore reflects these stages of the research.

On returning to the literature I found that there was a need to incorporate research on the subject of retention as this is closely associated with the student experience (Tinto 1993, Belanger 2002). It was then that the conceptual and theoretical framework emerged. Therefore, they were bracketed out throughout the data collection and presentation stage simply because I was totally unaware of them. It was at this point that the literature review was written (Chapter Four).

Although three lifeworld accounts had been part of the data analysis chapter (the other six are in the appendices) I still wanted to show the value of all nine participants. As students had volunteered and shared their experience I felt it important that this was reflected in the main body. Therefore, in Chapter Five this discussion takes place in relation to the literature.

Throughout the analysis I found that incorporation and retention became integral in understanding the link between the student experience and retention. Therefore, in Chapter Six I introduce the conceptual and theoretical framework and show how the data relates to these. This is why the dissertation does not follow a traditional order which is often the case with the presentation of phenomenological research (Langdridge 2007). The structure is therefore influenced by the bracketing process and presented in the order that the main chapters were written.

'We want to see and to tell it like it is' - descriptive phenomenology

This phrase of Eisner (1993, p49) is the essence of descriptive phenomenology as it focuses on how people come to see things (Dahlberg *et al*. 2008). It is categorised as descriptive research, according to Walsh (2001), as it is students' comprehensive description of their experience which is at the forefront and replicated in this investigation. "By adopting a strictly descriptive approach, we can let the phenomena speak for themselves" (Giorgi 1985, cited in Moustakas 1994, p13), and this approach is at the core of Husserl's philosophy (1970). I believe that a descriptive, rather than an interpretive, phenomenological approach helps deal with the subjective issues relating to the researcher as discussed above.

Descriptive phenomenology analysis works solely with the data. Although it does not mean that it cannot involve a theoretical framework from the start, descriptive phenomenology prefers not to incorporate one which can then influence the process. I concur with this philosophy. Trying to interpret or read into things excessively can result in being too subjective in judging what is important and what is not relevant, what Hegelund (2005) calls "dangerous subjectivity" (p656). The problem, as Abbott (2003, p98) states, is that "the detection of significance is a subjective activity;

significance does not occur ready made and labelled as such". I see this as a disadvantage to the interpretivist perspective using qualitative research because the researcher is more susceptible to misinterpret something based on their own assumptions and understanding. Of course, the descriptive phenomenologist is also susceptible to this but, in my view, to a lesser extent, because the concentrations are solely on how the world appears to a participant with regard to the particular experience being described (Langdridge 2007). The task in the descriptive camp is simply to describe the general features, excluding all elements that are not directly within conscious experience. It is how the world appears to a participant with regard to the particular experience being described. It resists the temptation to produce hierarchies of meaning and instead treats all detail with equal value regardless of how mundane it appears (Langdridge 2007). The emphasis is on reading the text with a sense of discovery for its meaning and to avoid any temptation to impose meaning. "Descriptive phenomenology is not concerned with explaining phenomenon but rather with describing phenomenon … There is no attempt to find the underlying causes … (it) simply describe(s) the 'things in their appearing'" (Langdridge 2007, p86).

The lifeworld

A concept within phenomenology is the lifeworld. Both Husserl (1970) and Heidegger (1962) refer to this concept as a central theme of their philosophical approach and both descriptive and interpretive phenomenology strive to access the lifeworld of respondents. It explores difference, individuality and uniqueness of experiences which are at the very heart of qualitative research (Shoemaker *et al*. 2000).

> We are all individuals living in a common world, relating to the world context and each other, all looking for meaningfulness and yet meaning in unique ways … The picture is always incomplete without taking into account their own experiences and understanding of themselves, their lived bodies. (Dahlberg *et al* 2008, p88)

It is a Husserlian concept which sums up what phenomenology strives to achieve – understanding of individual's "lived situation" (Finlay 2008a, p1). For Husserl, the world means a world experienced and made meaningful through consciousness. Social life can therefore be understood through an examination of people's selection and

interpretation of events and actions. It does not attempt to explain why people behave in certain ways by reference to their subconscious states or environmental conditions but how people interpret the world and interact with each other (May 2001).

Lifeworld is about the lived experience through intentionality – the relationship between a person and the object or events of their experience; in this case students' experience of their course. "When we experience something, it is experienced as something which has meaning for us ... we cannot avoid meaning" (Dahlberg *et al.* 2008, pp47-48). The meaning derived of this experience is prioritised, even though it may be hidden in our consciousness (Langdridge 2007). "Husserl used the term lifeworld to express the idea that individuals' realities are invariably influenced by the world in which they live" (Lopez and Willis 2004, p729). It therefore becomes a world of perception, a lived reality from which there is no escape (Dahlberg *et al.* 2008). The study of lifeworld puts aside how things supposedly are and focuses instead on how they are experienced (Finlay 2008a). It is how students experience their course and how it impacts on their lifeworld which is the focus of this investigation. The fractions within lifeworld research are then used to structure and analyse dialogue (explained later in the chapter). Therefore, in lifeworld research the main method of collecting data of this nature is interviews (Dahlberg *et al.* 2008), as it is "the purpose of the qualitative research interview ... to understand themes of the lived daily world from the subjects' own perspectives" (Kvale 1996, p27).

Interviews

To understand someone's world and their life, there is a need to use a meaningful form of human interaction and engage them in conversation (Puig *et al.* 2008); therefore, interviews were the most appropriate method to collect data. As the focus was on the student experience within the first six weeks of their course it was essential that interviews took place at an early stage. It is debatable whether a person can remember as clearly the details of their experience at a later stage when feelings and memory have evolved (Lockwood and Jones 1984). The qualitative interview attempts to understand the world from the subjects' point of view, essentially to uncover their lived world prior to scientific explanations – a "privileged access to our basic

experience of the lived world" (Kvale 1996, p54). Through this human interaction it allows us access to thoughts we were not aware of ourselves - unconsciously trapped, not confronted through habit (Merleau-Ponty 1968, cited in Dahlberg *et al.* 2008).

Anderson and Arsenault (1998) believe that researchers often start with their "preferred methods and then go searching for questions that fit" (p28). Given the choice, interviews would not be my preferred method as I favour small focus groups, but the decision was influenced by the desired end product: to understand a world from individual student's point of view and perspective. In accordance with descriptive phenomenology, interviews were chosen to obtain uninterrupted descriptions of each participant's reality – this highlights once again the tensions of the ontological perspective and the methodology.

> In an interview, the researcher is reliant on the interviewee to provide honest and open answers, yet we know that people want to be liked, want to maintain a sense of dignity, and want to protect some level of privacy. If respondents feel judged, ashamed or offended, or, on the other hand deferential, or awestruck, gathering credible data is far from assured ... The bigger the 'gulf' between interviewer and interviewee the greater the chance it will influence the interview process. (O'Leary 2004, 162)

Smith *et al.* (2009) believe that the most important thing, at the beginning of the interview, is to establish rapport in order to obtain good data; that participants feel comfortable and trust the interviewer. I felt this rapport had to be established before the interview – during students' inductions where both myself and my research were presented (discussed later in the chapter) and then reinforced at the beginning of the interview.

The focus of the interviews was not strictly structured. However, the format did contain standardised areas for discussion with the sole purpose of focusing on the subjects' experience of their first few weeks. Questions and areas for discussion ranged from decisions to return to education, confidence and relationships, to impacts of studying. An example of the interview plan can be found in Appendix A.

Dahlberg *et al.* (2008) state that interviews within phenomenology tend to last about an hour and they should allow informants to raise issues that they feel important while actively listening - in the same way a doctor enquires and listens to a patient's symptoms before making an assessment. Interviews were conducted accordingly. Kvale (1996) believes the interviewer's ability to listen actively to what the interviewee says "can be more important than the specific mastery of questioning techniques" (p132), and Silverman (2006) believes that the key to interviewing is to create rapport and avoid manipulating. Therefore, a casual and relaxed form of interview was adopted to help develop the rapport needed to bridge the gap between myself and each participant – essential with this type of interview (O'Leary 2004, Denzin and Lincoln 2005). It is unavoidable that "whenever two people meet, a process of reciprocal adaption invariably occurs" (Hanly and Hanly 2001, p526), but what Silverman (2006) identifies is that the relationship between interviewer and interviewee has to be considered fully from an ethical perspective to attempt to break down any barriers between researcher (in this case me as a lecturer) and the researched (a student relatively new to the university).

The interviews gave students the opportunity to talk about themselves. I wanted them to feel that someone was taking an interest in what they were doing and valued their contribution. My role as an interviewer became, therefore, one of actively listening and reflecting back what I had heard. My reflections through summarising then gave participants the opportunity to confirm the accuracy of my understanding. The interviews were conducted with the core beliefs as used within the humanistic approach to counselling in mind, with emphasis on the person-centred approach of Carl Rogers (1967).

All first interviews took place at a time convenient to each participant between 22 November and 1 December 2010. However, one interview was adjourned half way through as the student was short of time and this was completed a week later on 7 December. Interviews were conducted at this time as all students had completed at least six weeks of their course, not including their induction. These were then transcribed and follow-up interviews were conducted between 29 March and 4 April

2011. The timing of the second interview was influenced by one student in particular who was due to leave for a few weeks to have a baby. Not knowing whether she would return, I decided to conduct the second interview with her and then, for consistency, decided to do the rest of the interviews at the same time. These took place in weeks Six, Seven and Eight of students' second semester. The purpose of the second interview was to check that I had an accurate understanding of the student experience gained from the first interview. It also allowed me to explore and probe comments that had been made originally, and again give students the opportunity to reflect on their experience of the first six weeks. The interviews were then transcribed and added to the first transcriptions and left for a number of weeks before being read. This was a conscious decision so that when the interviews were read, they were done so with a sense of discovery.

In total, ten participants initially took part in the research. I decided that whoever volunteered would be interviewed as I did not want to disappoint anyone if they felt they would like to contribute. After all ten interviews took place, one was not taken forward as part of the research. The reason for this was that the interview conflicted with the aim of descriptive phenomenological interviewing. The participant struggled to answer questions and called upon me to offer example answers to which she appeared to latch on to. She was not able to articulate her experience, and I found that I was leading the interview too much. The interview was considerably shorter than the others as the participant tended to use closed responses. On post-interview reflection I decided that this interview did not contain sufficient data to contribute to the research.

Ethical issues

With any research, ethical issues, or rules of conduct as Burgess *et al.* (2006) identify them as, have to be considered throughout the research process. Institutional permission was granted for the research as well as consent from programme managers of the various courses for me to approach their students. It is, however, at the interview stage where ethical issues are magnified.

A traditional claim within social research is that the interview process produces an unequal exchange between the 'powerful researcher' and the 'powerless research participant'. (Reynolds 2003, p300)

It would be naive of me to believe that because students are willing participants that the subject of power is non-existent even though they are adults. "The ... interview is not the reciprocal interaction of two equal partners. There is a definite asymmetry of power" (Kvale 1996, p126), essentially because the researcher defines and controls the situation. Therefore, it was important to this research that the dynamics of the relationship were carefully considered right from the beginning. This meant that careful thought had to be given to the type of presentations given to students at inductions where my research was introduced. These took place at the end of September 2010.

To aid the bracketing process as regards the presentations, I sought help from a group of mature students. This was a group whom I had not come into contact with previously. I explained what I hoped to achieve and asked for their input regarding the sort of approach they would feel most comfortable with if I was to present to them. The feedback was that I should be smart, but casual enough in my appearance to break down any barriers that may exist in the minds of the students. Also, the way that I had spoken to this group should be the way that I should present to other groups at inductions.

The structure of the presentation at inductions was also carefully constructed; a transcript of which can be found in Appendix B. This is included because I feel the presentation was an integral and necessary part of the process in establishing trust between researcher and participants. The purpose at this stage was to make myself known to students, not necessarily to acquire volunteers.

Four weeks into students' courses, groups were revisited to engage with them; once again in an informal way to limit any power-dynamic that may exist before volunteers were sought. It was important to make the research as transparent as possible to students with the purpose of the research declared and explained to those who would

potentially be involved with it. At this stage volunteers came forward and they were, at this point, issued with an information sheet outlining the various details of the research (Appendix C). When writing this I had to imagine how it would appear to them; whether the tone complemented the presentation and that it was communicated in a user-friendly way, while at the same time covering all the necessary information about the research that they had a right to be aware of.

Through the relationship that was built up during the presentations, and the fact that the in-depth interviews as a technique helped provide respondents with an opportunity to take some control over the process, the power-dynamic, I believe, was limited. This was aided by the creation of a trusting relationship based on the Rogerian humanistic counselling philosophy (Hough 2010).

The concept of anonymity and confidentiality were explained and emphasised at the presentations. I am aware that the principle of confidentiality can provide respondents with assurance of anonymity, which in turn gives them the licence to talk freely. However, I am also aware that the ideal may be more difficult to uphold than it first appears. Researchers may use many techniques to anonymise the respondents, such as pseudonyms, but Barnes (1979) argues their function may be largely symbolic because they are transparent to those within the research setting and therefore it merely creates an illusion of complete anonymity. Brannen (1988) also concurs with this, suggesting that the unique and personal nature of the data often means that respondents are easily identified by themselves and those close to them. This I tried to make clear during the presentations.

Once students had volunteered they were asked to sign a consent form (Appendix D), and then a convenient time for each participant was arranged for the interview. These were conducted in university, kept to an hour and usually scheduled on the same day that students attended classes, thus causing minimal disruption to their schedule. Actual questions were not issued in advance as I felt that the areas for discussion were clarified during the presentations and on the brief given out.

The timing of the first interviews was, I felt, crucial. The feelings and experiences they had during the first few weeks of their course had to be fresh in their minds. Therefore, interviews took place in week Seven or week Eight of students' courses and were recorded. Although recording conversations can often seem intrusive and off-putting to respondents, it does contribute to the transparency of the process and essential if interviews are to be the main source of data (Maykut and Morehouse 1994). According to Shipman (1981), most interviewees forget the recorder is present after a while.

Before each interview I explained its purpose and reminded candidates about their right to withdraw. At the end of each interview I thanked them for their contribution, and explained that at the start of the follow-up interview a summary sheet would be given to them to check the accuracy of the main points that I believe they had made.

The sample

With those who participate as part of a sample in any research which is based on descriptive phenomenology, the aim in not representativeness but to describe unique experiences (Flinck and Paavilainen 2008). The number is dependent on the research.

> For a qualitative and small-scale research ... the exact sample size is more difficult to estimate. It will reflect the time and resources available, and the number of suitable people who can be identified and contacted for inclusion. As a rule of thumb the sample should be sufficient in size for the purposes of the research and be comparable with the sample size of similar pieces of research. (Denscombe 2007, p334)

In light of what Denscombe suggests here, ten interviews were conducted. The number was also influenced by Dahlberg *et al.* (2008), who believe that many who have conducted interview research in the past would have benefited from conducting fewer interviews and taking more time to analyse them. The aim was not representativeness as this would conflict with the methodology but a sample that could "describe unique experiences to be analysed to add to the understanding of the phenomenon (Flinck and Paavilainen 2008). Although students volunteered to take part, which again I am aware may have influenced informant selection, the sample

does fall under the heading of 'maximum variation sampling' which is appropriate for a phenomenological enquiry. Maximum variation sampling, according to Langdridge (2007), involves participants who have a common experience but vary on a wide variety of demographic characteristics. Langdridge (2007) goes on to indicate that the size of the sample is usually quite small due to the time consuming nature of the analytical process – he recommends no more than six. However, Dahlberg *et al.* (2008) believe it is the complexity of the phenomenon that determines the number – the more complex, the higher the sample. They recommend different ages, generations and genders, from different working backgrounds and cultures. The essential criteria, according to Moustakas (1994), is that the participants have experienced the phenomenon, are interested in the subject, willing to be interviewed and that they "grant to the investigator the right to tape-record ... and publish the data in a dissertation and other publication" (107). With those as part of the sample I believe that this criterion has been met. Although those in the sample have experienced the same phenomenon they each have a different journey to explore. The names of each of the nine participants have been changed to protect, as much as possible, their identity.

The nine participants

Karen

Karen is white, aged 35 and married with two children. She left school at 16 and although not knowing what she wanted to do went straight into further education and enrolled on a Travel and Tourism course. She had her first son at 18 and her second son at 25. It was when her youngest son started school that she began working in the area of childcare. During this time she completed a level 3 course which was a requirement for her foundation degree in *'Professional Studies in Community Family Support'*. Karen now works as a nursery nurse on a part-time basis and lives with her husband and children approximately seven miles away from the university.

Nick

Nick is black-Caribbean aged 49. He has enrolled on the foundation degree in *'Professional Studies in Integrated Services'*. His work career has been in mental health; however, when he became unemployed in his mid-forties he saw this as an opportunity to pursue a teaching career. He enrolled on a level 3 qualification and obtained work in a nursery. It was during his level 3 course that he was employed in his current position as a teaching assistant which he does full-time. His most recent course was completed just prior to him starting the foundation degree which has given him 20 credits towards his first year. He is married with two children and they live four miles away from the university.

Fara

Fara is Asian-Pakistani aged 26. She lives four miles away and is married with two children. On leaving school she went on to do 'A' levels, but did not complete them. The only course she has done since is a level 3 qualification. At present she works as a teaching assistant on a part-time basis and is enrolled on the foundation degree in *'Professional Studies in Early Years'*.

Amanda

Amanda is black-Caribbean aged 28. She lives five miles away with her daughter and her 89-year-old grandmother. Amanda works at a school on a voluntary basis as well as being the registered carer for her grandmother who is suffering with Alzheimer's. Amanda originally did go to university full-time, but did not complete her course. She then became a teaching assistant at a private school and it was at that time that she started a level 3 qualification. She is currently on the *'Professional Studies in Early Years'* foundation degree.

Carol

Carol is white, aged 27. She lives approximately 100 miles away and is married with one child. Carol is currently working as a children's centre coordinator and completed a level 3 qualification over three years ago. Carol had done 'A' levels on completing her compulsory education and then studied to become a nurse, but left without

completing. She is now studying on the foundation degree in *'Professional Studies in Community Family Support'*; a course not provided nearer to her home. She is currently pregnant with her second child.

Harriet

Harriet is black-Caribbean aged 45. She is a single parent with two teenage children who are currently doing 'A' levels. She lives six miles away in a house she has recently moved into. Harriet works as a teaching assistant and while working full-time and studying on her foundation degree in *'Professional Studies in Education with ICT'* she is also enrolled on two other courses: maths and engineering. She has a *National Nursery Examination Board* (NNEB) qualification which she achieved just after leaving school.

Jay

Jay is white aged 38. She lives seven miles away and is married with one child. Jay's work career has been in banking, but she changed her career when her daughter was born. She now works in a school full-time as a higher level teaching assistant which involves running after-school clubs. Jay had, within the past year, completed a *'Higher Level Teaching Assistant'* (HTLA) course which gave her 40 credits toward her foundation degree in *'Professional Studies in Early Years'*.

Mohan

Mohan is Asian-Pakistani aged 43. He lives four miles away with his wife and two children. Mohan came to England as a child with his parents and although he went straight into schooling he did miss out on many early years of education. He has worked as an integration assistant and a learner mentor on a paid and voluntary basis, and now works as a teaching assistant. He has a level 3 qualification and has enrolled on the foundation degree in *'Professional Studies in Early Years'*.

Tanya

Tanya is white aged 50. Her career has mainly involved working in offices. She is now a full-time teaching assistant in a school. She lives six miles away with her husband and their teenage son. Recently she had completed a level 3 course and earlier in the year

had completed a level 'P' course, which was arranged between the university and the school she works at. She has now enrolled on the foundation degree in *'Professional Studies in Integrated Services'*.

Pilot

In general, no matter which method is used to collect data, it should (wherever possible) be tried out as a pilot before being utilised in a full-scale data collection. Therefore, a pilot interview was arranged in order to assist the clarification of the structure and question design. It was conducted in October 2010 and involved a colleague who had recently been a mature student. The reason why this colleague was chosen was because she wanted to share her experience of what it was like for her starting a foundation degree. She also has an interest in phenomenological research which meant that a post-discussion helped to analyse the phrasing and sequence of the questions. This helped to ensure that the structure and content of the interviews that followed were suitable to elicit the type and nature of response required for the research. The pilot interview was not transcribed.

Transcripts

One of the problems of transcribing interviews is that the written word can look weak as it is almost impossible to convey the deep meaning in how people say things (Kvale 1996). However, it is an essential part of phenomenology. "Descriptive accounts have been the mainstay of a considerable amount of descriptive phenomenological work" (Langdridge 2007, p74) and everything should be transcribed verbatim (Dahlberg *et al.* 2008). Much was captured on tape and revisited during the analysis. I felt it important to transcribe the interviews myself. This not only helped me to ensure that nothing was missed out but also it helped in the process of data analysis. The interview is essentially a social encounter and the transcript of the event, however detailed, may not adequately convey this. This underlines the need for the researcher to regularly return to the original recording to get a stronger sense of the nature of the social interaction that took place (Kvale 1996).

The recordings were transcribed in 'Excel'; not in 'Word', as is commonly used. I did this because 'Excel', for me, is so much easier to work with than 'Word' in the sense that columns and rows can be added or transported into a separate sheet without pages becoming disjointed. Column 'A' on the 'Excel' sheet contained the code which referred to the dialogue of the actual interview in column 'B' (an example of a transcript can be found in appendix E). Column 'C' contained the codes for the summary or meaning units contained in Column 'D'. Column 'E' contained the codes for the lifeworld significance which was summarised in column 'F'. It meant that a summary of the interview (column 'D') could be separated and reproduced on a separate page. The same could be done with the lifeworld fractions in column 'F'. This was especially advantageous as it meant that the lifeworld fractions could then be manoeuvred so that each of the fractions could be grouped together. This was done for each of the nine transcripts.

Data Analysis

Kvale (1996, p184) states that "to analyse means to separate something into parts or elements". He goes on to identify five steps by which the researcher should approach the transcripts. The first is to read the whole of the interview to get a sense of it. Then natural meanings as expressed are determined and the theme that dominates a natural meaning unit is paraphrased in simple terms. These are interrogated in terms of the specific purpose of the study and finally "non-redundant themes of the entire interview (are) tied together into a descriptive statement" (Kvale 1996, p194). This sequence is similar to the sequence that Langdridge (2007) identifies from a descriptive phenomenological perspective. First is by reading the overall material, done in the context of the epoché. Second, to identify meaning units by paraphrasing each segment of text, keeping in mind the context in which they occur, then to assess these meaning units for their psychological significance moving from what Langdridge calls the "idiosyncratic detail to more general meaning" (p89). This was the sequence adopted with the transcripts here. The third stage, however, entailed working through the transcripts by analysing the data using the seven fractions of the lifeworld. This is what Langdridge calls the *"Sheffield School analysis"* (p103). Once the fractions were identified they could subsequently be traced to the original dialogue.

The seven fractions used to analyse the data were adopted, not as a way of interpreting meanings behind students' experience but to present and analyse each student's lifeworld as they start on a part-time foundation degree. Ashworth (2003b) uses the term 'fractions' to emphasise that they are interconnected parts of a whole. The fractions are:

- *Selfhood* – how the situation relates to a student's sense of self, whether there is a change in identity, a feeling of their own presence and voice.
- *Sociality* – any impact that coming back to education has had on relationships. These may be relationships with work colleges, family or friends.
- *Embodiment* – the effects, emotionally and physically, that starting a foundation degree has on the individual. The emotions that have been experienced since starting the course.
- *Temporality* – how the present is affected by the past and how it relates to visions of the future.
- *Spatiality* – how the situation alters the places that individuals go to. Where they study. What it is like coming into the university building.
- *Project* – how the situation influences a student's belief in themselves to achieve what is important to them. How it affects their belief in their own ability to carry out the activities that they see as central in their lives.
- *Discourse* – the terms they use in articulating how the situation impacts on their life.

There will always be some overlap with the fractions in the sense that analysis of a student's dialogue may relate to sociality but also be connected with selfhood. Essentially, I have separated, structured and analysed each account using the fractions above as headings in the same way Ashworth (2003a, 2003b, 2006) has presented them in the past.

Mood-as-atmosphere is a fraction of lifeworld – the last one to date to be identified by Ashworth (2006). However, this has not been included as part of the analysis.

Ashworth himself has been resistant to use the fraction in the past as it reflects "internal connotations" and the "person's state of mind" or disposition (Ashworth 2006, p224). I would agree with this and would not attempt to assess this aspect with participants using a descriptive phenomenological methodology. For me, mood-as-atmosphere is positioned in the interpretive camp.

In summary, the aim of descriptive phenomenology is to describe a phenomenon and its meanings without interpretation, explanation or construction. However, everything is still questioned and pondered upon (Dahlberg *et al.* 2008); in this case using the lifeworld fractions. Quite simply it seeks to describe and understand the meaning of central themes in the lifeworld of each participant (Kvale 1996). Maykut and Morehouse (1994) state that "what is important is not predetermined by the researcher" (p46) and go on to say that "the outcomes of the research study evolve from the systematic building of homogenous categories of meaning inductively derived from the data" (p47). In this way the data speaks for itself.

It does not require technologically sophisticated or expensive equipment for this analysis (Dahlberg *et al.* 2008). In fact, according to Langdridge (2007), software packages can restrict the way an analyst can work.

> New ideas can only emerge in the individual mind, from some unique insight and synthesis which, until it happens, remains entirely unpredictable. This is a subjective and uniquely human activity, and one which, for a long time to come, technology will play only an assisting role. (Abbot 2003, p104)

I see little value in using technology to aid analysis and understanding of participants' lifeworld.

In analysing and writing up the data (as can be found in chapters Three, Five and in Appendix F) there were limited examples of lifeworld literature to draw upon. Essentially, I used as my guide the work of Ashworth (2003a, 2003b, 2006), Ashworth *et al.* (2003), Dahlberg *et al.* (2008) and Finlay and Molano-Fisher (2008). Although these chapters are presented in my own style I have tried to respect the work of those

who I see as champions of lifeworld research. As a guide to the whole process of descriptive phenomenological research I have used as a textbook that of Langdridge (2007), as well as the work of Moustakas (1994).

Reliability, validity and generalisability

Reliability, validity and generalisability, "the scientific holy trinity" as Kvale (1996, p229) calls them, are oppressive in his view as they are concepts defined by the positivist tradition (Maxwell 1992). However, the fact that Husserl strongly advocated the need to apply scientific technique to his descriptive phenomenology certainly provides a convenient method for validity and reliability. It is accepted that one of the problems associated with any form of social research is the issue of bias. It is the duplication or replication of the research that could lead to different results if another researcher were to repeat it. While every attempt has been made to ensure that the research process has been as transparent as possible, I do recognise that I was at the centre, laying down the track, determining the direction the research journey was going. I do feel, however, that the decision to stay with descriptive phenomenology rather than interpretive phenomenology helped the research move closer to reliability. Lincoln and Guba (1985) use words such as trustworthiness, credibility, dependability and confirmability which I feel more confident and comfortable with. Mays and Pope (1995) believe that it is by keeping meticulous records of interviews and thorough documentation of the process that the qualitative researcher ensures the reliability of their analysis. If this is an accepted definition of reliability, then I believe I have attempted to account for it.

Doubts as to validity cannot be eliminated totally. However, they can be addressed through honesty, depth, richness and scope of data (Cohen *et al.* 2000). Hammersley (1990) links validity to "the extent to which an account accurately represents the social phenomena to which it refers" (p 57), while Dahlberg *et al.* (2008) suggest that it makes more sense to talk in terms of defensible claims. I feel that by staying close to the core elements of the methodology that the outcomes of the research could have been replicated by others adopting a descriptive rather than interpretative phenomenology. In that sense, I believe validity has been accommodated. It did

measure what it intended to measure (Lincoln and Guba 1985). However, I prefer to adopt Silverman's (2006) concept of the research having warrant:

> When presenting our own research findings we need to give some indication ... of the extent to which we would be prepared to bet on their being true. This is part of the warrant. (p147)

A key question of research of this nature is, therefore, not whether the findings are true, but whether the findings are likely to be true. From an ontological perspective, I use the word 'true' very loosely here in the sense that the debate about research and whether the results are true is "imprisoned" (Gorard 2004, p10) in the concept of reality and is based on the question as to whether reality exists independently or through the interpretation in the mind (Crotty 1998). This conviction also lies at the heart of Popper's (1959) philosophy. He advocates that science is not knowledge and can never claim to attain truth as "every scientific statement must remain tentative forever" (p280). To accept something as truth means to assume a world in which the regularities we perceive today will remain unchanged forever. For me, it is the extent to which those who participated believed that their experience had been captured. Participants were given the opportunity to examine their respective lifeworld account and each confirmed that it was an accurate description of their experience. Comments were made that they found it fascinating to read their own lifeworld account and it had helped them to see how much they had progressed and developed since those first six weeks.

As regards generalisability of the findings I do not feel, with such a small sample, that I can advocate its generalisability; it was never my intention. Dahlberg *et al.* (2008) strongly believe that with any lifeworld research it must be possible to generalise, but if it can not, it can "still be important and useful in several ways" (342). It is up to others to comment on this as they relate the findings to their own anecdotal experience in this field (Kvale 1996). However, I do believe that many part-time mature students returning to higher education would be able to relate to, and make connections with, many of the experiences of the participants in this research rather than to a general categorisation of the student experience in which no one fully fits

into (Shah 1994). The categorisation of the student experience is essentially designed for institutional convenience (Waller 2006).

Key terms within the aim of the research

The aim of the research was to identify how students experience the first few weeks of their higher educational course and how it impacts on their lifeworld. Key words here, as I see them, are *'how'*, *'experience'*, *'impact'* and *'lifeworld'*. Closely related to the epoché, the word *'how'* here denotes the openness to anything that emerges from those who engage in the research. As regards *'experience'*, it is the experience of the phenomenon by the student, whether significant or not, which is seen at the centre to which other aspects of their life are related; hence *'impact'* and *'lifeworld'*. In other words, the phenomenon of the first six weeks is at the core but in relation to the lifeworld. Essences of the phenomenon which are sought using descriptive phenomenology (Giorgi 1985, Preist 1998) are not sought using lifeworld analysis (Ashworth 1999). From an ontological perspective it does not attempt to identify what reality is, but instead seeks the experiences and the meanings made of these experiences by the individuals themselves.

According to Koch (1999, cited in Annells 1999), participants' stories should be accepted as their reality. He sums up the essence of the research for me by saying -

> The stories they tell are their constructions of the situation, the ways in which they make sense of the world. We do not come to see how people live, but rather, we may be able to understand what it is like for them living their lives. (P27)

The word *'experience'* then is used to denote understanding and meanings students have constructed to interpret the phenomenon of returning to higher education. According to Ashworth (2003a, p25), the lifeworld is the "individual meaning-construction" of the situation; therefore, in relation to the word *'how'* -

> the researcher must accept the possibility that the thing being researched may not have any relevance to the lifeworld of the interviewee or may have totally different meaning in one person's lifeworld from that in another. (Beech 1999, p42)

Langdridge (2007) identifies the focus of phenomenology "to be on people's perceptions of the world – or, famously – their perception of the 'things in their appearing'" (p11). According to Dahlberg *et al.* (2008, p31) –

> ... things are things of experience. The term experience denotes the relationship we have with the world in which we are engaged ... Going to things' means that, as researchers, we should position ourselves so the things can show themselves to us, and thus 'the thing' is understood as a phenomenon.

Accordingly, phenomenology focuses on this world as it is experienced. By adopting a phenomenological methodology I am interested in describing the world as it appears to these students. The lifeworld connection then aims to "describe and elucidate the lived world in a way that expands our understanding of human beings and human experience" (Dahlberg *et al.* 2008, p37).

> The lifeworld is the world as concretely lived, which should be the foundation for all phenomenological psychological investigation ... we see not only how experience is the focus but also how this is grounded in our everyday lived experience, experience in which meaning is prioritised. (Langdridge 2007, p23)

The primary interest is not just on each student but on the phenomenon and how the phenomenon impacts and connects cognitively to students' lives. The phenomenon is not considered separate, because each experience and interpretation will be connected to each person's lifeworld and therefore has an impact. It is not separate, it is a complete package. However, as the phenomenon is new to students it will, quite likely, have some sort of an impact on each person's lived experience away from the institution where the actual phenomenon takes place.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have discussed the philosophical foundations underpinning the research and have defined the methodology. The complexity of descriptive phenomenology and the bracketing process involved has determined the structure of the chapters, and therefore the presentation does not follow a conventional sequence. In the following chapter I focus on the data. There are nine lifeworld accounts that

have been analysed using the lifeworld fractions in relation to the phenomenon of starting a foundation degree. Three of these accounts have been selected and are presented in the following chapter.

Chapter Three: Lifeworld accounts

The focus of lifeworld is on individual experience. It seeks to understand how phenomena impact upon a sense of self; how someone feels emotionally and physically, the relationships a person has, hopes and ambitions, and how the past and the future play a part in the present (Hodge 2006). In order to illustrate in detail how the data was analysed for this project three of the lifeworld accounts are presented here to represent the process; those of Karen, Nick and Fara. These three were selected purely because they were the first three students to be interviewed, and it was these that made the initial impact of how varied the experience of the first few weeks could be. However, any of the nine lifeworld accounts would have served the same purpose. The other six accounts can be located in the appendices starting at page 161.

When presenting the individual accounts a quote is often given first followed by the analysis to put the student voice at the forefront of the accounts. As fractions are interconnected (Finlay and Molano-Fisher 2008), on occasions the same quote is repeated as it relates to another fraction. Reference codes are presented in brackets throughout the chapter and these refer to the codes on the actual interview transcript where the quote appears.

Karen

Selfhood

> I've been through the ... foster care status when I was a child ... My mum was an alcoholic and she had mental health issues so I've never had that bonding from my mum. When I was with my eldest son's father I had domestic abuse, so I've come out the end of that ... I've come out the end of so much and I want to make a difference in other peoples' lives, because I can empathise and I know what it's like to go through certain situations in your life, and I'm so passionate as well as working with young children who need to feel safe and secure because I've had that feeling. (KB7)

For Karen, it is important that she can help others and it has become her desire to be able to do so in the work that she does. This desire stems from issues she has had to face in her own life. Karen identifies how she has emerged from the experiences in her past and now she feels that she is in a position where she can offer understanding and empathy toward others through the connection she feels with them. It has created a passion, or enthusiasm within her which was instrumental in her deciding to do her foundation degree in *Professional Studies in Community Family Support*. After many years of not being interested in the work and jobs she has been involved in, Karen is now settled and has direction in her life. She is "happily married" and she likes working with families which her job involves (KB13).

> I feel quite clever ... I do, if that makes any sense, that I'm a mature student, I feel quite good about that. (KB225)

Being a mature student enhances a self-perception of being clever for Karen that leads to a positive feeling. However, her positive feelings can be fragile, particularly when it comes to the thought of higher education. Karen was "apprehensive" before starting and she doubted whether she would "be able to do it" (KB11). The decision to venture on to a foundation degree was her own decision but one made with her family in mind as she reflected on the value of education (KB15). However, learning does not come easy for her. She struggles to understand what is covered in class, but finds ways to over come this by developing her own mechanisms, such as using "spidergrams" (KB33). This involves a system whereby Karen restructures and simplifies material into a format which she can then understand (KB71). She sees this as different to the way others learn, but is comfortable with her need to do things differently. She has identified her own learning style, what she calls a "hands-on approach", and this has helped her to understand her own needs when it comes to learning (KB67). She also feels that her learning style can change – "they change from one day to the next sometimes don't they?" (KB157). Past learning experiences have affected how Karen expects learning to be. This contributed to her apprehension at level 4 - "I just didn't think I would be able to do it" (KB 13).

> I think differently ... act differently and I'm more serious now... I'm seeing
> things ... how important things are and how important the way that I do
> things ... I'm gaining a lot of knowledge about myself as a person. (KB87)

Being a mature student affects how Karen thinks she acts even within a relatively short amount of time. It makes her more serious and there is a deeper understanding of herself which enables her to think and assess things differently to the way she did before. She sees the way she works as having importance which is adding a new dimension to the way she sees her own identity. Even within the family with her two sons also studying, it gives Karen an added feeling of responsibility toward them. In this context she sees herself as a role model to them (KB15).

> I believe it's going to open up so many doors for me; I'm not sure at this
> stage which one entirely I want to take. (KB187)

Karen is beginning to think differently which brings with it an increased sense of agency as she sees career options open up for her. Even to contemplate other options gives her a sense of purpose as she now feels that she is "working toward something" (K225). However, belief in herself and levels of confidence are inconsistent with academic ability as she questions whether she can achieve at this level (K235). For Karen, study as a mature student is about oscillating between confidence and doubt in her ability. She identifies herself as the sort of person who passes rather than achieves high grades, so her expectations are never too ambitious (KB305). Working toward a goal provides some stability during periods of doubt.

> I'm understanding things in different lights, so that gives me the confidence
> to be able to do things on a college front and on a work front, and on a
> person front as well. I've noticed a change in myself. (KB273)

Being a mature student impacts on Karen's sense of self. Learning produces change as it is a basis for her confidence which then affects other aspects of her life.

> I don't like letting people in too much on the way that I feel, through my
> history. (K249)

Karen's past experiences make her reluctant to share her own feelings. She is open about her experiences but not with the feelings associated with them. She identifies a

negative side which can be destructive and when confidence is low - "that's where I have to watch that I don't give up" (K269). For Karen, levels of confidence are critical to whether she continues or not.

> That would have made me feel that I'd failed. I don't want to fail because I'm not a failure and ... upsets me even ... think that I can't do something because I know that I can ... (KB241)

Karen puts a division between what she does and who she is. Withdrawing from the course would equate to failure in Karen's eyes, and yet she feels that she would hold on to her self-belief that she is not a failure. She anticipates negative feelings just at the thought of having to confront the issue of withdrawal.

> When I don't understand anything it's hard to see light at the end of the tunnel and no matter how many times something's explained to me I still can't get it, then I feel it's going nowhere so I do feel I'm going to fail. (KB267)

> I've achieved heaps and I'm not prepared to fail at the first hurdle ... and it upsets me to even think about that really. (KB243)

The complexity she exhibits with her confidence and self-esteem is very much governed by the spur of the moment. She goes from feeling that she is going to fail to that of being very proud of herself (KB99). She even talks of her self-esteem "soaring though the roof" (KB97). These two extremes exist and are dispensed at various times which feeds into her identity as she holds uncomfortable emotional feelings which contrast to positive emotions. Holding on to the positives becomes a constant mental battle for her as she is aware of her weakness and propensity to allow negatives to dominate her. These are entrenched in her life - "I would always fail because of the negativity" (KB89).

Sociality

> ... meeting new people who I thought were going to be well educated compared to myself. (KB207)

For Karen, meeting new people who were to be her fellow students was a concern for her and led to feelings of self doubt. She assumed that they were going to be better

educated than she was. She now feels more of an equal with them, but still there is a belief that "they know more" than she does (KB169).

> I had a lot of doubt ... I didn't make it common knowledge to anybody. (KB29 – KB31)

Feelings like doubt are anxieties that Karen keeps from others. She does not like to let others in, so therefore finds it difficult to confide and share her own anxieties (KB249). Like her past, she sees them as issues that only she can deal with (KB31, KB247), and is selective when it comes to friendships - "I only have one dear friend, we're the best of friends and that will never change" (KB105). Being a mature student will not have an impact on significant friendships. Karen does not perceive friendship outside of this as a source of support or enablement and would not expect a friendship to be found with her new classmates.

> I'm starting to think in different ways about people which is nice because I'm going to have to think in that way for the job I want to do anyway ... My, my work colleagues, I know ... I can understand now why I clash with certain personalities, not them as a person, it's the way that they do things and I'm seeing beyond that now, understanding that now. When you hear of the politics in the staffroom, it's going completely over my head because I'm thinking differently, not thinking to the way people manipulate you into thinking. So it's ... taken me to the next level. (KB81-KB83)

Fitting in at work is a motivation to change and this change feels 'nice'. Within a few weeks, being a student has altered how Karen sees herself, both at work and towards her work colleagues. She feels that she has a better understanding of the relationships she has and she can rise above what she sees as the politics of the staffroom. She feels that her thinking is different and not determined by the influence of others and this new-found awareness strengthens the belief she has in herself, particularly in her work role. She also sees this as something she needs to develop in the job she wants to do in the future. Although self-esteem is a constant battle, in a social context she feels that the course has helped her reach an elevated level.

Although Karen still sees her natural mother she states that, because of the mental health issues her mother has, she will never really understand what Karen is trying to

achieve (KB109). Karen accepts this detachment from her mother and feels no bond with her (KB7). Her father and her mother-in-law, and especially her husband on the other hand, do understand what Karen is trying to achieve and are very supportive. Karen appreciates the "faith" that her husband has in her as he validates her goals by giving her time and space to study by taking responsibility in looking after the children while she studies (KB39, KB43). At the same time Karen will take the opportunity to try to study together as a family as this deepens family connections for her (KB15).

Karen also appreciates her fellow students and this contributes to her enjoyment of being a student.

> I love it (laughs), I was a bit unsure at first. I thought ergh ... I'm not young anymore you know, but on the course there's mixed ages and I like that and there's different people from all different backgrounds and I also like that as well. (KB19)

Mixed ages and social environments are positive elements of university for Karen. Although it took Karen a few weeks to settle on the course (KB29), she now feels more at ease as she can relate to those in her class. The building of relationships does not come easy and it takes time for her to feel settled with others. She now thinks differently about those whom she meets. "I used to stereotype people, erm, quite a few times, not intentionally ... and I'm seeing beyond that now because of the stuff I'm learning" (KB 83). Part of Karen's learning is about other people and the relationships she has with them. In this way, reflecting on others helps Karen to understand herself (KB87) through an engagement with a broader mix of people and working cooperatively with them.

After her first six weeks, although enjoying being a student and being in classes (KB17) Karen refers to one tutor as 'old school' because of her formal approach.

> I sort of like that, yeah, because she tells you what not to do and if you don't, then this ... so I sort of, in some respects I like to be told what to do ... it gives me direction ... and plus the sort of discipline. (KB285)

Karen likes this approach as it gives her strong direction and clarity. In return for her conformity she is offered what she sees as boundaries. She welcomes this as she feels she needs firm guidance and discipline to enable her academic development.

Embodiment

> I was so scared, anxious, definitely excited because it's a new challenge ... overwhelmed. (KB23)

Being a student gives rise to a range of emotions – excitement, being scared, "panicking, feeling worried, anxious" (KB211). Overall, starting a course brings the feeling of being overwhelmed. Although emphasised on Karen's first day the range of emotions continued through the first few weeks. Feelings can be ambiguous: one moment anxiety is "gone" (KB201) but then returns as Karen is "losing sleep" worrying about an assignment (KB217). Being worried is a familiar feeling that Karen has experienced throughout her life (KB89), yet the experience of being a student is "rewarding" and she sees the need at times to calm her excitement down (KB97).

> I find it hard to sleep on Monday, things are going over and it's absorbing, and I start theorising things. (KB279)

Through reflection, Karen analyses what she has learnt in class. Feelings can be hard to control and it can take up to two days for her to "switch off" after her day in university (KB35). At the same time, success in tasks provides feelings of pride which exceed her expectations and this is especially emphasised with a sense of achievement when her first assessment was returned to her showing that she had passed.

> Fantastic! I wasn't aiming for A's or B's, I was just aiming for a pass and that gave me a huge reassurance that I could do it and I was able to do it. That was a huge sense of achievement. ... I was so proud. Very proud! (KB305)

Being a student is a process of becoming – it is challenged by the past but goes some way to make a future that feels more positive. Karen talks of the time this takes, but the sense of achievement is rewarding as she has confirmation that she can achieve at this level. Passing her first assignment was a "huge factor" which determined whether she would continue (KB147). The motivation for Karen was not so much a high grade,

but the embodiment fear of failure which was "dismissed at that point" (KB307). For Karen, it was an important time because being in an unfamiliar environment of higher education made her feel "vulnerable" (KB37), and with it feelings of insecurity; a feeling she had experienced previously in her life (KB7).

Temporality

> I was always a worrier ... I would always fail because of the negativity that I've had since I was a child, and this, this is helping me to understand that I'm not a failure and that I can do things. (KB89)

The present is influenced by Karen's experience as a child. She feels that she has been able to turn negative experiences into positives, but it is not something that comes easy to her. Learning helps her to understand herself and her past. At present she wants to draw on her experiences and the way that she has dealt with them to help others in the future. However, she identifies a capacity to allow negativity to creep up on her, which is something she has to consciously fight against. When she succeeds in doing this she makes the link of how her past can influence the future and her foundation degree is the connection to enable her to do that.

> ... I think this year as a whole ... I've always known what I want to do, but this year I actually did the things that I wanted to do like stopped smoking in January, like I did the *Race for Life* in May and now I've started this so I've achieved so much. It's remarkable really ... yeah ... and this is just helping me even more. (KB99)

This extract depicts a sense of movement from the static mode of experience evident before the year began and how it has orientated her thinking toward new possibilities. Being a student can inspire change and new directions. Karen ventured on to her course at a time when she felt that she was accomplishing other things in her life. Each was a step away from her past and she uses words like 'achievement' when describing significant turning points during the year. For Karen, it is important to make a positive future out of her past and helping others is one way that she feels she can do this. She calls it 'remarkable' that she has met the challenges she puts in front of her, and this gives her hope that others will benefit from her progression. Therefore, being a student enables her past to be a basis for her future.

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Spatiality

> I was so scared, I was on the 'phone to my husband saying I'm at the door ... and he's like "just go in" you know. I was so scared, anxious, excited, definitely excited because it's a new challenge for me ... erm ... overwhelmed." (KB23)

Being a student means entering a new building with an unfamiliar environment. Negotiating this experience, Karen does as a team with her husband. The first day for Karen made her very aware of her surroundings. She recalls quite vividly where she was and how she felt as she entered the building which made a strong impression on her and gave rise to emotional responses. In this state she needed to be encouraged and navigated through the ordeal of getting to the room by her husband. For Karen, it felt like entering "the unknown" (KB25) and recalls the experience as "horrible" (KB213).

Studying gives Karen an opportunity to unite her family. At home she tries to ensure that the family study together in the same room (KB115) – her eldest son is studying at the same institution on a further education course and her other son is still at school. So being a mature student involves being with others, negotiating space and making the home a centre of learning, but it is also about finding space outside of the home. Karen also uses her bedroom as a study room for herself when she needs to be quiet, but she has found the need, on occasions, to come into university on a Sunday to study as she feels that there are fewer distractions (KN257).

Project

Karen feels that she has achieved a lot in a short space of time and the year has shown that projects can change; the once impossible can become achievable and that her goals are obtainable. The *'Race for Life'* and stopping smoking were big achievements for her and have given her hope that she can see things through. Karen has a belief in her capability as long as she can ward off her negativity (KB89).

> I believe it's going to open up so many doors for me, I'm not sure at this stage which one entirely I want to take ... I don't know whether after this one I'm going to top it up with a social worker one - I'm not sure. (KB186)

As Karen's direction changes and her opportunities increase her future projects can be made uncertain. It has made her question her future and the direction she wants to go in as she contemplates other options available to her through her course. She talks about life after her foundation degree has been completed and so has a vision of achieving it. Karen is "thinking long term" about other possible courses she could go on to at level 6 (KB295). However, she is in, what feels like, a luxurious position whereby she does not have to make any decision about her future for at least another year when her current course nears its end (KB295).

> I'm so passionate and keen, but I still have that anxious feeling ... I'm loving every minute of it really. (KB85)

Learning enhances Karen's passion and enthusiasm, but does not eradicate the anxiety that constantly accompanies her. The moment reminds her how much she is enjoying being a student, but anxiety is ever present.

> I just didn't think academically I would be able to do it and with my confidence sometimes that can be an issue. (KB13)

Doubts as to her capability are put in the past tense and now studying is a current project that is motivated by a belief that she can achieve at this level. However, doubt is still a constant companion and this makes her question that she can get through her course. For Karen, there is a dilemma as to her own ability. "I have doubts ... but I do think I can do it" (KB235). Karen reminds herself of how she has managed projects in the past - "When I feel I'm going to fail something that's where I have to watch that I don't give up" (KB269). The project of learning for Karen is fragile. It is something that can fail, be walked away from, or be taken away from her, and it all relates to how confidence has been an issue in the past.

Confidence is especially emphasised in the return of her first assignment. This gave her a real indication as to whether she had the ability to succeed at this level. When the grade and feedback came confirming that she had passed it played a "huge part" in her decision to continue (KB147). However, thoughts of withdrawing are never far away.

Struggling at the end of her first year with a piece of work, once again, makes her doubt her own ability (KB217).

Discourse

Karen talks mainly about herself; not so much as a mother or a nursery nurse but as a person striving to reach the ideals she has in her mind. In describing her relationship with study and being on the course, Karen uses a lot of words that relate to emotions of two extremes. She uses phrases such as 'achieved heaps', 'proud', 'new challenge', 'excited', but at the same time there are words such as 'doubt', 'change', 'anxious' and 'scared'. Learning is 'hard' and uncertain, but something to strive for. She goes from feeling fantastic to feeling very vulnerable, but all the time it is as if she has the mindset of expecting things to be negative. For example, she expected others in her group to be a "threat" to her (KB209), and saw the course as a series of hurdles (KB243). Karen reveals a lot about herself and about her negativity and these are issues which she rarely confides. At the same time there are indicators of real personal determination and enthusiasm to succeed, but quite often she can be heavily critical and unforgiving of her own limitations (KB137, KB181). There is a detachment toward others in the sense that she is unconcerned with how others may perceive her, as what she is doing is something for herself. The negativity is often expressive; however, they are terms she seems to have a good understanding of. At the same time she has an awareness of her own needs and the guidance she requires to succeed in the future (KB229).

Summary

During the first six weeks Karen's experience of being a student has brought a whole host of emotions. On one side is constant anxiety and on the other is growing confidence and enjoyment. The experience is changing Karen as a person as it enhances her self perception. The first day was of particular significance with her emotions being heightened as she was encouraged into the building by her husband. Receiving her first assignment back was also significant as this established belief that she could study at the level required. If she had not passed it could have meant withdrawing from the course and that would have been a failure in her eyes. Meeting

fellow students was a concern, but as she got to know and relate to them she began to appreciate their support. Karen has an altruistic vision of what she wants to do in the future, although she does not clarify exactly what that might be. Her course is a step towards her future which encompasses strong negative emotions of the past which she has to fight against.

Nick

Selfhood

> I'm a family man, so I've got to sort of try and tear myself away from the family every so often to get into my studies, and then of course there's my work ... you know, trying to marry the three, you know, in the sense that I'd say, er ... this is family time, this is work time, this is study time, and it can be frustrating. (NB20)

Nick finds the experience of being a student "nerve-racking" (NB20); however, it is more about how it impacts on him in relation to his family. For Nick, being part of his family is central to his identity and everything else revolves around that. There is a clear vision as to how his life is divided up as he tries to marry the three current aspects that contribute to his life. Although this helps to apportion his study time, being a student brings frustration creating a dilemma as he has to 'tear' himself away from his family. This means juggling his three roles to ensure that they are evenly balanced (NB64).

> Like I said before, watching TV, you've got a lecturer at the front just ... two hours of boring chat, you've got to do writing, with no interaction from the students, but yeah, it's been the total opposite. (NB88)

Nick anticipated that his student role would be a passive one. He expected some sort of hierarchical divide which derived from drama programmes he had seen on television (NB38). His impression of higher education had framed his expectation and he refers to the television representation on occasions (NB154, NB191). On starting the course Nick felt that he was willing to accept a subordinate role on the receiving end of a one-way communication system within the learning environment. It was, for

him, the way things were done. There was a sense of surprise that this did not turn out as expected.

> Obviously I perform in public so my confidence was sort of up there anyway, so I feel pretty confident, but then, erm, and then the other side as well, okay, new group of people, something new, right, so it's like well how am I gonna cope? I think that's ... that's the word - coping 'cos I've got to find a new strategy, a new mechanism to get by, yeah. (NB42)

Nick contrasts two sides to his confidence. As a musician, he feels "in control". He sees himself on stage as "giving his talents" and being appreciated, "whereas when you're sitting in the audience it's the total opposite" (NB197). In the classroom he is part of the audience and subsequently takes on a different role. The music stage for Nick is something he feels very comfortable on and in stark contrast to that of a student. Being a student means having to adapt to being in a new group and finding ways which will enable him to 'cope' with this new environment.

> ... back in my young days I was quite a shy person and it was my music that helped me break out. (NB203)

Music has been important for Nick and it still plays a big role in his life. It has been the key to unlock his shyness. He identifies his own needs in relation to this in the way that he likes to have positive people around him who appreciate his efforts (NB50). If Nick is not appreciated after he has put his "all into" something he feels it "dents (him) quite a bit" (NB207). The confidence in his identity is often reliant on how others view him.

> ... so if there's group work and it's got to be presented, it's 'hey Nick, you go, you go', right and I sort of get into a role really, or should I say a musicians role, okay I'm on show now and I'm gonna go out there and give it. (NB201)

This exemplifies the extrovert side in Nick's personality in that his social identity and presence is governed by those whom he associates with and who want to be reliant upon him. Like being on stage he honours the wishes of his fellow students which ultimately brings out self-confidence.

From doing an online exercise in one of his classes within the first few weeks Nick has identified his preferred learning style. He sees himself as a "kinaesthetic learner" where he would rather be actively "doing something rather than sitting and just listening" (NB94). This helps Nick to classify himself in a similar way to how he designates and apportions time. His interpretation of his experience is very much based on an inventory system where, once he can categorise or associate the experience, he appears to have a sense of control over it.

Sociality

Although Nick does not go out much he still sees his friends who take an interest in his studies (NB98). He sees this as a source of support. However, his main source of support is his wife. She has added new dimensions to his life and was the one who encouraged and enabled him to do the course, even to the extent where she sacrificed her own post-graduate course (NB80). He is very accepting of the advice and guidance she gives -"she's been my crutch and support" (NB213).

> ... it's just a case of every now and then, maybe it needs to be ruthless and says 'this is me time, I need to study, I need to sit down and do this, even if someone has to get upset over it. You know I don't want to, but you know it might have to be sometimes. (NB66)

Although Nick tries to balance his time for his wife and his children there comes a point where he puts himself first. He recognises that he may need to be 'ruthless' at times as study is about re-prioritising and involves putting his own needs first; something he finds difficult. This situation creates a state of dissonance with his identity as a family man.

> I think my most interesting experience really is seeing so many smiling faces. I haven't walked on the grounds and seen a sulky face yet ... and I think that in itself is an experience. (NB166)

The social aspect within the institution is something Nick occasionally refers to. He likes being in the building and the atmosphere within it. Although feeling comfortable he searches for responses in others which then establishes his own sense of presence

as he sees himself in relation to others. This search for acceptance was very much a cause for concern on his first day.

> ... when we were in the lecture room or lecture theatre, you seen all the rows of seats, you think hang-on, are all the classrooms like that? But obviously when we broke up and they're of a size that's reasonable, okay yes, I can interact here and that was a key thing for me to know I can interact with peers as well as the lecturers. (NB90)

On Nick's course there are three groups of approximately 22 students in each and at induction they were amalgamated. This was a concern for Nick as he thought that this was how they were going to be taught. The large lecture theatre was an intrusion as being in such a large group he could not visualise his own self in relation to others, because he could not see the scope of his interaction. It was a significant moment when they were divided up into smaller groups as this helped to alleviate elements of Nick's self doubt. Once in their respective groups he felt more at ease and confident, because he felt he could now interact in a classroom environment.

> I think students push you in that direction ... because I am a confident person, right, so if there's group work and it's got to be presented ... I sort of get into a role really, or should I say a musicians role, okay I'm on show now and I'm gonna go out there and give it. (NB201)

Nick draws on his stage confidence as a musician when it comes to group work and presenting. He sees it as stepping into a role. He revels in the way that others look to him to take the lead and he is very willing to do this. For Nick, it is the feeling of being appreciated which enhances confidence with his fellow students.

> It would be an anti-booster to my confidence that would, right 'cos I like to mix and work with like minded people who are caring, supportive, right, and if I don't receive some of that care and support then it's like ... Again I go back to that word appreciation, I wouldn't feel appreciated what I'm doing, what I've done and the contributions that I could put ahead to help others, so it would be pushing me in the wrong direction. (NB215)

Nick sees himself as caring and supportive and it is these characteristics that he looks for in others to interact with. The relationship Nick has with his fellow students and the feelings of security and appreciation are extended also to his relationship with his tutors. Although he was willing to accept a passive role, he now feels that the empathy

shown toward him by tutors has also boosted his confidence. Nick believes that had he not received this it would have affected his confidence (NB179). For Nick, it is about calculating how he fits in. Feeling secure with others helps him to exert a positive influence on those he associates with. Although altruistic, it stems from his needs of feeling accepted and needed.

Embodiment

> It was nerve-racking really. I didn't know what to expect ... loads of new faces, right well, who am I gonna work well with? What are the lecturers like? ... I don't know anybody, I'm a stranger here. (NB24)

Not knowing what to expect on his first day and being in a new environment emphasised the feeling of isolation which led Nick to self-assess how he would fit in. Reflecting back on his first day he recalls feeling like a 'stranger' which made him nervous. For Nick, the induction did help him feel more settled and secure about his course and toward himself. The following week, however, brought different feelings.

> We were almost like bombarded with information. It was almost like overload on the first day (NB34), there's papers coming from that direction, papers coming from that direction ... I almost had a folder full of information on the first day. (NB193)

If the first day brought feelings of anxiety, the following week brought feelings of bombardment. Nick started three modules and for each he was issued with a Module Delivery Scheme, one or two assignments and readings for the following week. He had seen what stress had done to others in his experience in mental health (NB54) and so was conscious of triggers which could lead to this in himself. He concluded that he was not going to allow it to affect him. He managed this by taking what he called a "balanced" approach (NB54). This meant him stepping out of his 'comfort zone' and bracing himself for a period of discomfort, while simultaneously not allowing himself to dwell on negative emotions (NB74).

> ... overwhelming, but brilliant. You think, okay, if I can pass that pain barrier then I know I'll be able to continue. (NB177)

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Nick experienced two extreme feelings at the same time during his first few weeks. The feeling of being overwhelmed was also accompanied by a positive feeling of enjoyment. At the time he was able to categorise this period and see it as a short-term stage which he must get through. He had identified that this was going to be probably the most difficult part of the course for him.

At home Nick ensures that his daughter has priority over the one computer they have. This ultimately means Nick studies late into the evenings which makes him feel "shattered" (NB20). He mentions getting headaches during the first few weeks in the plural sense, but then states that it had only happened once. He feels, in this instance, that it was self-inflicted and puts it down to staying up late and losing sleep in his quest to spread his time evenly between family, work and study (NB58-NB64). He also acknowledges that his tiredness spreads to feeling sleepy in classes, but this only happens when there is an absence of an interactive style of delivery from the tutor (NB92).

Temporality

> I say ... it's a week that's gone and I've got so many weeks to progress, and
> I know it's going to lead me on to where I want to be. (NB104)

For Nick, being on the course is very much a journey. As each week passes he mentally calculates the remainder that are left. He has a desire to use what he has learnt in his life and sees the course in this period of time as a stepping stone between his past and his future (NB54). The timing was right for Nick in his life to start his foundation degree, although he does suggest that there is "never a wrong time" (NB54). He would have done a course like this sooner if circumstances had been right, but always felt that his dislike of reading would be a hindrance when it came to his academic ability (NB164).

Nick is clear in the direction he wants to go in the future. However, there is an ambiguity about how he wants to use his past. In a way, he is disconnected from his previous career in mental health and fully focused on his ambition which takes him in a

totally different direction. His background has given him an appreciation of mental health which he wants to safeguard in himself.

> That first day reminded me of my school, my first day at school and you know I've still got that memory when my mom left me. (NB70)

> ... it's the only time I can say that's really brought back those memories of childhood. (NB72)

There are aspects of Nick's past which are entrenched within him which he associates with his first day. It brought back vivid memories of how he felt on his first day at school; feelings of isolation of which he has not experienced since. Entering the building on his way to the induction made him question himself as to how he would fit in, who he would work with and what the lecturers were like (NB24).

The first few weeks for Nick were:

> ... overwhelming, but brilliant! You think, okay, if I can pass that pain barrier then I know I'll be able to continue and go through it ... It's a bit like life really. Once you get past certain milestones or steps, you know, it becomes easier ... and that way you know you've overcome the first part ... might be hard, but at least you know you can achieve. (NB173-NB177)

Nick enjoyed the start of his course, but he did find being a student overwhelming. Although the experience was associated with his past, his drive was very much determined by his goal of wanting to teach and he has a clear vision of where he wants to be in the future (NB106). Studying is deferred gratification and he is willing to accept discomfort to achieve his goal. Although starting the course did have a big impact on him, he also had the ability to reflect and evaluate his experience which he could then put into context in relation to its value. This gave him the capability to brace himself of the impact and develop a strategic vision of his journey which he would see as becoming easier if he could "get past certain milestones" (NB177). The 'pain-barrier' is something he is prepared to endure because it is an investment for the future. Like life, learning involves going through discomfort in order to be in a position where he can manage it and with it a belief that he can achieve.

> I think because where I studied then it's sort of real close to home, geographically, right, because I was obviously born and brought up in (*name*), that's where I studied as well, right, so ... everything was local, but then coming here ... (NB28)

Being a student takes Nick away from home. For the first time he was attending an institution on his own - outside his local and familiar area, which he sees as part of his development. Previously, up until he met his wife, staying geographically within his area had been important to him. Venturing outside to attend university made a strong impression on him. It made him feel, when he entered the building, like "a stranger" (NB26).

> Yes, especially when we were in the lecture room or lecture theatre, you seen all the rows of seats, used to think hang-on, are all the classrooms like that? (NB90)

One of Nick's first impressions of the university was when he entered the lecture theatre for his induction. He found the size and vast space daunting and it raised concerns as to whether he could be comfortable in such an environment. He felt restricted and reticent to interact.

> ... the other time that something new to me was, erm ... travelling, right, because I'm sort of home grown, you know you don't travel very far from home, but since meeting my wife, you know, er, she brought something new into me, whereas I was able to look at a map, study it, oh yes the M1 takes you so far, okay let's do it, oh, M40 - roads I've never known before, you know ... been able to venture out. (NB78)

Prior to being a student it had been his wife who had helped Nick venture outside the area where he had grown up. This brought a renewed confidence in Nick where he could look at a map and have the belief that he could travel to different places. Now he was doing this on his own in higher education, and this was a sign of his own development and maturity. The time was right for him in his life to explore beyond his geographic boundaries.

> If you don't get out of your comfort zone you'll always be there, and if you want to be higher you need to go out and do something new. (NB74)

Nick sees his development within his control which involves him venturing out and going to other places. Although this is unsettling for Nick he is willing to go though this discomfort as he now sees the restrictions that he had previously put upon himself. Conversely, he says that he does not go out much. However, he does perform as a musician and he does go to church (NB48).

Home is where Nick feels very much at ease, but studying there can be a struggle due to the restriction of space. He tends to use the table in his front room, away from the television, where he feels he can scatter his books (NB221). With only one computer in the house he has to compete for it, but gives his daughter priority of the space as she is studying for her GCSEs (NB20).

Project

> I'm going to reach my goal and that's to teach. (NB179)

The current project for Nick is his studies and this is motivated by a clear focus of what he wants to do in the future. It is a drive that was a decisive factor in deciding to do his foundation degree (NB8). It is this that keeps him on the course, although he does feel that his relationship with peers and tutors were also contributing factors (NB179).

> My goals are still the same; I want to teach ... I'm not changing that one at all. (NB227)

Nick is almost defiant in his vision of future projects. He is committed and there is an underlying sense that he will achieve on the course. Any weaknesses he may have are no longer considered. For example, he is prepared to overcome his dislike of reading as he knows that this is part of higher education. He even feels after a few weeks that he is making progress with this (NB18).

> ... there's always something that I'm learning still, so even in my conversations now, say like I would be talking about erm, theorists, just 'oh, Vygotsky, ... Bruner, so, even the ... the language I'm beginning to speak just naturally. It shows that I am learning something. (NB40)

Being a student for Nick is about continual learning, and a sign for him that he is learning is that he can, in his conversations, use theorists he has studied. The project of study is influencing the language he uses and it is through his understanding of such concepts which boost his confidence. Being able to articulate his understanding in this way gives a new dimension to his social interaction.

> Well I've had one B and two C's for which I'm dead chuffed with really, right, to know that these were my first ones, right, and obviously and using those as a stepping stone to get me further, right, you know. Some might have been disappointed that they got a C, but no, I says ... if I start somewhere I can always build on this, so I was really chuffed. (NB209)

The grades Nick has received so far have confirmed to him that he has the ability. They have boosted his confidence and given him the belief to achieve higher. Once again he sees his studies and the grades he achieves as something to build upon for the future. These are no signs of disappointment as he takes more of a strategic approach to his studies. He is open to feedback and any that he gets he internalises so that he can build upon it. In the past there were self-doubts regarding his ability to achieve in education (NB18), but now there is a vision of his journey which, through his growing confidence, he sees himself completing.

His positive approach is also reflected in his attitude to losing his job in mental heath; a job he had done for twenty years. He used it as a trigger to start his journey into teaching because it finally gave him the time to study toward it (NB114). As one project ends it allows opportunity for another one to begin. To become a teacher is his goal and Nick sees his progression as a journey with teaching as his final destination. He feels determined and positive, but he is also aware of being self-critical - "I do have a tendency ... of knocking myself down ... if I know I can do something and I don't attain it" (NB50). Although no mention is made of withdrawing from the course he does state that he would consider dropping out if his family needed him (NB217), or if he recognised symptoms within himself that his mental health was deteriorating. For Nick, this is his "biggest scare" (NB138), because he has seen it in many others over the years through his work. Apart from this, Nick feels committed to carry out what is needed to complete the course.

Discourse

The language Nick uses is positive and most of what his lifeworld entails he puts into context of the journey he is on. Each aspect of being a student is part of a stage on the way to reaching his goals. He sees the present as a 'stepping stone' or a 'milestone' and any obstruction just means taking some sort of detour. There appears to be an assured expectation he will reach his destination. He refers to the challenges he faces as leaving his 'comfort zone' and going through 'pain barriers' which he braces himself for, but he also talks about travelling in a plural sense with others. At the core of his choice of words there is a strong sense of his need to be accepted and be surrounded by others with whom he feels comfortable. Although he focuses on his own ambitions he never loses sight of significant people in his life.

Nick also talks with the use of analogies. He categorises feelings by associating them with how he has felt in the past. He apportions time in the same way and focuses on how the present enables his transfer to the next phase of his life. At the same time he refers to himself very much in relation to, and part of, his immediate family.

Summary

Nick, when starting the course, was very much influenced by television programmes he had watched. He was expecting to take on a very passive role as a student; however, his perception of higher education changed very quickly. His confidence appears to be reliant on those around him and whether he feels comfortable and accepted by them. Being a musician is a big part of his life and this has helped him overcome his shyness. His wife is a big influence on him and the main supportive person who has encouraged him to challenge himself. He appreciates the support he receives, and this extends to those who are on the course with him. The start of the course was overwhelming, bringing back vivid memories often associated with feelings of isolation. However, he has overcome this and is enjoying being a student. Nick has a clear vision of his future and the course is an investment in that future.

Fara

Selfhood

>I feel like I really let myself down at the age of 17, 18. (FB12)

>I made wrong choices then and I've always regretted it ... I feel this is my second chance in a way and I'm really focused. (FB14)

For Fara, the fact that she did not achieve academically when she had the opportunity has been something which has stayed with her. She is quite critical, in an unforgiving way, of her behaviour when she was given the opportunity in post-compulsory education and this has influenced her decision to return. She has carried this regret with her since her teens and returning to education helps restore the respect she has for herself in this area. Fara's identity and view of herself is defined by her teenage experience. Therefore, the qualification is more important to her than what the qualification can do for her (FB198).

>I've always been a studious person; I've always really liked being in the educational environment and loved studying really and challenging myself. (FB4)

The inner belief Fara has in her educational ability has been trapped within her for a long time and is released by the opportunity of being a student. She has considered returning on a number of occasions, but although she is only 26 she feels that if she had left it too much longer she would consider herself "too old" to reach her goal of becoming a teacher (FB8). Being in an educational environment brings out a positive side to Fara's identity. It gives her the opportunity to challenge herself and there is confidence in her ability as well as a belief in her own potential (FB16).

>I was looking for excuses really to drop out. I was looking for excuses, yeah. I was just looking for things like, while ... I hope my teacher doesn't give me the time off work to, you know, my boss giving me the time off work to come to Uni. (FB33)

>I needed an excuse so I would have blamed ... someone to blame and even resent it in the end ... (FB149)

Being a student brings conflict within Fara. Although she feels she belongs in education she needs an excuse to withdraw from it. It is this element that prevents her from reaching her potential and goal to graduate (FB149). Although it was her decision to return to education, and although it goes some way to repair regretful moments from her past as well as giving her an opportunity to achieve, she desperately looks for reasons to drop out. However, she wants the responsibility to fall on someone else and the reason to be imposed upon her, thereby giving her someone else to blame. In this way it disguises the real issue. Having this as an excuse enforced upon her would help her to not look inwards and blame herself, a trait she finds in her husband and one she does not want to emulate (FB149). She also realises that this would have resulted in projecting resentment on to someone else to deflect any discontentment she may feel toward herself. This exemplifies the ambiguity within Fara as regards the part education plays in her life.

> I just wouldn't be happy with myself. I'd feel I'd taken the easy route out and I'm not that sort of person. (FB151)

If she had dropped out and it was down to her, then there would have been issues for her to deal with. There is a dual identity when it comes to her agency. On the one hand she tries to convince herself that this is what she wants to do but at the same time she looks for reasons to leave, although she cannot allow herself to make the decision to withdraw. The course for Fara brings out this dilemma and it is one which is central to the respect she has for herself in her own identity. Study for Fara is about fluctuating between desire, belief and reluctance. She believes she has the ability and wants to achieve, but there is a condition of worth that she places on herself that forces her to stay. She convinces herself that she is not the sort of person to find an easy way out. At the start of her course she also volunteered to take on the responsibility of being the group representative and although this contributed to her feeling that she had a voice, it was also an added responsibility she put upon herself.

> I feel like, yeah, if I needed to say something, or express something I feel like, yeah, the college would listen, the university would listen and I feel like I do know what steps to take. (FB92)

Fara believes she has a voice within the university. However, this highlights a contradiction in Fara's views of being a student. She talks about having to conform to the strictness of one particular tutor mentioning the feeling of being 'ashamed' when she was told that she needed to be quiet in class (FB20). This contributed to Fara adopting a subordinate role as a student. Although believing she has a voice within the university it does not extend to include the classroom environment, "because some lecturers are a bit intimidating and you feel they're going to snap my head off if I ask a question" (FB116). For Fara, there was a sense of powerlessness experienced in some lectures and it is one she accepts as part of being a student.

Sociality

> I have to compromise quite a bit. I mean, sometimes I have to compromise family time. (FB52)

Being a student means having to make sacrifices resulting in not having as much time with the family. At the same time it heightens her sense of appreciation, because of the limited time she has with them (FB147). Although this took some time getting used to she has now got into a routine and as things have settled "life is a lot more organised now" (FB67). For Fara, juggling her responsibilities and reassessing her priorities has given her better structure to her life and feels now that she has a better quality of lifestyle (FB68), although she does not elaborate as to why.

> He (her father) sees me juggling my family life, my work and education and he's thinking why would you want to do that? And he's, you know, roles as well. Culturally our role, a women's role in my culture is to raise a family and to look after the children and to be a homemaker basically, so when he sees me giving my children to my sister he's kind of thinking, well, okay, you're stepping out of your role now, you should really be ... if you can't look after them and work then you shouldn't be taking on other responsibilities, so I kind of try and, I don't really talk to him about it, I don't really show him, if I'm carrying my laptop I try to leave it in the car, I don't really want to remind him that I'm doing that degree. (FB 161)

For Fara, the changing perception significant others have of her is a concern. Although Fara has the support from her husband (FB155) she has to contend with the thought that her father disapproves of her doing the course. He fails to see why Fara would

want to juggle her family life with work in order to study. He sees her as responsible for raising her family and now she is stepping out of that role and taking on further responsibilities. For Fara, it is better not to confront this issue with her father and her desire to study is strong enough to withstand his disappointment. It does bring awkward moments for Fara as she drops her children off at her father's house for her sister to look after them while she attends university. The consolation she holds on to is the belief that her father will be proud of her, particularly as Fara is to be the "first woman in her family to get a degree" (FB162).

As for her mother, although not understanding Fara's desire to do the course, she was not against it. Fara feels that this relationship has improved since doing the course, although she does not clarify why (FB170-FB172).

> What's it like being a student? It's okay, you got your friends, you got your colleagues that you're working with and your students in your class, erm, it's still the same as when you were back at school - you've got your joker of the class and you've got the one that studies and the one that only wants to talk about the assignment, and you've got the others that are lagging behind and just wants to try and get some information out of you, so you've still got those main characters and then you've still ... even though you're adults in the room and the teacher's an adult you still got to give her so much more respect, and you know, learn to be quiet at the right time. So, all those rules still apply which ... I thought it would be a lot more different than that, a lot different than that. (FB18)

For Fara, being a student is like being at school in the sense that the make-up of her class is similar to when she studied 'A' levels. In this sense the group dynamics have not changed. They remain the same, as does the formal side of being in a classroom. Fara perceived her friends in the past as a bad influence on her studies and the reason for her subsequent demise in her achievements, although she takes full responsibility (FB10-FB11). Fara had anticipated a different type of relationship with her tutors in higher education with her adult status taken into consideration, but feels as subordinate as she did at school. However, her relationship with her current fellow students is a positive one, but it took time to build.

> I was quite nervous erm ... because I just didn't know about the
> experiences of others. I didn't know whether they were on the same (FB23)
> ... or if they were a bit more clued up. (FB25)

For Fara, returning to education made her nervous of those who would be fellow students. She questioned her own position and experience in comparison to others in her group and doubted her own intelligence. The nerves Fara felt on her first day were not so much seated in her own self-doubt but how her situation and experience compared to that of others.

> I think the first few weeks you just sort of erm ... feel you have no one to
> talk to and you feel like if you say something, if you show people the
> apprehension they might, you know, might not feel the same as you or
> they might not understand (FB41) ... I felt I was alone. (FB43)

After her induction and first week the feeling of isolation increased as she felt daunted by the amount of work she had to do. For Fara, this was something which could not be shared with anyone, as it might be perceived as a form of weakness (FB23 – FB33). Fara did not want to risk confiding in how she felt, because if others did not feel the same it would add to her feeling of alienation.

> ... everyone was ... talking about how nervous they were and I just felt like,
> I'm nervous as well and I felt like that connection with the rest of the
> group... then we started talking about supporting each other ... we were
> getting a lot of support and I just found that the group we work really well
> together, so, I felt like if I do drop out, and I did mention to others that if I
> do fail, I will drop out, and they said, no, we're not going to let you drop
> out. (FB45)

Once the group did start to share their feelings Fara realised that others were just as nervous as she was. This had a positive return for Fara regarding the support she felt and it meant a lot to her that her fellow students encouraged her not to withdraw. Her fellow students were now becoming a source of support. This coincided at the time with a better rapport developing with tutors who also helped her to settle and feel part of the course (FB121).

> I used to see my friends quite a lot (laughs). We used to have a fixed
> Sunday where we would meet up. That hasn't happened now for a while
> and that's one of the things, like I said I've had to sacrifice. (FB74)

Fara still feels the support from her friends. However, she has resigned herself that time with them is the one thing that has to be sacrificed. She was already compromising family time and, therefore, seeing her friends could not be accommodated. She still feels that they are supporting her in what she is doing and even believes that their attitude toward her has changed in the sense that they take her "a bit more serious now" (FB180).

Embodiment

> I keep questioning myself, thinking is this for me? I just found myself on a weekly basis just coming up to lectures, everything was just thrown at you, and you put it in a bag and you take it away and then it was like a week would go past and you'd be thinking about it, stressing about it, I guess there was nothing I could do about it at the time. (FB186)

The first few weeks was a time when Fara would question herself as to whether this was what she really wanted to do. During this period she felt she was just going through the motions of attending. There was a sense of powerlessness to change it, and her feelings were hard to control resulting in her being stressed with the situation. The sense of being overwhelmed was accompanied with feelings of panic. Consequently, this added to her state of confusion about what she wanted and the only way she could alleviate it was by leaving.

> Everyone else seemed so calm and cool and collected ... I was feeling really panicked... it was really overwhelming and I just felt really confused at that moment in time and I was looking for excuses really to drop out ... I did question whether I wanted this or not, because I was just really, really close to dropping out at that moment in time. (FB33)

Fara assumed that everyone else was okay and did not feel the heavy burden she was carrying. This was in contrast to what she had anticipated when she had mentally prepared for the course, having wanted it for so long (FB84). Added to this was the feeling of guilt that she had toward her sister as she passed on childminding responsibilities to her as she attended university (FB159). These emotions were trapped within her during the first few weeks and she saw no comfort in sharing them.

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Temporality

> There's never going to be a perfect time for me to come back into education. (FB6)

Since Fara's 'A' levels there have been opportunities to return to education but she would often find obstacles to put in her way (FB8). She had resigned herself to the notion that there would never be an ideal time. When she did start she found that being a student made a "massive amount of difference" in her life (FB121), but managed this by taking one step at a time (FB142). Her vision of the future enabled her to see that the compromising she does now with family time is relatively short-term (FB52), and therefore an investment into her future.

> I've put it off for a number of years and I've just found that each year it doesn't get harder, but I always make excuses for myself, so I'm just thinking if I don't do it now I'm never really going to do it, or I'm going to be too old when I do eventually qualify to be a teacher. (FB6)

For Fara, the limitation of time results in a pressure to study as she believes that if she did not take the opportunity now she would be too old when she did eventually qualify to be a teacher (FB8). There had been opportunities in the past to return to education, but the desire had not been strong enough to overcome her propensity to make excuses for herself.

> I've always regretted it and I've always said to myself if I had that chance again I wouldn't make those choices, and I feel this is my second, second chance in a way and I'm really focused now, I mean study is just ... every spare moment I get, apart from family time and work, is on study and I don't resent that at all, I mean, I'm quite happy to do that because without hard work you're not going to really get anywhere. (FB14)

For Fara, the course gives her direction in her life, one which could potentially unlock the entrapment she feels from her past. It is a second chance to be able to help deal with the regrets she has carried with her since her teenage years and realise the potential she believes she has always had (FB16). The present for Fara is not so much influenced by the future but by her past, and it is the past that is continually with her.

Spatiality

Fara has one room at home where she studies. She uses her bedroom where she has to "shut all the doors" in order to have quiet while she works (FB206). At university, she equates her settling down on the course with not only getting to know others in the group but getting to know the building. She did have concerns as to whether she was going the right way to class or finding the library or student services, but feels that it is "second nature" to her now (FB48).

> When we come in I'd like to be able to come into the classrooms and sit down, if I need to finish off a few things or prepare something, I'd like to have that classroom space, we don't have a base, if you understand, because there's already a lecture going on there and we have to wait in the corridor and then chit-chat and catch up ... almost like a 6th form common room. (FB114)

As Fara has settled, she reflects on her experience during 'A' levels and wishes for somewhere in the university which she could claim as a base; somewhere which combines facilities to work as well as opportunities to develop the social side of being a student.

> We used to have like a get-together and we were quite good because we used to organise things, we used to organise going down to events, erm, going to the cinema together, just going out and having a coffee and those have now ... I've stopped going to a lot of those meetings now. (FB74)

When Fara thinks about the sacrifices she has made in her social life she thinks of the places she used to go to. As her commitments increase and priorities change she no longer goes to the places she used to go with her friends. Being a student and having to prioritise her time means that she cannot justify this type of leisure activity.

Project

> I did my 'A' levels and I didn't really finish them off. It's still up in the air for me and I think it's made me even more enthusiastic about studying and seeing it through. (FB157)

Fara believes she decided to do the course for two reasons: she wanted the challenge and to help develop her career, although the first few weeks did make her question

her goals (FB25). However, at the core is a drive to succeed and to repair unfinished business of the past. Fara now feels that the course has given her direction and a renewed level of enthusiasm to achieve.

> At first it was a bit of ... I guess I didn't have a reference point ... this is my first grade and I didn't have a reference point. (FB168)

At the beginning of the course Fara felt that it was difficult for her to gauge her own ability because she did not know what the expected level was. Her previous experience of education had not prepared her for this and although having confidence in her learning she was still uncertain that she could achieve at this level. Hence, thoughts of dropping out were closely associated with her first piece of work (FB142).

> If I'd failed, I would've dropped out. (FB35).

> ... when I do get my grade back, if I fail I'm going to drop out. (FB86)

Although wanting someone else to blame for having to withdraw Fara did give herself an ultimatum when it came to her first assignment. The grade awarded was key in her decision to continue and there was a defiant clarity in her future decision. Failure, after so much effort, would be a sign that she could not achieve at this level and she would withdraw from the course. She saw a poor grade as failure and that she was not capable of achieving at this level. This shows the complexity of her beliefs. The belief that she is studious and likes the challenge of education is contradicted by doubt in her own ability to succeed.

> I'm hoping that I will have enough time to do the assignments, I mean I'm not trying to blow my own trumpet but I can do the work, it's not that I can't do the work. Erm ... It's just finding the time to do it. (FB96)

Fara did pass her first assignment and she was really happy that her grade was one of the highest in her class. This gave her a sense of reassurance. However, it also altered the angle of her concerns; it was now that of a time factor rather than an ability factor.

> I know I'm sounding a bit silly but I'm really looking forward to graduating wearing the sort of hat and the gown and everything so I'm really just focusing on that, although it's two and a half years down the line. Erm ... I'm trying not to think too much about what's in between and I feel if I

don't get that ceremony done I feel I'm really letting myself down, so I know it sounds really dumb, but it's like a little dream of mine, so even if I don't ... even if it doesn't qualify me and I can't use the qualification, it's just a nice experience for me to do that whole ceremony. (FB125)

The strong image Fara has in her mind of obtaining a degree and attending the graduation ceremony is one that gives her direction during the first few weeks when thoughts of withdrawing are constant. She pictures herself at the graduation, a vision she feels others would not understand the significance of. At the same time she is mindful not to let her imagination go too far because of the journey ahead. She adds another dimension to her vision by putting more pressure on herself that she would let herself down by not achieving.

As Fara settled on the course confidence grew and the image of her graduation took on less significance. In her second semester she admitted: "the graduation ceremony is still definitely there but I would rather, much rather have gained skills and gaining to become a better teacher" (FB 198). After six weeks of the course she sensed "more doors and avenues" were being opened for her as she considered new directions she could now take in the future after completing her course (FB78-FB80).

I do still want to become a teacher because it's just a real secure job in my eyes... it could take it into a lot of directions, you can do supply, you can do part-time, you can do temporary, you can do full-time, and in my opinion it's a real secure job and I need that security for my family. Having said that, I would really, really love to do something on the child psychology side of it. (FB78)

The ability that Fara believes she has now and the confidence she sees developing has given her the belief that she can take advantage of the options and directions which are opening up to her. The flexibility and the security of teaching appeals to her, but she would like to explore other careers. In this sense she sees herself with a degree and having some control over what she does in the future.

Discourse

For Fara, the terms she often uses relate very closely to her past educational experience. As she reflects she uses language to express her feelings in an oppressive

way. She adopts phrases as if she were a critical parent admonishing herself as a child. When talking about the positive approach to the course she speaks as if she were trying to convince herself of why she should do it. She mentions only briefly about her role as a mother or a wife and focuses mainly on the impact the course has on her as an individual.

Summary

Fara's past experience of education plays a big part in her life and influences the respect she has for herself. It is this that dominates her current experience in higher education. There is a complexity in her beliefs. She questions herself, but wants the challenge that she believes education brings her. However, the course is like an intrusion. At present she is honouring her decision to do it and the consolation she receives from this is the reinforcement of her self-image. She has a vision of completing, but is constantly looking for a reason why she should not continue. She appreciates the support she has from her husband, but it does cause conflict with her father. Although reluctant at the start of her course to share her feelings with others in her group, she has now come to feel that they are an important factor for her continuation. There was a lot of anxiety about returning as a student and this was emphasised with her first assignment. Once she had passed, it gave her the belief that she was able to study in higher education.

Conclusion

This chapter has presented three lifeworld experiences. Each student has a very independent and unique interpretation of their experience and journey. If there is to be an understanding of the student experience then I feel it important to examine individual interpretations and perceptions to show the diversity of reasons why students decide to come on a course as well as complete it. In the next chapter I explore what returning to education is like for mature students; the factors behind the reasons to return and how they adapt to being a student. I do this by reviewing literature that has explored the experience of the mature student.

Chapter Four: Literature review

In this chapter I review literature relevant to the experiences of mature students as they return to higher education. I start by identifying the government's agenda in the UK toward lifelong learning and the position non-traditional students occupy. I then go on to ascertain what the experience is like for mature students returning to education and discuss the reasons why students decide to return to education. I investigate a particular theme of widening participation; that of social class and gender in relation to how mature students prioritise and manage their studies outside university. I also identify research that has shown how relationships change for students on their educational journey. Within their studies I investigate how students adapt to being a part-time mature student and discuss the part assessment plays. I then consider the impact of mass education and the factors which determine whether a student continues or withdraws. I conclude by investigating the role of the university with regards to the provision offered to part-time mature students.

The learning agenda

2010 was to be the year that 50% of 18-30-year-olds were going to be in higher education (Leathwood and O'Connell 2003; Murphy and Roopchand 2003). In order to achieve this, there had to be a widening of participation and an encouragement of lifelong learning to reach those outside the traditional 18-21-year-old category. This was, according to Westland (2004), the "dawn of government awareness of lifelong learning heralded by the Dearing Report" (p282). Field (2000) questions the progress of lifelong learning since the Dearing Report and despite offering little evidence to support this, he concludes that its implementation has caused problems for higher education institutions as well as the government. He goes on to argue that the UK is not alone. Governments of Germany, Norway, Finland, Holland and Ireland have introduced lifelong learning polices. However, these have been essentially focused on persuading citizens "to change their ways" (p253) and return to learning. It has concentrated on the unemployed; a focus that suits employers and has resulted in higher education institutions restricting themselves to the development of vocational

training. In fact, Tight (1999) refers to non-vocational education as something which is now seldom discussed in national policy terms, and therefore receives very little funding.

As is common in most countries in the developed world, the primary concern for lifelong learning and the widening participation agenda has been skills-based vocational learning. This has meant opportunities for those who may not have considered higher education in the past (Jackson and Jamieson 2009). According to Toynton (2005), studying "is an element within life rather than a stage of life" (p107), emphasising that individuals already have personal expectations which they bring to the learning process. He stresses that learning must be integrated within their experience, expectations and learning styles. Therefore, there is a need to understand the perspective of mature students as they return to education by those responsible for delivering courses, or at least recognise them (Shah 1994). Adults' past experience is the foundation of, and stimulus for, their learning. How they approach or avoid tasks is related to their previous educational experience which often determines their sense of entitlement (Bamber and Tett 2000). It is also a journey; one which is enjoyable, but one that can often bring conflicts as an adult (Mercer and Saunders 2004).

Returning to education

According to Mercer and Saunders (2004), although age is no longer perceived as a barrier to learning, there is little published research about the experiences of mature students and even less so the older the student is (Jamieson 2007). Yet education is a significant route through which change and development in adulthood can occur, although the journey is often a challenging one. Mercer and Saunders (2004) found that students experienced periods of conflict and imbalance in themselves. As education can be life-changing, conflicts inevitably arise, particularly in the home. Students have to maintain a dual identity and attempt somehow to keep these identities separate (also found in Baxter and Britton 2001). Returning to education can make adults feel very different people and therefore the dynamics of their relationships outside university change. In many instances they were confronted with a choice between continued education and the survival of their wider relationships.

Another often reported conflict is the fear of failure versus academic success, particularly at the beginning of their course. Mercer and Saunders (2004) found that this was an anxiety rooted in the fear of being compared to younger, brighter students (also found in Murphy and Roopchand 2003). Although their study was essentially about Access students, these same fears and anxieties continued when students progressed to higher education. It could therefore be assumed that this anxiety must be heightened if students enter higher education without any form of access course. This suggests a need for practitioners to understand the experiences of these students in order to help them through this period. This is where education often becomes more than just a qualification (Mercer 2007); it is about personal growth.

According to Davies (2001), the return to education in adulthood is a fragile experience and the value of its investment complex. He identifies that most students recognise the economic benefits – career enhancement and employment (also identified by Brockett and Hiemstra 1991); however, time away from their family is a high immediate cost and this creates a dilemma. The fragility which stems from a lack of confidence in educational pursuits is also increased because higher education challenges previous identity; students change as they develop and realise their potential (Eastwood 2008). Yet, as Britton and Baxter (1999) suggest, becoming a mature student is part of a continuous process of identity reconstruction which, they argue, is central to modern life. Davies (2001) also suggests that institutions fail to recognise the concerns of prospective mature students. Amongst these concerns the fear of failure was a dominate one. This was more common amongst adults as opposed to younger students who had very often just completed a qualification and therefore compared their ability to their most recent academic achievement.

Research is limited regarding student experience during the first few weeks of a course. However, one conducted by Beard et al. (2007) is one of the few investigations to use lifeworld fractions in its analysis. It concentrated on full-time leisure students which included a small percentage of mature students. Through a case study, they assessed students' feelings after induction, after week Seven and again after week Seven of the second semester. They found that confidence was closely linked to

assignment success and that the first year was an emotional journey which affected every aspect of students' being. It identified the importance of the lifeworld of students and claimed that all lifeworld fractions were present. However, there was little attempt to demonstrate how.

The research of Yorke and Longden (2010) on behalf of Foundation Degree Forward provides a summary of the part-time mature students' experience. This report, which is not too dissimilar to the National Student Survey, acknowledged that the students in the sample were 'probably' registered as full-time which was confusing. The survey reported that students placed a high value on engaging with others and that their course had enabled them, as individuals, to grow which they had not originally anticipated. The report also emphasised the amount of commitment students had and the amount of juggling required in order for them to stay the course.

Lowe and Gayle (2007) found that on average the part-time students in their survey studied ten hours per week while working forty hours. The result of asking students how much they study outside classes is dependent on when during the semester the question is asked – towards the end of a semester is usually more stressful as regards submission of assessments than at the beginning. Lowe and Gayle (2007) do not clarify when this study was done, nor do they identify what is included in these ten hours of study. What they did reveal, however, was that the students were highly motivated to achieve and that they perceived the support they received outside university as an important contributory factor in their achieving.

Education – a choice?

Returning to education is an independent choice (Rogers 1986). The main factors behind the decision, according to Leder and Forgasz (2004), are to fulfil degree qualification ambitions and enhance career prospects with consequential financial gain. In seeking these, Adshead and Jamieson (2008) emphasise that adults are more agentic in their decision making than younger students. However, the concept that adults are volunteers in higher education is strongly opposed by Tight (1999) who claims that it is simply a myth. He claims that education is becoming a compulsory

activity. This is supported by Fuller (2001) who outlines the changes in employment over the past twenty years and recognises that qualifications have become more important. In fact, they are a necessity, otherwise adults in the workplace can become disadvantaged (Fuller 2007). Older adults have to compete with a qualified younger workforce for a limited supply of good jobs. Education has become a necessary lifetime activity (Cross 1981) and, therefore, as options become limited, the choice to obtain higher qualifications in adulthood may not be as agentic as it was once thought.

However, there are other reasons to return to study and Neville (2002), although providing very little evidence for his claims, suggests that, for many, it is personal development and self-fulfilment which accompanies the goal of career advancement. This is often borne out by fateful moments in peoples' lives that precipitate the need to return to education. For example, bereavement, separation, redundancy, and children leaving home are often triggers that make adults look for new meaning and direction in their lives. In fact, Dawson and Boulton (2000) believe that most adults will not consider returning to education unless they experience some sort of imbalance in their life. Mercer (2007) has also contributed to this debate and identified that for many participants in her research "part of their self was missing and it was this that they were reclaiming through education" (p26). The research suggested that the return to education was very much about establishing a sense of being and that academic and personal growth were inter-related. Murphy and Roopchand (2003) separate intrinsic and extrinsic motivations but believe that it is the enjoyment of the learning experience as well as the desire to strive for personal growth and fulfilment that is the ultimate motivation. They go on to say that this contrasts with the British Government's policy which seems to focus on stimulating extrinsic motivation in the individual, whatever social class and gender they are.

Social class and gender

Reay *et al.* (2002) and Reay (2003) compared the experiences of mature and younger students. Although their sample was small and concentrated on Access students, they concluded that education was more of a struggle for those from a working class background. They found that painful education memories can become powerfully

entrenched in adults which then exacerbate existing barriers. The students in their study were motivated by wanting to make a contribution to society (tackling global poverty, teaching, social work, charity) by "making a difference to the lives of other people by drawing on their own ... life experience and knowledge" (p8). This altruistic motivation was an isolated one and not commonly found in literature in this area.

Britton and Baxter (1999) observed that, because the majority of mature students are women, they tended to have greater family responsibilities. However, the institutional profile of many students is still one without such responsibilities. Britton and Baxter (1999) refer to identity and the different pressures faced by male and female students. In their study, male students had greater autonomy and less day-to-day care of others, while women focused on care and concern for others which was at odds with the individualistic self. This then resulted in guilt as they felt they were putting their own needs first. This was later emphasised by Dawson and Boulton (2000) who found women suppressed their own interests to cater for the family which magnified the conflict and internal struggle they faced. So, returning to education can lead to many conflicts within current relationships and renegotiations of personal identity which can be a challenging experience for students (Brine and Waller 2004). Brixton and Baxter (1999) also found that women negatively perceived that taking time to study equalled taking time for themselves, restricting them from fully immersing in their studies. Also, students without children were more likely to succeed and move on to higher education within one year.

As regards universities, Reay (2003) refers to the "working class habitus and the elitist field of the pre-1992 university sector" (p310). Although sparked by only one student comment, she concluded that many long established universities were not affected by the widening participation agenda because their base was a traditionally white, middle class one; hence, results tended to be better. What was apparent with the accounts she referred to was "how much old universities had to learn from some of the new universities in terms of making non-traditional students welcome" (p311).

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In the UK, those from a working-class background also had to negotiate culture. Mums and McFadden (2000) found that for male students there had been pressure on them, in the past, to resist any form of education and so education became an unfinished business. Burke (2007) also found that, at school, boys "must avoid working hard otherwise risk being bullied or harassed" (p417). This may be one contributing factor why there are more women than men in higher education. However, whatever the past experience has been for those returning, education brings with it other issues that can have a significant impact on students' personal life.

Relationships

Tight (1999) highlights what he considers to be the classic misnomer that education is good for people. He argues that it is commonly unsettling, not necessarily beneficial and may even be harmful. He stresses that HE can destroy relationships, especially marriages. Tight's claim here is questionable on two levels: first, education is only one factor amongst many in any relationship, and second, as Skynner and Cleese (1993) highlight, problems which exist in relationships are often exposed when there is a change of balance within them. In this sense, education is not the cause but a resultant contributory factor. However, Tight is not alone in mentioning what is now recognised as the 'Educating Rita effect' (Bates and Norton 2002; Brown 2006); an effect that Baxter and Britton (2001) see as gendered as the tensions are not shared equally between men and women. For female students it is they, not their partners, who have to do the adjusting. Female partners generally were more supportive, whereas for female students their partners' masculinity seemed to be threatened, especially for working class males (Christie *et al*. 2005). In such cases a dual identity was needed – one for university and one for home, which contributed to the pressure students felt they were already under (Mercer and Saunders 2004). Brown (2006) believes that it is common, almost probable, for marriages to collapse during a course of study, although she fails to identify when this begins to happen; neither does she consider that one of the factors in deciding to return to education may be related to early signs of relationship deterioration.

Bolam and Doddgson (2003) claim that hostility is not just confined within a marriage and that other family relationships can deteriorate. As desires change within individuals it can pose a threat to family and friends (Brine and Waller 2004). Bolam and Doddgson (2003) advise that students, at the beginning of their course, should be told of the possible problems which may be encountered in their relationships as they progress and develop. However, once students have enrolled it is, in a way, already too late to start advising them on the possible effects of the course. Also, this type of advice may be more appropriate coming from current students, as there is a tendency to relate to those with the same experience (Hough 2010). Bolam and Doddgson (2003) argue that universities could help by encouraging more inclusion of students' families with pre-entry and induction activities. They also suggest a need, in the future, for professionally trained tutor-counsellors to deal with a wide range of pastoral and academic issues.

Students' lives change in many areas. One theme that consistently emerges in the literature is the continuous juggling of responsibilities (Graham and Donaldson 1999; Reay *et al.* 2002; Reay 2003; Leder and Frogasz 2004; Yorke and Longden 2010). For one group of part-time students, identified by Christie *et al.* (2005) as *'pragmatists'*, studies were their main priority; their identity was bound up with their studies. However, most researchers identify that family and work are the main priorities. This juggling of responsibilities was increased, according to Alsopp *et al.* (2008), when they (usually women) were carers of others and that sacrifices had to be made in order to manage their studies (Kember *et al.* 2005). The time factor is therefore significant in students' progression.

Penketh and Goddard (2008) show how the difficulty of managing time and academic work is hindered by existing university structures, approaches and culture as traditional models of study are devised around young, full-time traditional students. They emphasise that the responsibility to change should not fall on the student but on the university, and that structures and policies, as well as approaches, need to change to accommodate mature students.

Adapting to the higher education environment

Askham (2008) refers to the anxiety students feel as they enter a 'taken for granted' environment – they leave one lifeworld and enter an intellectual world of academia. The uncertainty of returning to education, coupled with worry over the lack of academic skills they bring, contributes to a sense of vulnerability. Very often mature students judge their academic capabilities on their previous experience of school which is often likely to be poor. Thus, self-esteem is often low as is their expectation to perform well as "past experiences distorts expectations and magnifies anxiety" (Askham 2008, p93). At the same time they expect a very similar experience, one where they expect to be taught rather than learn (Daines and Graham 1988). Brookfield (1986) claims that this is one of the most daunting and difficult (but essential) tasks the facilitator has to encounter, but a climate of learning has to be established which considers these anxieties. Others have emphasised that this traumatic experience is magnified on the students' first day of attendance (Peters 2000; Woolley 2005) and the failure to address these issues can be a significant contributor toward voluntary withdrawal (Prescott and Simpson 2004).

Murphy and Roopchand (2003) acknowledge that mature students generally compare themselves unfavourably with younger students who have come straight from compulsory education and yet most do better than the typical 18-year-old. This is because they have clearly defined goals (Badenhoop and Johansen 1980); they take advice on instructions more seriously, are more intent on learning, and hope to gain something that they can apply in their work (Graham and Donaldson 1999). Therefore, the material they learn has to be useful and relevant. By exploring the construction of the adult learning world, Kasworm (2003) found that perceptions affect engagement. She found that student constructions change over time as they become more involved in higher education. Two of the five categories of students she identified were those who had an 'entry voice' and those with 'outside knowledge'. Students who had 'entry voice' searched for their place within the classroom which was sometimes set in a "confusing culture of actions, words and evaluative systems" (p89). They needed respect of their adult status. The students separated academic knowledge from real-world knowledge and perceived the faculty as "all-knowing and powerful ... where

previous knowledge and expertise have no meaningful relationship to the class content" (p90). Those from the *'outside knowledge'* group did not feel it appropriate to learn content "that was irrelevant to their adult worlds" (p91). They had more of a practical approach and valued class discussions. Although I am not convinced of the need to categorise students in this way, it does highlight the necessity for a skilled tutor who can adapt learning and teaching methods in order to encompass all learners, or, at the very least, to discuss the expectations students have with their learning.

Waller (2006) opposes the labelling of mature students for institutional convenience and stresses that mature students are too much of a diverse group because of their "highly individualised routes ... in arriving at where they are now, and where they still hope to travel to in their ongoing learning careers" (p127). Shah (1994) too recognises that matures students are not a homogenous group as each individual inhabits "enormously diverse histories and positions. Each has their own particular story" (258). It is these histories or experiences which guide students through their educational journey; a journey they may not have been ready for when they were younger.

> It can therefore be argued that, although adult students encounter a number of barriers to higher education, they are capable of more effective and elaborative learning than younger students precisely because they are likely to be far more adept at examining and exploiting their prior experience in order to make sense of new information and new situations. (Richardson and King 1998, p69)

Richardson and King (1998) go on to suggest that adults are just as likely to get a good degree and, in fact, tended to get better ones in the fields of arts and sciences. However, they did acknowledge that a break in education appeared to hinder maths and scientific skills. They make the point that mature students exhibit a deep approach toward their studies compared to younger students. At the same time, while adults complain about poor memory, it is often based on society stereotypes about the adverse effects of ageing which they feel reflects intellectual impairment, "but they ascribe precisely the same memory failures in a younger person to a lack of attention" (p74).

Donaldson and Graham (1999) identified six key elements which determine the experience of adults. *'Prior experience'* was listed first. Through interviews with mature students in America, they found that they could recall various sources of learning from formal schooling to social and cultural contexts of adult life. They argue that it is these experiences that have an impact on learners' motivation, self-esteem and self-confidence. Students draw on previous knowledge to make meaning of new material and to understand it in a way that transforms their previous understandings. They make connections to other real-life activities and they also recognise the need for their learning to be useful and relevant - emphasising the need once again to embrace these experiences and use them as a foundation for learning in the classroom. Whatever the experience, "real education comes after we leave school; and there is no reason why it should stop before our death" (Durant 1954, p521). However, with formal education comes assessment.

Assessment

Another important aspect to consider when examining the experiences of mature students returning to education is assessment. The Dearing Report (1997) attempted to promote the concept that students are customers (Field 2000) although this failed to recognise that students differ significantly from customers in the sense that they do present themselves to be judged. Young (2000) understands the need to grade students; however, raises a concern to protect vulnerable students. She refers to Knowles (1998) who believes that grading mature students is contrary to the very nature of adult development because it makes adults feel like children being judged. Although Young (2000) identifies the anxieties associated particularly with the first assignment, she did find that self-esteem played a significant part in how adults responded to positive and negative feedback. In her study, responses were not related to ability, or to the grades received, nor were they related to whether the comments were positive or negative. She found that those with high self-esteem had a positive attitude toward being assessed and receiving criticism, whereas for those with low self-esteem, feedback was seen as more damaging. Assessment and feedback is a key aspect for many students as they search for vital confirmation that they are progressing, which in turn feeds into their development (Williams and Kane 2010). For

many, assessment is the main priority and more important than what is gained in the classroom (Spurin 2008).

Webber (2004) identifies a conflict for students in terms of wanting to get a certain grade versus significant learning. He suggests that students sacrifice deep learning in order to channel their energy into an area confined by the assessment, usually dictated by restrictive learning outcomes. Brown (2006) demonstrated how she overcame this conflict with a post-graduate course, structured without any learning outcomes or syllabus, allowing students to decide what to study and what to investigate in their assessment. Although not supported by any empirical evidence or theory, she argues that students' motivation can be determined by their own areas of interest. However, this should be viewed within the context of post-graduate students; a group with different needs and expectations to those on undergraduate programmes. Neville (2002) argues that for many students "writing their first assignment and waiting for the results and feedback from the tutor is a crucial time – and often can make the difference between staying the course and dropping out" (p15). Fleming and Murphy (1997) concur with this view that the first assignment creates a high level of anxiety as students grapple to assess what is expected of them. This contributes to much of the learning environment that is inhabited by the adult learner, and for many this has a negative or obstructive impact upon the learning process (Askham 2008). The system, which is essentially set up for younger students, often restricts the development of adult learners as they are put on the conveyor belt of mass higher education (Askham 2008).

The political climate

The reports which influenced government policy over a decade and a half ago (Dearing 1997, Fryer 1997, Kennedy 1997) all emphasised the need to encourage mature students back into higher education and yet, as Adnett and Tlupova (2008) claimed, the actual costs of this were transferred to the students and their families. What Adnett and Tlupova failed to see was that their claim would have greater emphasis in 2012. There has been an increase in higher education, yet also a relative decline in direct funding (Blake *et al.* 2003). According to Nixon (1996), this meant central

government putting pressure on principals and vice-chancellors, who in turn increased pressure on deans and faculty heads of departments to accommodate these changes. Consequently, the priorities of academic staff also required re-organisation. Later, Nixon *et al.* (2001) emphasised that the control mechanisms they saw at the forefront in higher educational institutions subsequently resulted in the need for bureaucratic systems (Readings 1996; Ritzer 2001).

Alternatively, the government desires society to become highly educated and is encouraging widening participation, yet have forced universities to become more business orientated (Shattock 1999) which in the past has often neglected students' needs (Simpkins and Lumby 2002). Emphasis, according to Hodkinson (1997), is on efficiency and 'value for money'. The government's aim of attracting 50% of 18-30-year-olds into higher education by 2010 was a recruitment aim; no mention was made of how many of those 50% should actually achieve a qualification. The focus in the future with the goal of 40% of the working population achieving a level 4 qualification by 2020 (Leitch Report 2006) may well be on retention (Smith 2007) and one where the experiences of students at every stage will need to be considered seriously (Shugart 2008). In the past there has been tension between corporate development and academic practices where universities, especially those on the periphery, have had difficulty in competing on "homogenous quality because if their quality is superior then it is unlikely to be recognised, precisely because they are located on the periphery" (Marginson 2002, p416). This means, as it has always done, that these universities will have to fight even harder for survival.

When New Labour took office in 1997, they proclaimed 'Education, Education, Education!' and emphasised the need for lifelong learning (Tight 1998). Although recognising that learning is key to prosperity, Taylor (2005) feels that they have rarely given part-time higher education, adult education or lifelong learning much of a high profile even though, "depending on definitions, approximately 35% of learners in higher education are part-time, and over 40% mature students" (p108). The overwhelming emphasis of government policy is on younger learners – primarily the 18-21 'traditional' full-time student. The point Taylor (2005) goes on to make relates

closely to what Marginson (2002) mentions about those universities on the periphery; that although -

> all higher education institutions should have a widening participation strategy and practice, it is clear that the elite 'Russell Group' universities, for example, will construe this in meritocratic terms: that is, that widening participation strategy will be focused on ensuring that the 'best' students are recruited and that admissions policies are 'fair'. (Taylor 2005, p111)

It is a system that is fair in terms of qualification but hardly one that adopts the widening participation policy. This highlights the fact that those from a higher socio-economic background will still be the beneficiaries as they have been in the past (Waller 2006).

> ... despite widening participation, class inequalities have hardly changed. Rather than moving from an elite to a mass system, we now have an elite *and a* 'mass' system, although the 'mass' as yet only applies to the middle classes. When only 14% of working-class people attend university, it can hardly be called a mass system. (Leathwood and O'Connell 2003, p612)

As Smith (2007) sums up, what has really happened is that the initiative has been to increase rather than widen participation. However, for those who do participate, the investment can be complex.

The complexity of investment

Decisions to participate carry an economic risk and are a key to understanding students' motivation to study in higher education (Davies 2001). Mature students have to weigh up economic benefits. Career enhancement can be viewed as deferred gratification compared to time spent away from family, which is an immediate cost. For lower income groups, higher education is often seen more as a debt rather than an investment (Adnett and Tlupova 2008). Questions students ask themselves include – How much will it cost? How much debt will I acquire? Can I fit in study with earning and caring? What if the course is at the wrong time or support services are not available? (Davies 2001). Students need to know about funding, timetables and crèche facilities which are sometimes not answered until they start. Prospective students are very often unaware of what they need to know and therefore ask these questions as

they arise, but as Davies emphasises, a reactive service from an institution cannot be satisfactory. As Askham (2008) maintains - "as academics, we rather take for granted much of what surrounds its formality without ever really seeing this from the student perspective" (p91); and yet this knowledge is important. Jamieson *et al.* (2009) see this as relevant to policy makers as it has an impact on the marketing of courses, the nature and guidance for mature students as well as curriculum issues. Yet -

> there are few policy initiatives designed specifically to address the needs of part-time mature students ... part-time students tend to be invisible because they study at home or only attend evening lectures, and are often not recognised as constituting part of the student body. (Jamieson *et al.* 2009, p247)

In the past, universities have only been encouraged rather than forced to expand their part-time provision (Davies 2001), and Shugart (2008) argues that the system is not well designed to meet the needs of adult learners, most of whom are employees who study rather than students who work. O'Donnell and Tobbell (2007) identified that mature students perceived themselves as peripheral participants in the higher education community and often excluded. They conclude by emphasising that when students are prevented from full participation, a disempowering effect results. This is significant in terms of the student experience and therefore retention.

Retention

Ozga and Sukhnandan (1998) believe that although mature students generally are better prepared for higher education in the sense that they have developed reasons to enter, at the same time they are also vulnerable to external aspects disrupting study and therefore attrition is unavoidable. They are critical of Tinto's (1993) model of retention (Tinto's model is explained in Chapter Six) as they feel that it focuses on students as the problem. However, Tinto (2006, 2009) clearly recognises the importance the institution plays in the student experience, although does identify that retention may not be high on the list of priorities for everyone. Tinto (1993) also identifies that external factors will always be an issue for mature students.

McGivney (2004) also recognises that external constraints play an important part in students' lives and cites examples of students hiding their study from family members. She goes on to highlight that the reasons students give for their withdrawal are very often ones which do not threaten their own self-esteem, or are perceived as acceptable reasons. Thus, the real reason for withdrawal is often not revealed. She argues that there is more likelihood that students will continue if they find membership of a friendly and supportive group within the university. Charlton *et al.* (2006) found that early withdrawal can lead to a sense of failure for students. They, like McGivney, identify motivation and institutional support as more important factors for perseverance than entry requirements. However, accessing the required support, due to external demands and the constraints of time, can be a problem. It can also result in restricted social integration which ultimately can lead to withdrawal.

Wilcox *et al.* (2005) also emphasise the importance of social support. They telephone interviewed full-time students which included a minority of mature students (16%). The survey also included students who had withdrawn, although there was no mention of how they managed to encourage withdrawn students to participate. It highlighted that students did not take the decision to withdraw lightly and that many factors were involved in the decision. They conclude by identifying the significance of the first few weeks for students and that a "lack of social networks and supportive interactions is a major factor for students in deciding whether to stay or leave" (p720).

Kember and Leung (2004) found that commitments meant sacrifices of personal pleasure and a relative surrendering of social life. The part-time students in their survey perceived self-determination, motivation and intrinsic interest as important factors to progress on their course. They also found that those with a poorly developed sense of belonging were more likely to withdraw. Their advice was to make students aware of these factors early on in their course to prepare them for their journey, and consequently aid their retention. Leone and Tian (2009) suggest that higher education institutions' retention strategies are more reactive than proactive. Engstrom and Tinto (2008), like Leone and Tian (2009), see student success stemming from institutions

that take seriously the construction of environments conducive to students feeling part of and interacting within - none more so than in the classroom.

Roberts' (2011) research centred on non-traditional students who had completed stage 1 of their course to identify and raise "awareness of issues that could potentially lead to negative experiences and subsequent attrition" (p184). The focus was on teaching and learning with all participants suggesting that the teaching experience was far from what they had expected. Although it brings into question what these students did expect, it highlights the fact that students do consider leaving based upon the teaching provision. This, therefore, emphasises the need to examine the provision from the perspective of the student. Glogowska *et al.* (2007) stress the need to find out if courses and support systems work in the way they are intended. They suggest that the only way of finding this out is by examining the student experience to assess efficacy and a subsequent contributing factor toward withdrawal. It highlights that the first semester is a critical time for students as they adapt to the institution (Longwell-Grice and Longwell-Grice 2008). In the future, universities may have to consider whether they are contributing to the decision students make to withdraw by assessing their own provision of this critical period from the perspective of the student.

The future
Given changes to fees from September 2012 it is unlikely that the target of 40% of the workforce attaining a level 4 qualification by 2020 will still be high on the government's agenda. The forecast of Eastwood (2008) that traditional student numbers would drop over the decade may be accelerated in the immediate future which will ultimately put more emphasis on the need for non-traditional students and their retention.

Universities around the world also face common and stronger demands for accountability from society (Yoshimoto *et al.* 2007). Bolam and Doddgson (2003) stress that the performance indicators and the production of league tables will become more important in the future. For example, those low in tables for such issues as retention may have difficulty in attracting new students and therefore future funding. If

retention becomes a priority, institutions will need to acknowledge the needs of mature students, a point reinforced by the Department for Business Innovation & Skills (2009). In their assessment of the future of universities, the growth of part-time study and the aim to widen participation for adults is something that has to be addressed in order for universities to survive. The points made compare with the National Student Forum (2009) which also emphasises the need for more flexible delivery modes to enable this accommodation. It also highlights the inadequacy of the current provision for mature part-time students. The emphasis will be on institutions adapting to student needs, rather than the student having to adapt to the institution. According to Penketh and Goddard (2008), this will mean that structures and policies will need to change as well as approaches to teaching and learning.

Notice will have to be taken of those institutions that have a proactive approach to widening participation and retention. Yorke and Thomas (2003) did such an investigation of six universities in the UK whose retention was above the national benchmark. They found that each had a strong policy commitment to access and retention backed up by practical action. Amongst the topics that institutions took seriously were: *academic preparedness*, *the academic experience* (teaching, learning and assessment), *finance and employment*, *family support* and *institutional services*. Essentially, their research centred on attitude toward students, and not just the attitude of the academic staff. Mature students were made to feel an integral part of each university and there seemed to be a greater understanding shown as to what it was like for these students returning to education. They also found that there was a shift away from summative assessment in favour of formative assessment at one institution, especially during the first year, which helped struggling students to manage without the extra burden of 'failing or trailing' – they were integrated into the system gradually. The research uncovered the importance of understanding the experiences of mature students as they venture into higher education.

The findings of Yorke and Thomas (2003) were similar to Woolley's (2005) exploration of examples of good practice at universities in America. He identified that it was the understanding of the barriers students face, the anxieties they feel and the changing

and conflicting identities they unavoidably go through which helped students with their transition. It is this type of research that will be of value to institutions as they try to adapt in the future. At present, "educators and administrators often rely on earlier research on how HE affects traditional students and assume that the same things are true for adults – even though they may intuitively know better" (Graham and Donaldson 1999, p147). In the future it may have to be confronted.

Education is not just about achieving a qualification. The journey is one where many personal sacrifices are made; one where learners' potential can ultimately be realised. Transitions are made where learning facilitates necessary growth and one where students can escape the trappings of their past. It needs to start in an environment where this growth can take place with universities playing an integral part. Walters (2000) identifies this growth as a painful experience, as adults leave familiarity of one adult stage to enter the next which demands a temporary surrender of security. This eventually results in a significant increase in self-esteem, which in turn promotes self-confidence. Improving retention means that more mature students potentially develop their self-confidence by completing their course, which in turn aids funding councils' audits as success is often measured by completion of courses.

The hopes and fears of adult learners are often closely associated with the institution and those with whom students come into contact (Gallacher *et al*. 2002). Presently, universities have a profile of a student as one without any family responsibility. They may need to consider the type and level of support they offer to their students in the future to better meet the needs of a diverse student body (Leathwood and O'Connell 2003), as well as give consideration of more flexible programme designs for non-traditional students (Carney-Crompton and Tan 2002). As Bamber and Tett (2000) concluded, there is a need for curriculum and assessment to be adapted toward mature students. As society and the nature of work have changed over the past twenty years higher qualifications have become increasingly important (Fuller 2001). The onus will continue to be on individuals to attain them.

Conclusion

This literature review has focused on the experience of mature students in higher education and how this challenges many aspects of their lives, as well as their identity. Student guides exist such as Bowl (2003), Dawson (2006), Gatrell (2006), Pritchard and Roberts (2006) and Snow (2012), to help prepare students with their academic journey. However, there is relatively little research about the actual journey and the transitions they may face (O'Donnell and Tobbell 2007, Spurin 2012). Most research on mature students tends to be mixed in with full-time students' experience (Ozga and Sukhnandan 1998, Britton and Baxter 1999, Bolam and Dodson 2003, Wilcox *et al.* 2005, Charlton *et al.* 2006, Beard *et al.* 2007, Fuller 2007, Mercer 2007, Yorke and Longden 2010). Few researchers make direct contrast between full and part-time study and many researchers do not even mention whether their research was on part-time or full-time students.

Most of the literature is on mature students as a collective homogenous group. There are few researchers who have explored the depth and diversity of the student experience by focusing on individuals and putting the student voice at the forefront. Most findings are treated as representative and, according to James (1995), cannot therefore reflect experience in a meaningful way. This is because being a learner affects so many other aspects of peoples' lives, and yet this is not recognised by many institutions other than the fact that they are *'learners'*. By categorising and differentiating the mature student experience from that of the traditional student, James (1995) identifies research as adopting a *'social species approach'* and calls for the need to "look outside as well as inside the educational institution" (p646) if there is to be a greater understanding of the student experience; in other words he could be referring to the need to explore the lifeworld.

Gallacher *et al.* (2002) identify that returning to education is an individual and complex journey governed by the "individual's subjective experience, the meaning which they attribute to their experience, and their sense of becoming a certain person" (p498). Waller (2004, 2006) too recognises the need to examine individual experiences to gain a deeper understanding of the student experience and this is achieved by listening to

the student voice. Current literature generally does not focus on individual lives of "how real people experience and make sense of such transitions" (Mercer 2007 p223), and yet this is important because "if, as practitioners, we are to fully embrace mature students within a system of higher education, we need to understand their experiences" (Mercer and Saunders 2004, p296). As universities refocus their attention on widening participation, practitioners and policy makers will need to acknowledge and take into account what it is like for individuals returning to education in order to adapt to their needs, especially with students paying higher fees from 2012.

The literature reviewed in this chapter regarding mature students has essentially used research which has been conducted with students who have established themselves and, in most cases, committed themselves to complete their course. I did not identify any research focused primarily on the most critical part of the mature student experience – the first six weeks when most withdrawals take place. This study has made explicit the gap in knowledge and the contribution of this study. In the next chapter I return to the data to discuss the experience of all nine participants. As I do this I demonstrate how the findings of this study have complemented or contradicted previous literature.

Chapter Five: Discussion

Although three lifeworld accounts have been presented in detail to illustrate the analytical process, data from all nine participants has informed the findings of this study. It was important to me to include all participants to capture their valuable contribution and to honour their commitment to the project. The discussion that follows is, therefore, drawn from the nine individual lifeworld accounts. The findings represent what could be captured of a lifeworld of a beginning student within the timeline of this particular study. Lifeworld, with its focus on individual experience, highlights the variance in being a student. The importance of this for developing practice is that it can go some way in establishing the impact provision has on individuals to gain a greater understanding of the student experience. I have selected this method of presenting to reflect common features of what it was like to return to higher education as a student, whilst still emphasising the complexity and individuality of the experience. In this way I have shown how the lived experience differs from the collective. Within this chapter I reflect also on how the experiences of these students are captured within the current literature, and consider how they might aid further knowledge and understanding by offering new insights into the student experience.

Returning to education

The decision to return to education for these students was very often an individual one and made independently. There was a belief that they were ready to do a higher education course, or at least to test out whether they could achieve at this level. The age of these students' children was also a factor in that they had reached an age where they were less reliant, as Carney-Crompton and Tan (2002), and Waller (2006) had found. For Harriet, it was a decision that had been planned for some years, but she had waited until her children were of an age where they were more independent. For others, although there was a feeling that their children were also less reliant, it was combined with more support from those within their immediate family to help with childcare. In the case of Amanda, whose grandmother suffers from Alzheimer's, day-care help was available from outside agencies.

Intrinsic factors for participants returning to education often related to ambition. All had confidence in their work role and, apart from Harriet and Mohan, all had a clear vision of what they wanted to do. For some, the decision was heavily dominated by what they wanted to achieve in the future (Brocket and Hiemstra 1991). Motivation often stemmed from career advancement and financial gain (Leder and Forgasz 2004); however, only two students indicated that they had thought of any subsequent financial gain they may receive in the future. Leder and Forgasz (2004) also found that students came back to education to fulfil degree qualification ambitions. This was evident with these students, even though there was awareness that the foundation degree was not a full degree. There was a belief with all participants that they were capable of progressing in their career and although the time was right to return to education in their lives, as Fleming and Murphy (1997) had found, there had been few opportunities in the past for them. For two students in particular, education was very much unfinished business and they were reclaiming, as Mercer (2007) identifies with mature students, an under-developed part of themselves, or resolving something in the past through education. For these two students, this appeared to be the dominant intrinsic motivational force behind their return.

There was only one instance (Jay) where the decision was made instantly just prior to the start of the course, but this was made so that she gave herself little time to consider the consequences. For seven of the nine students, there was a very clear career goal in mind and the course was seen as the route to achieve that goal. For Mohan and Harriet, however, the career goal was weaker as it was more a case of seeing where the course would take them. Their ambitions were not as specific; they were happy to have the flexibility of staying as they were or moving on when the time came. Both felt that they did not need the qualification which meant, for Mohan, that there was little commitment to the course when he started; the opposite was found with Harriet.

On making the decision to return to education, Nick, Jay and Amanda were very determined even at a very early stage to complete their course. Once the decision was made they were then committed to it. This shows how the decision can often be

instrumental in establishing students' commitment. Harriet shared similar beliefs, but she would assess whether to complete her course at the end of her first year and not before. For the others, commitment would come at varying stages over the first few weeks.

For Jay and Nick, another contributory factor in their decision to return to education was that they had recently completed modules at level 4 whereby the credits gained contributed toward their foundation degree. Tanya had also done a pre-course which helped build her confidence to progress on to level 4 – an important aspect of any pre-course (Buckler *et al*. 2006). For Jay and Nick, there was never an indication that they would not complete. This corresponds to Snow (2010) who suggests that those who enter via a pre-course generally do not contemplate withdrawing.

In this sample there was no evidence that the decision made by students to return to education was triggered by a critical incident. There were some with unresolved issues relating to the past which may have resulted in an imbalance, but this was not a recent development. According to Dawson and Boulton (2000), Neville (2002) and Gallacher *et al*. (2002), the return to education in adulthood is often triggered by fateful moments in peoples' lives such as bereavement, separation, redundancy, or children leaving home. In fact, Dawson and Boulton (2000) believe that most adults will not consider education unless there has been some sort of imbalance in their life. Although it must be remembered that the sample size was small, there was no evidence that such fateful moments lay at the foundation of the reasons why students returned to education.

For all participants, returning to education was an individual and personal choice and for students like Harriet and Mohan, it was not one that they were unduly committed to. The findings of this sample contrasted with the findings of Tight (1999) who suggests that education, at this level, for mature students is not a voluntary decision and that students feel obliged to return because of the necessity for the qualification. These students want the qualification to progress, but in many cases it was not essential for them. However, there are other factors students consider, not so much in

choosing to return to education but in the institution they choose. In the case of Mohan, it was because there was a prayer room available for him to use.

Starting the course

For seven of the nine students, the first day generated a lot of anxiety, very often related to feelings of isolation. For five of them it also brought feelings of inferiority and concern about who would be in their class. It was a day when these students questioned their motives and the experience often was an intimidating one, as Peters (2000) and Woolley (2005) have found. Essentially, it is students' first day where an established lifeworld is challenged as they enter into an intellectual world of learning in which they feel they have little knowledge and are equipped with too few skills in order for them to cope with (Shah 1994, Askham 2008). It is a day remembered quite vividly and for three students it was likened to a significant experience in their past, such as the first day at school. However, it is also a day where there are feelings of excitement. Although many authors (Carney-Crompton and Tan 2002, Mercer and Saunders 2004, Penketh and Goddard 2008) have referred to the anxiety students feel at the start of their course, I found no research which focused on the severity of these first day feelings.

It was only Mohan who mentioned that he was not nervous, but for him not knowing what to expect helped eliminate any nerves as he did not know what to be nervous about. Only expecting to be on the course for two weeks meant there was little pressure put on him because he could opt out at any stage. For others, emotions were mixed; apart from feeling nervous and anxious there were also feelings of excitement as to the challenge ahead. Having attended the induction these students tended to feel much more at ease about the course, as it not only imparted necessary information it essentially helped these students to feel calmer about the journey ahead of them.

The first week of classes was especially memorable to these students. This was where they had three different lectures where a Module Delivery Scheme was issued as well as one or two assignments for each. Handouts and required readings were also

distributed. Even for the most determined in the sample, such as Amanda and Nick, this was overwhelming and they used the word 'bombarded' to express what it was like. Harriet and Karen also used the same word in the same context, whereas Tanya recalled how her bag had considerably increased in weight with the amount of handouts. This 'bombardment', as it was often called and the feeling of being overwhelmed was something that I did not find in the literature.

During the first few weeks feelings of tiredness increased, especially during the working week. This often filtered into lectures, particularly during the last class of the day which went on into the evening. These feelings stemmed from an increase in their range of responsibilities as they balanced schedules to fit in study times. Many have written about mature students having to juggle work, family and study (Graham and Donaldson 1999; Reay et al. 2002; Reay 2003; Leder and Forgasz 2004; Mercer and Saunders 2004, Glogowska et al. 2007, Snape et al. 2007, Yorke and Longden 2010) and the findings in this research are no exception. Tanya, for example, mentioned how tiredness was also accompanied by feelings of stress as she became 'moody' at home and was beginning to 'snap' at those around her.

These students used a variety of words to describe how they felt: 'panic', 'daunted', 'anxious', 'flustered', but often they were associated with, and put into the context of, having a lack of terms of reference. This was especially emphasised in relation to the first assessment and to a certain extent guessing what was expected of them which intensified their anxiety (Fleming and Murphy 1997, Neville 2002). This ultimately, on occasions, led to symptoms such as headaches, as was the case for Nick and troubled sleep for Karen and Tanya. Others such as Jay, Amanda, Mohan and Harriet, although there were feelings of anxiety and moments of panic, they would adapt more easily.

Despite confidence being exhibited in various guises and developing at varying speeds, it was still the return of the first assignment which was to be a significant indicator of their ability. For Jay, Tanya and Fara, these first few weeks were made even harder by the lack of guidance, or reluctance as Jay believed, on the part of one particular tutor to give any direction and help regarding the assessment. Once feedback was received

and their first piece of work graded, there was a sense of relief. At this stage none were expecting high grades; a pass being the sign that most were looking for. For Karen, Fara and Mohan the grade was significant in the sense that they believed that they would have withdrawn if they had not passed. For Jay and Amanda, it was actually doing the assignment which they found daunting; however, it was coupled with an expectation that they would pass. For Nick and Harriet, they would have been disappointed had they not passed, but they would have moved on and learnt from it. It was those who were more determined in their academic pursuits who took more of a holistic approach – that of not basing any decision to drop out on one factor. For Fara, Mohan and Karen and to a lesser extent Jay, Tanya and Carol, it was the moment when feedback was given that provided the vital confirmation that they could study at this level and that they could progress. This complements the work of Williams and Kane (2010) who found that the established belief that students could achieve at this level was the basis for their development.

For all of these students, a level 3 was their highest existing qualification. There was an understanding that level 4 was higher education and two students remarked that seeing the word 'degree' in the title was a reminder that this was study at a higher level. In that sense, there were two considerations regarding a higher education course: on the one hand it was about learning, but on the other it was about being judged at an academic level never experienced before. Therefore, the first grade was a signal indicating progression and passing it became the firm foundation block to build upon which could then absorb disappointments later on. Any fear of not being good enough came from being exposed to what they saw as weaknesses or hindrances to their progression in education, whether it be a lack of skill in writing academically (Jay), a general dislike of reading (Harriet and Nick), having a mental block toward computers (Karen), or the need for academic support (Mohan).

Students in this sample gave no indication that they were comparing themselves in any way to young full-time students. Literature, however, has indicated that mature students do have concerns about this comparison (Murphy and Roopchand 2003, Mercer and Saunders 2004). The only comment that was made in connection to

younger students was that as a mature student, more guidance and support was needed due to the gap in years since they last studied. These students gave no indication that they saw themselves on the periphery within the institution either, yet O'Donnell and Tobbell (2007) believe that part-time mature students often perceive themselves in this way and can feel excluded.

For those students new to level 4, there was an expectation that they would take on a passive role as a learner, or at least be exposed to a very formal style of teaching; an expectation, as Daines and Graham (1988) suggest, of being taught rather than learning. Past experience of education forms this impression and it is often perceived as a negative one (Askham 2008). As the first few weeks progressed this perception changed quite quickly; however, it was dependent on the classroom experience. There were some students who had difficulty adapting to one tutor who they thought to be very strict. Jay found her encounter very intimidating and felt a sense of surprise that as an adult she had accepted such a degree of subordination. However, Karen spoke positively about this approach. For Carol, her concerns toward this tutor were different. It was the thought of travelling over a hundred miles to university and not being allowed into class if she was five minutes late. These experiences often influenced perceptions of having a voice within the university and whether the university saw their opinions as a valuable contribution.

There was a sense of surprise for these students that they were enjoying being a student, that they felt that they were developing as individuals and that their self-confidence, although fragile at times, was rising. Two students (Tanya and Karen) made reference to their learning styles and spoke with clarity as to their respective category. The category helped them to understand how they responded to information and consequently developed confidence in their ability to learn. It helped them make sense of how they had reacted in the past in a learning environment. For Karen in particular, it helped her to devise her own strategies to facilitate her learning. It had also given her hope that she was capable and that the stumbling blocks experienced in the past were no longer a hindrance.

By the time of the first interview, all had completed at least six weeks of their first semester. Even in that short time these students had experienced imbalance in themselves as they were adjusting to a new way of life, while subsequently accepting that this disparity was a necessary part of their own development (Mercer and Saunders 2004). The investment in their development creates a dilemma that study is often perceived as selfish time for themselves (Reay *et al.* 2002). This increased feelings of guilt toward those close to them as Britton and Baxter (1999) have highlighted. However, this also included:

- Guilt toward work colleagues for leaving them to attend university (Jay).
- Guilt toward family members for having to take childcare responsibilities (Fara).
- Guilt about feeling unwell due to physical problems related to pregnancy and not feeling well enough to study (Carol).
- Guilt toward family for feeling tired (Mohan).
- Guilt toward fellow students when they themselves did not have to take the module assessment having done it in a previous course (Jay).
- Guilt for having to restrict time with the family (Nick).

These feelings were also mixed in with feeling proud of what they had achieved and education was becoming more than just a qualification (Mercer 2007). It brought with it a mixture of emotions where there was, for some, a constant questioning of whether the course was right for them. For those who had a strong determination to complete the course, it was more a case of persevering. However, all participants, like those in Yorke and Longden's (2010) sample, were happy being students and as a result were highly motivated. These students did enjoy the learning experience which, according to Murphy and Roopchand (2003), creates an unconscious desire to strive for personal growth and fulfilment. They liked coming to university, being in the building and feeling a part of the academic environment. However, they were not studying or had not chosen to study for the simple enjoyment of doing so, as was the case with the sample in the research of Heery *et al.* (1996).

At the beginning of the course these students experienced insecurity to varying degrees. However, this was overcome through interaction with others where similar feelings of self-doubt could be shared. While this developed, it was apparent that some individuals had, at one time or another, contemplated withdrawing:

- Tanya had considered leaving on her first day when she found that she was no longer in the same group as her friends with whom she had completed a previous course.
- Carol, having a round trip of 200 miles to travel to university while pregnant, had the constant thought of "What on Earth am I doing?" She had decided to withdraw on the weekend before her first interview, but had reflected on her decision after speaking to her sister and decided to continue.
- Karen felt bombarded with information during her first week, but would persevere at least until her first assignment was returned.
- Jay also contemplated what her reaction would be to receiving poor grades and not seeing her own progression.
- Mohan was just testing the course out and did not expect to last more than two weeks.
- Fara was constantly looking for reasons to withdraw.

The first few weeks were unsettling and it was not surprising that there were thoughts of withdrawing (Wilcox *et al.* 2005). Glogowska *et al.* (2007) and Longwell-Grice and Longwell-Grice (2008) were of the few researchers to recognise the importance of the first semester for students as they settle into the institution. In fact, apart from Beard *et al.* (2007) whose students took about seven weeks to settle, pre-course 'tasters' such as Snow (2010) and Spurin (2012), there is little indication how complicated everything can seem in the first few weeks of a course. However, not all had thoughts of withdrawing. Harriet had not contemplated withdrawing and would not do so until the end of her first year. If she was not to pass, she would not return for her second year. For Amanda and Nick, the thought of withdrawing had not been considered except in anticipation of extenuating circumstances such as ill health.

Although tensions existed regarding these students' decisions to continue, it was also combined at the same time with enjoyment of the experience. As all reflected on being a student they found that they were enjoying their course and liked being a student.

Relationships

Although family was important to all participants, there was an awareness that sacrifices had to be made in order to make time for study. It may be the sacrifice of attending a day at university instead of seeing a young daughter, or not visiting an elderly mother as often, or just generally not having as much time as they did before. Right from the start, time had to be re-apportioned and, apart from Harriet and Amanda who cherished time on their own, there was a sense that it was being done begrudgingly. There was also less time spent with friends; a natural sacrifice to make for many students (Christie *et al*. 2005). Kember and Leung (2004) suggest that this is part of the commitment of being a part-time student – that something has to give and usually it means reducing a social life.

Outside of their course, these students identified support coming from one person, whether it was a mother, a work colleague, a line manager, a husband or a wife. There were only two students, Amanda and Harriet, who did not indicate that they had external support but, at the same time, they did not indicate that they required any such support.

Seven of the nine students in this sample were married with partners supportive of them and what they were trying to achieve. Tight (1999) suggests that education is not good for people and that it can destroy relationships - especially marriages. Brown (2006) found marriage break-ups common for students in higher education, but there were no signs at this early stage that relationships were suffering here. There was an appreciation of the support that they were receiving from their partners and this was irrespective of gender. Baxter and Britton's (2001) findings indicate that there were different pressures from partners depending on gender - female partners were generally more supportive than male partners. With the students in this sample, with the exception of one female student whose partner seemed reluctant to take on the

extra childminding responsibilities, this was not found to be the case, although it is again acknowledged that it was at an early stage in their course. Neither was there any indication that these students took on two identities – one for university and one for home, as Baxter and Britton (2001) also suggest.

Relationships with family members can also change (Bolam and Doddgson 2003, Brine and Waller 2004), and there were two examples of where this had happened. For one student, it was a father's expectation of the family responsibilities he felt his daughter was relinquishing by doing the course; and for another student, it was an uncle who became belittling and condescending toward her. In both cases each student adapted their behaviour in a non-confrontational way to reduce tension, and over the weeks the relationships did improve.

Without denigrating the need for outside support, as the weeks developed it was the relationships with fellow students that emerged as the main source of support and encouragement. This often contrasted with the initial feelings these students had. On starting the course, apart from Jay and Harriet, there was a general feeling of isolation and inferiority toward others, as there was an assumption that those in the group would be more intelligent or know more about the industry they were working in than they did. For Jay, she was not worried about making new friends and fitting in because she believed it came easy to her. For Harriet and Amanda, they were quite content to work in isolation, but over the weeks even they, along with all of the students in the sample, began to appreciate the support from their fellow students.

As these students spent time in their respective groups together there was more of a sharing of anxieties and concerns. As this happened, class mates very often became a very important source of support. For some, it became a motivational factor and, in the case of Fara, it was a major contributory factor as to why she stayed on the course. As contact and association developed beyond the confines of the classroom, it subsequently created a greater sense of security. It was only Harriet who, although getting along with and having an appreciation of her fellow students and their support, did not see them as an important factor for her continuation. She still wanted to be

self-reliant. She was doing this for herself and the strength of her independence and determination negated the need to be dependent on others.

Studying

These students found time to study on a regular basis, but it had to be fitted in with their other responsibilities. Apart from Harriet, study was often done at varying times during the day or night and very often difficult to plan as Snape *et al.* (2007) had found. It is a time that is vulnerable to disruption from family members (Ozga and Sukhanandan 1998).

All participants, apart from Carol, live within seven miles of the university which means that there are opportunities to come in at the weekend when it is quiet and there is little competition for facilities. Jay and Karen were the only ones who had mentioned that they had done this. Conversely, Amanda likes to come in early on the day of her classes to spend as long as she can in the university. When classes are not timetabled she still uses the time to come in on her scheduled day and feels revitalised as soon as she enters the building, no matter how tired she may have felt before. For Amanda, the university is time for her and a way of escaping the everyday pressures she has in her life.

For all participants, except Karen, studying at home is something that needs to be done in isolation. Most needed to close the door to everyone and have solitude and alluded to liking it when their family actually went out and left them alone. Alternatively, Karen saw study time as an opportunity to bring the family together. Her eldest son was studying at the same institution and her youngest son was still at school. Study was something which they could do together and she had a vision of using it to unite the family. This unification of the family through study is generally not found in the literature.

None of these students living with partners had an actual private study room, space was a struggle and they had to make do with what they could, whether it was a bedroom, kitchen or just a front room. For Harriet and Amanda, who were living

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without partners at home, they did have access to a private study room. Amanda, however, was always subject to disturbances, especially from her grandmother, but really valued the time she had on her own. She felt fortunate because she could also find solitude at her mother's house where there was a room in which she could lock herself away. For Harriet, there was a sense of joy in being in a room separate from anyone else; a room which was bright and cheerful solely for her and her alone.

The future

For seven of the participants, there was clarity in their minds about their career goals and where they wanted to be in the future. However, these goals were now, for many, often adjourned as the course was furnishing them with ideas about the possibility of alternative career routes which could now be considered. It has only been Yorke and Longden (2010) who have alluded to this and identified that it was an area that had not been anticipated by students. However, this also brought with it a feeling of comfort in the sense that they had the luxury of not having to make any decision now, that it could be put on hold until they neared the end of their course.

Although these students had a future vision of themselves once their course was completed, the immediacy of the situation meant that for Nick, Jay and Fara, they were ticking off each week and thinking of it as a step closer to finishing. They saw each week, not only as one that had gone but as one closer to the end. In this sense, their education was seen as deferred gratification even though they were enjoying the experience. For Fara and Tanya, shorter-term goals replaced longer term ones having visions of themselves at the graduation ceremony or just wearing their cap and gown. In the second semester these images were not as strong and the longer-term goals had replaced them. Although these students were open to new career directions each image came with the assumption that they would successfully complete their present course. How visions can alter to support students through their first few weeks was not discussed in the literature.

Participants were also very aware of their previous experience of education. For Amanda and Fara in particular, education was an opportunity to repair some of the

negative feelings that they had carried around with them, to rectify a "perceived deficit through re-engaging with formal education" (Waller 2006, p27). There was a real sense of how the present linked the past and the future. For Karen, she wanted to use the experiences of her past as a resource to help others in the future and the course was the link to enable her to do that. For Carol, what she was learning on the course caused her to reflect on how she had managed past situations, and this was subsequently changing her outlook about the way she would work in the future. No one had lost sight of their past. For some, it was more important than the future, for others there was a strong sense of what they were doing now was their link to the future and what they wanted to accomplish.

There was a connection between all these students as regards their career goals and ambitions. Five of the students wanted to become teachers because they felt that they were good in their present teaching assistant roles. For Karen and Carol, they wanted to develop their skills so that they could be more effective when it came to dealing with families. Therefore, the majority of students in this sample wanted to make a difference in the lives of others by drawing on their own experiences, and therefore wishing to contribute to society (Reay *et al*. 2002). This concept also complements the work of Snape *et al*. (2007) who found that the type of industry students were in (in their case the childcare and education sector) resulted in a strong commitment to the work they did. Even for those whose goals and ambitions were more flexible, all participants saw the course more as an investment for their future and not as an immediate debt as Adnett and Tlupova (2008) had found.

Conclusion

All participants' focus was on themselves, whether it was about the past or what they hoped to achieve in the future. To a large extent there was a detachment about how others may view them, even within their own family, as they tended to concentrate on themselves as individuals and not so much as a part of an extended family unit.

Although much of the literature often categorised the experience of the mature student the individual experiences of these students often complemented the

literature in many areas, but it also gave new insights into the student experience. Overall, I did not find any literature which investigated the lifeworld of mature students using the fractions to research the first few critical weeks of a part-time course. What my research did reveal in connection to the literature was that, although tutors may see a mass of faces sitting in a classroom, teach and assess them accordingly, little is really known of them as individuals and their individual experience, or how they make meaning of their experience. A contribution that this study makes is to highlight that if institutions want to find out whether courses and support systems work as they are intended, then the only real way is by examining in-depth the student experience (Glogowska *et al.* 2007), in order to find out if the provision is a contributory factor in students' decision to stay or withdraw.

Through the analysis of the nine participants' accounts, it was clear that there was a close link between the student experience and retention. At this stage, I did not have a conceptual or theoretical framework for the study as I wanted to see what emerged by referring back to the literature. It was at this point that I discovered the work of Van Gennep (1960) and Tinto (1993). It was apparent that these were appropriate to adopt as a conceptual and theoretical framework for this study as they helped to understand the internal processes and external influences that relate the student experience to retention. In the following chapter I outline these. I then go on to analyse how the findings of this study apply to these models.

Chapter Six: Conceptual and theoretical framework

Tinto's (1993) theory of institutional departure from higher education was adopted as a theoretical framework to support an understanding of the nature of the experience of beginning students. This helps to explain the complex process of events which influences individuals to withdraw from their course. Tinto adopts two conceptual models: Van Gennep's (1960) *'Rites of Passage'*; that of separation, transition and incorporation, and Durkheim's (1951) egotistical suicide theory in relation to social integration. The theories of Van Gennep and Durkheim, though not directly related to student attrition in higher education, describe the process of social integration experienced by the students. Tinto adopts these as 'descriptive' or 'conceptual' models which form the foundation of his explanatory theory of departure. For example, the *Rites of Passage* provides a way of applying the stages adults experience as they progress into new communities to the process students experience adapting to higher education. In addition, for Tinto, the application of Durkheim's theory of social integration in society reflects "the ways in which the social and intellectual communities that make up a college come to influence the willingness of students to stay" (Tinto 1993, p104). In this sense Tinto separates a conceptual framework; one that is descriptive, from a theoretical framework, which he sees as explanatory.

In this chapter I explain the conceptual stages of separation, transition and incorporation and, like Tinto, I use this as a conceptual framework. This contributes to an understanding of Tinto's (1993) interactionist theory of institutional departure and the stages students go through as they enter higher education. By applying the findings of my study to both frameworks I demonstrate how they contribute to a greater understanding of the student experience and why students stay or withdraw. All references to the work of Van Gennep and Durkheim are cited from Tinto (1993).

The conceptual framework

The conceptual framework is based on the social anthropological work of Van Gennep (1960) known as 'The *Rites of Passage'*. His research explored how the process of *rites of passage* within tribal societies could be applied to the establishment of new memberships for people finding affiliation with new groups. Tinto (1993) identifies that Van Gennep's focus was on the movement of "individuals and societies through time and with the mechanisms which promote social stability in times of change" (p92). Van Gennep saw the process that individuals go through in their life as a series of passages, not only from birth to death but also from membership and acceptance from one group to another.

Van Gennep (1960) identifies three distinct stages: separation, transition and incorporation. He believes that the concept could relate to a variety of situations and to any longitudinal process; in this case the process that mature students face when starting a foundation degree. As a conceptual model, it outlines the typical stages students go through when establishing themselves with a new membership group, especially when first joining a new institution and the difficulties individuals face in navigating their journey through the early passages to a new academic membership. It entails moving from a secure position as a known member in one group, to that of a stranger in another and thus the natural feelings of weakness and isolation associated, as he calls it, with a temporary 'normlessness'. In a student context, it is this which in turn can heighten the likeliness of withdrawing prior to incorporation.

As one develops and moves on in life separation is the leaving of past associations, while transition is the period during which one starts to interact in different ways with members of a new group. It is within this new group that the individual is seeking to find acceptance and membership of, and this requires adjustments on the part of the individual which, in most cases, means enduring temporary isolation. Incorporation is involvement with the unfamiliar group with new patterns of interaction, establishing membership and being part of that group. It exposes the issues of adjustment that many either endure or decide to withdraw from. For adults on a part-time course, their separation and transition is not so much a physical one as they usually maintain their

associations with family, friends and work. Therefore, these stages for them are more individual in the sense that not all may experience these stages in this order or at the same time as others. It is, however, a movement that calls for altered patterns of relationship, both social and intellectual within these new communities.

The *rites of passage* was chosen as a conceptual framework for two reasons. First, the study focuses on the impact on the lifeworld of part-time mature students as they start their higher education career, and therefore the stages of separation, transition and incorporation apply. Second, Van Gennep's conceptual process is at the heart of Tinto's (1993) interactionist theory of retention which forms the theoretical framework for this study.

The theoretical framework

The theoretical framework for this study is based on Tinto's (1993) interactionist model of institutional departure. Tinto applies this theory to student attrition, the foundation of which stems from Durkheim's theory of suicide. For Tinto, the use of Durkheim's conceptual model of suicide correlates closely to the experience that students go through when starting a higher education course. It was Durkheim who believed that the study into suicide would reveal much about the character and problems of society in which suicide occurs. He categorised four types of suicide: altruistic, anomic, fatalistic and egotistical, and it is the egotistical type that Tinto employs, in a metaphorical sense, as it is of particular relevance to the experience of students. Egotistical suicide occurs where individuals are unable to become integrated in two areas; social, which is based on personal affiliations from day to day interaction among various members of society, and intellectual; the sharing of values which are held in common with other members of society. Individual integration into the social and intellectual life of society promotes concomitant membership which Durkheim found to be an essential component of social existence. Therefore, as well as incorporating Durkheim's conceptual model, Tinto also adopts Van Gennep's conceptual stages of separation, transition and incorporation as they are key elements in the process of integration.

Once the foundation of social and intellectual integration is established, individuals have to then find at least one community within the institution in order to secure membership. For Tinto (1993), the concept could be applied to students starting higher education. Higher education institutions are made up of academic and social systems. The academic system focuses on the formal education of students and is centred on what goes on in the classroom, whilst the social system is based on the daily life and personal needs of those within the institution. Tinto outlines that membership to one of these is essential for student progression. Meeuwisse *et al.* (2010) sum up this aspect of Tinto's model by stating that "the lower the degree of one's social and intellectual integration into the academic and social communities of the college, the greater the likelihood of departure" (p94). However, personal characteristics or individual dispositions also play a part.

Tinto (1993) recognised that an individual's personal disposition influenced the likelihood of them adopting a metaphorical suicidal response to stressful situations. It is the combination of individual dispositions and those elements of the egotistical view as stated above that provide an explanation as to student decisions to depart or continue. Tinto (1993) identifies that these dispositions relate closely to the expectations students have, based on their goals as well as their motivation. It is this which determines individual intentions culminating in their desire to complete.

Intentions are visible through the individual's valued goals, whether they be educational or occupational, towards which behaviour is directed. These reflect aspirations and expectations which are based on past experience. Commitment is the willingness of the individual "to work toward the attainment of those goals both in the educational enterprise generally and within the context of a specific institution in particular" (Tinto 1993, p110). For example, a student may have high hopes and goals for his or her future but may be unwilling to commit to attaining them.

> As in the case of suicide, goals (intentions) and motivations (commitments) can be seen as helping to explain why it is that certain individuals, when experiencing the conditions of social and intellectual malintegration within the college, will choose to depart the institution. (Tinto 1993, p111)

This illustrates the use of the concept of suicide in a metaphorical sense. It is the combination of environmental conditions – inadequate social and intellectual integration into the institution's systems, and the individual disposition (intentions and commitments) that help explain why some students will continue and others will withdraw.

However, apart from institutional experiences, Tinto also recognises how external commitments may also influence the decision to depart. Although adults retain membership in their communities, it does call for altered patterns in these relationships, both social and intellectual. If these communities do not support, or indeed oppose, participation in higher education, then transition is made more difficult.

Although the theory is longitudinal in the sense that it applies to a student's full journey to completion, it applies most appropriately to the beginning of the student experience (Tinto 2005). It explains how interactions within the academic and social communities of an institution can impact on the student experience, and thus their lifeworld, and determine whether they continue or not. Mature students on part-time courses traditionally have less contact with fellow students and faculty members, and are therefore less academically integrated which may have an adverse effect on their studies.

Interaction does not guarantee that students will continue, but the absence of interaction enhances, in most cases, the likelihood that they will not. It highlights the importance for students to establish social and intellectual membership, and therefore identify themselves as members within the academic and social communities in which they now find themselves; not so much in the separation stage but the transition and incorporation of the *rites of passage* that Van Gennep (1960) identifies. Some form of integration in at least one community is a minimum condition for students to continue and the greater the involvement, especially in the academic community, the greater the impact on learning. Interactions are important; however, from a phenomenological perspective, it is not the interactions that are so important but how each individual

understands and derives meaning from them. This all has an impact on retention and with universities income relying on fee-paying students, this may become an important subject for many of them in the future.

Application

Using Van Gennep's (1960) stages of separation, transition and incorporation it was found that the separation stage for these students was different to traditional students whose separation often entails leaving home for the first time and living independently whilst attending university. These students did not separate from their external attachments in the sense that they had not left home and family to do the course. Family, work and friendships are not aspects which they decide to separate from and Tinto (2006) recognised this in making a distinction between full-time students who leave home to attend university, and mature students. However, there is evidence in the literature that, for many, separation, particularly that of marriages, does take place (Tight 1999, Bates and Norton 2002, Mercer and Saunders 2004, Brown 2006), but this may well occur long after incorporation.

If there is a separation before transition then it is more to do with moving on and progressing as maturing adults; a wish to leave past stages of their life behind them. Using examples from participants' lifeworld accounts, Karen, although wanting to use her experiences as a platform to help families in the future, showed a desire to move on from her past. For Nick, taking a new direction in his life separated his association with mental health. For Fara, it was her experience in post-compulsory education that was in need of closure. In this sense, working toward a higher education qualification enables this type of separation to take place.

The transition stage for mature students, a largely under-researched area according to Knox (2005), is the most critical stage that takes place during the first few weeks of the programme. Daines and Graham (1988) found that mature students underestimate their own abilities which trigger off anxiety during this period. According to Leathwood and O'Connell (2003), this is particularly evident with female students as they especially wish to gain approval of others. It was magnified on the first day of

attendance for these students where most felt anxious and nervous. Van Gennep (1960) identifies that it is during this stage that individuals feel like a stranger. For these students, it was a time where they questioned their own decisions as their own sense of presence was scrutinised.

The support these students received from their own external networks was important, but it was the support derived from their group that became integral - something they were unaware of in the early stages. One problem was that these students were only together for approximately six hours per week, so it took time for them to get to know each other and build relationships. Even for students such as Harriet and Amanda, who were originally unconcerned about developing relationships with fellow students, began to appreciate the support element which they were now experiencing.

During this transition period, a mixture of feelings and emotions occurred as these students adjusted to study in higher education. Many mentioned the feeling of being overwhelmed and bombarded with the amount of information and work given to them in their first week. Coupled with this was the feeling of tiredness as they adapted to new patterns of daily life. It was a time where the past, as well as visions of the future was captured within the present. It was this period that raised doubts as to their ability to succeed, be accepted and question what is central to their life. For Askham (2008), it includes concerns mature students have regarding their own limitations, their capacity to succeed and feelings of demotivation within a confusing and alien culture.

The question of when incorporation takes place is different for each student. For example, Nick seemed to feel incorporated very early on by his appreciation of the environment and relationships with his classmates. Although building relationships and feeling accepted by fellow students came across as an integral element for all participants, the results of the first assignment seemed a decisive one. Passing it (whatever the grade) was a step toward incorporation. It was not so much incorporation to the institution, as these students generally spent very little time there; it was more an incorporation into academia.

Based on Durkheim's egotistical suicide analogy, students need to be integrated into social and intellectual communities. The social community begins very early when students meet peers whom they will share their journey with over the following 27 months. All participants made mention of the friendships that had been formed with classmates and how they felt comfortable early on with their group. The intellectual integration took longer and was constrained by individuals' preconceived beliefs about others in their class. Feelings ranged from those of inferiority; that others would be better educated, to thoughts that they might be the odd one out. Only one participant had little concern in this area as she felt confident that she could ignore others if she did not like them. She did not need, or rather was not reliant upon, this social integration. As the first few weeks progressed and these students got to know others in their respective groups, the barrier to the intellectual community within the group tended to break down as there was a realisation that the insecurities and doubts they had as individuals were similar to others. This was often difficult for those who did not naturally like to share insecurities, which resulted in an over-reliance on certain members of the group to voice and share theirs. Although this is not dissimilar to most social encounters, it was intensified because of the new and alien culture that these students had found themselves in.

After six weeks it was apparent that these students were more settled with themselves and with others in their group. Bonds were being formed as friends were made and this provided an important support mechanism for each participant. It was a supportive network that established itself relatively quickly, considering that these students only saw members of their group once a week. As to the individual environment perspective and Tinto's model relating to egotistical suicide, it became apparent throughout the interviews just how important these relationships were for these students and that they were aware they were not alone in the way they were feeling. Eventually, at different times, all became incorporated into the social and intellectual community within their groups.

The next section of the model relates to the institution and the academic and social systems within it, which for mature part-time students are essentially found in the

classroom (Kasworm 2003). The model indicates that students need to locate at least one community to gain the necessary membership and support (although not finding membership to the academic side usually results in some sort of involuntary withdrawal). The social systems (based on daily life and personal needs within the institution beyond the classroom) were not as important as they perhaps would be for younger full-time students. As these students were only in the institution for approximately six hours per week and had to manage external responsibilities, they often did not get involved with other social aspects of the institution. Relationships that were formed with fellow students developed beyond the confinements of the classroom, but the relationships with faculty and staff were very often dependent on the lecture experience. Some of these students felt that one or two of the tutors had forgotten, or were not aware of, what it was like to study part-time while working full-time, which created a divide. The only example when these students actively sought membership to social systems outside the classroom was when two participants volunteered to be their respective group's representative, which is more a formal academic membership rather than a social one. This closely relates to the finding of Alsop *et al.* (2008) who found that mature students "tended to prioritise formal academic activities over the informal academic activities" (p628).

The academic membership tended to be the community that these students felt most insecure about. As discussed in Chapter Five, academic membership for some was centred on the return and grade of the first assignment, which gave these students the terms of reference needed to feel established within the academic community. Not passing the first assignment meant, in some cases, not continuing with the course. Whether this would have actually happened is not possible to say. However, what can be said is that it was a key factor in relation to their confidence and security enabling membership to the academic community. Leading up to this membership was, however, an unsettling period.

It took time to settle into an alien culture and for things to make sense. For most, it was three to four weeks before cohesion occurred. Each student needed some sort of confidence 'booster', whether it was feeling supported; that they understood what

was going on, or even just a feeling that they liked the atmosphere within the institution. The classroom environment as created by the tutor therefore became the main representation of the institution for these students. The tutor represents the institution and dictates the learning environment and creating the right learning environment for mature students is something many have written about in the past (Knowles 1984, Rogers 1986, Rogers 1989, Curzon 1990, Gallacher *et al.* 2002).

The personal dispositions in Tinto's theory essentially come down to intentions (goals) and commitments in the sense of being dedicated enough to see things through and complete a programme. Intentions are individual, valued goals and these can be either educational or occupational. For five participants, the occupational goal of becoming a teacher was shared, whereas for two, in particular, the focus was more on repairing academic ambitions from the past, indicating that the goal was more educational than occupational. For others, the goals were more varied ranging from wanting to be in a position where they could help other families, to obtaining the qualification because it was needed as part of a career. For some, there were no clear goals. They would just see how the experience evolved. One thing that these students did not anticipate on their course was that career options would begin to present themselves. The educational goal was therefore creating options for individual occupational possibilities.

Students often enrol on a course with a strong determination to complete it; a determination which is a key 'pull factor' for persistence, according to Glogowska *et al.* (2006). For two students, there was no clear occupational goal identified. Their intention was purely educational in the sense of self-development. One participant (Mohan) felt quite content with his life and did not believe that he would actually last more than two weeks. Without any confirmed commitment from him, and the fact that he did not expect anything from himself, took away any pressure and anxiety - as if he was just 'dipping his toe' in the water before diving in. Charlton *et al.* (2006) mention that a lack of intrinsic motivation can often not be an important factor in decisions to continue. Mohan enjoyed his experience and utilised the study support available to him to such an extent that he developed the belief that he could actually

do it. Therefore, the educational goal of self-development coupled with a growing belief in himself was enough to build his commitment.

External commitments will most likely take priority for mature students (Donaldson and Graham 1999), and there is little higher education institutions can do to alter that. It is when external commitments become external pressures that thoughts of withdrawing can occur (Charlton *et al.* 2006). All participants had caring responsibilities and finding time to fit study in was a common problem. The transition for students "realistically entails a significant degree of adjustment to an already full repertoire of commitments and responsibilities" (Carney-Crompton and Tan 2002, p150), and this is coupled with less time which often inhibits access to the support systems on offer within the institution.

Conclusion

Separation in Van Gennep's (1960) stages was not found to be a physical one in the process for these students. However, there is evidence in the literature that student identities change and dual identities are formed as separation with external relationships begins to take place (Baxter and Britton 2001). The separation, if there is one, may be more connected to these students' past which higher education provides a platform to move on from. It may well be the case that students do begin to separate from their immediate families, but certainly during the early stages of the course, albeit with a relative small sample, there was no evidence to suggest this here. The transition and incorporation elements were much more apparent and these lay at the foundation of Tinto's (1993) model.

Very early on all participants integrated with fellow students and the social environment within the classroom, and began to recognise that the concerns they had about themselves were shared. The intellectual acceptance did take longer as there is a human tendency to compare oneself to the minority (those who are doing better), as compared to the majority. As these relationships were formed, the support that was gained became very important, as other researchers have found with mature students (Wilcox *et al.* 2005, Tinto 2006, Lowe and Gayle 2007, Yorke and Longden 2010).

Tinto (1993) identifies that students must find membership to either the academic or social systems of the institution. There was little evidence that the social system was particularly important for these students outside the classroom; in fact the membership was satisfied with the developing of relationships within the classroom. Academic membership is essential and for these students to be integrated some sort of terms of reference was needed; confirmation that they could succeed at this level. This generally came from the return of the first assignment.

From the personal dispositions aspect, intentions ranged from being very apparent and strong, to very weak. For some, taking the decision to do the course was intention in itself and commitment naturally established from that. Although commitment was there from the start for many, it was, at the same time, very fragile during the first few weeks. As time went by, all participants saw the benefits of completing the course, adding to their commitment. There was recognition that the sacrifices they were making now with their family were very much seen as an investment as they were now thinking of the long-term advantages. For these students, it was essentially about weighing the costs and benefits that Tinto (1993) refers to and how benefits must outweigh the costs in order for students to persist in the educational environment (Morternson 2005).

All participants believed that the course had a big impact on their life, and although sacrifices were necessary and much anxiety experienced, they were all enjoying being a student in higher education on a part-time foundation degree. There was satisfaction with the environment and the new relationships that had been formed, but essentially it was their own self-confidence that had been enhanced. In this way the course became more than just an academic qualification in the sense that it resulted in direct change in the way these students felt about themselves (Mercer 2007).

Tinto's (1993) model helps to explain why students stay or leave. Within the first few weeks it is still a very fine line as to whether some students continue or not. These students stayed because they had, or gained, commitment, but the journey is a precarious one and until commitment is reached the threat of withdrawal remains.

Out of the nine in the sample, four said they could have withdrawn at any time during those first few weeks; two students had isolated moments when they had thoughts of withdrawing, but for the other three (those who conveyed a strong determination), there was never an indication that they would leave. The research here demonstrates the difficulties of incorporation and suggests that institutions can aid this process in the way assessments are designed, courses are structured and classroom learning environments are created.

On reflection, Tinto's theory can help explain the lived experience of mature students at the beginning of their course. It provides a rationale for why some students might question their own intentions as they go through a transition period, and why they might identify that the support from those around them is so important. The findings from this study suggest, however, that the theory needs also to consider the effects of the classroom environment as a mechanism for enabling social and academic integration to the university. The relationship these students had with the university was often one interpreted through the classroom experience and not so much on other aspects of university life. This, I believe, contributes to an understanding of why students fail to complete their course, but will not predict individual motives. Even when social and intellectual integration has taken place and academic incorporation is established, motives and intentions within individuals are unpredictable and can change rapidly.

In this chapter I have explained the conceptual and theoretical frameworks adopted for this research and applied to them the findings of this study. In the following chapter, I make my conclusions and demonstrate how the project contributes to practice. I then identify areas for future investigations. Finally, I reflect on my own journey as a researcher and identify the limitations of the study.

Chapter Seven: Conclusions

In this chapter I conclude the study by examining the research journey and how it relates to the aim and objectives set out at the beginning. This is followed by a consideration of the study's potential contribution to practice and identified areas for future investigations. I finish by reflecting on my own research journey. As I do this I identify limitations of the study.

I highlighted in Chapter One the changes to student funding which will impact upon higher education in 2012, potentially affecting the provision of part-time courses. As the income for universities becomes increasingly reliant on student fees, retention may be a more important issue in the future. Currently, the statistics that HESA issue do not reflect an accurate picture of student attrition as most student withdrawals are not included in the data. I established in Chapter One the significance of the first six weeks as regards student retention compared to any other time during a course. If there is to be an understanding of why most withdrawals take place in this period, then it is the student experience which needs to be examined.

Christie *et al.* (2005) suggest that in the past institutions often perceived that it was the student who was at fault for not fitting in, rather than anything to do with the provision offered. Presently students are asked for their reasons for withdrawal, but this is essentially for funding audit purposes; it helps to group students into generic categories. Little is revealed about their student experience and what it means for them. Nor does it uncover contributory factors which have led to their decision. It especially does not give any indication as to why other students stay; hence the value of understanding how part-time study impacts on the lifeworld of mature students - the aim of this research. Being a student is not just about participating on a course and the relationship the student has with the institution, but also how it impacts on so many other aspects of their life – how it impacts on their lifeworld.

In Chapter Two I clarified the philosophical foundations that underpinned the research and explained why a qualitative approach was selected. Using a descriptive phenomenological enquiry involved an ongoing analysis of the bracketing process which influenced significantly how the research was conducted and determined how it was presented. I identified how lifeworld supported the process of capturing the student experience (objective 1). Adopting a descriptive, instead of an interpretive, phenomenological approach allowed the voice of the student to take prominence within the research.

The study set out to acquire data which represents participants' experience. In Chapter Three I presented three students using lifeworld fractions as a tool to structure and analyse the data. This analysis was based on the interviews conducted with students and placed the student voice at the centre of the research (objective 2). It exhibited diversity of the student experience (objective 3) and demonstrated, as Waller (2006, p116) found, the range of experiences as being "complex, diverse, and individually situated". This displays the limitations of generalisations in relation to the human experience. Each individual account affirmed the idiosyncrasy of their decision making, drives, emotions, motives and how their past was instrumental in the immediacy of what they were doing, as well as contributing significantly to their future.

As part of the bracketing process, I engaged, after collection and analysis of the data, with the literature. Within the review in Chapter Four I identified the research that has focused on mature students returning to education (objective 4). I set out to explore why students return to education and how universities have responded to the growing widening participation agenda over the past decade or so. Elements of the student experience that are captured within the literature include how highly motivated mature students are, how they have clearly defined goals, and how adapting to higher education takes time. Entering, what has been termed as an 'alien culture' brings anxieties through a readjustment of the lifeworld, and tutors can play a significant role just by showing to their students an understanding of what it is like to study part-time (Wilcox *et al.* 2005). The literature on adults returning to education suggests that

university systems are designed and targeted toward traditional students and that this can often hinder the progress of part-time students.

In Chapter Five I set out to capture the varying experience of starting a foundation degree by including all nine participants; not as a homogenous group but to highlight that although they all experience the same phenomenon, the lived experiences were very different. In this chapter (as well as Chapter Three) I felt that it showed the difference between experience and the lived experience. Each shared the same event in many ways, but each lived their experience in a personal and unique way. The feeling of isolation, for example, was strong and lasting for one, yet only fleeting for another. The factors that influenced decisions to return to education ranged significantly. With the exception of two students, these involved career goals, yet this did not relate to or indicate their determination to complete the course, nor did it reflect the commitment they had to their studies. Varying pasts were very much part of their present and instrumental in the way they saw their future. As William Franklin once said, "The past is not dead. In fact, it's not even the past" (cited in Fuller 2011, p137). The first day, for example, can engender in a student a mixture of emotions such as apprehension and nerves, as well as excitement at the challenge ahead. The lived experience had the potential to bring back significant childhood memories often associated with feelings of isolation. In a way for many, the first day was an 'independence day'; a time which involved the past as much as it was the beginning of the future. The sense of isolation experienced by these students subsequently made them question what they were doing and what they really wanted in their life; questions which continued for some during the first few weeks. As a practitioner, this demonstrated to me the need to account for these feelings without making the assumption that they exist for everyone.

In many instances, the data reflected much of the literature about mature students in relation to the reasons for returning to education, what it was like for them to return, the associated feelings and how expectations very often are governed by students' past experience of education. Although this supports current literature, it also offers new insights as well as aspects which challenge current literature.

The second research question was - Does an understanding of the lifeworld of students identify factors that might lead to withdrawal. The application of the data to the conceptual and theoretical framework was important in answering this question. Therefore, in Chapter Six, I set out to use an established framework to help position the experiences of the students in this study. In this way it contributed to an understanding of some of the internal processes and external influencers that can contribute to early withdrawal (objective 5), as well as why students stay.

The aim of the study was to develop a greater understanding of the student experience. Being a student requires many adjustments and can often mean, during the transition stage, enduring temporary isolation. The first incorporation often sought is into the social and intellectual community (found with fellow students). This became an integral source of support for many of the participants. After that, the need was focused on intellectual integration within academia which is essential for student progression. In this transitional stage, the anxiety experienced had very often come from not having any terms of reference as to what, at this academic level, was expected. For some, the first assignment was the vehicle toward incorporation into the academic community. It was also a sign that formed their commitment to themselves, whereas for other students commitment was evident from the start. The application of Tinto's (1993) theory demonstrates that there are many influences that determine whether a student continues or not. If external communities or the institution do not support this transition, then incorporation is made more difficult.

Contribution to practice

The final objective of the dissertation was to enable the student voice to impact on course development of the part-time foundation degree provision.

The data from this study highlights the potential importance, yet complex nature, of induction for a student. Induction not only introduces students to the institution and to higher education but more importantly is an opportunity to help students feel positive about their position on the course. These students generally felt a mixture of emotions in relation to their ability and their group. An induction can help ease and

eradicate the feelings of isolation by addressing anxieties students may be experiencing. It is about finding a way to help accelerate their incorporation into the social community. Failure to address issues such as these at this stage can also lead to a lack of academic incorporation and trigger thoughts of withdrawal (Prescott and Simpson 2004). It was evident that the empathy and support received from fellow students was important, indicating that there is a role for them, as established students, to play in aiding individuals through transitional periods.

The study also revealed how students respond differently to different styles of teaching. For some, a strict approach is helpful, for others it can impact negatively on their sense of self as a learner. Teaching styles can, therefore, have an impact on students and there may be a need during induction to help more with how best they can manage the range of teaching methods they will be exposed to.

The literature indicates that it is likely that students may change as individuals and that their close relationships outside of their course may deteriorate over time. Although this is not something that was identified in the early stages of these students' journey, it is something that might need to be addressed to help prepare students for the future if they wish to progress. Therefore, there is tension which needs to be resolved between preparing students for their journey ahead, while at the same time not over-complicating and inundating students with information they may not need, or which could discourage them.

Adapting to higher education was found to have a big impact on these students, especially in forming terms of reference about what was expected of them at this level. At present, based on the student experiences, there is little consistency as regards how students are given guidance with their assessment, yet this is something which many of these students felt anxious about as they sought academic integration.

The study also highlights how commitment can develop at various times in students and is often very difficult to identify. For those who had progressed from doing a recent pre-course, especially if the pre-course was accredited on their foundation

degree, commitment was more apparent from the start. This shows potentially how a pre-course can be an incentive for students to continue their studies.

At present, the academic semester structure where three modules start at the same time, was a contributory factor to these students generally feeling overwhelmed during their first week of classes when all assignments, readings and relevant information were issued at the same time. Penketh and Goddard (2008) refer to the fact that mature students' time and work is hindered by existing university structures which are devised for full-time students. At present, courses are structured with examination boards and external verification in mind which means that it is the system that dictates the structure, not the needs of the students on the course.

Attrition is not just about numbers and financial consequences. At the core of all this are peoples' lives and a negative experience, or a contributory factor influencing withdrawal, can subsequently affect their future and can often mean that an individual may never again attempt a return to education. It is highly unlikely that student attrition can be prevented; however, this study identifies potential "barriers in the way of persistence" (Tinto 1993, p188). If retention is seen as important to a university, then the evidence suggests that prioritising the first year has potential long-term benefits (Yorke and Thomas 2003). The example of the university at the centre of this research shows that most withdrawals take place before week Eight, and in particular during the first six weeks. This indicates that if students do survive the first six weeks of their course the chances of the university retaining them become considerably higher, thus highlighting the importance of guiding students through this transitional period.

Areas for further research

The findings of the study expose areas for further research. First of all, the intensity of emotions felt for many on the first day was a memorable one. It was a time when these students questioned themselves and, according to statistics, when some do not return the following week. Research into the affects of students' first day may aid the programme that is provided for them. Another area for further research is how goals change for students as new directions open up. Whether this is the case with courses

that fall under other schools is unknown; however, such research may highlight benefits to potential students when returning to education.

Individual accounts brought up unique experiences which could be the basis for further research. For example, how studying as an adult can unify a family by studying together and, for individuals who do this, how they deal with the conflicting components of making sacrifices within the family as well, at the same time, as uniting them. Finally, as many courses in the future may move toward distance learning, it would be of interest to investigate how Van Gennep's (1960) model and Tinto's (1993) theory apply to those students studying in isolation at level 4; to study how the social and intellectual incorporation takes place without physically being in a university building or with others in a classroom.

Reflections on the research journey

The research journey began with an examination of my ontological and epistemological perspective. From this the formulation of the philosophical underpinnings took place and the methodology was built upon this platform. I felt comfortable with these aspects at the beginning of the journey. What I tried to keep in mind was the quote by Eisner (1993) regarding descriptive phenomenology - "we want to see and to tell it like it is" (p49). I do believe that adopting a descriptive approach helped edge slightly closer toward objectivity. However, the bracketing process was a constant and continual battle. On numerous occasions my analysis and conclusions were not always derived from the data. The experience of working with mature students and my philosophy about teaching and learning often biased my approach. Through doctoral supervisory support I was able to re-examine my writing and make every attempt to ensure that the analysis was kept within the discipline of descriptive phenomenology. This has helped me reflect on my own bracketing and made me more aware of my own contribution. It meant a constant return to the data to assess whether the analysis was solely coming from that. At times it felt like a painful self-critical journey. On reflection of the interviews I can now see how some of the questions were based on my own assumptions of what I felt was significant, instead of allowing the applicant to dictate this. In other instances, the bracketing process

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worked well. For example, not involving a theoretical framework until the latter stages helped because it did not influence the data collection or analysis.

With regard to how I set out to recruit volunteers in the research there is very little, even with hindsight, I would change. There were, I felt, the right number of participants and the interviews went smoothly. Students who volunteered were very enthusiastic in their support; however, they were volunteers. Therefore, it is possible that these students may have been motivated by a wish to express their opinions on the subject. This, along with focusing on the individuality of experience, is another reason why I do not claim generalisablity with the findings of this study. Originally, I wanted to include those students who, in the early stages of their course, had withdrawn in order to have a wider range of views and to find out how their experience had led to their decision to withdraw (another topic for further research); alas this was not possible.

Another limitation of the study is that these students did not have to pay course fees. This meant that there were no associated financial consequences and therefore not a contributory factor influencing thoughts of withdrawal. For many of these students, a fee-paying course would not have been an option open to them. In this sense payment was not a factor in establishing or reflecting students' commitment. From another perspective, it was useful not to bring fees into the equation as I was able to focus on the student experience without it being influenced by monetary value. There are many permutations of how varying levels of fees, the position of affluence a student may hold and the perception an individual has toward these, can influence the student experience. As higher fees are to be introduced from September 2012 this, I believe, is another area for future research.

Whilst transcribing I found, once again, that I was very critical of myself as an interviewer for not probing and questioning more deeply when opportunities to do so were apparent. I was constantly thinking 'why did I not ask them to develop that point?' When it came to the analysis I did feel that the lifeworld fraction of spatiality could have been explored further. Students did not reveal too much about the

different places they went to or how their space was affected by their studies. I do believe, however, that participants benefited from the interviews in the sense that it gave them an opportunity to talk about themselves and their experiences. As in humanistic counselling, it might be argued that the one thing that most people need is for someone to actively listen to them (Sanders 2002).

I found it useful to transcribe all my own interviews. Although it was time-consuming it did give me more of a sense of where the participants were coming from. I also found it beneficial to transcribe them in 'Excel' rather than in 'Word', as this gave me more flexibility when it came to separating text into the fractions. The only slight problem with using 'Excel' was when it came to do a word search. It would not highlight the actual word in the text but just indicate the cell where the word could be found. I also found it necessary not to have large chunks of text within one cell. However, on reflection I would use 'Excel' again to transcribe interviews.

The way that the transcripts were structured and coded made it very easy for me to develop an audit trail. I found that using descriptive, instead of interpretive, phenomenology meant that it was necessary to keep returning to the transcripts to make sure exactly what the participant had actually said to ensure that it was not my interpretation of what was said. I tried to verify that I was describing phenomenon rather than explaining it (Langdridge 2007).

Another tool which helped significantly was the copious amounts of notes I had made over the past four years from the literature I read. All my notes, which amount to well over 90,000 words, were typed up and contained as 'Word' files. This meant that I had a system whereby I could trace references very quickly without the need to find the hard copy or to re-read it again. Each entry contained the full reference, what the article was about, how it could relate to my subject, comments about the article, the main points, quotes and the relevant page numbers, as well as my reflections and any criticisms of the article. I found there were three articles that significantly informed my study. The first was by Young (2000), who identified how mature students responded to feedback on assignments was dependent on their self-esteem. This made me more

aware of how I give feedback in my own practice. The second article was by Askham (2008), who emphasised what an alien culture higher education can be for students entering it. The third article was by Waller (2006), who showed the importance and value of individual mature students' accounts instead of categorising them into a convenient box that no one fully fits into.

With my own studies, completing a piece of research of this kind has made me reluctant to throw anything away. The recycle bin on my computer has not been emptied for months and I have been resistant to throwing any hard copies of previous drafts away – just in case. All my writings, whether they be notes or chapters, were stored on two computers and one memory stick, but still the fear of losing it remained. All data that was stored was anonymised and encrypted. It was only the interview recordings that were deleted. This was done after the transcriptions were completed in accordance with the written agreement I had given the participants.

As a journey, there were times when I felt isolated and often lonely; where I felt there was little light at the end of the tunnel. Confidence that I could achieve at this level was often fragile. It was a journey reliant on the advice of others, particularly dissertation supervisors. This sometimes meant taking a slightly different direction to the one I had in mind and, at times, I would lose sight of what I was hoping to achieve. The conceptual and theoretical frameworks helped enormously because they focused my research and gave me direction. If I had discovered these frameworks earlier they would possibly have really helped to direct my questioning during the interviews. However, this would not have aided the bracketing process, because they would have given me ideas as to what to look for at the data collection stage.

Choosing a descriptive instead of interpretive phenomenological enquiry also helped me to bracket, because it made me focus on what was actually said without me offering an interpretation of what I thought was meant. I did, however, find it difficult when it came to analysis of the data, because I would constantly question whether I was being interpretive. At times I found it frustrating because I could see links to psychoanalytical theories of behaviour with some participants in the way they had

reacted in situations and it would have been interesting to have pursued these lines, but this would have been interpretive. I also felt that I wanted to make recommendations based on the points made under 'contribution to practice'. However, this would have been influenced by my own philosophy and would not have stayed within the boundaries of descriptive phenomenological research.

I feel that what is presented here is only a snapshot of the student experience. I found the presentation of the data and the analysis difficult as there were no examples of dissertations to guide me in presenting lifeworld research. This meant re-presenting the data chapter in different ways to see which way appeared most conducive to examination. In the end, although the presentation of data was influenced by Ashworth (2003a, 2003b, 2006), Ashworth *et al.* (2003) Dahlberg *et al.* (2008) and Finlay and Molano-Fisher (2008), I have presented it in a way, I believe, is accessible to those who read it. It was important to me that it was written in a sensitive way, not only to respect those who took part in the research and who wished to read it, but also that it should be understandable to those who would examine it. The fractions of lifeworld research as used by Ashworth I found interesting, fascinating and useful, not only in analysing data but also to help structure its presentation. At the core of lifeworld research are individuals and their world, and it is this that most interested me.

(Word count: 49,078)

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Appendix A: Interview Plan

Interviewee name: **Date:**

Interviewee details (course, age range)

Start time: **Finish time:**

Preliminary Comments:

Concluding reflections:

Tell me why you decided to come back to education? (Temporality)
What has your past experience of education been like?

Tell me about your experience of being a student.

Tell me about the start of the course.
How did you feel coming to induction? What did the induction do for you? How did you feel after?

What was it like coming back a week later and starting classes? How did you feel after that day?
Any significant instances/experiences?
Tell me about the subsequent weeks. What was your experience of these weeks? Positive/negative?
Right/wrong decision? Confidence/self-esteem?

Can you compare the experience to anything else in your life?
How did your experience compare to what you expected?
What words have you written down which sum up the way you have felt? (Discourse)

Has being at college affected your life? Has it affected the things you do/places you go in your life?
(Spaciality)
How has this course impacted upon relationships with friends and family? (Selfhood)
Have relationships altered? (Sociality)
How do you feel about yourself? Have your feelings about yourself changed since starting? How has it
affected you? (Embodiment)
How has it affected future plans? Life plans?

Has coming to college changed you and what you do in your life? (Selfhood)

How prepared were you for university? (Project)
Where do you study? (Spaciality)

Do you feel you have a voice and that the College understands what it's like for you?
What factors do you think will determine whether you continue with your course?
Why do you think fellow students have dropped out?

How do you think the experience of other students compares to yours? (Selfhood)
Would you have done this course if you would have had to have paid?
How much would you have paid?

If you were in charge of your course, are there any changes that you would make for new students?
What advice would you give to prospective new students?

Appendix B: Presentation transcript

How are you feeling today? If there was one word that could sum up how you feel about today and your course, what would that one word be?

Those are very interesting words.

The reason why I'm here is because, like you, I'm on a course as well. And like you I have to do assignments. One of my assignments is a research project, but I can choose any subject I like and the subject I am interested in are people like you - students who have come back into education, perhaps after a gap. My own personal feeling is that the course you're doing in a lot of ways is harder than the one I'm doing because some of you may not have written an essay for a while or studied, and at this moment you don't know what it's going to be like.

I'm particularly interested in the start of your course and I would like to interview one or two of you to find out how you've made sense of it all, how it's impacted on other aspects of your life, how you feel about yourself, how it compared to what you expected, were you prepared for the course and how you manage it.

I'm also interested in interviewing you even if you withdraw from the course. I hope you don't of course, but if you do I might just write to you and ask you if I can interview you. If you're not interested then just throw the letter away. I wouldn't be trying to talk you into coming back because that's not the purpose. It's just that whether you're on the course or withdrawn, you've still had some sort of experience and I'd be very interested in that.

If you do volunteer to be interviewed I'd ask you to write a few words down now and again over the next few weeks of how you're feeling, or any significant incidences. We could then refer to these in the interview. Interviews will be recorded, but they will be confidential – it will only be me who listens to them. You can withdraw at anytime, so even if you've agreed to be interviewed you can change your mind – even after the interview. So if you call me up and say, I don't want you to use that interview I did with you – I was just in a bad mood, then I won't, unless its a few weeks later when I've worked hard transcribing it.

It will also be anonymous, in the sense that I will change your names, but I can never guarantee 100 percent anonymity because if you say something like 'it's hard with ten kids trying to study all the time', someone might read that quote in an article and say to themselves 'I know who said that'. So it will be anonymous up to a point.

If anyone is thinking that maybe 'I wouldn't mind being interviewed', I have an information sheet here which explains the research, the purpose and has contact details. So if you'd like to contact me or ask me any further questions then please do so.

I'm going to come back in a few weeks and talk to you again and then hopefully one or two of you might volunteer.

Appendix C: Information sheet given to participants

My name is Martin Spurin and I would like to invite you to take part in a project I am involved with.

Although I lecture at (*name of institution*) I am in fact also a student studying for a doctorate in education at Sheffield Hallam University and part of my course is that I conduct a research project. The research I've chosen is one that I've always had an interest in: part-time mature students returning to education. My project therefore involves examining the experiences of students like you at the start of their course and I would like you to be part of the study.

What is the purpose of the study?
I want to find out about the experience of starting a part-time foundation degree. What was your experience of the first few weeks of your course? I am seeking a vivid, accurate, and comprehensive portrayal of what these experiences were like for you: your thoughts, feelings, and behaviours as well as situations, events, places, and people connected with your experience. Through your participation I hope to understand the essence of what it is like for students such as yourself studying part-time as it reveals itself in your experience. The reason for the topic is that research literature in this area has suggested that returning to education for most adults is quite a challenging experience in their life and I would like to know more about this in order to identify ways in which we can make it better in the future.

Do I have to take part in the study?
No, not if you don't want to. It is completely optional and it will not affect your results in any way if you don't.

I am hoping that you will find it beneficial because it will give you the opportunity to think about what's happened to you, give you opportunity to reflect upon how it's affecting you and give you space to talk about that. If you are happy to take part then I would ask you to sign a consent form to show that you have agreed.

What will happen if I take part?
I will ask you to jot down a few words in a journal or diary the feelings and experiences you've had within your first few weeks of your course. This can be done every day, every few days, once a week or just when you feel like. You may even want to refer to any incidents which strike you as significant. This is in no way designed to be onerous or time consuming. These will then be referred to during the interview which I shall arrange with you. The interview will take about one hour and it will be recorded (this is for my benefit to make sure that I capture accurately your experiences). You do, of course, have the right to request that the machine be turned off at any point during the interview. I will then ask whether we can arrange a second interview where I will present to you a summary of your experiences from the first interview for you to

comment upon. This is to ensure I have an accurate understanding of what you have told me as well as capture how your thoughts and experiences have developed since.

Will my part in the study be kept confidential?
Any information you give during the study will be handled in confidence. No-one will listen to the recorded interviews except me and they will be deleted as soon as the transcription is done.

Will it be anonymous?
Yes, the whole study will be anonymous as far as possible in the sense that your name will be changed in the transcripts and in any further published material. However, please keep in mind that it is always possible that someone close to you may recognise you from reading a quote in an article.

What will happen to the results of the research?
Apart from the submission for my course at Sheffield Hallam University, I will be reporting the findings of the research to (*name of institution*) in the hope that it will develop practice in the future. Material may also be used at the (*name of institution*) research conference to develop staff understanding.

Can I withdraw even though I've agreed to take part?
Yes, it is your right to withdraw at any stage prior to, during and up to two weeks after each interview (by this time all information will be anonymised and transcribed).

Contact details and further information
Researcher: Martin Spurin   Tel: (*telephone details*)
Room *(room number)*
(Address if institution)
Email: *(email address)*

If you have any problems with the study, or are unhappy with the way it is conducted, you should contact Dr Nick Hodge, Supervisor of the research project at:
n.hodge@shu.ac.uk

Thank you for your time, and I hope you will consider volunteering to take part. I would certainly value the unique contribution that you could bring to my study. If you have any questions or want to have a chat to me about the project please do not hesitate to contact me or pay me a visit.

Appendix D: Consent form

CONSENT FORM

Please hand this back to Martin Spurin

Please initial each section

1. I confirm that I have read and understand the information I have been given about this study.

2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time prior to, during and up to two weeks after the interview.

3. I understand that data collected during the study is for a research project and therefore may be looked at by examiners at Sheffield Hallam University and possibly (*name of institution*). I understand too that it may be represented in future published journal articles and material may be presented at the (*name of institution*) Research conference.

4. I agree to be interviewed and understand that the interview will be tape recorded.

Name of Participant:

Signature of Participant:

Contactable details:

Name of Researcher:

Signature of Researcher:

Date:

Appendix E: Example of interview transcript

KB	Transcript	KD	Analysis	KF	Theme
KB74	You thought it was going to be tough?	KD74		KF74	
KB75	Yeah, and I've waited for it actually (laughs). I thought gosh, it's going to be tough and I know I'm going to have tough times as the months progress because they're obviously letting us in gently, I think, yes, it's okay but I'm expecting it to get harder.	KD75	K doesn't feel that it has been as hard as she expected.	KF75	
KB76	Okay ... Has it affected your life?	KD76		KF76	
KB77	Yep!	KD77		KF77	
KB78	The first few weeks even?	KD78		KF78	
KB79	Yeah ...	KD79		KF79	
KB80	In what way?	KD80		KF80	Project - even in a relatively short space of time K is thinking differently to the way she did before and it is making her even more passionate in what she is doing.
KB81	I've ... I'm more determined erm ... To do what I what I wanted to do. I'm extremely ...I'm even more passionate than I've ever have been. I was sort of er, erm ... I used to stereotype people erm, quite a few times, not intentionally erm and I'm seeing beyond that now because of the stuff I'm learning, erm, it's about your perceptions and your judgements, it's all, and I'm starting to think in different ways about people which is nice because I'm going to have to think in that way for the job I want to do anyway. So my thinking has completely changed erm, my attitude in life is completely changing. Everything's really positive.	KD81	K feels more determined now she is thinking differently.	KF81	
KB82	Can you give me any examples ...	KD82		KF82	Sociality - K is understanding how others could manipulate her in her thinking, she feels as though she has risen to another level.
KB83	Erm ... My, my work colleagues, I know .. I can understand now why I clash with certain personalities, not them as a person, it's the way that they do things and I'm seeing beyond that now, understanding that now. When you hear of the politics in the staffroom, it's going completely over my head because I'm thinking differently, not thinking to the way people manipulate you into thinking. So it's ... taken me to the next level.	KD83	K analyses the relationships she has with work colleagues and feels she now rises above issues that she has more of an understanding of.	KF83	
KB84	And that's just happening in the first few weeks?	KD84		KF84	
KB85	Yeah, yeah, I don't know whether it's because I'm so passionate and keen but I still have that anxious feeling ... Er, yeah. I'm loving every minute of it really (laughs).	KD85	K feels anxious still.	KF85	Embodiment - increased passion but still accompanied by anxious feelings.
KB86	Has it affected the things you do in your life?	KD86		KF86	
KB87	Erm ... Yeah, cos I think differently, I'm starting to think differently, act differently and I'm more serious. Erm, not that I wasn't serious but I'm seeing things erm ..... And how important things are and how important the way that I do things and how important that things happen, why they happen and stuff so I'm gaining a lot of erm, knowledge about myself as a person too.	KD87	K is finding out more about herself and the course is helping her to do that.	KF87	Selfhood - K can feel the progression in herself as she develops her thinking skills.
KB88	So has that changed the things that you do perhaps in your life, not just work and at home ...	KD88		KF88	

Appendix F: Lifeworld accounts

<u>Amanda</u>

Selfhood

> It's quite difficult to be selfish ... I could take more time off, but then I'm putting myself in a situation with my nan for her to get used to me and as her primary carer ... I find it causes more harm than good. (AB 151)

For Amanda, being a carer for her grandmother is an important part of her life. She lives with her 89-year-old grandmother who has had Alzheimer's for the past few years and has devoted much of her time, along with her daughter, to looking after her. For Amanda, this has given her a focus in her life although she has now reached a stage where she needs to take a new direction. However, moving on from an altruistic position brings emotional disharmony as she finds it difficult to put her own needs first. Coming back to higher education does create a dilemma for her as she has to be more selfish with her time and this has consequences when she reflects on her role as a carer. Amanda compensates for this by the belief that giving her grandmother more time does not help her in the long term as this encourages her to be over-reliant.

> It's not nice when you say you're a carer. They haven't got an idea of what's involved. (AB39)

Being a carer influences how Amanda sees herself in relation to others and she makes assumptions about how others see her. For Amanda, there is a stigma attached to being a carer by society and this makes her defensive with those she tells. Yet she feels proud in what she is doing (AB37).

> I just take it as my time away from my nan and caring responsibilities. (AB147)

Being a student for Amanda is essentially about giving time to herself, but this brings unnatural feeling of selfishness for her. The time she makes for herself is time that would normally be devoted to caring. The only way for her to make time is through sacrifices she makes in her caring duties.

Because the caring role you can forget about yourself so much and I didn't realise that 'till one day – I went to find some shoes in my bedroom and I didn't have any, but my nan and my daughter were sorted … just that thought, not necessarily finance but the thought - Amanda, go and get some shoes. It wouldn't even enter my head and I thought that's not good, that's a route to danger so I'd become isolated if I do that and just really into myself and thinking about everyone else but myself. (AB34)

There is an internal struggle for Amanda in putting her own needs first. It is something new to her as she has always put the needs of those she cares for before her own. She now realises that this is not a healthy position to be in. On reflection, she could see her escalation into isolation subsequently leading to a loss of her own identity. There had to be some changes and for Amanda being a student helps to restore some sort of balance. She now feels there is a new direction in her life; one that is personal to her and her alone.

I'm a single mom doing university and I'm caring for my nan full time, so it's just amazing how much you can stretch yourself and still remain balanced. And I think some people are quite fearful of that with myself and they keep telling me, 'it's too much' … but I block it out. It's not too much because I'm managing. I'm a lot more proud of myself now. (AB174)

For Amanda, there are three roles she plays in her life: a carer, a mother and a student. Although balancing these roles has been challenging, she is proud of the way that she has handled her responsibilities and feels that this may have altered the way others view her. The agency of her decision making is reflected in her independence and this is strong enough to dismiss the advice of others. The sign for Amanda that she is not taking on too much is that she is managing the situation. She is shocked by how much her three roles challenge her, but she has determination and is proud of where she is in her life. She considers the course as "my time" (AB147) and she has been surprised with her own sense of strength. She is here to complete what she set out to do.

I'm only leaving if I die … or obviously if anything happens to my daughter, God forbid, but that's it. Even if my nan was to pass away tomorrow I'd be here Monday, I know that for a fact. (AB112)

Amanda is defiant in her attitude to completing her course. She has even put it in context of how she would react if her grandmother died. Being a student is a priority for her.

> ... it's something for myself for one, I know I've got to do it 'cos I'm more than capable and I know I'm capable, I know I'm good on the practical side as well so it's just this side to level and balance it out. Obviously set an example for my daughter, a role model for the rest of the children in my family and also as well to make my parents proud 'cos they have been ... and they know I can do it, they know I'm interested in it, I know they look forward to me finishing ... (AB164)

There are no thoughts of withdrawing for Amanda. Being a student fulfils many purposes and helps with an imbalance she feels she has in her life. She is confident in her capabilities on a practical side, but there is a piece missing which education fulfils. Learning for Amanda enhances self-image. The perception others have of her in her family is also very important. She sees herself as responsible for being a "role model" within her family, but also she wants her parents to be proud of her. She manages her three roles by relinquishing some control and delegating some caring duties, allowing her to focus on her own study (AB164). By arranging for her grandmother to go to day-care on university days Amanda is free to devote herself to her studies and to see beyond her identity of just being a carer.

Sociality

It is important for Amanda that she gains respect from her family. Therefore, she seeks their approval by being a role model (AB166). Relationships have not changed since starting the course; except one. Her uncle's attitude toward her suddenly changed in a negative way. "He's kind of working against me at the moment and doing little things to try and flare me up in a way where I react to his stupidity, but I don't stoop to that" (AB90). Amanda tries to react positively when confronted with this attitude.

> Since I started studying again ... he's moved study, moved personal papers ... my first actual college application form went missing and I know it was still in the house on the table, you know things like that. Spiteful things that you don't really want to speak about with your uncle, but one thing I've learnt about being a carer is being open about my life and about how it's going to improve services, so I'm quite open and I will say he's an idiot and

I don't like the way I've been treated by him. But at the same time I'm not going to let him ruin it, or anything I'm trying to do now. So it makes me stronger in a sense when he does something, I go and get my books and I get my face in them and I quote from them, that's what I do, basic channelling, everything that gets in my way I channel it into my studies. (AB92)

Amanda does not perceive her uncle as a source of support and the deterioration of the relationship is unsettling, but the spitefulness he exhibits brings out defiance and determination within her. Amanda will not allow her uncle to ruin what she is doing. She does not feel she can confront him when she believes he has moved papers of hers in her house. Yet she does allow herself to demonstrate defiance by reading her study books in front of him. This is Amanda's counter-attack. She uses, in this instance, her studies and knowledge as her armour to fight back. There is a sense of what she is doing is right as she can see, in the long term, how she can improve services although she does not expand what she means by this.

Amanda makes no mention of friends in her life at present. She did have close friends when she started university before, but she lost one of them to death in close succession to losing someone close in her family. This was something which affected her so much that it led to her feeling that she could not continue with her studies at that time and subsequently withdrew from her course.

It's changed in the sense of ... anyone who is doing anything above what they already know is a threat. (AB73)

Starting the course for Amanda has changed her relationships with colleagues at the school she now works at. Amanda believes this happened once they realised she was going to university. She interpreted this as a threat to them and especially to one person in particular who was already on the course but who, according to Amanda, was struggling with it (AB73). Amanda is not intimidated by this change of attitude as she feels that because she now works on a voluntary basis, she has control over the things she does and can move on at any given time. These relationships are not that important to her and like the relationship with her uncle she is able to block them out

(AB70). Amanda accepts isolation with many relationships as she identifies those which are important to her in her life and dismisses those that are not.

> You do feel quite inferior at that point because you're thinking 'okay, I've been out of work for a year, I've been out of education before, what am I doing basically (laughs), what am I doing here?' (AB86)

For Amanda, being out of work and not being in education for a while has made her question herself. At the start of the course Amanda had to deal with how she felt in relation to fellow students and this made her question herself and what she was trying to achieve. Amanda's feeling of isolation was fed by a feeling of inferiority toward others in her group. As the weeks progressed Amanda felt much more at ease with her fellow students as they began to share how they felt on the course. Students within her group were exchanging phone numbers and there was a growing feeling of support (AB88). By the second semester the feeling of inferiority that she had at the beginning of the course had gone.

> I still feel that, that little barrier there between some of the ladies on the course, but that's the same as in a workplace. It's the same when I walk into a doctors, it's just everywhere isn't it? That's just how it is. (AB182)

Although Amanda feels supported by her fellow students there is still a barrier that exists. The acceptance she experiences rotates as she never feels fully part of a group. Amanda can very quickly feel isolated and where there are signs of alienation she withdraws into her seclusion. For Amanda, there is an expectation that barriers will exist with others and being a student is no exception.

> On a part-time course you're alienated from everyone, you don't really see the life of the college because you're here so late so it's nice to actually have a familiar face, even if it is in the canteen to say hello to, even the ladies that takes the tray up ... I have a nice little chat with her too. You know it just lightens the load in that sense about that fear of not knowing anyone as well. (AB137)

Amanda is able to contrast her previous experience of higher education as a full-time student to that of studying part-time. Being part-time brings a certain amount of alienation. Her classes tend to be during the evening when most students have finished for the day. For Amanda, being a mature part-time student means she misses

out on her association with other university students. She compensates for this by engaging with those she regularly comes into contact with who are detached from her course and this helps her to alleviate a total fear of isolation. Amanda's need for this oscillates between wanting to be solely on her own, to feeling fearful of not having the opportunity to socialise.

> I'm single in terms of male, female relationships, companionship in that way. I am single, that does bother me at times because I'm someone who doesn't think that I don't need a partner, I'm not like that. I do need a partner and I do want one and I will ... When people meet me they automatically think I'm (either) married, or a mess because I'm not with anyone. So they think how can someone so nice be by themselves? You must be a problem, you know, and it makes them shy away from me ... I've found that relationships with my daughter become stronger because I'm studying childhood. I'm so conscious of my parenting now that I'm studying children ... always very conscious of how I deal with that and sort through situations, the attention I give her, the time that I give her. She could have a lot more time but I make sure I condense the times so that what we're doing is beneficial to her erm ... emotionally, so she doesn't feel left out, or she feels I'm not interested. (AB95 - AB96)

Amanda feels secure with the close relationship she has with her daughter, but she does think about what it would be like having a partner. For Amanda, there is a need for adult company which she does not get from those whom she lives with. Amanda is open about her needs in this area. She believes that not being in a relationship influences how others may see her and again she makes assumptions as to how she is perceived being a single person. She feels others see her as a problem and therefore do not pursue any form of relationship with her. Her daughter is her main priority and she speaks positively about how the course has developed their relationship. For Amanda, studying 'Childhood' has helped her to become more conscious of her daughter's behaviour and the ways she should respond as a mother.

Embodiment

> Coming into it, I felt very scared 'cos I was thinking 'Oh my gosh, just please nothing get in the way of this one, I really want this' and then you kind of tell yourself only you can let it get in the way whatever it is. So, coming in was obviously daunting, but when you speak to everyone else you're all in the same boat ... Made me feel a bit better in that sense and then

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obviously the lecturers letting you know that they know how you feel
basically and that really helped, that really helped, yeah. They were very
clear, very friendly, very bubbly ... (AB49)

Amanda felt scared on her first day and coming into the building was a daunting

experience even though she had confidence in her academic ability. Although she felt

nervous, her concerns were more to do with her journey to completion. Even so,

fellow students and tutors at the induction did help her to feel more settled. The

tutors' empathetic and understanding approach was important to her; however, this

did not stop her questioning herself and experiencing feelings of panic. This was not

helped by the added layer of pressure put upon herself by her perceived expectation

to complete the course by her parents (AB9).

> I was tired, absolutely shattered ... from travelling as well. I've recently
> given up my car because it costs too much to run so I'm juggling buses and
> things like that. The change has been dramatic in the sense, where before I
> used to have a little bit of energy left because I was in the car ... now it's
> totally drained. I'm getting used to that now; I'm doing a lot more walking
> as well. (AB143)

Being a carer, a mother and working while studying is tiring for Amanda. Working on a

voluntary basis means that finances are tight and since giving up her car and using

public transport it has meant Amanda feels even more exhausted. However, she has

noticed how her feelings change as soon as she enters the university building.

> I get here, I could be absolutely shattered and my nan's been up all night
> knocking my door and talking in the mirror, walking around looking for my
> granddad and things like that, and I can come into college ... just like that,
> I'm awake, whereas I could've been half dead on the way here. As soon as I
> get in I wake up, I'm revitalised, I'm ready and I think that's not because of
> my strength now, that's obviously because of the friendly environment that
> I'm working in and I feel I have the support of the people on my course.
> (AB84)

For Amanda, coming into university is an escape. Being a carer is demanding and it can

mean disrupted sleep. She is also aware that at home she is always on call and that her

study time can end suddenly by the needs of her grandmother. However, no matter

how tired Amanda feels, entering the university building revitalises her energy. Being a

student gives Amanda an oasis. Although feelings of isolation still exist, she enters a

building she feels part of and this renews her strength which compensates for the other demands in her life.

> The first day was good, but then it became daunting when the assignments were handed out 'cos you know, they were all handed out on the same day, not necessarily due back the same day of the week, but they hand everything out first so obviously you get this work and you're 'oooh, I thought this was part-time. (AB53)

Amanda enjoyed her first day of classes, but was still daunted by the amount of work and information given out. With all the assignments issued on the same day it led her to question whether the course was part-time. However, when she had rationalised that all the work did not have to be submitted at the same time she could then begin to organise herself better. Being a student for Amanda is about planning and pacing things as a way to protect herself from feeling stressed (AB60).

> ... if I'm somewhere away from my family and I go into a depression 'cos I've lost my nan, moved out of her house, everything's changed, in a strange flat that I didn't want to accept. (AB184)

Amanda anticipates how she may feel in the future if she moved house and was in a new area. She sees that the changes that could happen with losing her grandmother and being away from her family could impact on her health in the future.

Temporality

> The level of understanding being at (*previous university name*) University was quite different. I'm not saying there was no single parents or anything like that, but at the same time, tutors ... they weren't as compassionate. I mean I don't expect, you know, extra help and extra time just because I'm a single parent, but there was, there wasn't much leeway... I couldn't really work with the tutors there ... I just found there was a brick wall and it was like 'look, you've applied here, keep up to speed or get lost basically and that, that's how I felt, so I actually .... was also finding out myself who I was in that sense in terms of what I actually wanted from my life and how to go about it, whilst dealing with life, because I've never had death and stuff in my family and amongst my friends up to that point ... (AB8)

Amanda's past experience of higher education was a time where she was finding out who she was and what she wanted from her life. The difficulties she was having in her

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life and as a student were not accompanied with an empathetic attitude from tutors. At that time she felt that she was given an ultimatum of either keeping up or getting out. Feeling that her tutors showed no compassion as to what she was going through, she subsequently withdrew. Being a student previously was a time where she experienced a lot of problems of a nature she was not equipped to deal with. Now she feels she has the mental freedom to focus on her studies. However, the belief that she would eventually return and complete a higher educational course had never left her (AB22) and now the time was right for her to restart her education. Coming back to education was not about repairing the past but more about beginning again after a deferment in her studies.

> I now need to find that out to see whether or not I need to add maths to go on to teaching, whether I need to add it on now because if I have three years here, four years, however long, then I'm able to add one subject on each year, if I need to do my science, I know I passed my English language and literature, but I'm not sure about the science and maths so I probably need to do them again ... and if I do I need to fit it in from now really rather than waiting until later and have to do a whole year of GCSE's ... so yeah ... forward thinking. (AB55)

Being a student gives Amanda direction and a vision. She wants to be a teacher and is aware that she may need to add further curriculum subjects such as maths and science to her qualifications. She thinks strategically about the future and calculates how she can add one subject each year for the next three to four years. There is no sense of wasting time for Amanda as she anticipates the possible hurdles to be confronted over the coming years which could stifle her vision. For Amanda, study is an investment for the future as she plots the stages ahead of her.

Spatiality

With caring for her grandmother as well as her daughter, time is very precious. Amanda apportions time with them, but she does like the solitude of studying alone. She studies in her bedroom, which is not ideal for her because of disruptions; however, it is somewhere she can shut the door to a certain amount of distractions. She tends to study late in the evenings, although a set study time is almost impossible for her with

her caring responsibilities (AB153). She has organised some off-site care for her grandmother which enables Amanda to be at home on her own.

> In the sense where I hope to move around a lot more in terms of ... before I was very strict ... like we're staying over this side of town because it's easier to town and it's easier to do this and that erm ... I'm in Small Heath and although it's not that far it can become difficult, but on the other hand the better schools are further out, like Yardley ... so I found it easier in that sense in terms of life plans, I thought yes, I can actually move outside the city centre. I've always grown up around here, Leebank, Ladywood, so it made me broaden in that sense that I could move round a bit more. It's changed that kind of life plan in terms where I would purchase a house and things like that. (AB100)

> I've had to get used to the fact that I'll have to accept an area that I don't want to live in. Then on the other side of it, I thought I can't allow myself to do that 'cos if I'm somewhere away from my family and I go into a depression 'cos I've lost my nan, moved out of her house, everything's changed, in a strange flat that I didn't want to accept, I wanted a house, so you know what I mean so I've had to get into the mindset of moving to another area. I know I could but at the same time I don't want to make it become a negative that I have done that. (AB184)

There is an ambiguity within Amanda as regards her feelings about where she will live in the future. She has always stayed within the same region; however, she talks confidently about venturing out of her area and moving house. She sees moving to a new area as part of her life plan, but then anticipates how she may feel being isolated from her family. There is a desire to move but thoughts of how she may feel in the future restrict her into staying in the area she lives now. Currently Amanda feels restricted in many ways since giving up her car. She no longer has the freedom to travel as she did before (AB143). This means that her social life has also changed and she no longer goes to the places she used to go to, such as her Salsa classes (AB145).

When it comes to study Amanda likes the solitude of her own bedroom. Occasionally she goes to her mother's house where there is a little room where she can go and play music and have time to herself (AB145). At university she likes spending time in the library and using the gym. "Sometimes my nan's at the day centre and I come in and have a meal downstairs – just something for me, that's just mine ... and that's what I see it as and that's what boosts me" (AB41). There is an appreciation of the places she

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goes to which derives from a feeling of solitude. University is a special place for her to come because she sees it as time for herself.

Project

> I've always known I've always wanted to be a teacher so ... it's been easier to a point in that sense because I know where my goals are taking me ... Not everyone has that. Not many people know what they want to do with their life, they know what they enjoy, they know what they like doing as hobbies and things of interest, but they don't know what they want to do with their career, so I found that people have struggled on courses just to do a course to keep mom and dad happy, to keep husband happy and to show that they're doing something. (AB120)

Future projects are planned out and clear. Being a student allows her back on track with her ambition. Amanda knows where she wants to be in the future, although she is vague in defining it. She reflects on her intentions of doing the course and compares her intentions to those of 'others', although she does not state who these 'others' are. There is confidence in her own ability in that she can juggle her other responsibilities in order to complete her course. She was disappointed to have dropped out previously when she believed she was capable and this is now a second opportunity for her to finish what she set out to achieve. There is a belief that she has the capability to complete the course and feels that she is "riding it through and actually enjoying it, instead of putting that pressure on" (AB156). She is determined to complete whilst fulfilling the responsibilities she has as a registered carer. Although she will not relinquish any of her duties, Amanda is fully aware that they may not be around for long.

Discourse

When describing the impact the course has Amanda uses phrases which indicate a desire to be self-reliant. She speaks, not so much about her past or about her future but very much in the present. Apart from her daughter and her grandmother, she speaks from a very isolated place and conjectures as to the assumptions others make about her. She has come to not depend on anyone or expect anything from anyone. She uses words which indicate an appreciation of the support she gets from her fellow

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students, but speaks in terms of a barrier between them. The words she uses shows how she has reflected on her feelings from dark periods in her life. However, there is also an anticipation of how she could feel in the future if certain things were to happen in her life, such as moving house or her grandmother dying. She speaks only briefly about her role as a mother and more about being a carer. At times, when asked about the course, her response was often associated with being a carer and how that responsibility impacted on her, more so than being a student. She speaks in very long sentences which often drift off and returns to the subject of her caring responsibilities.

Summary

Amanda sees herself as a mother and a carer more so than as a student. It is only now, since becoming a student, is she considering putting her own needs first. Study is a personalised thing and it is something she is not confident others will understand. Her last experience of university was halted by the circumstances she found herself in and were not helped by the attitude of the university she was attending. Amanda expects alienation in the things she does and makes assumptions about how she is perceived by others. However, this does not hinder her determination. She enjoys being a student, especially coming into the building. There were doubts at first, but she is confident in her ability to achieve at this level.

<u>Carol</u>

Selfhood

> I think it is difficult because at work as a manager you have to have most of the answers there or you have to go off and find them. Whereas here, you're coming in like a blank canvas really and it's a bit … you've got to absorb all that information. It's very different roles, but I mean it's good. (CB192)

For Carol, her identity as a student is in stark contrast to the identity and role she plays at work. At present there are no expectations to have knowledge at the beginning of the course as a student which frees her of any burdens of responsibility. This is

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opposite to how she feels at work where, as a manager there are responsibilities she has to live up to. She has a positive attitude toward this and uses the analogy of starting the course to that of a blank canvas waiting to be filled, with herself as responsible for being receptive of the knowledge delivered.

> ... in terms of confidence, I think, it almost strips you of your confidence at first ... because you think, you know what you're doing and then actually you think ... you get into these lectures and you're like ... what shall I... I didn't know the background to that and... that's quite good, you know it helped ... it ... it's like you're here and you've got no foundation really have you? (CB60)

The course for Carol is a new beginning that she accepts will mean a period of adjustment. She sees starting higher education as stripping her of her confidence in as much as she has to establish her own identity and terms of reference in an academic environment. For Carol, this is not seen in a negative way but as a positive platform to build upon. The confidence that she has in her ability stems from previous post-compulsory education. She originally went into nursing and was comfortable with the academic level (CB80). Returning to education and being in lectures benefits Carol in as much as it helps her to put into context what she does at work as a community family support worker

> ...just getting back into that, a whole mindset of having to study and having ... you know, not just going home at night and thinking, I'll put the TV on. (CB16)

Although Carol saw starting university as a massive upheaval in her life she welcomed the challenge. For Carol, it was about developing a focus toward study which involved reorganising herself (CB174). This meant taking a disciplined approach to her study and making sacrifices in her own leisure time.

Carol feels very comfortable in higher education and believes that she has a voice within the university. At the same time she has determined very quickly who amongst her tutors she would actually confide in and who she would avoid (CB122). Therefore, the voice she believes she has is restricted to those who are receptive to her.

I've seen quite a few people shot down for challenging her already. (CB202)

The relationship Carol has with tutors is more ambivalent. She prefers a teaching style which encourages discussion with all students within her class (CB82). However, she highlights one class where this does not take place. For Carol, this means adapting her learning style to this formal delivery. From what she has seen from students in her group she is willing to accept a more passive role to ensure that she would not be embarrassed in front of others.

> I think it's really, it's really a diverse group of people, but yeah, we've all gelled really well. It's just like getting the different experiences from different people ... Everybody is interested in what you've got to say and it's like another woman today has been telling me about being made redundant at work and it's, you know it's that supportive network, you know people are supportive towards you and you hope you're supportive toward them, which is quite, it's quite surprising because we are only together for such a short amount of time. (CB225)

For Carol, diversity of the group is a positive element of the course. Carol has found support within her class and there is a sense of surprise at how well she feels her group gets on. Although Carol is not reliant on their support, she does value it and this enhances her enjoyment. She sees the support as a two-way network in which it is just as important that she is seen as supportive toward others. There is a sense of surprise that others are genuinely interested in her and her experiences.

> My mum's really supportive, she's ... she was a 'stay at home mum' until she was ... until about 11 years ago and then she's gone out and she did a Tec' childcare and eventually through part-time study became a teacher and now she's just done her *Early Years Professional Status*, so she's really supportive and I kind of ... she kind of thinks do it while you're young instead of, you know, being like me, just graduating at the age of fifty, so she is supporting me. (CB98)

Outside of university the main source of support Carol receives is from her mother who she sees almost as a role model when it comes to education. Although Carol does not clarify what this support entails it is apparent that the relationship she has with her mother is one that she values. There is also support from her sister of whom she

turned to when she was thinking of withdrawing from the course (CB52). As regards her partner, when asked whether the course had altered their relationship she replied:

> No, you get the occasional digs about 'I don't know why you're doing it' ... (laughs), yeah because obviously he has to do the whole childcare on a Monday, you know, so, I see her first thing in the morning and then don't see her at all until the next morning and there's times when he's ... he works from home ... he's then got meetings and I'm always thinking - have your Monday, care for her on Monday - so I think that gets to him a bit because obviously his job is better paid than mine, but then I make the point that if I gain my qualifications that, you know, I've got the potential to either to go higher or at least transfer across, you know. (CB 221)

For Carol, the course does bring a dilemma. Monday is a day where she goes through the whole day without seeing her daughter and she sees being a student as time "taken away from her" (CB90). This is something Carol finds difficult as it causes friction with her partner who Carol needs to rely upon on Mondays. For Carol, her partner does not understand why she is studying and believes it is borne from his reluctance to take on childcare responsibilities. Carol sees this help as being given begrudgingly. This adds another dimension to being a student for Carol as she is constantly aware of the impact it has on her immediate family.

Embodiment

> I'm still positive. I think on Saturday because I'm pregnant and I felt, I've got lots of problems as well ... I woke up on Saturday and I had really ... I had morning sickness and I just kind of thought ... I just can't, I just can't ... the thought of having to sit and finish off the assignment was just ... and all, all through Saturday I thought 'I'm not doing it, I'm not!' and I got up yesterday and I was in a better mood and got on with it and spent most of the day doing it and it was fine. (CB89)

Carol was twelve weeks pregnant when she started the course; however, she was confident that it would not affect her studies (CB90). She was aware that she had a ready-made excuse if she did want to defer or withdraw and in a way this took away any pressure on herself (CB126). Pregnancy brings other considerations for Carol in being a student as she was experiencing problems with her health. The physical problems and mood swings which she was experiencing had culminated in her decision to withdraw from the course in week Six. This was the first time she had contemplated

withdrawing and it was based on how she felt on that particular day with an assignment to get ready for submission. The following day brought a more positive frame of mind and the decision was reversed.

> ... I was thinking, if I don't get these assignments done this weekend ... and even though, you know ... you can get an extension - extenuating circumstances ... but in my head I was thinking that just puts it off for another week or whatever ... I just felt so guilty, everyday I felt guilty if I didn't feel well not doing anything, thinking that, you know I'm not able to get it done. (CB56)

Carol rationalises that having extenuating circumstances and an allowance to submit an assignment late would not alleviate the pressure she felt because all it would do is prolong it. Even though Carol was not feeling well due to her pregnancy she did not see her condition as a justifiable reason for having extenuating circumstances. In fact, what she did feel was guilt because she was allowing it to prevent her from studying and completing her work. For Carol, this was part of her responsibility of being a student.

> I think, kind of, the level that it was set at, but obviously you don't know ... Every lecturer can't look at your face and go well 'you're at that level, you'll come out with that', but yeah, I think in that first six weeks, with me it was a lot of panicking of how ... whether what I was going to do was going to be good enough. (CB241)

For Carol, starting a course brought difficulties as regards the expected level. This triggered an emotional response as she felt she was starting to panic. At the same time she realised that this was an accepted element of the course and rationalised, from a tutor's perspective, that there was little way for anyone to be able to make any relative judgment about an individual's ability before they submit.

> ... I was like 'oh my ...' and then it just flustered me, but once you got here it was easy and you got to the front door and they told you where to go ... that was fine, but just that whole panic because I didn't know where I was going. (CB26)

Carol acknowledges feelings of panic on her first day; however, these were not associated with being on the course, but linked more to being on time and finding the right place to go. This 'flustered' her but her emotions settled once she was at the

induction. For Carol, the focus was on getting there rather than any anxiety of starting a course.

During Carol's second semester, as she came close to the birth of her baby, she felt that she was still motivated being a student even though she found her second semester harder (CB176). It was during this semester that the pressure of time-keeping increased. Her first tutor of the day required students to be punctual otherwise they would not be allowed into the class. This played on Carol's sense of time as her 100 mile journey could be wasted if she was late (CB198).

Temporality

Time is something Carol makes frequent reference to.

- We hadn't done anything and I thought I could have left three hours earlier (CB46) – in reference to one lecture at the end of the day.

- Wished I'd started out earlier (CB36) – in referring to her first day.

- I might be five minutes late … straight away you think 'Oh my God', I've got to get there on time (CB198) – in reference to her first lecture of the day.

- We've waited around for an hour (CB136) – when one lecture was cancelled.

For Carol, when time is wasted she feels 'frustrated' when it could have been used more productively. This sense of time was also significant when Carol started her nurse training. At that time she envisioned the years ahead of her before she qualified and felt it to be too long to wait (CB186), "it seemed years away" (CB12) and this initiated her decision to drop out.

When asked what it was like coming back to education she likened the impact to that of having children (CB66) - "you think you know what you're doing and then actually you get a child in your life and oh my God … haven't a clue" (CB68). For Carol, the analogy was used to highlight the inability to prepare herself for the course prior to its inception. It demonstrates the contrast of two extremes of time; before and after

starting a course. However, she did feel that it was not quite as daunting as becoming a mother, as there was always an option to drop out.

> It's been really good actually ... looking back ... and reflecting ... and thinking, oh yeah, if I'd have known that I could've used that. (CB38)

For Carol, the course helps her to analyse her past dealings in her work role with families. She uses these dealings as a basis for her assignments and this is helping her to reflect on how she could have done things differently. Carol values education as she contemplates how her understanding and development will enable her in her practice in the future.

Spatiality

> ... just that whole panic because I didn't know where I was going. (CB26)

For Carol, being in the right place as scheduled is important. The first day meant that she did not know where she was going. Carol was travelling over 100 miles to attend university and the travelling was a concern to her (CB120). Carol was limited as to where she could study her Community Family Support foundation degree. The choice was either 100 miles away or 250 miles away from where she lived.

> I don't mind it and it does give me a chance to sit and think about what we're going to do today and different things. (CB182)

The journey is a three-hour round trip which, for Carol, was more of a concern than actually doing the course. As the weeks progressed Carol did not see the journey as a negative element as it gave her the opportunity to reflect on her studies as well as other aspects of her life.

At home Carol does much of her studying on the sofa in the lounge. There is a study room, but as it is next to her daughter's room she feels that she can study better away from her family. She prefers it when her husband and daughter go upstairs and leave her to study on her own.

> I think in that first six weeks, with me it was a lot of panicking of how ...
> whether what I was going to do was going to be good enough. (CB 241)

There are occasions when contradictions are expressed by Carol. She states that ability was never a concern for her, but then questioned herself as to whether her work would be good enough when she actually started. Also, she mentions that she was more concerned with the travelling than the actual course, but not knowing what was expected of her brought feelings of panic.

> I got the results and I looked at the results, I was a bit like, well actually I
> can do it ... and I think part of wanting to leave was that I didn't feel like I
> was giving it enough time and I've probably still not giving it enough time,
> but I'm getting the results. (CB213)

The grade from the first assignment was the confirmation that Carol needed that she could study at this level and this was a factor in her decision to continue. There was a sense of surprise as she felt she had not allowed enough time and although time was still a factor, it was not a hurdle in her ability to pass.

Carol had contemplated withdrawing just once, but then she said "I'm kind of surprised I'm still here" (CB237). Before Carol started the course she felt that those around her had tried to put her off as they envisioned the difficulty of study and work while being pregnant (CB54), but as she felt that she needed the qualification to back up her coordinator's role her determination outweighed the advice of others. Her motivation to achieve was for the qualification, rather than what she was learning. Learning on the course would be something of a bonus - "at least ... I'll learn something as well" (CB8).

Before starting the course Carol had a vision of needing to spend eight or nine hours a week studying at home; however, she found that in practice it was closer to three or four hours (CB106). She was due to have the baby over Easter and she envisioned having just four weeks off from her course and therefore was confident that she could

manage it. Things did not work out as planned for Carol. She did not return after Easter and was unable to complete her second semester.

Discourse

In describing the impact the course has Carol uses words which relate closely to being impatient – 'could have left three hours earlier', 'waited around for an hour', 'it seemed years ahead', 'wished I'd started out earlier', 'I wish I had more time'. The emotions she expresses are then very closely related to feelings of "panic" and being "flustered". The course is seen more as a chore - "I want to do it, but it's the actual doing part that's the difficult thing (CB50). Confidence is either 'stripped' or 'really positive'. There is a detachment evident when she speaks about her relationship with her husband as she mentions the "occasional digs" (CB221) she experiences by doing the course. She refers to her daughter on many occasions and this is a pull factor for her away from attending university. At only four years old she is asking Carol "why are you always working at the weekend?" (CB86). This makes Carol question whether the course is worth the investment in time. Carol's focus is very much on the present, she speaks only briefly of the past and the future. She states that she appreciates the support from her fellow students and that she wants to be supportive towards them. However, she is not reliant upon it and apart from the guidance from her sister and support from her mother Carol does not indicate that she needs others in her life at this time to help her on her course.

Summary

There is ambiguity in the confidence Carol has in her ability. She sees being a student as a new start where there is little responsibility to shoulder. She was not looking for support from those in her class, but has come to appreciate it. Carol did not see her pregnancy as a hindrance, but it has brought health problems. Consequently she has not been well enough to study and time pressures led her to consider withdrawing after six weeks of the course.

Harriet

Selfhood

> To be honest, nothing has really changed, I still feel the same ... I don't feel any different. I just don't think 'I'm a student now', and you know, I'm still me being a mom and working and paying all the bills, I'm still doing all the same things. It just seems normal; I don't label myself as a student. (HB18-HB20)

For Harriet, being a student has no impact on her sense of self as her identity is not determined by being a student. It is just an added dimension to her responsibilities (HB83). Study is something she fits in with everything else she does. Harriet is self-reliant. Her studies have not forced her to seek solitude, they have just compounded it.

> I think I've got enough confidence to do what I need to do and achieve what I need to achieve, but self-esteem ... I haven't really got high self-esteem, I'm kind of like middling, you know there's always things about yourself that you don't really like too much, like pushing out too much in the open that you kind of ... but I'm alright with that ... I wouldn't say that I'm lacking in confidence. (HB59)

For Harriet, confidence and self-esteem are unrelated. She has confidence in her ability to study in higher education and yet self-esteem is not considered high. Self-esteem appears to relate to aspects of her identity which she is able to conceal, whereas confidence is very much about her ability to do what she needs to do to achieve. Although believing that she is disorganised and leaves "things to the last minute" she does not allow it to worry her (HB51). On deciding to do the course she did consider everything else she was doing in her life and debated whether she could cope (HB65), but she had contemplated coming back into education for several years. For Harriet, waiting for her daughter (the youngest of two children) to start high school and being less reliant on her was always going to be the time when she would consider doing a foundation degree (HB101). "Now they're older it's so much easier" (HB 125). The decision to do the course was also not made out of a sense of a need to do it, more about a sense of seeing how she would get on, trying it out and seeing where it would take her (HB22).

> It's boosted my confidence in a sense that most of my comments from the lecturers are saying my writing skills is really, really good … erm and obviously the way I write my English is really, really good … and I think that's what boosts up my grades basically. So, I'm quite pleased. (HB151)

Since starting the course Harriet's confidence in her academic ability has increased and this is sourced by the feedback regarding her written work. Higher grades are attainable through writing well and this in turn enhances her confidence toward her studies. This boost of confidence helps Harriet to manage her studies better as her confidence acts as a motivator (HB155). She enjoys being a student and feels that in classes her opinion is respected and therefore feels that she has a voice as a student within the university.

Sociality

> I don't go out anyway … I mean I go out rarely, I mean I went out this weekend, but … I'm the type of person that likes to stay in the house anyway, I like being at home … the only impact was my mom, I don't go and see her much anymore. She goes 'you never come round anymore' because where I've moved to I'm like just down the road from her now, even closer to her and I think I've been to her house about five times since I've moved down there (laughs), so it's not very good. (HB77)

Harriet likes to spend time at home and although she has moved closer to her mother she is seeing less of her; one of the repercussions of starting her course. Her mother has noticed this change and Harriet is aware of this. There is no mention of seeing friends or whether she has friends.

> All the work that I was letting myself in for, not the people 'cos obviously you can always ignore them if you don't like them so, it's not the people, it was the fact that - coming here and would I cope. (HB33)

Harriet found the first day "nerve-racking" (HB30) and this was in connection to being able to cope with the amount of work, but the thought of meeting fellow students was not a concern for her. Although Harriet gets on very well with others, how she would get on with her fellow students was not a concern for her. For Harriet, being a student is about independency, being un-reliant on others and not about making new friends. There appears no need to be liked as university is just one small aspect of her life. She

felt confident enough that she could isolate herself if need be and focus on what she was doing. Although not needing others she is open and flexible to adapt if circumstances are right. There is no indication from Harriet that she has support from anyone outside university. However, she also suggests that she is not in need of any such support.

> ... the group's really, really nice, we really get on really well together ... everyone shares ideas and yeah, it's an enjoyable group and I do look forward to Mondays as well. (HB189)

Being a student took on an unexpected dimension for Harriet. As the course developed there was a sense of surprise that she is enjoying the company and support of her fellow students. This has made the experience of doing the course a more enjoyable one for her to the point when she looks forward to being in class with them.

> Well, my kids, right (laughs), in our house right, my eldest is always in his room anyway, right and my youngest is always on, you know, on play-station or watching the *Sky* up there, whatever, so everyone's always separated anyway, we barely are together. The only time we sit together is ... when we're eating in the dining room or sometimes my daughter will actually come, if she's watching the same thing as me, she'll come and join me, other than that, no. I'm all alone downstairs sometimes thinking where is everybody? You know so, yeah ... we're all doing our own things. (HB87)

The independence that Harriet has in her life is reflected in her relationships with her children. Although living in the same house there is a separate existence as they all do their own thing in separate parts of the house. Harriet is happy to share time with her children, but essentially it is an isolated existence. However, she does ensure that they assemble to share time together at meal times. Apart from this, Harriet is equally content to spend time on her own.

Embodiment

> I'm really laid back about things. I don't stress over anything until I have to because I've always been like that ... everything in my life ... I've always said - there's no point worrying about something until you know it's going wrong. If you see it to be okay just get on with it and go along with what's going on, so no, I am kind of laid back. (HB73)

For Harriet, being a student is not stressful and study does not have a huge impact on her life which stems from her attitude toward life which is seeped in the confidence she has in herself. She does not allow herself to worry about things unless they are going wrong. However, Harriet was nervous on her first day as she contemplated the amount of work which she would have to do. Although the nervousness did not last for long it was still out of character for her. The feelings she experiences and the outlook she has on life derives from her philosophy - "don't worry about anything else or what anybody else is doing, that's what I say" (HB139).

Harriet had contemplated what it would be like being a student in class. She anticipated herself being bored in lectures as she saw herself passively being on the receiving end of a formal delivery, but she found that she enjoyed them. This has contributed to her liking the student experience (HB26).

Temporality

> I've always wanted to do something and er, I wasn't sure what and I've always said I'd love to get a degree in something, but once again I didn't know what and this opportunity came up to do this course, so I thought to myself I'll have a stab at this and see how I go and er … and hence why I'm here. (HB2)

For Harriet, to study for a degree was an ambition even though she was unsure of the direction she wanted to take. The timing was important to her. She had waited for her children to be of an age when they were less reliant on her and this now coincided with the opportunity of a foundation degree in *Education and ICT* (HB101). The duration of the course was not a major consideration, it was more a case of trying it out to assess her ability to achieve at this level and then she could contemplate progressing (HB22). For Harriet, there is a fluidity regarding how she sees the future.

> … because obviously I've got a busy outside life, got loads of things that I'm doing as well and I've also taken up … a maths course as well which I'm doing … and then I'm also doing an engineering course … and this at the same time so, I'm a bit busy at the moment. (HB4)

Harriet has very little spare time for herself and although working full-time she is committed to other courses as well as the foundation degree. For Harriet, having so many things going on in her life culminates in her focusing just on the present. She speaks very briefly about her past and although she has a goal of teaching in the future, it is something that she will deal with when it arrives.

Spatiality

> I've got to do it and then one Sunday that's it - I'm going to go to the spare room and I shut the door and just sat in there and I just read it all through ... I got it typed up and that was done, yeah ... so that's where I go when I've got to work upstairs - in the spare room ... (HB45)

Harriet has recently moved house which she rents. Although she has a lot of commitments she says she does not go out much and she is happy staying in. She and her children are very self-sufficient as they occupy their own rooms which separate them as a family, except for the dining room where they gather for the main meal. For Harriet, her study room is very special to her. She shuts the door and it brings an isolation which enables her to concentrate on what she has to do (HB45).

> It's quiet up there. It's still got a bit of junk in because obviously we've recently moved ... but it's quiet there and the kids can, like do whatever they're doing and it's peaceful up there and it's nice ... nice bright room as well, it's nice to work in. (HB47)

There is a peacefulness that Harriet enjoys in her own room even though it is untidy and still stores the remnants of her house moving. It is quiet in this room for her to study. She has added a bean bag and she is happy to spend time there (HB161). She mentions little about going out as she is quite content with her own company in her own house.

Project

> When I initially started the course I did say to myself right, I definitely want to go into teaching and then I thought about it and I'm not sure now I do want to ... I don't know whether I want to do something a bit different with it, but I will obviously persevere, but it leaves the choice open for me when I'm done. (HB173)

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The course for Harriet has meant that new options have opened up to her as regards what she can do in the future. Originally the thought of going into teaching was her main goal, but now there is more flexibility with her future projects. Originally, she saw the course as having a dual purpose. It was an opportunity to progress in her career and this would subsequently earn her more money so that she could buy the house she is renting (HB91). Progression and the comfort which she finds in her new house appear to have been the motivating factors in deciding to do the course.

> ... if I've got to do it, I'll do it! I'm one of those that if I've got to do something I'll do it. (HB35)

There are no doubts for Harriet as to her commitment as the decision to do the course is a reflection of her intention. Once she has decided to do a project she sticks to it.

> If I fail my first year, that may make me want to leave because, erm, if they said to me I've just passed, that will be okay, but then I'll have to make sure that I work harder next year to make sure I pass better ... if I was to fail my first year that will make me leave, definitely. (HB119)

The determination that Harriet possesses eradicates any thought of not having the ability or any notions of withdrawing. There is no consideration given to leaving based on one factor such as one piece of work. Harriet appraises the situation holistically and will not make any decision until she has completed the first year. It will be her overall performance which would enable her to assess her own ability in relation to achieving on the course.

> I don't like to give up. I'm one of these people that I would have been gutted and really disappointed if I'd have failed. (HB167)

Harriet is really enjoying learning again and believes she is copying with it well (HB12). The determination she has would not have minimised disappointment if she had not passed an assignment. However, the belief in her ability would have helped her absorb it and move on. The enjoyment she has of the course comes with a sense of surprise, especially as in the past she had "hated reading" (HB30) which she saw as a hindrance to her educational progression. However, she is overcoming this dislike to the point where she is now enjoying the reading she has to do (HB30). She has received good

grades and her confidence in her ability is growing based on the belief that she can do it. She resists negative thoughts and there is spontaneity in her attitude toward life - "if you want something, you have to go for it" (HB131). For Harriet, her current course is just one project amongst others. Although time consuming it is not intrusive on her life. It gives her a new dimension, but she does not allow it to dominate other aspects of her life.

Discourse

There is a strong sense that Harriet enjoys what she does in her life. She is very comfortable with herself and being in her own company. Through her language she reveals an independence; one where she does not expect much from others and therefore is not reliant on them for her happiness and progression. She talks about obstacles such as problems with her computer, moving house, and juggling responsibilities, but there is a sense that she just deals with each one in the present. The essence to her identity is that if she has got to do something, she will do it. There are no indications that she allows doubt to take over.

Summary

The commitment Harriet has in her decisions and the positive outlook she exuberates communicates an enthusiasm and joy in what she does in her life. She does not see herself essentially as a student as this is just one aspect of a very busy life. Her children are now of an age which enables her return to higher education. Although getting on well with members of her group she is un-reliant on others' support. She works independently and is happy with her own solitude without feeling isolated. She did feel nervous on her first day about doing the course, but any anxiety she had was about managing it along with her many other interests and responsibilities.

Jay

Selfhood

> If I make the decision I need to do it, I'm like that in my life and that's why once I'd done it ... I didn't really think about it very much. I just thought 'no, that's what I want to do and just did it without thinking really and that might have been partly why it was a bit of a shock ... because I hadn't really done any real ground-work on it. (JB81)

Jay made the decision to do the foundation degree two weeks prior to the start. It was a decision that she made quickly and one based on her desire to be a teacher – something she feels she is already doing as a teaching assistant but not being recognised for (JB75). For Jay, there appears a strong sense of agency as she feels that she makes decisions once the thought is in her mind without thinking through the consequences (JB170). Jay did have a "little panic" about making the decision, but accepted the consequences as she had put herself in a position where she felt she could not back out (JB85). This was also in light of the vow she made to herself that she would never study again because of the workload (JB87). Since making the decision, the course has enabled her to feel proud of what she is achieving as her confidence has been given "quite a boost" (JB87).

> I feel like a child, I don't feel like an adult ... we're treated as maybe the sixteen-year-olds in the previous lecture were treated and it's hard. (JB89)

Since starting her course Jay has experienced one tutor who she considered as very strict and unapproachable. In this instance she does not feel her adult status is taken into consideration and that the tutor cannot differentiate between a sixteen-year-old and an adult (JB89). For this reason she would not consider challenging her as "this particular person wouldn't think twice about knocking you down in front of everybody else" (JB97). Therefore, Jay accepts a subordinate role. Consequently, this experience has led her to believe that she has no voice as a student because the power is firmly with the tutor. Jay sees herself as a passive person and yet reluctantly accepts this power dynamic even as an adult. Even when she had already achieved credits for one

module, she was told that she still had to attend classes; this she obeyed without question (JB192).

> I used to be a person, like I say, that left everything to the last minute, I've been much better since I started and I think that's been really good 'cos I've seen other people that were like me, so I don't really want to be like that ever again, you know. Erm ... the motivation yes is from the other students. (JB150)

Jay reflects on her approach to study and how she has changed since starting the course. She sees her previous behaviour of leaving things to the last minute in others and it is something she does not want to return to. The incentive to change is determined by her relationships with her fellow students.

> ... the lecturer that was the bit of the problem last time, I just think I'm getting used to her to be honest which really isn't a great thing, but sometimes you have to. (JB214)

Being a student and accepting the power dynamic of a lecturer is disappointing for Jay. It has meant compromising her adult status in order to get through this relatively short time period. Although she feels this is not 'a great thing', for Jay, being a student means compensating her self image by adopting a practical and strategic approach. For Jay, this is only one small aspect of being a student and so uncomfortable emotional feelings can be sustained for a while.

Sociality

> I tend to leave things to the last minute. This is much better for me, that I was ... I left everything to that last couple of weeks and I was up 'till three in the morning ... yeah ... erm ... but with this one ... I've got a friend whom I'm doing it with who's the complete opposite from me. So she's been really good for me and really good influence so I seem to have really taken that on board and I'm actually so much more prepared than I would ever be. So it's hard to compare really because I think I've changed. But I think it's, obviously for the better and I think it's through the lecturers, the type of course it is and also because of the person I'm doing it with really. (JB45)

Even after six weeks Jay recognises changes in herself and these have been due to the influence of others. By having to work in partnership with someone else it has forced her to adopt a different approach to studying which she now sees as being more

productive. Through reflection, Jay sees the value of the relationships she has with those associated with the course.

> My friend who I work with who I know, she tells me all the time that I'm great at talking at seminars and the presentations and... that I'm really organised, she's quite positive about me which is quite nice ... but I would not have a clue what anybody else thinks about me. (JB206)

Jay has made many friends with students in her class and her confidence is particularly boosted by one fellow student whom she also works with at her school. She enjoys the positive feedback and compliments she receives which then feeds into her confidence. At the same time she is uncertain as to how others in her class may view her.

> I'd have a bit more empathy I think. Well, a lot more empathy, but we're all different as people aren't we, so that's hard in itself ... maybe a bit more guidance. (JB126)

Although being a student brings satisfaction in many different ways, she identifies that she would have liked all her tutors to be empathetic in their approach. At the same time she rationalises how difficult this can be and that people are different. At the start of her course Jay felt she needed more guidance with her study in relation to what was expected of her and she was disappointed that this was not given (JB27).

> I have (made sacrifices), but nothing really that people would find visible if you can understand what I mean. It's probably a little bit less time spent on Facebook and the internet rather than 'we can't do that because I've got to do college work' ... So probably, if you ask my family members, they would probably think that it just happens ... if you know what I mean. (JB57)

Outside of university, relationships with her family have not changed and Jay feels that any changes or sacrifices she has made while on the course have probably gone unnoticed. Main sacrifices have come from her own personal time and so the commitment she gives to the course is not recognised at home.

Embodiment

> The induction was in a big lecture theatre and erm, it was quite a lot of information to take on, but it wasn't scary at all. I didn't ... I felt as though it was quite a good feeling and I thought I'm back into it. Erm, this will be

okay and, you know, I think that day was fine when we had that induction, but then in the first session, perhaps the first one, two, three sessions where the assignments were flying out and the dead-lines and that was when it became a bit, a bit real. (JB24)

For Jay, the induction was not something she got nervous about; however, she had just completed a *Higher Level Teaching Assistant* (HTLA) course at level 4 and so was aware of what to expect on a foundation degree. Although she found there was a lot of information delivered in that session, it did, however, give her the feeling that she was back into it and ready to take on the role of a student. It was in her first week of classes where she felt there was a reality check as assignments were being issued as if they were 'flying out'. Jay felt quite overwhelmed by this.

I got a B+ overall in *'Development'* which I was dead chuffed with. (JB172)

Jay felt really boosted by receiving a high grade on one of her earlier modules. Prior to this she had received a 'C-' and a 'C' grade which she felt okay with. However, it was the higher grade which gave her confidence and motivation.

I haven't got the energy if I'm perfectly honest. It's not so much the time at night, it's the energy. (JB18)

Having the energy to study during the week is something Jay finds difficult and she is tired after working all day (JB16). It is not helped by the fact that she runs two after-school clubs. She does acknowledge that there is time during the evenings to devote to study, but her tiredness erodes any inclination she may have. This means that most of her study takes place during the weekend. She feels that she is especially tired when nearing deadlines for submissions.

So you do feel a little bit guilty leaving your workplace really, erm ... you've got to make sure that when you go you're not leaving any loose ties, so I think that's one thing that's been hard. (JB180)

Jay has to contend with feelings of guilt while she does the course. When she attends university she leaves work at midday and she finds it difficult leaving work colleagues to carry on in her absence.

> ... and there's only two of us who haven't and they're finding the three really hard, they've got assignment here, there and everywhere. I feel quite guilty really if I'm honest, when I'm sitting there and they're panicking. (JB204)

Having already completed one of the modules prior to starting her foundation degree it has meant that she does not have to complete the assessments. This brings on feelings of guilt towards those whom she studies with. She feels uncomfortable when she sees them panicking about the module assessment when she does not have to do it herself.

Temporality

> I'm wondering when I'm ever, ever going to use this, ever in my work - I have to admit. I've been through all the NVQ 3, although it wasn't at such a higher level, ... and I chat to teachers and they say ... we can't remember that and how would you ever worry about what Piaget said or ... you know ... I understand why we've got to do it, but sometimes you think ... ooh, do we really need to be doing this? (JB20)

For Jay, the course is about rationalising the practicality of what she is learning. At present, after six weeks, she is not convinced of the value of what she is learning in relation to her work. She shares the concepts with other teachers and the immediacy of the situation confirms to her that it is unlikely that what she is covering will be useful to her in the future. She has not needed them in the past and she is doubtful whether she will ever need them in the future. At the same time she understands the reasons for their inclusion.

> I'm a much different person from last time aren't I? But it's funny really when you come because this time last week I hadn't done my presentation so I might have been a little bit more ... only a little bit, but of course I'd done it the weekend so we've just got to hand it in today and do it next week. It just depends doesn't it on the timing really ... (JB214)

For Jay, the responses she gives during the interviews are very much determined by which week in the semester she is in and how much she either has to submit or has accomplished. Jay believes that her emotional responses are determined by how much work she has to do at that given time. The week of her second interview she had

completed most of her work and therefore felt much more positive than she would have done had the interview been held during the previous week.

> It's interesting actually 'cos at the time it's really bad, but then once it's happened, you don't forget it but almost it goes ... erm ... It made me realise there is time to do other things, you know, you can do it if you try although obviously lots of it was done in ridiculous hours of the morning and stuff. Erm ... but yeah, no, I feel quite good about myself especially getting to the end of the module and getting the credits and ... yeah, so that was good. (JB142)

The start of the course was difficult for Jay, but she was willing to go through momentary discomfort. In her first semester she felt that by week Eight the semester was almost over and that she had nearly completed half the year (JB104). At the same time she realises that the feelings she had associated with starting the course were now being eroded. She does not look too far ahead into the future and focuses very much on the present. Any changes she makes in how she studies renews her identity and the person she saw herself as in comparison is very much part of her past. When Jay completes a module there is a sense of accomplishment which brings positive emotions.

Spatiality

> I don't, not really, although there is a room where I could, it's just getting round to sorting it, but I have been into college, I came into college last semester for a Sunday and that was great, to be fair. I just wish it was easier with the parking and things like that. Erm ... of course living seven miles obviously it's not easy, but it really did make a difference just getting those books off the shelves and just sitting and just putting them back, you know, you haven't got to think about taking them home, lugging them home and it was quiet and it was just a really nice atmosphere to work in. (JB160)

Living seven miles away from the university is not easy, distance wise, for Jay. However, she has on occasions come into use the library within the university on a Sunday which she found to be a quiet and congenial atmosphere to work in. At home there is a study room, but it is not one which is ready for use, so her study areas range from the dining room table to spreading out on the bed.

> I can't go shopping ... (laughs) .... I've just had to have less time where I dawdle about and don't do much ... I'm not going to the gym now which I was doing - can't fit that in... I think if I do do it, I could've been doing this even if I don't do that. Do you know what I mean? It's really weird really, but ... so yeah, it's affected it in that respect but not really. (JB55)

Although there are elements of indecisiveness in Jay's explanations she is clear that she no longer goes to places such as the gym where she went before starting the course. Again, she tries to rationalise how she could still go shopping and to the gym, but the essence of what she says is lost through her contradictions.

Project

> But I found that that was leaving us a little bit in the dark, I felt. There was almost a bit of secrecy about what it should look like and that they were doing us a 'huge' favour when they did give us papers to look at, but it was literally 'I'm having them all back - you've got five/ten minutes to look at it'. Well, that's hard to take in really in that time, but we got there in the end ... (JB27-JB29)

Part of achieving in higher education is about being able to write well, for which Jay feels confident about. Not having had this ability would have made the course very difficult for her (JB12) and Jay feels that the 40 credits that she did prior to the course have really been invaluable. She does feel, however, that her study was made to be more difficult than it needed to be by the lack of guidance at the beginning regarding the assignments. It was a time when Jay felt that she needed more enlightenment as to what was expected of her. When her group were given past students' scripts to look at after constant requests, it was done, but reluctantly in Jay's opinion. At the same time, Jay rationalises that there is an element of autonomy expected in students which she believes is part of university life (JB29).

> If I find that my grades are going lower rather than going up, that will be a big thing for me, I would find that hard, I think it would be a real knock of confidence, erm, and it's wrong and I know it's wrong because really you should think 'oh well I'll do better next time', but I think if anything, that probably would be the only thing. ... But I think really, apart from anything else, it's just my grades. (JB104)

Although Jay believes in her ability to achieve in higher education, there is a need for her to see progression in what she does and this is closely associated with her level of confidence in her ability. Confidence is important and if her grades deteriorate it would make her question whether the course was right for her. Simultaneously, she feels that she should not think like that because it is not the right attitude to have. However, her grades are the only factor that would make her contemplate withdrawing.

> ... since I've started it I'm not a 100% sure that's what I want to do. It could lead to something else, but until I've really got these two years out of the way I can then start thinking about whether there's something else I want to do within education, but maybe not a classroom teacher ... specialist in something or ... I'm not quite sure that a primary teacher is actually what I want to be and it's quite interesting because that's really what I wanted to do, but since I've started ... it's not just one door it opens ... (JB65)

At the beginning of the course Jay had a clear vision of what she wanted to do in her career. However, even within a few weeks she now considers other options and is interested in becoming a 'speech therapist' (JB164). For Jay, being a student opens up opportunities for her future and there is a feeling of excitement about the prospect which has at its foundation the assumption that she has the ability (JB210). She indicates that she will go on to do a full degree and this is accompanied by an expectation that she will complete her foundation degree.

Discourse

In describing her experiences Jay tends to refer back to the impact of one particular tutor on many occasions. At the same time there are always elements of empathy as she rationalises each situation from someone else's perspective. She shows that she is analysing situations more from a practical point of view, rather than an emotional one. There is concern shown about how others may see her and it is important to Jay that she feels at ease with them. She mentions very little about her home life and her role as a mother and a wife. These appear separate and unrelated in her discourse to that of being a student.

Summary

Jay's decision to enrol on her course was very much done on the spur of the moment. Since starting, she has adopted a very passive student role with one of her tutors. She does not want to be confrontational and therefore adopts a strategy to manage this short period of her course. Jay feels she has changed in many ways and feels now that she works differently compared to when she started. She is better organised, whereas previously she had often left things to the last moment. At the start of her course she felt that she needed more guidance with the assessments and found that this was a difficult time with the amount of work issued to her. However, her grades have got better over time and this has impacted on her level of confidence. If grades had not improved it would have given her cause to consider leaving. Presently, being a student adds to her responsibilities and it has meant less time for herself. Although enjoying the course she is not convinced that what she is learning is helping her in the job she does as a teaching assistant.

Mohan

Selfhood

> Yes, purely for my own development, nothing for the money or anything, you know, just for the development. I just ... I didn't think I had that in me like, that I could do that sort of thing, but it's just one of those things, so it was why don't I just try it, I see other people getting on the course, mind you they didn't have as much knowledge as I have, so I thought I should give it a go. (MB8)

Mohan chose to do his foundation degree, not because he felt he needed the qualification, but purely from an intrinsic need. For Mohan, it is about giving him more freedom in the future if he does decide to develop his career. His confidence fluctuates between being very content with who he is and his life, to not believing that he can achieve in higher education (MB86). At the same time he believes he has an advantage over other students which is based on the range and depth of his work experience.

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I had to move on ... even if I stay in the same position I still want to learn more. If I do want to change I'm able to. (MB175)

For Mohan, being a student is a sign that he is developing even though his decision to return to education was more of an experimental one. He enrolled believing that he would not "last long" on the course (MB18). Whether he progresses in his career or not is not important to him at this moment, but he likes having the option to change if he so desires in the future. For Mohan, the course is an investment to enable him greater agency in the future. At home, by attending university and studying he believes he is seen as a "role model" by the rest of his family (MB70).

It was important to me because, if there wasn't a prayer time, a set time, you know you have to do like at a certain time because you have to be here for about five to six hours, there's always one of the prayer times which falls in with the time at college. If I wasn't able to do that then I wouldn't have bothered ... (MB98)

For Mohan, his faith is central to his life and the fact that the university had a prayer room was a determining factor for him in deciding which institution to attend. The planned times of his prayers are not something he is willing to compromise and this is more important than the course itself. However, he is aware that sacrifices have to be made in life in order to achieve anything (MB106), although he did not speak of the sacrifices he was actually making.

Sociality

I think it's just the atmosphere and the people, you meet new people and ... new ideas basically ... from all walks of life. (MB60)

In the university Mohan likes the classroom environment and has enjoyed the company of those in his class. The association he has with others are positive aspects of being a student. He gains a lot from the experiences others share and has found that he likes the diversity of the group. For Mohan, the problem of having less time with his family is shared by other members of the group and this helps him to feel less isolated (MB195). Study for Mohan means time away from his family, but he feels that he has to get on with it (MB179). He states that he has confidence in his own social skills, but does have a feeling of inferiority when it comes to study in comparison to

others. He believes that things that take him about six hours to do, would only take between two and three hours for others (MB121).

Embodiment

> The problem is, I go to work and I come back and I'm so tired, it's very difficult to actually ... er, study and if you want to do the reading, you start reading and then your eyes close so I tend to get up in the morning now, about two or three hours early to do my reading because I can't do it at night. I mean, you come back from work at four o'clock and then you sit down and relax, you're in that mode, then you go to sleep ... and you pick up a book, do some reading ... and then it's not possible ... eyes keep shutting and you can't understand anything. (MB183)

The physical impact the course has on Mohan is that he does feel more tired when it comes to studying at home. He found reading in the evenings after he had been to work was affecting him. He has combated this by changing his routine and the time he does his study. For Mohan, studying when he is tired affects his learning.

> I wasn't nervous, in the sense that I didn't know what to expect ... Mind you I was still confused until a couple of weeks, I was just confused, what came from what and ... very confusing. (MB14)

With no expectations on himself and the belief that he was not going to last more than two weeks on the course took pressure off him. Therefore, he did not feel nervous on his first day as he did not know what to be nervous about. Having no terms of reference about what was expected and the fact that he was just trying the course out helped Mohan. However, he did feel it took him a long time to settle on the course and even into his fifth week he was finding everything confusing (MB158).

> I mean some of the tutors went through similar experiences, I think one of them mentioned she used to get up four o'clock in the morning, you know, to do the work from four to eight to accommodate her learning style, I mean that sums it up really, you just have to make sacrifices if you want to get somewhere. God helps those who help themselves. (MB106)

Mohan finds it comforting that a tutor shares her experiences of how she scheduled her time when she studied. He believes that to achieve anything in life requires making sacrifices but that it is in accordance with his faith. It took Mohan a few weeks to get

into a pattern to accommodate the changes he was making. He eventually found that writing a schedule helped him organise himself better as he could schedule in study times (MB154).

Temporality

Mohan speaks very little about his past. He is aware that he missed out on many early years of education before his parents brought him to this country although he does not indicate that he felt disadvantaged by this. His past has lowered his own expectations and in this way he values the development he sees in himself. He states that he always wanted to be a teacher (MB10), but this is a fluid ambition and not one that drives him in the present. He wants to see development in himself which is more important than actually achieving the qualification. However, he would not do the course if there was no qualification to obtain (MB211). He accepts that his development requires him to make sacrifices in the present and therefore being a student for Mohan is an investment for the future.

Project

> I wasn't expecting that I'll be able to handle everything, you know, listening to lectures and do the essays ... I'm terrified of writing anything down ... (MB20)

> I think I was confident already, it just broadened my horizons, basically I look at er, my role as a teaching assistant differently now than when I did before I came. (MB66)

> I thought I'd probably last a couple of weeks and then ... I probably won't last long. (MB18)

For Mohan, there is a complexity as to his confidence. He states that he was confident in his ability at the start of his course. However, this confidence was not extended to his academic ability. The concerns regarding his writing were central to his belief that he would not last long on the course; that he would opt out. In this way he does not put pressure on himself and this has given him the freedom to continue. Even into his seventh week he still doubts whether he will continue and yet what he has learnt so far is making him think differently in his job as a teaching assistant. Having accessed

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the support mechanisms within the university at a very early stage has helped him with his study and developed his belief that he can achieve at this level (MB28).

Discourse

Mohan did not elaborate much; he spoke in very short sentences. For example, when asked what it was like to be a student, he just said "brilliant" (MB56) and did not reveal much more than that. He uses terms which are expressive, yet could not fully explain at times. For example, when asked in what ways the course has helped him with his job he replied - "language development, socially and sort of cognitive" (MB50). When challenged on what he meant by this his reply was very disjointed. He talks little about himself as a family man, nor about any of his relationships with fellow students, although he does indicate an appreciation of them from a supportive aspect. In describing his experience Mohan refers on a number of occasions to his faith and how this is central to everything else he does in his life. For him, personal development is at the core of what he does and his discourse is centred on this. If Mohan does not see progress he sees himself as being 'stagnant' (MB175). Even if progress is only minor it is acceptable.

Summary

The confidence Mohan has in his ability is difficult to categorise as he offers so many contradictions. He is content with his life and the progress he has demonstrated to himself throughout his life, but the course is not something he feels fully sure of. The absence of expectations in himself extinguishes any anxieties he may have about the course because he can walk away from it at any moment without any associated negative feeling which may accompany that decision. He speaks little about the past and his future will take care of itself. The focus Mohan has is on the present. He does not go into detail about the sacrifices he makes. He enjoys being a student and he likes the students he does the course with.

Tanya

Selfhood

> I wish I'd gone into the area of learning I've gone into now because I just ended up working in an office, but it wasn't what I wanted to do, it was just the way of things. My mom wanted me to get a job and that's the job I got. That's the way it went. (TB32)

For Tanya, there is a sense of regret that she did not have the same enthusiasm for learning when she was younger. She feels that when she left school her destiny was already determined for her by what was expected at that time and there was little agency as to her career.

> Yeah, definitely and I suppose what makes it worst for me in a way because I'm a kinaesthetic learner and I have done the little test for that. I do, I'm much better at ... if someone shows me how to do it, I can pick it up a treat, but to sit there and read it, I find it really difficult. (TB103)

Since Tanya has been on the course she has categorised herself as a kinaesthetic learner. By identifying her own learning needs it helps her to establish a style that suits her. She has identified that relying on an auditory system when she reads is not productive.

Making the decision to study on the foundation degree was right for Tanya and at the core is her belief that she is more than a teaching assistant. She has confidence that she is capable of achieving more (TB68). She feels committed and determined to complete the course (TB39) although she feels old at the age of fifty (TB159).

Within the classroom she believes that as a student there should be respect toward a tutor and she would have to feel very strongly about something before making any sort of challenge (TB205). She does, however, believe that she has a voice within the university and this is evidenced by her volunteering to be the student representative for her group (TB107).

> I love it, I love coming here on a Wednesday. Yeah and I've made so many friends. I think that's a big part of it as well because it's quite social as well ... a bit of fun, you know, we get our heads down and have a look at ... we kind of ... we've been texting each other over the last couple of weeks - like where can I find this and how do I go about doing this? It's support as well because you get great support from the people in your group because they're all willing. (TB33)

As the first few weeks progressed, a network developed within the group and this is a big part of being a student for Tanya. Her gregarious nature helped her to make friends easily and the social element that was created within her group became an integral part of the course. How Tanya feels amongst the group is central to her enjoying the course. She likens them to a "little family" (TB170) where everyone supports each other. She recalls what her tutor told the group at induction about speaking up in front of others and that whatever she asks she can guarantee about ten others will be thinking the same thing (TB59). For Tanya, this helped her to feel less intimidated in speaking up in class and to voice her concerns.

> I still see them, I mean most of them are at work anyway, but I still see them. I probably don't ring people up as much as I did because I don't seem to find the time to do that either, but at the end of it I know it's worth it and as long as I still keep that contact, as long as I don't just let it go then that's fine, but that's something I've got to be aware of as well, that I don't just ... not pick up the phone because you hear that don't you? So-and-so never rings me anymore and I don't want to do that. (TB79)

Away from the course, Tanya has less contact with her friends and she is very aware of how this change in behaviour since starting the course may be viewed. She puts this into the context of the value of her learning and sees the sacrifices she is making as a worthwhile investment as long as it does not harm the friendships she has. At work, Tanya receives the support from her head teacher and appreciates that she goes out of her way to help her. This is something Tanya does not take for granted as she sees an absence of support for many in her group (TB93). At the same time she feels in competition with one work colleague who is on a different foundation degree and this has increased Tanya's determination to complete – "I'm not going to fail because if I

drop out and she goes on she'll be able to say, 'Oh she dropped out the course' and I wasn't going to let that happen" (TB146).

> I think I feel a bit more confident, but I think it's because as well I've had people who have helped me realise I can do it 'cos there are times, and we all do it, we all say I just can't do this, you know, but I've never ever felt like giving up, never felt like giving up or walking away from the course and saying I don't want to do it. (TB91)

For Tanya, the support that she has received has given her more confidence in herself even in moments where her self-esteem has been low. At home she receives support from her husband who is "brilliant" and puts up with her when she shows signs of being in a mood (TB77). Tanya believes that she is "lucky" to be surrounded by so much support and it is this that has led her to the belief that she would not consider withdrawing (TB93). There is a determination to complete the course for Tanya, but there were fleeting doubts on her first day.

> Oh my God, I don't think I want this. (TB37)

Tanya is appreciative of the pre-course she did leading up to the foundation degree as it gave her the needed confidence to progress. Even so, she found the first day to be 'scary', but was helped by the fact that she knew some of the students from her pre-course. When she was put into a different group to them it was the only time that she questioned what she was doing (TB37). For Tanya, there was a feeling of withdrawing at that moment, but it was only momentary. The rest of the induction helped her to settle and she soon made friends with her new fellow students.

Embodiment

Although feeling nervous on her first day the separation from those whom she knew from her previous course brought back feelings of isolation which she associated with "being the new girl – first day at school" (TB174). Tanya soon recovered from this with her natural propensity to make friends easily.

> Mind boggling, it really was ... but purely because we had so much erm... so many handouts, they were like chapters of books that we'd got to read or

was worth us reading and for the first week it was literally ... my bag weighed a ton when I went out of here ... (TB55)

Tanya found the first week of classes to be overwhelming. She recalls the amount of work she was given and she could feel a difference in the weight of her bag compared to when she entered.

Erm ... (laughs) very moody, I know I take it out on my husband and the son and the dog (laughs). I don't mean like I've been going around hitting them or anything, but it's just like snappy and ... because I've even woke up in the night worrying about whether I've got the right stuff in the course content and ... but I think everybody's been the same. (TB139)

For Tanya, the course has impacted on her emotions. The amount of work and the impact it had on her time over the first few weeks was altering her behaviour at home. She is conscious of how she has become short-tempered with her family and yet she does not believe that normally she allows herself to feel stress (TB121). Usually her philosophy is to try her "best" and not to get worked up about things (TB119). However, her behaviour has changed and she was not aware of this until her husband brought it to her attention (TB76). Tanya has even been waking during the night and this is related to being uncertain about what is expected of her with her assessed work. Receiving a poor grade brings severe negative emotions - "I got a D+. I felt absolutely devastated and I really couldn't explain ... I felt like crying. That's how bad I felt" (TB209). The experience was so upsetting that she could not express how she felt and this made a lasting impression on her, but not enough to contemplate withdrawing.

Temporality

... I mean, I have to be in work for half eight because we have staff meetings at twenty to nine before the children come in ... now you'd think there would be time to fit some college work in really because I got up at quarter to seven, I went downstairs and made cups of tea, I made sandwiches, I made breakfast, then by the time I got upstairs, got changed, put some makeup on and stuff ready for school it was eight o'clock, so I just got time to make my breakfast and then I've got to go. So that's a whole morning just gone. (TB81)

For Tanya, finding time to fit study in can be lost very quickly. Getting up early she feels should give her a little time at least to do some study, but her family role takes that away from her. Time is precious to her and something she has so little of (TB73).

Reflecting on her first few weeks Tanya felt that the time went very quickly especially with so many other commitments -"It was at the end of the semester that I even got my breath really" (TB137). At work her time is taken up with staff meetings, classes and at present the school Christmas play (the only thing she ever feels stressed about). Outside work her time is taken visiting her mother-in-law who has Alzheimer's disease (TB73). Therefore, time for Tanya is one filled with other commitments.

> I'd wish I'd have done more when I was younger, I wish I'd ... If I'd ... It is true that they say if they could put an old head on young shoulders and know what you know now I'd have tried a lot harder at school, but because it's a breeze at school isn't it? It's like oh well, if I don't do it, I don't pass and that's it, but I still got nine CSE's. (TB29)

As Tanya progresses on the course she reflects on her schooling and that she did not take the opportunities that were open to her at the time. Tanya feels she did not try hard enough when she was younger. There is a sense of regret that it is only now that she realises the potential she once had and this has heightened the value of learning. Her reflections of school make her appreciate the opportunity she is getting now, but she is also thoughtful of the age she will be when she does eventually qualify to be a teacher (TB97).

Spatiality

> I love the atmosphere of it, I like the ... erm, being out of work for the day, for the afternoon and I wish it was the day 'cos if I had the day I could come in and I'd go in the library but, erm, I just like the kind of easy-going atmosphere, nobody really pressures you ... I just like the kind of easy going way. You can get into trouble, but you can't get into trouble in a bad way, you can only get into trouble for not handing things in. (TB85)

Tanya likes coming to university. She identifies the atmosphere that she is drawn to as well as the fact that she likes being away from work. Previously, her pre-course was delivered at her school which was convenient, but she likes the detachment the course

now offers. She especially likes the library and would go there more often if given the time. She finds the staff there especially helpful (TB35). Originally, she found the university to be large and this raised questions within her as to whether she would actually find the places she needed to go to at the beginning (TB47). For Tanya, there is a freedom associated with being a student and the responsibility she feels is essentially one she has toward herself.

> I mean I sat down, I was sat at the kitchen table last Thursday writing my essay because I always write everything in rough first, I never just try to type it up and I was writing it in rough first and then it was like, T, do you know where this is? … and you know when you're sitting there you think I just wish you'd shut up, but you can't say it because then you get moaned at, but that's how I felt, it's like "Oh for God's sake, just shut up and leave me alone". Every five minutes it was something. (TB194)

At home Tanya finds that working downstairs means that she does not get the peace she needs. If she sits with her laptop at the kitchen table her family will interrupt her as they are used to asking her questions. Tanya does end up working downstairs, but at weekends it gets easier as her husband is out at work. On occasions she chooses her bedroom to study where it can sometimes be the only place she can find that is quiet (TB196).

Project

> If I say I'm stupid, I don't mean it in the head. I think sometimes I don't have enough confidence in my ability. I think I can do it, but I question myself whether I can do it. I'm not at the stage where I feel 'oh yeah, I know exactly what to … go away and do it now'. I don't feel like that. (TB178)

Confidence is something Tanya is still searching for in her learning. She questions herself whether she is capable but sees herself at a stage in the future where she will have belief in her own ability. She does not believe she is stupid but that things do not come that easy for her. For this she needs clear guidance to aid her understanding.

> Confidence wise yeah … because once I got erm … I think on my first assignment I got a C or a C+ and that made it like, that wasn't good enough, I want to do better than that and when like I got the first one back from this course that was a C and I thought I can do better than that, I know I

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can do better than that, but it's just knowing what to put in your reports, that's the bit I'd ... and the referencing foxes me a bit and I've wrote down everything that I could think of that I need to write in a reference. (TB23)

Tanya is frustrated because she feels she needs guidance as to what to include in her work and she struggles with referencing. For Tanya, building confidence is centred on her grades and each time she receives a grade back it creates a drive to do better. Being a student is different to her past experience of education because of the autonomy she has as an adult. She is determined to succeed with her current project and this is derived from an underlying belief that she is not a failure (TB144). The cap and gown will be testimony to that (TB144).

Discourse

Tanya's discourse throughout the interview is very much based on her academic ability and time. She speaks little of her role at work or at home and focuses more on her capability to succeed on the course. There is a determination and enjoyment about being a student although there is awareness that academia does not come easy to her. For Tanya, being a student means there is a risk of being exposed as regards her knowledge and understanding in relation to her academic ability. On three occasions she makes reference to the word 'idiot' in relation to herself and her ability.

I could do (with) a book in idiots' speak really. (TB26)

An idiot-proof book would do it for me. (TB101)

Nobody treats you like an idiot. (TB180)

Tanya shows through her dialogue that deep down she believes she is capable and that her concerns stem from not having enough time. She uses terms connected to her emotions, but can quickly move on from disappointments. There are many references to the support she receives, not so much from her family but from her head teacher at work and from fellow students.

Summary

For Tanya, there is an appreciation of learning, but this is coupled with regret that she did not take it seriously when she was younger. The support she gets, especially from

fellow students, is important to her and enhances her enjoyment of being a student. She is determined to complete the course and take the opportunities that have come her way. The only doubts she had of doing the course were on her first day when she questioned her own intentions as to what she wanted to do. She quickly got over this as she moves on from her negative emotions promptly. Tanya does not feel she suffers from stress, but there have been times when she has woken in the night worrying about an assignment and being 'snappy' with the family, including the dog. Her main concerns are getting things clear in her own mind of what she has to do and then finding the time. Overall, there is an enjoyment about being a student and the challenges this brings.