INFLUENCES ON CONCEPTIONS, PERCEPTIONS AND EXPERIENCES OF EMPLOYABILITY

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Abstract

This research explores the responses to the employability agenda of staff working within a post-1992 Higher Education Institution (HEI). Recent policy and discourse has served to drive this issue to the top of many HEI agendas. HEIs are required to provide data about the employment rates of their students at course level (Office for Students, 2018). University marketing material emphasises these statistics as publicity and promotion to prospective students (Burke *et al*, 2017, p.88). Employability is, therefore, a priority for many institutions operating within a competitive, marketised higher education (HE) sector.

This research contributes to existing work on employability by examining, in one institution, the lived experiences of the following key participants in the agenda: senior leaders, middle managers and academics. By adopting an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) approach, rich data was generated revealing the often hidden institutional conversations taking place. The findings of the research reveal a complex and varied response to employability, influenced by several factors, principally: personal experience, values and beliefs, position within the institution and the nature of the institution itself. Common experiences emerged in terms of surveillance and auditing, characteristic of an HE environment governed by increasingly standardised policies, where measuring employability has become mandatory. Participants were united in advocating a bespoke approach to employability policy development and evaluation, which takes account of and recognises various macro and micro issues, for example: the region in which the research setting was based, the nature of the institution, and the diversity of the student body.

The research further indicates that institutional approaches to employability can be understood as a change process, impacting on individuals in the sector in various powerful ways: identity, loss of control, agency and increased pressure are significant issues for participants. The research demonstrates that the implementation of the employability agenda within HEIs is clearly challenging and requires an understanding of the influencing factors on perceptions and conceptions of employability, and negotiation with key staff. For academics in particular, local adaptation of policies and strategies was seen as crucial to meaningful developments in the agenda and the avoidance of being merely policy-led.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Background to the research and rationale

Since 1945, the UK higher education sector has undergone massive change, transforming from a group of elite institutions into a mass system. The changes and growth of the sector are the result of a combination of social, economic and political factors, as outlined by Sutherland (2008, p.48): "demand for higher education increased in the 1950s, partly as a consequence of a new affluence of the middle classes and partly as a consequence of the structural changes made to secondary education in 1944". He also notes documents such as the Robbins Report (1963) as key to growth (Sutherland, 2008, p.48). The 1988 Education Act and the 1992 Further and Higher Education Act transformed the way in which HEIs were structured and received funding. More recent events impacting on higher education institutions include a global economic and financial crisis and reviews of the higher education sector as a whole (The Browne Report, 2010; Wilson Review, 2012; The Higher Education and Research Act 2017). Throughout this period of change, there has been a growing focus on employability as a more instrumental approach to HE has developed. The current discourse, particularly since the introduction of tuition fees, emphasises that HEIs should provide "value for money" (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, (BIS), 2015, p.10) and this is inextricably linked to students being able to secure an appropriate job following graduation (see Office for Students (OFS), 2018).

For several decades, there have been wide-ranging debates around the role of higher education in developing student employability. However, there has been an increased

emphasis and pressure on HEIs from successive Governments to be explicit about plans and strategies they have in place to address such issues, as well as potential employment outcomes for students. For example, universities are now required to provide data to the OFS about employment rates, earnings and the roles graduates occupy after completing a particular course. This information is then published on the Unistats website, as part of the Key Information Set (KIS) data (OFS, 2018). The Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) also includes measurements of graduate employment as one of its three, core metrics and, crucially, this data is used as part of the assessment regime which results in institutions being graded (BIS, 2016). Therefore, in the current climate all universities have to respond to the requirements of the employability agenda and this research examines this issue within a post-1992 higher education institution. In order to maintain confidentiality and anonymity of participants, minimal information about the institution is provided within this thesis. However, for context, the institution is well-established as a widening participation HEI, recruiting a diverse student body and actively engaging with the local community and wider region.

At the start of my career within HE, I was responsible for employability within a specific subject area. My role included engaging with industry and developing work-based learning opportunities for students, as well as curriculum development, which embedded and facilitated the development of skills seen as important for the workplace. This experience has driven my interest in what is increasingly a pressing issue for HEIs. However, as noted within the literature review, there are hugely differing opinions and attitudes around employability within HEIs (which I have

encountered during my time working within HE), and the response of staff to employability is of particular interest to me.

I recognise that employability research could include discussions around a wide range of issues, including the skills agenda, graduate attributes, work placements and apprenticeships. However, this research focuses on how staff perceive, conceive and experience employability, with specific reference to their experiences of dealing with undergraduate students and curriculum within a post-1992 HEI. My research has been designed to allow participants to drive and lead conversations about employability and their interpretations of the term. I recognise that the debate surrounding the definition of employability is complex and contested, and this research does not claim to resolve the issue. Rather, it explores the term in depth and considers how it is interpreted by key constituents as part of their role within HE.

1.2 Identifying a gap

The employability literature includes discussions around institutional approaches to employability (see, for example, Mason, Williams and Cranmer, 2003), and case studies on the implementation of employability initiatives and strategies are available (Fallows and Steven, 2000; Speight, Lackovic and Cooker, 2013). Debates around definitions of employability continue (Knight, 2001; Cranmer, 2006) due to a lack of consensus on the issue, and the way in which employability should be measured and evaluated is considered (Harvey, 2001; Knight and Yorke, 2007). Various models have also been developed and are presented as a solution for institutions aiming to build employability into their curriculum (see Knight and Yorke; 2004; Dacre Pool and Sewell, 2007). It is important, therefore, to recognise the existing research in this area

but also clarify how I will both draw on this work and move the research on. This section sets out my approach, explaining how my research adds to current work on employability.

Mason, Williams and Cranmer's (2003) research evaluates the types of employability initiatives being developed by a range of HEIs and gathers data from both academics and students. Yet some scholars (Tymon, 2013; Andrewartha and Harvey, 2017, p.202) note the absence of the "student voice" in the employability literature and Tomlinson (2005) addresses this in his PhD, which involves interviews with both staff and students. Priest (2106, p.95) examines employability from a specific disciplinary perspective (music technology) and explores the views of various groups including: students, academics, employers and "individuals working at policy level", via a mix of qualitative and quantitative methodologies. He notes that further research with academic staff would be useful: "It would be valuable to consider the attitudes of academics to the enhancement of graduate employability across various disciplines and types of universities" (Priest, 2016, p.309). Cui (2014, p.52) interviewed staff and students as part of her PhD on employability, focusing on three subjects: sport, dance and physical education. In her rationale, she notes the absence of the student voice but also states: "Research studies on lecturers' experiences, perceptions and understandings are limited". Barrie's (2006, p.215) research, however, focuses on academics and takes a phenomenological approach to understanding their perceptions and conceptions of "graduate attributes". Zaitseva *et al* (2008) examine employability as a change management issue, as they assess the response of staff to the implementation of an employability-driven curriculum within one department (School of Sport and Exercise sciences), and Morrison (2014, p.492) examines

employability through the lens of education studies, interviewing staff at various levels of seniority. Yet, Morrison (2014, p.489) also suggests there is a lack of research exploring academic opinion.

In light of the comments above, there seems to be a gap, in terms of giving academics on the ground, who are experiencing the implementation of top-down strategies in the classroom, a voice on these issues. This omission perhaps reflects what is happening more widely, as suggested by Courtney (2013, p.41): "Globally, governments are moving towards the commercialisation of higher education (Kelsey, 1998), resulting in the rise of managerialism and a diminishing influence of the academic voice (Marginson, 2000)".

As the aim of this research is to explore the lived experiences of participants working within a post-1992 institution, an Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) approach is appropriate. IPA calls for a level of homogeneity in terms of the research participants (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009, p.3) and my participants share the common experience of working within the same institution, all with a requirement to respond to the employability agenda. Cranmer (2006, p.169) also suggests that HEIs' attempts to address employability have resulted in "mixed outcomes" and my interviews with participants will explore, in part, how and why policies are developed, interpreted and implemented.

In addition to senior managers, I include middle managers within the participant groups and Ramsden (1998) and Pearson and Trevitt (2005) have noted that they can occupy a crucial role within academia. Within the case study institution, there are middle

managers with an employability remit and two of these individuals have been interviewed. There is little existing employability research which takes a multi-perspective approach to examine and compare the perceptions and understandings of senior leaders, middle managers and academics together, from one institution.

In summary, I have remained faithful to the overall aims of IPA, whilst meeting doctoral requirements for uniqueness, in terms of contributing to existing employability research.

1.3 Research aims and questions

Having identified a gap and provided a rationale for my research, the following research questions have been developed:

1. How is the employability agenda perceived and conceived by academics, middle managers and senior leaders within the institution?
2. What are senior leaders', middle managers' and academics' lived experiences of the employability agenda within the institution?
3. How are senior leaders, middle managers and academics making sense of and interpreting the employability agenda as part of their role within the institution?

The questions have been developed following an in-depth analysis of the literature, which suggests that employability policy is developed and influenced by a wider change agenda. Such changes inevitably impact upon institutions and staff within them and it is this aspect upon which my research focuses. There is a lack of consensus around terminology and understandings of employability, leading to the

development of research question one which explores participants' perceptions and conceptions of employability. The literature reveals that employability agendas are experienced by individuals within HE in various ways and often cause polarised views to emerge. Such issues are explored through research question two. Research question three emerged through close reading of the literature on change within HE and the impact on staff working within HEIs.

The IPA literature (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, p.47; Larkin and Thompson, 2012, p.103) was also key in terms of developing the nature of the research questions which are open, broad and focus on revealing the experiences and meaning-making of individual participants. Research question (RQ) one allows for the exploration of subjective understandings of employability, and RQ two facilitates the analysis of the every-day, personal experiences of the employability agenda for participants. RQ 3 exposes participants' meaning-making around the agenda and, along with RQ 2, also aids with the exploration of participants' experience of the wider change agenda.

1.4 Structure of the thesis

Chapter one has set out the background and rationale for the research. Chapter two is a literature review, divided into two sections. The first covers several aspects of employability, including debates around definitions; key milestones; theories and concepts and resistance to employability. The second half of the literature review is concerned with change. It explores wider economic, social and political changes which have directly led to the current focus on employability within the sector. Chapter three provides an explanation and a more detailed rationale for adopting an IPA methodology. It explores my ontological positioning and epistemological beliefs,

leading to a justification for pursuing research within the framework of a qualitative paradigm. Chapter four is a presentation of the findings of the research, describing and explaining the emergence and meaning of the themes. Chapter five is an analysis of the findings, with reference to relevant literature. Finally, chapter six outlines the conclusions and recommendations, bringing together the key findings and offering recommendations for future practice.

Chapter 2: Literature review

2.1 Rationale and parameters

Several topics are explored within this literature review in order to fully address the research questions. The first part will focus on the notion of employability, examining the key themes, theories, concepts and debates. A rationale for the current focus on employability within HE is offered, exploring the changes within wider society which have impacted on the sector and led to employability becoming a priority. As Trowler (1998, p.13) explains, the "emphasis on the purposes of higher education tends to shift depending on the economic and political situation at the time". This review will highlight these agendas by focusing on issues such as globalisation and neoliberalism, examining their impact on the university sector and providing context and background.

Key events in the HE sector post-1945 will be reviewed, as it is from this point that issues which can be seen to have shaped the current discourse on employability have emerged. As the research aims to explore how policy around employability is being interpreted (in order to answer research question three), the literature review will also refer to key documentation, published by Governments and policy makers, in addition to academic research. As the development of the employability agenda is examined as a result of a wider change agenda within HE, the second part of the literature review will consider the issues of driving and implementing change within higher education. Academics' responses to a changing agenda will be explored and leaders' attempts to implement new strategies and policies in response to external requirements will also be considered.

2.2 Employability as a national debate: the context

Employability has been pushed to the top of institutional agendas as a result of a period of significant transformation. Atkins (1999, p.267) states that “over the last decade there has been a steady stream of reports and papers urging the higher education sector to take key, core, transferable and employability skills into the heart of the students’ learning experience” and, from the 1980s, financial support for HEIs to develop students’ employability was made available by the state (Cranmer, 2006, p.169). Prokou (2008, p.388) suggests that the 1990s saw a shift in the prospects of graduates, when a university degree was no longer a strong predictor of securing employment. Morley (2001, p.131) emphasises “the drive towards economic competition between ‘developed’ nations, and the desire for society to get an economic return from the investment in higher education”. For several decades, therefore, student employability has been a significant concern for higher education. The result of this increased focus on employability is a discourse that suggests a key role of universities is to prepare graduates to enter the workforce (Wilton, 2014; Sin and Neave, 2016; Small, Shacklock and Marchant, 2018). As the employability debate has developed so too has associated policy, driven by Governments of all political persuasion. The first part of this review explores some of the key milestones in the development of the employability agenda.

There are many notable milestones and policies (see appendix 1, p.222) which have emerged since the 1980s, leading not only to the development of employability initiatives within HE, but to employability becoming a key part of HEIs’ overall strategies. The 1988 Education Reform Act and 1992 Further and Higher Education Act are significant. Maclure (1998, p.84-85) provides a detailed critique of the 1988

Act and suggests: “The legislative changes, then, have to be seen in the light of this statement of intent. They are designed to provide the Government of the day with the power to mobilise the resources of higher education in ways that they believe (or hope) will increase national wealth”. Arora (2015, p.637) describes the Dearing Report (1997) as putting “the wheels in motion for the ingraining of the discourse of employability” and “a significant turning point in the mainstreaming of the agenda”. One of the recommendations of Dearing (1997) was that HEIs should work with students to develop “key skills of communication, numeracy, the use of information technology and learning how to learn” (Dearing, 1997, p.372*).* These skills, according to the report, should be developed alongside subject-specific knowledge and the overall aim was a focus on “lifelong learning” (Dearing, 1997, p.10). Another key milestone occurred in 1999, in Bologna, where ministers representing countries across Europe (including the UK) “agreed on a common vision of a European Higher Education Area” (EHEA, 2016) and signed up to the Bologna Declaration. One of the goals of the Bologna process was “fostering the employability of graduates throughout their working lives in rapidly changing labour markets” (EHEA, 2016). Lee, Foster and Snaith (2016, p.96) cite the Leitch Review of Skills (2006) as key to employability becoming a priority in HE and, although the report highlighted the need to develop skills within society as a whole, special mention was made of the role of higher education in this national objective (Leitch, 2006, p.3). The report includes “recommendations to change the targets faced by HE institutions to increase the focus on workforce development, away from a sole focus on participation in HE by young people” (Leitch, 2006, p.100). The publication of such reports signalled a focus within HE on the skills agenda.

In political terms, there has been a consistent move towards dealing with employability as a means of determining financial support, irrespective of the political party in power, as Jameson *et al* note (2012, p.26). The imperative on higher education to demonstrate their economic worth within society has become increasingly explicit, particularly since 1992, and policy documents are specific about the need for HEIs to be transparent about the work they are doing around employability. In 2010, the Higher Education Minister, stated that HEIs in England should publish employability statements which: "…will summarise what universities and colleges offer students to help them become job-ready in the widest sense and support their transition into the world of work" (BIS, 2010). In 2011, a White Paper was published which stated: "We will ask the main organisations that hold student data to make detailed data available publicly, including on employment and earnings outcomes..." (BIS, 2011, p.6).

A Green Paper, outlining changes to the HE sector, issued by the Conservative-led Government in 2015, included "a greater focus on graduate employability" (BIS, 2015, p.7) as one of the core aims. The subsequent White Paper maintained an instrumental discourse, which clearly positioned universities in terms of its role and contribution to the economy. One of the aims of the Government proposals was to "enhance teaching in our universities by implementing the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF), using a phased approach" (BIS, 2016, p.19). There are three core metrics in terms of assessment within the TEF, one of which is the data collated annually relating to graduate employment rates, known as the Destination of Leavers from Higher Education (DLHE) statistics (BIS, 2016, p. 47). The issue of student and graduate employability to the higher education sector, therefore, is crucial, not least

because the results of the TEF assessment are linked to financial incentives, including allowing institutions to maintain or increase fees (BIS, 2016, p.50).

According to Arora, HEIs are held accountable for the development of student employability skills, as well as for "failing to produce graduates with appropriate skills" (2015, p.636). Policy documents reflect this view and businesses and trade bodies representing employers, such as the Confederation of Business Industry (CBI, 2012), have also joined the call for HEIs to ensure that their students are prepared for the world of work upon graduation. The message from Government (and previous Governments), therefore, is clear: the HE sector needs to do more to address student employability skills.

2.3 A rationale for employability: the development of the knowledge economy

One of the objectives of the employability agenda is to equip students with the skills they need for the modern workplace, as a job for life is no longer realistic in today's economy (Fallows and Steven, 2000, p.75; Prokou, 2008, p.388). This leads to one of the central arguments offered for pursuing and developing employability initiatives: the need for universities to contribute to the knowledge economy, helping to develop and nurture human capital amongst its student body and, ultimately, society's future workforce. As Morley (2001, p.131) suggests, the "central legitimating idea of Higher Education in Britain is changing. Increasingly it is being viewed as a sub-system of the economy". Fuelling this approach is the influence of neoliberalism, which Olseen and Peters (2005, p.314) insist:

> …must be seen as a specific economic discourse or philosophy which has become dominant and effective in world economic relations as a consequence of super-power sponsorship. Neoliberalism is a politically imposed discourse, which is to say that it constitutes the hegemonic discourse of western nation states.

They also note: “the importance of knowledge as capital” (Olssen and Peters, 2005, p.330). The centrality of the knowledge economy within neoliberal policy, and, therefore, the employability debate is clear throughout the employability literature and relevant policy documents (see Dearing, 1997; Bridgstock, 2009; Wilson, 2012). Redó and Comas (2011, p.174) have also emphasised a European-wide acceptance of the development of the knowledge economy, noting: “a shift towards fostering and promoting training, human capital and the knowledge society as an essential element of the driving force behind the European economy”. Policy makers and those advising governments continue to advocate the development of a knowledge economy (BIS, 2009). Wilson (2012, p.2) suggested “The words of Lord Dearing continue to ring true. The economic and social prosperity of the UK depends upon a healthy knowledge-based economy”. Such reports establish the dual responsibility of higher education to its students and, importantly, to wider society, and provide an economic justification for pursuing an employability agenda in that society will benefit in the long term.

Peters (2002, p.94) notes that the “investment in human capital” is one of several key distinctions between a knowledge economy and a “traditional economy”, and that “human capital (i.e. competencies) is the key component of value in a knowledge-based economy”. Marginson (1993, in Välimaa and Hoffman, 2008, p.270) further

explains: “First, education and training increase individual cognitive capacity and therefore augment productivity. Second, increased productivity leads to increased individual earnings, and these increased earnings are a measure of the value of human capital”. Human capital, therefore, is presented by advocates of the employability agenda as an asset, something valuable for both those individuals being educated and to society. The societal benefits, however, are often prioritised within the employability discourse with a focus on the need to grow and support the economy. Le Grange (2011, p.1039) states that “human capital theory holds that economic growth depends on investment in education” and Holborow (2012, p.99) points to a discourse which portrays “human capital development as the essential ingredient for economic growth and, it follows, the main function of higher education”.

The contemporary, dominant narrative, therefore, is that a key purpose of higher education is to develop students’ human capital capacity, with the focus on an economic rationale for the employability agenda. Atkins (1999, p.270) describes a “contract” between universities and wider society “that in return for the public monies invested in it, higher education must make a contribution to the economic prosperity of the country”. As Knight and Yorke (2003a, p.3) explain: “many Governments are concerned that investment in higher education should increase the stock of human capital which is seen as a source of national economic well-being”. Yet, despite the volume of literature and policy documents which expound human capital theories as a rationale for prioritising employability, there are several commentators who challenge these explanations. Morley (2001, p. 132), for example, questions the Government’s focus on “applying a supply-side strategy” and cites Keep (1997, in Morley, 2001, p. 133) who suggests that “employability discourses are prone to overlook the possibility

that many employers will want a significant proportion of their workforce to occupy low skilled jobs". Brown, Hesketh and Williams (2003, p.109) agree with Keep and describe human capital theories as "problematic". Others question the fundamental beliefs bound up with the neoliberal notion of education as a means of developing human capital, with Holborow (2012, p.93) suggesting that it "represents a subtle masking of social conflict and expresses metaphorically the commodification of human abilities and an alienating notion of human potential, both of which sit ill with the goals of education". Yet, Tomlinson (2017, p.339) suggests that those developing policy continue to rely and draw on such theories.

In an increasingly competitive marketplace, in which higher education institutions are competing to recruit students, employability has become a key factor in the decision-making process undertaken by those students: Blyth and Cleminson (2016, p.11-12) refer to a literature review undertaken on behalf of BIS "as part of the TEF development process" and which "highlights that employment outcomes were considered the most important factor by students when choosing a Higher Education establishment in 2015 (Higher Education Policy Institute, 2016)". Jameson *et al* (2012, p.26) provide a summary of Tomlinson's (2008) work in which he "argues that in the context of increasing fees and the current economic climate, students (and their parents) are increasingly shopping around for courses, seeing employability as a core criteria". Government policy and rhetoric, outlined in the discussions above, has led to a dominant instrumentalist discourse, highlighted by Holmes (2006), and which now seems to be adopted by key stakeholders in the employability debate. Holmes (2006, p.13) suggests that "the conceptualisation of skills and attributes as possessions that are used in performance, the possessive-instrumentalist perspective" has "severe

flaws" (Holmes, 2006, p. 1). Yet Tomlinson (2008, p.58) suggests that "students appear to have internalised the dominant view of 'education as a return' so prevalent in higher education policy".

2.4 The problems and issues with the notion of employability

There is debate and disagreement within the academic literature around perceptions and understandings of employability and Holmes (2017, p.360) states: "…rarely do such discussions address the question of what kind of concept it is". Similarly, Cranmer (2006, p.172) highlights problems with several aspects "from defining, to measuring, to developing, to transferring". She suggests that employability is a "woolly concept to pin down" (2006, p.172) and refers to Knight's (2001, in Cranmer, 2006, p.6) assertion that it is a "chameleon concept". Boden and Nedeva (2010, p.42) state that "it is not possible in principle to define precisely the content of 'employability' as that is where heterogeneous employers' needs and individuals' attributes meet, and of course this will vary over time too". Barrie (2006) offers insight into the differences between academics' understandings with his research around conceptions of graduate attributes. He developed "four increasingly complex, qualitatively distinct understandings or categories of description" which were: "precursory conception, complement conception, translation conception and enabling conception" (Barrie, 2006, p.223). The categories represent views of graduate attributes that move from skills and knowledge students already possess upon starting university (precursory conception) to enabling conception which "lie at the heart of scholarly learning and knowledge, with the potential to transform the knowledge they are part of and to support the creation of new knowledge and transform the individual." (Barrie, 2006,

p.223 – 225). Such research further demonstrates the disparity of understanding and conceptions around employability issues.

Nevertheless, there are several researchers who have offered definitions of employability. For Hillage and Pollard (1998, p.1), it is "about having the capability to gain initial employment, maintain employment and obtain new employment, if necessary". Knight and Yorke (2006, p.8) view employability as "a set of achievements – skills, understandings and personal attributes – that make graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations, which benefits themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy". Yet scholars have criticised approaches which focus on the individual's ability to secure a graduate job and which fail to recognise other significant factors that could have an impact (Morley, 2001; Moreau and Leathwood, 2007). Brown, Hesketh and Williams (2003, p.110) argue that employability "exists in two dimensions – the relative and the absolute". The absolute approach holds individuals accountable for being unable to secure work, rather than examining the wider societal issues (the relative dimension), as employability "will vary according to economic conditions" (Brown, Hesketh and Williams, 2003, p.110). Moreau and Leathwood (2007, p.319) also criticise the focus on the individual:

> There is wide research evidence to suggest that the 'non-traditional' graduates in this research are at a disadvantage in seeking graduate employment – whether because they gained a degree at a post-1992 university or because of their ethnicity, gender, social class background, disability or age.

Morley (2001, p.132) highlights additional factors pertaining to the ability to secure employment: “in the employability discourse, aspects of students’ lives such as gender, ethnicity, social class tend to be disregarded”, and Morrison’s (2014) research highlights the issue of class. In addition to personal barriers, other research notes the impact that the reputation of a HEI can have on student employability. Boden and Nedeva (2010, p.48) state: “The University of Oxford website does not contain an employability statement but, despite this, Oxford graduates are widely regarded as highly employable”. It is important to note, therefore, that HEIs are not a homogenous group and, although many HEIs are actively pursuing and promoting an employability agenda, investing significant resources, others may not be.

Closely linked to the issues above, other academics question the way in which employability should be measured, which also raises concerns about the TEF assessment criteria. For example, Harvey (2001, p.97) is critical of the “insistence that employability should be measured by outcomes in the form of recent graduate employment rates”. He suggests that this type of evaluation frames successes as an “*institutional* achievement rather than the propensity of the *individual* student to get employment” (2001, p.97). Little (2001, p.121) also questions the use of destinations data, highlighting, however, the “emergence of ‘employability’ as a dimension of quality” of an HEI. She argues that “an institution’s seemingly poor rate of graduate employment might say more about the make-up of that institution’s student population than it does about the quality of its higher education provision”, also recognising potential barriers faced by some students seeking employment (Little, 2001, p.126). It is clear, therefore, that the evaluation and measurement of employability is a complex issue and a whole range of factors are significant in determining whether a student will

secure employment. As Brown, Hesketh and Williams (2003) suggest, market conditions need to be considered, and this is perhaps particularly pertinent for those students studying and attempting to secure employment within regions of the UK with high unemployment rates, making geography another factor impacting upon a student's employability journey.

In light of such criticisms of the way in which employability discourse has developed, some researchers are calling for alternative approaches to research in this area. Cashian (2017, p.111), for example, advocates a "critical realist" analysis of the agenda, which offers a "view of the nature of social reality as somewhere between the interpretivists and positivists views" (Cashian, 2017, p.112). Social structure and agency are central tenets and he purports that "from a critical realist perspective 'student employability' relates to students interpreting and taking actions in response to the surrounding employability structure, both pre-university, during university, and indeed post-university" (Cashian, 2017, p.115). Holmes (2001; 2015; 2017) is also critical of the development of employability research, specifically the fact that "the skills and attributes approach dominates both the current practice and research agenda". Instead he promotes an approach to employability which focuses on identity and the factors involved in "becoming a graduate" (Holmes, 2015, p.220). He has set out a "manifesto for researching employability", at the core of which is recognition of the importance of considering both structure and agency (Holmes, 2017, p.367). However, as analysis develops, there is still a lack of research which aims to better understand the experiences of staff within this agenda.

2.5 Approaches to employability within the HE sector

Another crucial aspect of the employability debate is the way in which HEIs should respond to and implement employability policy. The Dearing Report (1997, p.3) set out requirements of HEIs and states: "learning should be increasingly responsive to employment needs and include the development of general skills, widely valued in employment". Many HEIs have focused on the development of skills (Holmes, 2015, p.220) but alternative models take a "holistic approach that embed employability as part of academic learning" (Harvey, 2005, p.16). Cranmer (2006, p.170) provides a useful overview of the way in which employability skills learning and teaching has been developed by universities across the UK. However, she also questions whether the significant, continued investment in developing employability is appropriate:

> …it would surely make sense for universities to redirect some of their resources from classroom-based initiatives seeking to develop employability skills to increasing employment-based training and experience and/ or employer involvement in courses…
>
> (Cranmer, 2006, p.182-183).

Another way in which student employability is being addressed is by encouraging students to experience the world of work (see Helyer and Lee, 2014), as a way of gaining valuable experience and developing key skills. Such experiences can take various forms, including paid and unpaid work experience, work placements, volunteering and internships (see Holdsworth, 2010; Edwards, 2014; Kamerade and Paine, 2014 for analyses of such initiatives). A closer working relationship between

industry and higher education is also encouraged in several policy documents and official reports (see Dearing, 1997; Leitch, 2006; Wilson, 2012).

The sector's clear focus on developing employability initiatives is evident through the work of those organisations working closely with HEIs, such as The Higher Education Academy (HEA). It refers to employability as "a priority in the 21st century" (Higher Education Academy, 2018) and has developed a range of materials and guidance to help HEIs design and implement employability initiatives. The wider academic community has developed various employability models, with the USEM (Yorke and Knight, 2002, p.264) and the CareerEdge models (Dacre Pool and Sewell, 2007) as frequently cited examples. Knight and Yorke (2003a, 2004, 2007) have written extensively on the importance of embedding employability into the curriculum and outline their "concern for academic values and the promotion of good learning" (Knight and Yorke, 2004, p.1), firmly believing the two are not mutually exclusive. Their model combines "understanding, skills, efficacy beliefs and metacognition" (Yorke and Knight, 2006, p.6). However, the "response to the USEM model was mixed", according to Small, Shacklock and Marchant (2018, p.156). Dacre Pool and Sewell (2007, p.280), who are generally positive about the model, felt that it could alienate some groups as it was "too academic and not easily understood by students or their parents" (Small, Shacklock and Marchant, 2018, p.156). Their CareerEDGE model, therefore, amalgamated the "theoretical and practical" in a way which they believed would be user-friendly to the wide range of stakeholders involved in the development and implementation of employability (Dacre Pool and Sewell, 2007, p.280).

2.6 Academic resistance to the employability agenda

Academics' objections to the employability agenda are raised within the literature. For example, Speight, Lackovic and Cooker (2013, p.123) refer to the "polarity of views on employability" and Ashe (2012) highlights the issues that lecturers within the disciplines of politics and sociology have expressed. However, it has been suggested that resistance to the employability agenda is more likely within certain types of HEIs:

> …it has often been remarked that research-intensive universities have been reluctant to deviate from a value system that concentrates solely on the importance of academic development, and sees this as being diametrically opposed to the development of employability skills
>
> (Baker and Henson, 2010, p.64).

Other research suggests that academics recognise the importance of addressing employability "…but there are wide differences between universities and between subjects about how it's most appropriate to treat the issue" (Mason, Williams and Cranmer, 2003, p.30). My research takes place within a teaching-centred university where these assertions can be further examined with academics from a range of subjects.

A key objection to the employability agenda is that it suggests that higher education exists to train students for the workplace and, therefore, makes businesses' requirements a priority (discussions around the purpose of a university are included later). Lee, Foster and Snaith (2016, p.15) suggest students also have an issue with

this: “engagement with the employability agenda is patchy” and “there appears to be tensions arising from what is clearly a business-led agenda”. Washer (2007) recognises the “resistance to the idea of education solely for the needs of industrial capitalism” (2007, p.59) and Yorke and Knight (2003b, p.vii) suggest that “the human capital approach gives higher education an instrumentalist twist that many academics find discomforting”. Finally, Zaitseva *et al* (2008, p.10) also highlights the “instrumental approach” as a concern amongst some academics in their research. Therefore, the instrumentalist argument upon which policy makers and other external stakeholders base the overall employability rationale is that which raises most concern amongst certain academics.

Other commentators suggest that some academics feel unable to address employability skills within the classroom. Bennett, Dunne and Carré (1999, p.72-73), for example, state that they “feel it is not part of their role to provide skills for employment”. A BIS report (2011) found that: “Whilst 91% of UK careers staff felt that academic staff shared responsibility for employability skills, involvement is often limited” (Artess, Forbes and Ripmeester, 2011, p.8).

The notion of disengagement is highlighted in de la Harpe *et al*'s (2000, p.238) research which suggests that “the majority of staff have little enthusiasm or interest in engaging in professional-development activities…”. A lack of expertise is specifically raised in Laughton’s (2011, p.238) research by academics who feel ill-equipped to embed and teach employability skills as it falls outside of their specialist disciplinary areas. This issue is one which merits serious consideration: the role of an academic is to be expert in their chosen field and, therefore, a reluctance to engage in an area

which is unfamiliar is perhaps understandable. Elkington and Lawrence's (2012, p.54) research with academics revealed that: "Non-specialist teaching elicited a range of feelings with phrases frequently emerging such as: low confidence; insecurity; 'out of comfort zones'; and 'just coping'". The response to concerns about specialist knowledge, raised by Laughton (2011), was to "convince and demonstrate to tutors that they do not need to be employability experts" (Laughton, 2011, p.238). Yet, developing persuasive and convincing arguments to counter claims that expertise is not essential would presumably be difficult. Laughton (2011, p.238) recognises, for example, that: "Academic identity is forged primarily through an association with academic disciplines". Henkel (2000) cites Becher's (1989) research in this area and notes that he draws on Bailey's (1977) influential work around "tribes" as a way of conceptualising academics working within their own subject: "each tribe has a name and a territory, settles its own affairs, goes to war with others, has a distinct language or at least a distinct dialect and a variety of ways of demonstrating its apartness with others" (Bailey, 1977, in Henkel, 2000, p.18).

In addition to concerns around expertise, is that the pursuit of an employability-focused curriculum could lead to "diluting" (Yorke, 2010, p.8) in terms of the subject material (also see Speight, Lackovic and Cooker, 2013, p.120). However, Teichler (1999, p.77) suggests that a transforming, instrumental, neoliberal environment, provides the conditions in which "generalist" knowledge is perhaps more highly regarded than "specialist". Harris (2005, p.423) notes that "socially relevant and applied knowledge has become more important to an emergent 'knowledge economy'". Therefore, concerns about teaching outside of one's area of expertise also raise wider questions about shifting perceptions of the value of knowledge. A polarisation of views between

wider society and some sections of the academic community is apparent as, while many academics' main concern is the pursuit of specialist knowledge, external pressures from, for example, Government call for a more instrumental approach to education. Harvey (2000, p.9) points to this dichotomy by suggesting that "higher education is heavily characterised by instrumental learning, which takes two forms that are pulling in different, and increasingly opposite, directions".

In summary, Knight and Yorke (2004, p.20) offer a list of reasons why academics view the employability agenda as "a challenge to academic values". They include:

- Universities exist to promote truth, wisdom, scholarship and qualities of mind. The world of work has quite different values, values that are anti-pathetic to universities' missions
- It means doing what employers say
- It means giving students time to go on placements and work experience, which reduces the time for academic study
- My job is to teach the material and there's already too little time to cover it. If I have to teach skills as well, things will be impossible
- We'll have to spend more time counselling and advising students.

Jameson *et al* (2012, p.34), whilst recognising academics' concerns, also advocate a proactive approach or risk not having their voices heard: "taking possession of the situation can create opportunities to apply critical thinking to practice and is certainly preferable to the consequences of being marginalised in this debate".

Despite all of the issues outlined above, Arora (2015, p.644) suggests that "the employability agenda, reinforced by the discourse of the skills gap, has become common sense and subsequently difficult to challenge". Holmes and Miller's report (2000, p.658) on employability initiatives implemented at the universities of Newcastle and Northumbria quotes the Pro-Vice Chancellor of the University of Newcastle:

> These projects lay to rest the false dichotomy between 'academic' and 'employment related'. They amply demonstrate that you can, and must, integrate traditional intellectual skills and attributes with employment related skills and attributes.

Any challenge to the "common sense" employability agenda is "seen as a stance against the interest of the student" (Arora, 2015, p.644), which seems to suggest an ethical responsibility for a focus on employability. Laughton's (2011, p.238) description of an attempt to "engage hearts and minds" of academic staff who are less enthusiastic about embedding employability into the curriculum also encourages staff to act responsibly towards students, "emphasising a key moral purpose of HE in preparing students to be functionally mature individuals so that they succeed in their chosen careers". The literature suggests, therefore, that academics who question the employability discourse, are persuaded to comply in a variety of ways, some of which call into question their responsibility to students if failing to conform.

2.7 Summary of employability issues

There is considerable debate within the literature on employability; not only in relation to an overall definition of the term, but the way in which initiatives to increase students'

employability skills should be developed and implemented, as well as how they are evaluated. Much of the research on employability focuses on the following areas: an analysis of the implementation of employability initiatives; recommendations and case studies offering best practice to other institutions; and an analysis of the approaches to measuring or evaluating the success of employability projects. As Cashian (2017, p.111) notes, there is considerable information available devoted to "show and tell" or "what works" examples of employability development within HE. Yet Holmes (2017, p.364) states that such examples provide "little contribution to a broader development of our understanding" and that there is "a disjunction between most recent research on graduate employment outcomes, and most policy pronouncements and employability initiatives".

This section of the literature review has attempted to explicate the range of opinions and solutions offered around employability debates, and demonstrate the importance of the economic, social and political context in terms of the agenda. It also highlights a dichotomy of opinion within academia between those who are more accepting and attempt to offer ways in which HEIs can implement employability strategies (Avramenko, 2011; Chang, 2014; Laughton, 2011; Rao, 2014), and those who are sceptical (for example, see Baker and Henson, 2010 and Frankham, 2017). These issues will be explored with the participants involved in this research.

2.8 The changing nature of higher education

In order to understand the continued focus on employability within HE, it is important to appreciate some of the major changes which have impacted upon the sector, and which are driving an agenda which prioritises employability. There is a significant

amount of literature tracking key events in higher education post-1945 (see, for example, Henkel, 1999; Kogan and Henney, 2000; Sutherland, 2008) and a range of economic, social and political factors are examined and suggested as drivers for the change. The key issues that emerge from the literature are massification, cost-cutting and accountability, globalisation and the pursuit of neoliberal policies, and their ultimate impact of changing management practices within higher education.

Several authors (Kogan and Henney, 2000; Sutherland, 2008; Smith *et al*, 2010) refer to the Robbins Report (1963) as key in the move towards massification. In fact, Sutherland (2008, p.50) suggests "the nature, size and structure of higher education changed beyond recognition post-Robbins". There is wide recognition within the literature of the significance of this transformation of HE into a mass system (Kogan and Henney, 2000; Newby, 2003; Smith *et al*, 2010). According to Scott (1995, p.170), the sector witnessed more "complex" HEIs emerge as they were faced with the task of developing a clear strategic direction in a crowded marketplace as a consequence.

Massification is an important milestone when discussing employability as it has resulted in an increasing number of graduates looking for graduate-level jobs which, some suggest, can lead to "over supply, often referred to as over-education" (Sutherland, 2008, p.50). Becher and Trowler (2001, p.5) state that academics are "more likely to have come from professions outside of academia and more likely to be involved in vocational subjects and new disciplines and domains of knowledge" in this changed system. The link between industry and academia, therefore, has strengthened, reflecting the increased focus on employability. Yet, publications such as the Wilson Review (2012, p.1) also call for the relationship between business and

academia to be enhanced and the need to "increase opportunities for students to acquire relevant work experience during their studies".

The literature highlights that financial concerns relating to higher education became more of an issue in the latter part of the twentieth century (Kogan and Henney, 2000; Henkel, 2000). A combination of problems with the economy and a reduction in funding for Higher Education in the 1970s and 1980s saw the emergence of a changing relationship between the state and the sector (Kogan and Heney, 2000; Henkel, 2000). The increased involvement and monitoring of HEIs by the Government resulted in less freedom and self-governance for universities (Bauer and Henkel, 1999, p.242). One of the most significant changes around this time was the 1988 Education Reform Act, which saw HEIs "brought more firmly under the control of the Secretary of State, through changes in their funding aimed at increasing accountability and making them more amenable to government direction" (Maclure, 1988, p.ix). Equally important was the 1992 Higher and Further Education Act which:

> …ended the funding distinction between polytechnics and universities. The former were given degree awarding powers and central government funding from the Department of Education to all institutions of higher education was now to be allocated via the Higher Education Funding Councils
>
> (Sutherland, 2008, p.48)

With reference to the 1998 Act, Maclure (1988, p.84) states that:

> The more the White Paper stressed the traditional academic and professional functions of higher education, the clearer became the overriding priority: universities and polytechnics had to be made to serve the Government's dominant aims for the success of British industry and commerce and the creation of an enterprise society.

This legislation and the introduction of tuition fees in 1998 are vital in terms of providing context for the trajectory of prioritising employability.

McRoy and Gibbs (2009, p.689) suggest many of the changes within higher education "are similar to those that have occurred across the public sector as a result of government policy and funding aimed at outcomes" and Hartley (1995, p.409) identifies the rationale for significant change is: "the justification has been the quest for quality, for efficiency and effectiveness". The accountability of higher education to wider society, therefore, is closely linked to economic concerns and a desire to reduce state funding. However, some scholars suggest that an "anti-professional ideology had been building up for some time…" (Kogan and Henney, 2000, p.57). Välimaa (1999, p.25) agrees that a "lack of public trust" in higher education became an issue. There are many other key events in the history of higher education, several of which centre around funding and economic issues. However, it is not possible to discuss all of these events in detail within the limits of this review. The brief summary of issues provided here highlights the consequences of the implementation of a politically-driven

agenda, which has seen the introduction of neoliberal policies and which will now be considered.

It is important to note that, during the period described above, globalisation and neoliberalism had a significant impact on the higher education sector, and provide an explanation for the growing concern about employability issues within the sector. As Kalfa and Taska (2015, p.583) state: “Against the backdrop of the neoliberal agenda, increasingly entrepreneurial, customer-focused universities in anglophone countries focused growing attention on ensuring the ‘employability’ of their graduates”. Globalisation and neoliberalism, therefore, provide a context for the rationale, offered by many within the employability debate, that higher education is a way of improving the country’s and an individual’s economic prosperity.

For many, (Becher and Trowler, 2001; Jauhiainen, Jauhiainen and Laiho 2009; Välimaa and Hoffman, 2008) the move towards globalisation has been a key catalyst of change within higher education, having a significant impact on the sector. Jauhiainen, Jauhiainen and Laiho (2009, p.418) provide a definition of globalisation:

> A process that proceeds from the top down (globalisation from above), which involves the triumphant march of capital, supra-national market forces and the new (IT) technologies across national boundaries, and the ‘colonising’ forces that accompany them.

However, it is the “spread of neo-liberalist social and educational policy” (Jauhiainen, Jauhiainen and Laiho 2009, p.418), which is linked to globalisation, and which causes

most concern (see St George, 2006; Le Grange, 2011; Pritchard, 2011; Holborow, 2012).

Smith *et al* (2010) suggest that a partial explanation for the changes in the UK higher education sector, post-World War Two, can be found by examining events in the United States (US). Their research refers, for example, to trips to the US undertaken by individuals responsible for the Robbins Report (1963) (Smith *et al*, 2010, p.451). There is recognition elsewhere within the literature that the neoliberal policies, described in this review, were favoured by both Reagan and Thatcher (Le Grange, 2011, p.1040), noting the American influence. Neoliberal policies are often linked to the right, in political terms. Smith *et al* (2010), for example, note the "special relationship" between the US and the UK in the late 1970s and the "shared ideologies of Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan based on free-market solutions to the public sector crisis" (2010, p.448). Le Grange (2011, p.1040) also makes the link between neoliberalism and the "'new right' in Europe".

It is important at this point to highlight key policies and rhetoric of the main political parties in terms of higher education and employability. For example, during the Labour-led Government between 1997 and 2010, there was an emphasis on the notion of higher education offering opportunities for social justice and widening participation. The party set a target that "at least 50% of young people should enter higher education" (BIS, 2009, p.3). The BIS report into the future of HE, produced during the tenure of the Labour Government, highlighted the need for HEIs to develop the employability of their students (BIS, 2009, p.8), but the wider narrative was one of continuing widening participation, with a focus on helping young people from lower

socio-economic backgrounds to access universities (BIS, 2009). The report did, however, set out requirements for HEIs to "publish a statement on how they promote student employability" (BIS, 2009, p.8). In 2010, the Browne report (2010, p.31) also emphasised the need for a greater amount of information relating to the employability of graduates to be made available: "The UCAS portal will allow students to compare courses on the proportion of students in employment after one year of completing the course; and average salary after one year".

Following the general election in 2010, the Conservative and Liberal Democrat Coalition Government announced its plans for the higher education sector. In a speech given by the then Higher Education Minister, David Willetts, a continuing focus on widening access and social mobility is listed alongside clear messages of financial concern. Two of the four objectives for the higher education sector were to ensure that "universities have more robust funding arrangements and that we have a fiscally sustainable HE system" (BIS, 2010). In 2009, the Labour Government had warned the sector that there would be issues around financing (BIS, 2009, p.2) and since 2010, the Coalition Government announced various austerity-driven plans, with the then Prime Minister, David Cameron, confirming "that austerity measures would continue after 2015 if the Conservatives won the next election" (Morris, 2013). Consequently, after winning the general election in 2015, the Conservative Government outlined its mission to continue the transformation of HE, with an ongoing focus on graduate employability and proposals to introduce a teaching excellence framework. Rhetoric is dominated by discussions around "value for money" within the sector, which the former Higher Education Minister, Jo Johnson MP, described as "an increasingly pressing issue in higher education" (Gov.uk, 2017) and which is the subject of an Education

Committee Inquiry (Parliament UK, 2018). In addition to the instrumentalist employability agenda, therefore, the contemporary employability discourse has been clearly positioned within a narrative of financial restraint. There is a need to demonstrate a return on investment for students and parents who are now being asked to contribute more to access higher education. Irrespective of the political origins and influences of neoliberalism, it is clear that its central policies and ideas are permeating all areas of higher education, have been for some time, and are evident during a Labour-led, Conservative and Liberal Democrat Coalition and Conservative-led Government. In fact, Pritchard (2004, p.511) suggests that while neoliberalism has traditionally been "associated with the New Right, it is becoming politically bipartisan".

2.9 The impact of globalisation and neoliberalism: changing practices within higher education and a move away from Humboldtian values

There is a considerable body of literature (Jauhiainen, Jauhiaren and Laiho, 2009; Kauppinen, 2012; Sum and Jessop, 2013) which assesses the impact of globalisation and neoliberal policies on higher education, leading to the introduction of ideas such as "new managerialism, academic capitalism and academic entrepreneurialism" (Deem, 2001, p.8). Such notions are characteristic of an era of commodification, massification and marketization, with universities seen as businesses and students as customers. Olssen and Peters (2005, p.328), for example, suggest a "shift from 'bureaucratic-professional' forms of accountability to 'consumer-managerial' accountability models". Higher education, it is argued, is "now viewed as a product or consumer good which can be bought, sold, bid for, haggled over or auctioned like any saleable commodity" (Pritchard, 2011, p.128). The discourse which positions universities as businesses and students as consumers has accelerated with Pucciarelli

and Kaplan (2016, p.311) suggesting that: “Now, education is becoming a global service delivered by quasi-companies in an ever-more complex and competitive knowledge marketplace”.

From around the period of the 1980s a new public management approach was encouraged and implemented through higher education policy (Kogan and Henney, 2000), characterised by the “development of corporate strategies, strong central management teams, the proliferation of cross-institutional support units concerned with quality assurance, teaching and learning, staff development…” (Becher and Trowler, 2001, p.11). Additionally: “Measured outputs, strategic planning, performance indicators, quality assurance measures and academic audits” (Olssen and Peters, 2005, p.313) were introduced across the sector. As further evidence of external control over universities, many “targets and performance criteria are increasingly applied from outside the academic role” (Olssen and Peters, 2005, p. 326). Deem (2004, p.109) has also written extensively on reform in some areas of the public sector suggesting it: “places considerable emphasis on culture change and the need to overtly manage academics and academic work in the context of further marketisation of publicly-funded education…”.

The current debate within the literature on change in higher education, therefore, seems to question the purpose of universities, as suggested by Olssen and Peters (2005, p.313), who explain that “…neoliberalism and the associated public discourses of ‘new public management’” has led to a “fundamental shift in the way in which universities and other higher education institutions have defined and justified their institutional existence”. HEIs seem to have moved away from the traditional

Humboldtian beliefs which advocated "principles of idealism, wholeness of view and neo-humanism" and which "espoused a philosophy of *Bildung* - self-improvement and inner cultivation through cultural and educational environment" (Pritchard, 2011, p.201). In contrast, neoliberal ideologies promote education as beneficial for the knowledge economy and therefore wider society, and this is driving change within the higher education sector.

As a response to this changing environment, Välimaa (1999, p.25) develops the idea of a "pragmatic university" and explains: "pragmatic universities are expected to be productive and efficient higher education institutions with high social accountability and quality of education". However, Giroux (2001, p.2) suggests universities should primarily provide "civic education" which involves "taking seriously what it means to educate students for critical citizenship and political agency". He warns of the dangers of accepting "what Bill Readings (1996) has called a consumer-oriented corporation more concerned about accounting than accountability" (Giroux, 2001, p.5). Those academics resistant to the employability agenda often draw on the types of arguments offered by Giroux (2001), challenging the acceptance of an instrumental, human capital approach to higher education. Arora (2015, p.638), for example, is critical of the dominance of employability research which is predominantly "positivist" and suggests: "…approaches, such as critical pedagogy have gained greater credence by moving debates forward and progressing beyond characterisation towards exposing and transforming less quantifiable dimensions of educational realities".

While Arora (2015, p.639) draws on the work of Gramsci and notions of "hegemony" for her analysis of the employability agenda, Foucault's work has provided a

theoretical framework for scholars critiquing neoliberal education policies and their impact on those working in education (see, for example, Perryman, 2006; Ball and Olmedo, 2013). These examples invite an interpretation of employability which foregrounds issues of power, and such interpretations seem appropriate considering the claims made within this review that the agenda is being driven by neoliberal policy being imposed upon the sector. I return to these ideas, therefore, in the discussion section.

Despite much of the literature proposing that the sector is pursuing a neoliberal approach to education, clearly focused on the benefits to the economy, there is ongoing recognition of the importance of social responsibility within wider narratives. The Dearing Report (1997, p.7) suggested that: “The purpose of education is life-enhancing: it contributes to the whole quality of life. This recognition of the purpose of higher education in the development of our people, our society, and our economy is central to our vision”. Yet contemporary policy seems to increasingly focus on the concern that higher education provides a return on investment, particularly in the light of increased tuition fees. The Government seeks to hold higher education to account on behalf of the tax payer (BIS, 2011) and, therefore, official documentation is more forthright in terms of the instrumental expectations of higher education (BIS, 2009, 2011, 2012, 2015, 2016). This suggests that theories of human capital as a rationale for the ongoing commitment to the development of students’ employability skills will persist.

2.10 How the higher education sector responds to change

My research explores how senior leaders, middle managers and academics are experiencing and making sense of the employability agenda, which has been identified as a key aspect of a wider change agenda. Therefore, it is important during the final section of the literature review to examine how change is being dealt with in HE. This section will consider the challenges and opportunities of implementing change within HEIs; recommendations within the literature for the successful implementation of change; the impact of change on academics, and how leaders are dealing with the change agenda.

Implementing change within organisations is a complex process, and one which is often unsuccessful (Kee and Newcomer, 2008). According to the literature, managing change within HEIs is no exception and also fraught with difficulties (Bercovitz and Feldman, 2008; Knight and Trowler, 2000; Robertson, Robins and Cox, 2009). Some writers suggest that the very nature of HEIs means that change will be difficult: Elton (1981, p.23) states that "universities are essentially traditionalist to an extent that makes them inherently almost incapable of internally generated change". Taylor (2006, p.251) also suggests that "commonly, however, universities are portrayed as deeply conservative and reluctant to change. Advocates of change are often accused of undermining traditional values and eroding the position of the academic body". Maassen and Stensaker (2011, p.764) refer to researchers such as Clark (2004) and Greenberg (2007) who "argue that the traditional intrinsic characteristics of the university may survive even the most radical waves of reform and change, although further transformations of the university are inevitable".

Researchers also note the “complexity” (McRoy and Gibbs, 2009, p.688) and “diversity” of HEIs (Välimaa, 1999, p.23). HEIs have deeply embedded cultural issues, evident in internal structures and hierarchies and embodied in the nature and role of an academic. Silver (2003, p.166), for example, describes a university as a “‘collection’ of groups, all with their own touchstones of academic and professional behaviour, scholarly values and critical endeavour, which are capable of opening up rifts with its real or perceived values and behaviours”. Winter (2009, p.124) also highlights the dual aims of universities to “sustain traditional academic cultures while simultaneously promoting and developing corporate ideologies and structures”. The complexities described here also reflect issues which have emerged with the employability agenda: as a corporate and business-focused discourse is being promoted and embedded within HEIs, academics may have to adapt programmes or be explicit about where employability skills are being developed and addressed (Osborne and Grant-Smith, 2017, p.59). Such an approach may require academics to move away from the familiarity of their discipline or subject area into generic skills, which can be uncomfortable (see, for example, Laughton, 2011). Knight and Trowler (2000, p.76) refer to research that suggests: “faculty have a strong allegiance to their discipline, which often outweighs their loyalty to the university (Sykes, 1988; Becher, 1989; Altbach & Lewis, 1996)”. HEIs, therefore, consist of local subcultures, inhabiting the overall, wider culture of an institution, which adds layers of complexity in terms of attempting to instigate and implement organisation-wide change.

The importance of the individual within the change process must be noted. McRoy and Gibbs (2009, p.692) cite Meister-Scheytt and Scheytt (2005) as “asserting that the individuals of an organisation are ‘idiosyncratic and often obstinate’ but are experts

when it comes to arguing". This point is particularly pertinent in terms of higher education, as the role of an academic is to take a critical stance, debate and challenge, as Deem (2004, p.111) explains: "academics are trained as critical thinkers and can apply this to anyone attempting to manage them". Kolsaker (2008, p.515) adds that "academics have traditionally been difficult to manage despite managerialist structures that render strategies of domination possible". If one accepts the argument offered by Bercovitz and Feldman (2008, p.69) that "organisational change occurs via the individual" then it would seem that a clear understanding of the individual's beliefs, attitudes and perceptions are important in order to successfully implement change (Trowler, 1998). In fact, Knight and Trowler (2000, p.69) warn against attempts to force change as "attempts to improve teaching by coercion run the risk of producing compliance cultures in which there is 'change without change' while simultaneously compounding negative feelings about academic work". This type of response within an organisation is also referred to as "symbolic compliance", where fear of reprisal drives an individual to participate in change initiatives (Bercovitz and Feldman, 2008, p.75).

One of the recurring themes within the literature on change is the loss of control and freedom experienced within HEIs, mainly due to the increasing involvement and power of other stakeholders (Bryson, 2004; Taylor, 2006; Kolsaker, 2008), an argument often raised to counter support for employability. Newby (2003, p.15) suggests "different organisations, groups and individuals all feel that they have a legitimate claim on influencing the activities and priorities of higher education". Barnes (1999, in Henkel and Little, p.162) also notes the increased involvement of the state and the impact this has had on HEIs for several decades: "although British Governments of both political

colours continue to pay lip service to academic freedom and university autonomy, their actions since the mid-1980s have run counter to their words". Olssen and Peters (2005, p.315) explain that this is characteristic of neoliberalism: "neoliberalism has come to represent a positive conception of the state's role in creating the appropriate market by providing the conditions, laws and institutions necessary for its operation". Therefore, legislation and regulation continues to be introduced which seeks to hold institutions to account and increasingly dictate not only how universities should be managed at an institutional level, but also determine the detail of what should be included in the curriculum: "We also see (particularly in the UK) government policies becoming concerned with micro policies affecting the style and content of higher education…" (Henkel and Little, 1999, p.17).

Alongside this issue is that of the decreasing power of academics. Kogan and Henney (2000, p.24) suggest that: "in the UK, power seems to have shifted from the level of the working academic to that of the institution, the national authorities and the market". Academics may be asked to change the way they teach or the detail of their curriculum in order to meet employability requirements (see Osborne and Grant-Smith, 2017), and tackle topics with which they are unfamiliar (Laughton, 2011). As Trowler (1998, p.33) notes, change within HE is often implemented via a top-down approach. However, research indicates that the academic community is comfortable to challenge change with which it disagrees: "As a general rule, academics tend to resist changes which are perceived to threaten their core values and practice, which have a negative impact on individuals and which diminish group autonomy" (Robertson, Robins and Cox, 2009, p.33). Implementing change within universities, therefore, will be difficult unless "the pre-existing values and attitudes of staff, both academics and others" are

“understood and addressed when considering change”, particularly as “Individuals and groups are far from empty-headed, especially those in universities” (Trowler, 1998, in Brown 2012, p.140).

Arguments of loss of control and academic freedom are often cited as a defence against a focus on employability, and are enduring themes within the literature on the neoliberal agenda in higher education. For example, Frake cites Raduntz’s (2005, in Frake, 2008, p.47) view that “in the marketization process educators have been marginalised in favour of trainers and business managers”. Trowler (1998, p.9) adds that “control over the curriculum is conditioned by consumer choice rather than ‘producer control’, a key aspect of neoliberal thinking”. Evidence suggests these perceptions exist elsewhere, as Taylor *et al’s* (1998, p.265) research with academics in Australian universities reveals. They report that academics “agreed overall that vocational expectations limit freedom in course design…”.

These external influences can potentially have consequences inside the institution. For example, Taylor *et al* (1998, p.226) suggest that: “academics’ distrust of administration will not be ameliorated by the growing managerial desire to conceive of higher education as a corporate service industry which acts as a government-funded provider of services of students”. However, despite such claims of tensions within the workplace, there are those who dispute the fact that they exist, with Watson (1994, in Trowler, 1998, p.33) suggesting that “creating a polarity between the managers and academics is myth-making”.

Nevertheless, changes within the sector are presented as reasonable and appropriate by stakeholders such as the Government, as HEIs must be held accountable for the investment made by UK tax payers in the funding of higher education. Despite the fact that many agree implementing change is difficult, HEIs must respond to Government policy and legislation, as it is tied to funding, and there is advice within the literature on how best to implement change. As with the wider literature on change management, there are several 'how to' approaches to changes proposed, with reference to well-established models such as Lewin's (1947) three step change model (see Lawler and Sillitoe, 2010, p.44) and Kotter's (1996) eight phase model of change management, which is recommended "as an appropriate model to guide change in a higher education setting" (Lawler and Sillitoe, 2010, p.46). Such models provide a linear, step by step process to follow in order to manage the change process, yet all of the discussions to date argue that HEIs are complex organisations, involving competing discourses and narratives of active participants, which suggests that successful implementation is not straightforward. As Brown (2012, p.145) states: "inevitably, change management cannot be viewed as an event but more as an ongoing iterative and dynamic process taking account of changing circumstances…".

In recognition of the important role of individuals (and specifically academics within debates on change in higher education), Trowler (1998) highlights the suggestions within the literature of a move "from a top-down" to a "bottom-up approach" (Sabatier, 1986, in Trowler, 1998, p.2). He (1998, p.2) notes that research on change management includes "a focus on the role and power of 'street level bureaucrats' (Lipsky, 1980)". He explains that when researching change in HE, the former approach, which prioritised senior personnel, positioned the academic as "passive"

(Trowler, 1998, p.102) and “powerless” (Trowler, 1998, p.60), which is unrealistic. Knight and Trowler (2000, p.72) argue that individuals are able to exercise “human agency” and Newton (2003, p.432) concurs with this view of active agents operating within higher education: “students and staff do not passively accept the demands or consequences of new policy or strategy”. Dearlove (1997, in Robertson, Robins and Cox, 2009, p.33) describes top-down approaches as “invariably resisted and bottom-up approaches….slow and partial”. Another argument against a top-down approach to policy implementation includes, as suggested above, the notion that individuals will not fully embrace change (Trowler, 1998, in Brown, 2012, p.141). Brown (2012, p.140) suggests a considered approach to change: “it is not sufficient to direct, require or issue edicts, however well thought through they are”. The rejection of a top-down approach is also linked to universities’ “established academic cultures and modes of behaviour” (McRoy and Gibbs, 2000, p.690); namely strong associations and loyalty to disciplines and subjects and therefore departments, rather than wider institutions, as well as the freedom of self-management of departments and faculties within a university. McRoy and Gibbs (2000, p.690) suggest that “individual departments in universities exercise largely unquestioned authority over curricular and pedagogical decisions” and that “within departments individual faculty operate largely as independent entrepreneurs”. Clegg (2003, p.807) further states that: “the privileging of disciplinary discourses over managerial ones represents one way whereby academics continue to assert the priority of their values against the knowledge of the organisational centre”. In fact, the importance of recognising issues pertinent to departments and subjects when managing change in HE is highlighted by several authors (see, for example, Knight and Trowler, 2000; Henkel, 2000; Newton, 2003).

The significance of culture in implementing change in higher education is clear within the literature. In Bercovitz and Feldman's (2008, p.70) study of academic entrepreneurship, they state that "results suggest that the decision to participate in strategic initiatives is influenced by both social learning prior to an individual joining the organisation, and subsequently, by the individual's exposure to relevant peer behaviours within the organisational subunit". Trowler (1998) refers to Becher's (1988, in Trowler, 1998, p.27) suggestion that culture "operates in three arenas: front of stage (public arena); back stage (where deals are done) and under the stage (where gossip is purveyed)". He urges consideration of all stages in order to fully understand an institution, rather than simply "accepting the front of stage articulation as 'the' culture" (Trowler, 1998, p.27). The exploration of the under the stage arena is key when speaking to participants about the employability agenda. Although public facing documents might indicate that policies and procedures relating to employability are in place and supported, it would be naïve to accept that this is a view consistent throughout the institution. An understanding of the conversations taking place behind the scenes is useful in terms of providing a fuller picture of practice, opinions and beliefs within the institution, an approach taken by Zaitseva *et al* (2008, p.6).

The message from the literature, therefore, is that the implementation of change is challenging, fraught with difficulties and that there is no simple solution. As Robertson, Robins and Cox (2009, p.32) suggest: "to effect systematic change in higher education requires a sophisticated blend of management, collegiality and simple hard work over a prolonged period of time".

2.11 Leadership of change in HE

As this research includes participants in senior and middle management roles, it is important to explore issues around leadership in higher education. There is a significant body of literature exploring this topic, including debates around recommended approaches to leadership through times of change (McRoy and Gibbs, 2009; Mader, Scott and Razak, 2013). Discussions around leadership within higher education have focused on collaborative and collegiate approaches as ideal models for implementing change, as opposed to "managerialism or 'top down' leadership" (Bolden, Petrov and Gosling, 2009, p.257).

Knight and Trowler (2000, p.81) suggest that change is best implemented when the "focus on leadership attention is at the level of the natural activity system of universities: the department or a subunit of it" and other researchers concur that the role of the department head within academia can be crucial (Ramsden, 1998; Pearson and Trevitt, 2005). These individuals, often defined as "middle managers" (Ramsden, 1998, p.22) are portrayed as gatekeepers between key constituent groups, as suggested by Ramsden (1998, p.22): "Now more than ever heads of departments stand at the three way crossroads between the world external to the university, the people who constitute its senior management, and its academic and support staff". Therefore, for some, the focus of implementing change within HE should be at the department level, rather than at senior level management. As part of this research, I interview staff occupying roles at middle management level within the institution.

The literature suggests that, although there is "no single, all-embracing theory of educational leadership" (Bush, 2008, p.9), leaders should be working together with

staff to achieve change. Knight and Trowler (2000, p.78), for example, in their discussions on implementing learning and teaching strategies, reject both transactional and transformational approaches in favour of "interactional leadership" which they describe as "directed collegiality". Mader, Scott and Razak (2013, p.269) suggest that "co-creation" is essential and Robertson, Robins and Cox (2009) are also advocates of this collaborative type of approach.

In a similar vein, distributed leadership is an approach which is "represented as dynamic, relational, inclusive, collaborative and contextually-situated" (Bolden, Petrov and Gosling, 2009, p.259) and is discussed at length within the literature (see Bolden, Petrov and Gosling, 2009; Sewerin and Holmberg, 2017; Jones and Harvey, 2017). The aim is that leadership becomes the responsibility of the many, rather than remaining with one individual. Discussions above describe academics as active, critical members of an institution and it would seem that an approach to change which renders them powerful agents in the change process would appeal to core values such as academic freedom and professionalism. As Newton (2003, p.435) states, successful change initiatives require the "ownership and support from frontline academic and support staff". However, Bolden, Petrov and Gosling (2009, p.260) are sceptical of the existence of distributed leadership within higher education environments. If higher education institutions are complex, potentially with tension between constituent groups, such an approach will presumably be difficult to achieve: Knight and Trowler (2000, p.77) recognise the considerable challenges and Winter (2009, p.121) notes the "academic identity schisms" between what he refers to as "academic managers" and "managed academics", as both often pull in different directions in terms of priorities and beliefs about the purpose of higher education.

Knight and Trowler (2000, p.78-79), again, highlight the important role of department leaders as a way of navigating such issues, and the need to: "…act in a way that is sensitized to current practices, discourses and meaning construction in their departments". Similarly, Winter (2009, p.128) suggests that effective leaders in higher education need to "connect with the academic heartland and adapt corporate principles and practices to the normative values of academics and the educational needs of universities". He insists that although akin to "walking a tightrope" it is possible to simultaneously pursue a corporate agenda and protect core academic principles (Winter, 2009, p.128), a point which is particularly relevant in terms of the implementation of employability policies.

Therefore, despite advocating collaborative approaches, the responsibility seems to remain with leaders of institutions to drive change by adapting their behaviour and discourses used in order to engage academics in the process. Bercovitz and Feldman (2008, p.74), for example, note the link between leadership and culture. They suggest that leaders "influence behaviour in organisations both by building culture and by acting as role models" and that "culture and role modelling cues are most pertinent in environments beset with ambiguity". As stated by Pearson and Trevitt (2005, p.106), leaders and managers in higher education have to seek a "balance" when developing institution-wide policies and strategies, designing plans which allow staff to implement "local" initiatives yet also ensure the institution meet the requirements of the sector.

2.12 The impact of change on academics

My research specifically examines the response to the employability agenda from the perspectives of both academics and managers. Although there is little research on

this specific area, Knight and Trowler (2000), in their discussions on change relating to learning and teaching, point to a significant amount of research (much of which was published in the 1990s) which examines the impact of the change within HEIs on academic life. They provide a list of the key issues that have been raised: “intensification; ‘hard’ managerialism; a loss of collegiality; greedy institutions; ageing, malaise and marginality” (Knight and Trowler, 2000, p.71 – 72). The pace and scale of change within higher education has been significant and there is evidence that this has had a negative impact on staff. Newton (2003, p.434) states that: “staff report confusion and resignation in the face of demands placed upon them by a shifting body of policies and strategies in areas such as learning and teaching, assessment, quality assurance, research, income generation and so on”. Henkel (2000) also refers to Showey’s (1995, in Henkel, 2000, p.691) assertion that people can experience “anxiety in many organisational change processes”.

Impact on academic identity is another issue raised within the literature with Harris (2005, in Ek *et al,* 2011, p.1306) suggesting there is “a partially altered self image among academics, as a result of changing conditions, where notions of academic freedom, autonomy and purpose are weakened”. Zaitseva *et al’s* (2008) research examines the impact on identity after an employability curriculum is introduced, and O’Byrne (2015, p.222) recognises that “changes to identities are often driven by external forces, and the change process can be traumatic”. She draws on Archer’s (2000) influential work on structure and agency to analyse academic identity within one Irish HEI (O’Byrne, 2015, p.223). Archer’s (1995; 2000; 2003; 2007) seminal work on agency and structure was developed throughout a series of books. Core to her theory is a rejection of the way in which society and individuals have been historically dealt

with in sociological theory. She contends agency and structure are distinct, insisting: “Therefore, social realism should continue where it is going, namely struggling on to link the ‘parts’ and the ‘people’, without conceding for a moment that their respective properties and powers can be reduced to one another, or should be regarded as inseparable and mutually constitutive” (Archer, 2000, p.7). Archer’s work is explored in relation to my research within the discussion section.

Despite the bleak picture painted by several authors in terms of the impact of change on academic identity and freedom, Kolsaker (2008, p.522) suggests that this is an “overly pessimistic” interpretation of the situation. Instead, she offers an alternative view of academics who are adeptly adapting to new environments: “academics appear to be crafting and recrafting their identities as conditions change…” (*ibid*). Evidence from Trowler’s (1998) research also suggests a range of responses from the front line academics who are faced within ongoing change. He identifies four broad categories of response, as depicted below in figure 1.

	Accept status quo	Work around or change policy
Content	Swimming	Policy reconstruction
Discontent	Sinking	Using coping strategies

Taken from Trowler (1998, p.114)

As Trowler (1998, p.113) is keen to clarify, the "categories are not mutually exclusive" and depending on the circumstances at a particular moment in time, allow for change and flux. Trowler's (1998, p.126) assertion that attempts to portray academics as passive are unfounded is reflected in the fact that policy reconstruction is the "potentially largest" category. This particular category refers to "the processes academics engage in when they reinterpret and reconstruct policy on the ground, using strategies to effectively change the policy, sometimes resisting change, sometimes altering its direction" (Trowler, 1998, p.126). He suggests, therefore, that "successful change is more likely to come about when there is a consensus above and pressure below, a 'change sandwich'…" (Trowler, 1998, p.154). Arora also references Giroux (in Arora, 2015, p.639) who she says: "sees an important role for the educator to play in questioning, challenging and shaping educational policies, philosophies and traditional pedagogies".

2.13 Summary of change issues

The literature on change within higher education, as a result of wider cultural and political agendas, portrays a sector which has had to continually adapt to frequent, new legislation and policies. The sector is seen to be dealing with an increasingly demanding group of external stakeholders, including Governments, employers, students and their parents. An increase in the power of these stakeholders over HEIs has led to continuous attempts to adapt and develop strategies to meet new targets and demands, specifically around new employability policies. Within the sector, academics are sometimes portrayed as mourning a bygone era of academic freedom, a lack of educational instrumentality, with many now anxious, stressed and de-

professionalised. However there are also those who urge caution against the acceptance of such a pessimistic view of the sector, as noted above.

When describing the literature on change in higher education, Filippakou and Tapper (2016, p.11) state that: "…overviews of both system change and the various individual institutional innovations have tended to describe what has changed rather than *how* the change process functions". However, this research will address the question of 'how' by exploring how managers and academics are experiencing the employability agenda within higher education.

Chapter 3: Research methodology

3.1 The research approach

Denzin and Lincoln (2011, p.11) state: “the gendered, multiculturally situated researcher approaches the world with a set of ideas, a framework (theory, ontology) that specifies a set of questions (epistemology), which are then examined (methodology, analysis) in specific ways”. As indicated, the research process can be seen as a series of steps or stages. I agree that it is the role of the researcher to carefully consider each stage and decide what the most appropriate approach will be if the research is to be seen as robust and trustworthy. However, this is not a straightforward process and, as Denzin and Lincoln indicate (2011), the researcher is likely to have ingrained beliefs which may cause them to (consciously or subconsciously) make decisions which are influenced by past history and experiences. Such issues will be discussed throughout this chapter with the aim of advocating a reflexive approach in terms of positioning.

Sarantakos (2005, p.29) presents what he refers to as the foundations of research in the form of a diagram, seen in figure 2 below.

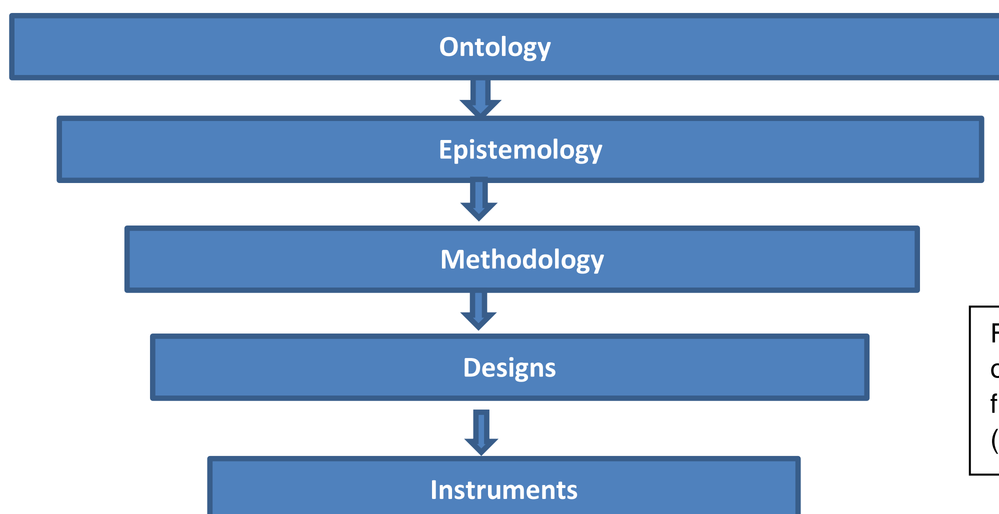


Figure 2: Foundations of research. Taken from Sarantakos, (2005, p.29)

This diagram illustrates how each stage feeds into and influences the next, so that, for example, ontology will impact upon epistemology, which will in turn influence the methodological approach taken, and ultimately dictate the tools used to undertake the research. Sarantakos's (2005) approach to research is one which I have followed in order to answer my research questions. Other authors (Creswell, 2013; Bryman, 2016) present alternative paths or processes, including Crotty (1998, p.3), who substitutes theoretical perspectives for ontology, but the overall approach remains consistent.

Sarantakos's model has been used as a framework for the following discussion around how my position has influenced the development of my research questions. However, despite the diagram and this methodology chapter being presented in a linear manner, it should be recognised that there has been fluidity and movement when undertaking this research. Following ongoing reading of both the research methods and wider literature relevant to this project, a process of ongoing reflection and refinement has taken place. This adaptable approach is advocated by several authors (Anderson and Arsenault, 1998; Gilbert, 2008) and Marshall and Rossman (2006, p.51) suggest "the flexibility of design" is "a hallmark of qualitative methods".

3.2 My positioning

The pivotal role of the researcher, particularly in qualitative research, is noted (see, for example, Flick, 2006; Cousin, 2009; Braun and Clarke, 2013). Creswell (2013, p.15) states that: "Whether we are aware of it or not, we always bring certain beliefs and philosophical assumptions to our research...". These issues can be examined via a detailed discussion about ontology and epistemology. By addressing these

philosophical concerns, I am able to explore the important question of positionality and shed light on how decisions have been made about the research questions and research design and methodology. It is important to consider definitions of these key concepts, which are discussed by several researchers (for example, Bryman, 2016; Creswell, 2013; Sarantakos, 2005). However, Crotty (1998, p.10) states that, “writers in the research literature have trouble keeping ontology and epistemology apart conceptually”. Cousin (2009, p.6) explains: “all researchers have to address these questions at some level” as they will influence the overall design of the project; from the initial decision about the research topic, through to the development of the research questions; the adoption of a particular research paradigm; the choice of methodological tools and, ultimately, the interpretation of the data.

Creswell (2013, p.20) suggests that “ontological issues relate to the nature of reality and its characteristics” and Crotty (1998, p.15) states that there will be a “distinction between objectivist / positivist research on the one hand and constructionist or subjectivist research, on the other”. He emphasises that it is necessary to “be consistently objectivist or consistently constructivist”. I agree with Crotty (1998) that once the overarching philosophical positioning has been explored, there should be some consistency in terms of the approach taken. In other words, the researcher’s ontological and epistemological stance will dictate the type of research questions developed and the methodological approach taken.

In terms of the range of positions adopted by qualitative researchers, my overall belief is that knowledge is constructed and interpreted by individuals, a position broadly taken by relativist researchers (Braun and Clarke, 2013, p.27). I believe that

individuals working within HE will experience their own bespoke reality in terms of, for example, the implementation of an employability agenda and this will be influenced, in part, by the position they occupy within the institution. Robson (2002, p.25) provides a list of "features of relativist approaches", including "reality is represented through the eyes of the participants", and one of the aims of this research is to explore these realities amongst participants.

A constructionist approach fits with my ontological beliefs outlined above. According to Sarantakos (2005, p.37), constructionism purports that there is "neither objective reality nor objective truth. On the contrary, reality is constructed. Although physical reality exists, it is not accessible to human endeavour" and Crotty (1998, p.42) defines constructionism as:

> The view that all knowledge, and therefore all meaningful reality as such, is contingent upon human practices, being constructed in and out of interaction between human beings and their world and developed and transmitted within an essentially social context.

The research questions outlined in chapter one have been developed from my constructionist position; the belief that there are multiple realities and the desire to explore these realities with participants. For example, research question one aims to explore individual perceptions and conceptions of employability, and the second research question explores the specific experience of each participant. The final research question examines individual interpretations of the employability agenda, reflecting a constructionist philosophy that suggests participants are actively

constructing meaning and knowledge, and that meaning is developed through interaction with and within key groups to which they affiliate.

It is also important to address my own position in terms of constructionism. Bryman (2016, p.29) states that "in recent years, the term has also come to include the notion that the researchers' own accounts of the social world are constructions" and if one adopts a constructionist approach, then the researcher will be part of the meaning-making process. As Flick (2006, p.16) states: "the subjectivity of the researcher *and* of those being studied becomes part of the research process". As the researcher, I am also an academic within the institution in which the research takes place and my position has obviously influenced my research questions. I was responsible for employability in a previous role and current experiences as an academic implementing institution-wide policies has fuelled my interest in this area. This will inevitably have an impact on this research in several ways, many of which are discussed throughout this chapter.

Cousin (2009, p.6) suggests that "epistemology is about conceptions of the nature of knowledge and ways of coming to know", while Bryman (2016, p.24) states "an epistemological issue concerns the question of what is (or should be) regarded as acceptable knowledge in a discipline". The phrase acceptable knowledge is important and highlights issues also raised by Scott and Usher (2011, p.11-12) who suggest that epistemology seeks to address "what the criteria are that allows distinctions to be made between what is legitimately knowledge and what is simply opinion or belief". Based on the description of constructionism above, which acknowledges the existence of multiple, constructed realities, and recognising that ontology leads to and influences

epistemology, then the research questions have been developed to allow for an in-depth exploration of the views of participants. This is the most appropriate approach which will enable me to answer the research questions: "subjective evidence is assembled based on individual views. This is how knowledge is known - through the subjective experiences of people" (Creswell, 2013, p.20).

My epistemological approach can be described, therefore, as interpretivist. Cousin (2009, p.9) suggests that "interpretivists argue that human sciences must address people's intentions within given contexts, not simply observe outward behaviour" and Carr and Kemmis (1986, p.83) explain that interpretivists "replace the scientific notions of explanation, prediction and control, with the interpretative notions of understanding, meaning and action" (Carr and Kemmis, 1986, p.83). The idiosyncratic nature of participants' experiences, coupled with individuals' background and knowledge, will lead to the construction of bespoke realities and interpretations. My research questions clearly focus on the ways in which academics experience events and changes within their professional lives and how managers lead this change; engaging in a meaning-making process. However, meanings and understandings, as Bryman (2016, p.29) suggests, are also subject to change. I recognise that not only has each participant presented an interpretation of their experiences, my position as a researcher within this type of research paradigm dictates that the findings are simply one interpretation of a constructed reality: "researchers recognise that their own background shapes their interpretation" (Creswell, 2013, p.25). These philosophical discussions lead to an explanation of the methodological approach and the more practical issue of methods and research tools which will now be discussed.

3.3 Methodology

My research questions have been designed to be broad in nature, encouraging an exploration of multiple realities, and are best answered through qualitative research (Punch and Oancea, 2014, p.27). Robson (2002, p.5) refers to qualitative research as being "flexible in the sense that much less pre-specification takes place and the design evolves, develops and (to use a term popular with their advocates) 'unfolds' as the research proceeds". The nature of my research questions, which requires talking to participants at length, means that a change in approach or development of alternative questions may be necessary as participants reveal information about their experiences.

Marshall and Rossman (2006, p.55) suggest that adopting a qualitative approach enables a "deeper understanding of the participants' lived experiences of the phenomenon under study" and Braun and Clarke (2013, p.24) also emphasise that qualitative research allows for a "far richer (fuller, multi-faceted) or deeper understanding of a phenomenon than using numbers…", all of which adds to the arguments in favour of a qualitative paradigm in order to answer my research questions. However, there are several criticisms of qualitative research noted within the literature; the most common of which is the subjectivity of the researcher and the influence of the researcher's position in the process (see, for example, Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2007). Yet supporters of qualitative research advocate an acceptance that the researcher is part of the research process. Cousin (2009, p.32) states that "most qualitative researchers also accept that their analysis and write-up are deeply influenced by their own positionality". She continues that the discussions around positioning have: "shifted from minimising subjectivity to thinking about how to bring

oneself into the research process" and that "researchers should not strive to be wholly detached from their research" (Cousin, 2010, p.10). Denzin and Lincoln (1998, p.41) also suggest that "qualitative researchers accept the fact that research is ideologically-driven. There is no value-free or bias-free design". Although qualitative research means that "data are mediated through this human instrument, the researcher…" (Merriam, 1998, p.7), this is also the case with quantitative research as both "quantitative and qualitative research involves interpretation" (Cousin, 2009, p.4).

I recognise the pivotal role of the researcher in qualitative research and so it is important to demonstrate that my research is trustworthy. The literature suggests that one of the ways of achieving this is by adopting a reflexive approach (see, for example, Brannick and Coughlan, 2007; Cousin, 2009, 2010), and reflexivity is discussed in detail below.

3.4 Rationale for adopting IPA

As a result of the discussions above, IPA seemed the most appropriate methodology. The aims and philosophical and theoretical principles of IPA closely matched the objectives of my research: specifically, I wanted to pay tribute to participants' subjective realities, giving them a voice; and I also take an interpretivist approach and recognise the inevitable role of the researcher.

Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009, p.1) describe IPA as "a qualitative research approach committed to the examination of how people make sense of their major life experiences". Although participants' experiences of the employability agenda may not initially seem to qualify as a major life experience, Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009, p.2) recognise that attempting to define an experience is difficult; and explain:

> At the most elemental level, we are constantly caught up, unselfconsciously, in the everyday flow of experience. As soon as we become aware of what is happening we have the beginnings of what can be described as 'an experience' as opposed to just experience.

The introduction of new policies by Government leads to the development and implementation of employability strategies and plans within the institution, all of which represent 'experiences' for managers and academic staff, particularly when demands to meet targets and change curricula and practice are required. Alase (2017, p.12) states that a "..phenomenological approach will give in-depth descriptions and interpretations of the research participants' 'lived experiences' vis-à-vis how the phenomenon, which is being studied, has impacted the lives of the research participants". One of the aims of this research is to investigate the potential impact the employability agenda has had on the working lives and practices of staff within the institution. She continues: "however, for those stories to make sense interpretively, the interpreter (researcher) of the stories must have a true and deeper understanding of the participants' 'lived experiences'" (*ibid*).

As an academic within the participant institution, it could be argued that I am in a good position to understand the experiences of other academics, but not managers and senior leaders. Alase (2017, p.12) insists that "it is important for the researcher to put themselves in the shoes of the participants" and I would, again, suggest that this is a possibility with my research. Larkin, Watts and Clifton (2006, p.116) elaborate by suggesting that: "Thus the analyst's role in IPA does require the generation of an

'insider's account', but it also requires that meaning and commonality are sought beyond that point". Despite acknowledging similarities in terms of the experience of working in the same institution as my participants, I believe it must also be recognised that each participant has unique experiences and will make sense of these experiences subjectively and, therefore, uniquely.

3.5 IPA: Philosophical foundations: phenomenology, hermeneutics and idiography

The overarching methodology for this research is Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) which, as Braun and Clarke (2013, p.180) suggest, is a guiding framework for the overall research process; a "methodology". IPA was initially developed by Smith (1996). It has been extensively used in the field of psychology, but is increasingly being utilised in other disciplines (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009, p.4). It is influenced by the three key philosophical approaches: "phenomenology, hermeneutics and idiography" (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009, p.11), all of which will be explored in this section in order to justify its use in this research.

Braun and Clarke (2013, p.181) explain that "phenomenology is about the study of experience" and "IPA's overriding concern is with exploring people's lived experiences and the meanings people attach to those experiences". Finlay (2009, p.475) also notes that "phenomenological research attempts to capture subjective, 'insider' meanings and what the lived experience feels like for individuals". In this research, the lived experience of the employability agenda is explored.

IPA draws on key philosophical ideas and frameworks. Larkin, Watts and Clifton (2006, p.105) outline the influence of Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger, recognising Husserl as “the founder of the phenomenological approach (and Heidegger’s mentor)” and note their belief in “the human individual as an inclusive part of reality – as an entity that is essentially embedded, intertwined and which is otherwise immersed in a world that it inhabits”. Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009, p.16) explain that Heidegger ultimately went on to develop his own account of phenomenology, focussing on an interpretive version, which emphasised “the lived world – world of things, people, relationships and language”. He also foregrounded the way in which humans interact and are inextricably part of a social world, developing the notion of intersubjectivity “which aims to describe this relatedness and to account for our ability to communicate with, and make sense of each other” (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009, p.17). Such ideas are important in my research which examines academics’ and managers’ perceptions and conceptions, recognising that they are part of a subculture, institution and wider society, and noting the influence and impact such positionality can have on their views and interpretations of reality.

Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009, p.18) also outline the contribution of philosophers Merleau-Ponty and Sartre to the development of IPA, highlighting the former’s “work on the embodied nature of our relationship to the world, as *body-subjects”*. The core assertion is that each individual experiences the world subjectively “thus while we can observe and experience empathy for each another, ultimately we can never share entirely the other’s experience, because their experience belongs to their own embodied position in the world” (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009, p.19). Sartre concurred with the notion of embodiment (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009, p.21) but

also suggested that human beings are in a state of flux, working towards "becoming ourselves, and that the self is not a pre-existing unity to be discovered, but rather an ongoing project to be unfurled" (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009, p.19).

Schleiermacher (1998), Heidegger (1927) and Gadamer (1960; 1990) are integral to the development of hermeneutics (Smith, Larkin and Flowers, 2009), which focuses on the issue of interpretation. Heidegger saw "phenomenology as an explicitly interpretative activity" and also explored the issue of "fore-conception", which recognises that interpretations will be influenced by our own knowledge and background (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009, p.25). In terms of this research, I am cognisant of the fact that I am offering one interpretation, heavily influenced by my own beliefs and experiences, and which is one of many possible narratives. IPA, as a qualitative methodology, accepts the influential role of the researcher but also suggests the technique of "bracketing" as a potential way of identifying, but then setting aside "fore-conceptions" (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009, p.25). For example, following each interview, it is suggested that researchers write up their initial thoughts and impressions before embarking upon the analysis, enabling the researcher to solely focus on the data. Larkin, Watts and Clifton (2006, p.106) summarise Heidegger's "view of the person as always and indelibly a 'person-in-context'" meaning that, as a researcher, "we can never fully escape the 'preconceptions' that our world brings with it". Gadamer's work also considers the researcher's position and past experiences. The suggestion is that our own "preconceptions" will inevitably influence our understandings and interpretations of data, "thus, interpretation is a dialogue between the past and present" (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009, p.27). IPA, therefore, emphasises the need to stay close to the original participant response, yet

Schleiermacher (1998, in Smith, Larkin and Flowers, 2009, p.22) notes that a well-developed interpretation of a personal experience or narrative, can lead to insightful accounts.

The notion of the hermeneutic circle is central to IPA (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009, p.28). At the core of this concept is the symbiotic relationship between “the part and the whole”: “to understand any given part, you look to the whole; to understand the whole, you look to the parts”. Smith, Flowers and Larkin offer a diagrammatic explanation of the ways in which the part and the whole interact and influence each other, as seen below (figure 3):

Figure 3: the hermeneutic circle

The part	*The whole*
The single word	The sentence in which the word is embedded
The single extract	The complete text
The particular text	The complete oeuvre
The interview	The research project
The single episode	The complete life

Taken from Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009, p.28)

The hermeneutic circle reminds us of the “iterative” nature of IPA analysis (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009, p.28), suggesting that the researcher “may move back and forth through a range of different ways of thinking about the data, rather than

completing each step, one after the other". This process reflects my experience of analysis, requiring regular review, re-examination and reassessment of, for example, themes identified within the data.

IPA, therefore, has a strong interpretive element but "involves a dual interpretative process, referred to as a double hermeneutic" (Braun and Clarke, 2013, p.181) which recognises that just as the research participant is offering their own interpretation of their experiences, the researcher is also interpreting the interpretation offered by the participant. As noted, I acknowledge my own role in the research process and the fact that my experiences, beliefs and attitudes will inevitably influence the overall process, although I attempt to adopt a reflexive approach, as well as employ bracketing as part of the IPA process.

Finally, idiography is key to IPA as it is concerned with individuality:

> Firstly there is a commitment to the particular, in the sense of *detail*, and therefore depth of analysis…Secondly, IPA is committed to understanding how particular experiential phenomena (an event, process or relationship) have been understood from the perspective of different people, in a particular context"
>
> (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009, p.29).

IPA prioritises individual accounts and experiences, yet this does not preclude the findings from being developed to make wider claims, rather: "it locates them in the particular, and hence develops them more cautiously" (Smith, Flowers and Larkin,

2009, p.29). Therefore, as part of the data analysis process, each case is studied in-depth, and in isolation, before moving to other cases, which allows for both commonalities and differences between participant accounts to be revealed. Smith (2004, p.41), therefore, outlines three “characteristic features of IPA” which are “idiographic, inductive and interrogative”. IPA research conveys the nuance of individual stories, in addition to offering comment “on important generic themes in the analysis” (Smith, 2004, p.42). Therefore, although my research will not represent the response of all HEIs to the employability agenda, it is possible to make some claims about the responses of academics, managers and senior leaders within a post-1992 HEI.

3.6 Data collection: discussion group and interviews

The main data collection method employed in this project was semi-structured interviews. However, as a way of generating open and honest initial discussions around the notion of employability, an informal discussion group was organised.

3.7 Discussion group

A key objective of the discussion group was to get beneath the public-facing discourse around employability, in order to explore the subjective realities of the employability agenda for staff. Although the discussion group took place before a final decision to adopt an IPA approach was taken, it is appropriate to offer an analysis of this type of method, in relation to IPA. Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009, p.71) discuss focus groups as a possible IPA research tool but urge researchers to think carefully before utilising them. Unlike one to one interviews, the focus group includes several participants, all with their own stories and experiences and the close analysis of

individual narratives can be more difficult. However, they also suggest that "approaches to data collection which aim to engage with shared experiences (such as small group interviews)…" are amongst the methods "likely to become more common" (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009, p.204)

As the researcher, I was part of the discussion group, but asked a colleague to take on the position of chair. This enabled me to listen more carefully to the discussion and get involved, when appropriate. Involving others to manage the process is recommended (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009, p.73). Although occupying a management position, the Chair is known to some members of the group and is viewed by colleagues as approachable and trustworthy. The other four participants were senior lecturers from a range of subjects. Advice is offered in terms of logistical aspects of the focus group, with Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009, p.73) suggesting that "four to five is a good size for a focus group". The aim with including academics from different disciplines was to build a picture of the institutional conversations taking place around employability, a strategy pursued with the semi-structured interviews.

The discussion group, therefore, was an exploratory first step in collecting data, used as a way of generating initial themes and exploring perceptions around the employability agenda. It also influenced and aided in the development of appropriate questions for the one to one interviews. However, in order to give voice to individual participants and do justice to individual narratives, providing a rich, in-depth account, I felt it appropriate to focus on the one-to-one interviews for the purpose of presenting the findings of this research. An IPA analysis, as described in chapter four, was undertaken using the transcript from the discussion group in order to identify the

emerging themes, but the main findings and discussion chapters solely relate to the one to one, semi-structured interviews.

3.8 In-depth interviewing: semi-structured interviews

A key aim of IPA research is to engage in in-depth conversations with participants which allow them to "…tell their stories, to speak freely and reflectively, and to develop their ideas and express their concerns at some length" (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009, p.56). Semi-structured interviews are seen as an appropriate tool to employ (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009). I wanted participants to talk openly and at length about their experiences, but within the parameters of a specific topic and themes. Semi-structured interviews provided me with an opportunity to explore participants' thoughts and experiences in-depth, within the "naturalistic" setting of a participant's work environment (Wilson, 1996, p.95). Kvale and Brinkmann (2009, p.27) state that "a semi-structured life world interview attempts to understand themes of the lived everyday world from the subjects' own perspectives", which is essential in terms of answering my research questions, as it is the individual perceptions and thoughts of academics and managers which are sought. Therefore, the semi-structured interviews provided a way of maintaining focus, exploring themes relevant to my research questions, but also specific issues important to each participant.

3.9 Issues to consider with semi-structured interviews

As with all methodological tools, there are benefits and disadvantages to consider. Bias and subjectivity of the interviewer are revealed as key criticisms of interviewing and addressed within the literature (Arksey and Knight, 1999; Basit, 2010, Minichiello *et al,* 1995). Basit (2010, p.110) suggests that the "ontological and epistemological

stance of the researcher determine whom and how we interview" and Cohen, Manion and Morrsion (2007, p.150) note that "interviewers and interviewees alike bring their own, often unconscious, experiential and biographical baggage with them into the interview situation". I am experiencing the implementation of the employability strategies and policies and will, therefore, bring this experience with me to the interview process. However, my position has been clearly and transparently stated and explored throughout this thesis and led to the adoption of a reflexive approach in order to address such issues.

Rubin and Rubin (2005, p.6) highlight one benefit of interviews between colleagues with the notion of "concept clarification" where people who "…interact regularly share a common history and vocabulary". They suggest: "the purpose of the *concept clarification interview* is to explore the meaning of these special, shared terms". Concept clarification was an important part of the semi-structured interviews as it was vital to clarify understanding of various terms, not least employability itself. I would also argue that being part of the institution in which the research is taking place was beneficial, in that I am part of a shared culture and able to engage with interviewees via some common experiences and vocabulary.

Some writers advocate building a relationship and level of trust between the interviewer and interviewee (Cousin, 2009; Arkey and Knight 1999). Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009, p.64) emphasise the importance of building a "rapport", stating that "unless you succeed in establishing this rapport, you are unlikely to obtain good data from your participant". Cousin (2009, p.76) states that "the more distance between interviewer and interviewee, the less trustworthy the responses are likely to be", but

Minichiello *et al* (1995, p.79) warn that there is little advice available on how to do this. Saltmarsh, Sutherland-Smith and Randell-Moon (2011, p.55) suggest that "sharing accounts of similar experiences, values or ideals during an interview" can help forge "connections", while also raising Melles' (2005, in Saltmarsh, Sutherland-Smith and Randell-Moon 2011, p.55) concerns that such an approach can lead to "a form of cultural reproduction rather than cultural critique". I therefore, navigated through a difficult process, nurturing a relationship built on trust, yet cognisant of the need to maintain some distance in order to provide a rigorous analysis of the data. I also used bracketing, a concept developed by Husserl (1927, in Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009, p.13). Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009, p.42) state: "…so you will have to try to suspend (or 'bracket off') your preconceptions when it comes to designing and conducting your interviews or other data collection events".

A further issue related to the relationship between interviewer and interviewee is raised by Qu and Dumay (2011, p.238) who suggest: "there is a danger of simplifying and idealising the interview situation based on the assumption that interviewees are competent and moral truth tellers…". Alvesson (2003, p.170) also suggests that it is difficult to know how "honest" participants are and specifically refers to interviews in "academic contexts" where "people are typically aware of issues like personal, institutional and occupational prestige and reputation". Saltmarsh, Sunderland-Smith and Randell-Moon (2011, p. 50) examine the issues of researchers interviewing other academics and make the point that this group of people are "likely to engage professionally with the published findings of research in which they have taken part, and recognise themselves, their peers, their managers, their (and others') institutions, and the situations therein described". They emphasise the importance of adhering to

ethical protocols in order to protect anonymity, which is imperative in my research and is addressed within a separate section. They also reiterate the relevance of reflexivity in this situation (*ibid*), something which I endorse and explore in detail below.

One can envisage challenges on the part of both the interviewee and interviewer when interviewing academics: participants may be reluctant to reveal information and the researcher is acutely aware that the findings will be scrutinised by their interviewees, as fellow researchers, as well as their wider collegiate network. All research is, and should be, subject to scrutiny but when academics interview academics about the institution in which they are employed there is perhaps an implicit acknowledgement that the findings will be monitored and challenged because of the nature of the profession.

Rubin and Rubin (2005, p.12) suggest that semi structured interviews "share key features". Amongst these similarities is the fact that the interviews are "extensions of ordinary conversations" and that interviewees are "partners in the research enterprise rather than subjects to be tested and examined" (Rubin and Rubin, 2005, p.12). Cousin (2009, p.73) agrees with this notion and suggests that interviews are "best conceptualised as a third space", highlighting the constructionist nature of the process in that both parties should "work together to develop understandings". Kvale and Brinkmann (2009, p.54) agree that "interview knowledge is socially constructed in the interaction of interviewer and interviewee". Although such comments allude to an almost egalitarian nature to the interview process these authors also raise the issue of power. For example, they are clear that there is a "power asymmetry between the researcher and the subject" as "the interviewer has scientific competence, he or she

initiates and defines the interview situation, determines the interview topic, poses questions and decides which answers to follow up, and also terminates the conversation" (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009, p.33). Gillham (2000, p.1) sums up the relationship between interviewer and interviewee as "a controlling one" as the interviewer is driving the process. However, Basit (2010, p.112) reminds us that in terms of access to data, the interviewees are also powerful. I agree that power is an issue with interviews but would suggest that it can shift between interviewer and interviewee, depending upon the situation and the participant being interviewed – for example a senior leader or academic. Nevertheless, in terms of maintaining a reflexive stance, this is something which was considered.

Broadly, Rubin and Rubin's (2005, p.30) responsive interviewing model was adopted which aims "to generate depth of understanding, rather than breadth", acknowledging "the fact that both the interviewer and interviewee are people, with feelings, personality, interests and experiences". This model seemed most appropriate as it allows the interviewer's individual style and personality to be adopted and recognises that, with each interview, the experiences, knowledge, values and bias of the interviewer will, inevitably, be part of the process, reflecting my constructivist-interpretive approach to research. The "responsive interviewer customizes each interview to focus on what the individual interviewees are expected to know" (Rubin and Rubin, 2012, p.38), an option I was keen to pursue with individuals from the three key groups. Central to this type of interviewing is the notion that participants are "conversational partners" who "actively contribute to the research, bringing to the interview their experiences and interests" (Rubin and Rubin, 2012, p.72). Finally, although the interviews would inevitably be influenced by my reading of the literature,

in particular, I felt it important to approach the interviews with an open mind as "researchers who 'know' what they want to find out are like doctors who know what a patient's problem is: they may well be right. But they may equally well miss something" (Gillham, 2000, p.3). Basit (2010, p.115) also suggests that "keeping an open mind about what kind of data will be generated..." can help to "minimise bias".

Giving voice is a key objective of this research, and this can be achieved via a qualitative approach (Braun and Clarke, 2013, p.19). Eisner (1991, in Cousin, 2009, p.77) identified interviews as an opportunity to give voice in what he saw as a "quasi-therapeutic" relationship. Furthermore, giving voice is one of the key purposes of IPA; the other is "making sense" (Larkin and Thompson, 2012, p.101). Bogdan and Biklen (2006, p.214) note that "'giving voice' has come to be associated with qualitative research" and explain that the objective is often to enable those not normally heard to be given a platform and to enable "social change". The aim with my research was to give voice to academics and managers whose views to date are underrepresented within the literature on employability. Furthermore, as my research involved managers, some of whom are amongst the most senior within the institution, changes to the way in which policies are implemented could be recommended.

3.10 Choosing the participants

Significant consideration was given to deciding who to approach as potential participants in this research project. Wengraf (2001, p.96) emphasises the importance of undertaking a "haphazard selection of informants" and Gubrium *et al* (2012, p.251) suggest that "research questions and previous literature can be a starting point in determining whom to interview". My overall constructivist approach dictates that I am

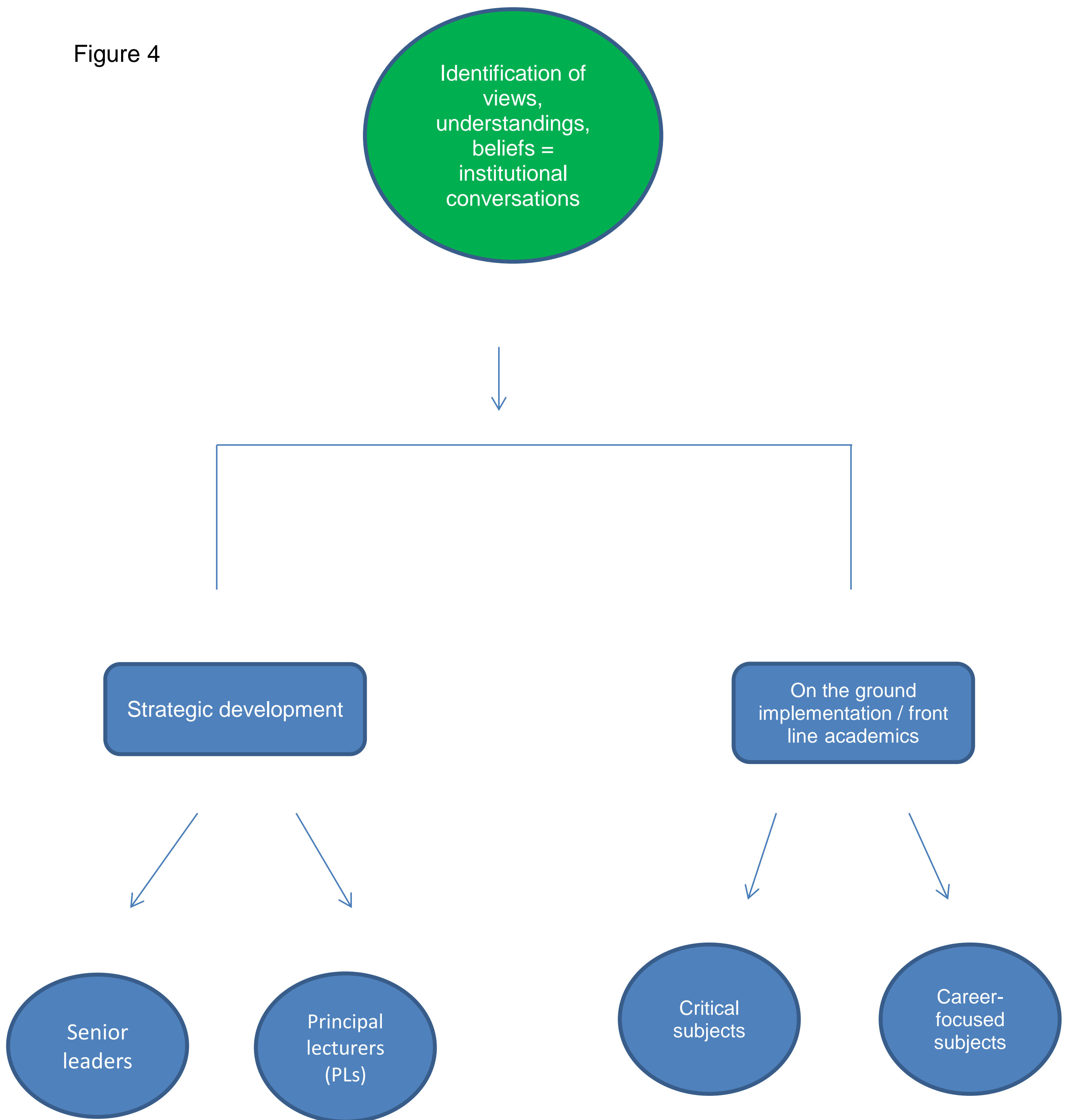
seeking to explore issues in depth, rather than breadth. The purpose of the research is to explore participants' bespoke realities and experiences, rather than make generalisations about groups within the institution. Central to the decision-making process in terms of my selection was the IPA literature: "this means that samples are selected purposively (rather than probability methods) because they can offer a research project insight into a particular experience" (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009, p.48).

Small numbers of participants are preferred in IPA, in order to allow for individual voices to be heard. In addition "IPA researchers usually try to find a fairly homogenous sample, for whom the research question will be meaningful. The extent of this 'homogeneity' varies from study to study" (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009, p.49). Larkin and Thompson (2012, p.103) suggest "participants tend to have *understanding* of the topic at hand. Typically, this understanding is experiential – IPA is not usually used to study people's attitudes to issues that are of no direct relevance to their lives". My interpretation of homogeneity in this research is that all participants share a common experience of working for the same post-1992 higher education institution. All interviewees are experiencing the employability agenda as part of the changing environment within HE, as Government policy is introduced and institutional policy and strategy is developed, imposed and implemented within the institution. All but one participant has a background as an academic, but participants have been further grouped together to meet the requirements of homogeneity, to include senior leaders, managers and academics, as I develop an understanding of the institutional conversations taking place around the employability agenda. However, Braun and Clarke (2013, p.181) also state that: "Comparative designs are possible in IPA,

comparing the experiences of different groups…". My research enables a range of perspectives to be explored as I have further categorised my participants by the roles they occupy, allowing for "convergence and divergence" (Smith, 2004, p.41) between the groups to be identified. Importantly, Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009, p.52) state that: "In multi-perspectival studies (eg Clare, 2002), the exploration of one phenomenon from multiple perspectives can help the IPA analyst to develop a more detailed and multifaceted account of that phenomenon".

This research explores the experiences of the employability agenda amongst three key groups within a post-1992 institution: 1) those responsible for developing employability strategies and policies and leading the changes; 2) those responsible for managing the employability strategy at faculty level; and 3) academics who are experiencing the change and implementing the policy on the ground. The first group are senior leaders. Generally, these participants, responsible for the University's employability strategy development, occupy senior or management positions and do not teach on a regular basis. Group 2 are Principal Lecturers (PLs) for Employability; they are senior academics with strategic responsibility for employability within a faculty. Although they have teaching responsibility, the interviews with these participants focus on their employability role within their specific faculty. I refer to this group as middle managers. Participants within group 3 are "front line academics" (Newton, 2003, p.432). Broadly, they undertake teaching, research and other associated administrative activities within a subject area, and one of the roles of these academics is to implement the various strategies and policies developed by senior managers. Figure 4 depicts my approach.

Figure 4



Although the identification of those responsible for developing and leading on employability strategies and policies within the institution is fairly straight-forward, the selection of academic staff is more complex. An evaluation of other research in this

area revealed a range of approaches taken. Part of a major research project which involved eight HEIs across the UK stated that the researchers:

> …covered five subject areas -- Biological Sciences, Business Studies, Computer Science/Studies, Design Studies and History – which were selected in order to obtain a mix of traditional academic subjects, recently-established and / or rapidly growing vocational subjects and courses where First Destinations data point to a wide range of experiences of initial entry to employment
>
> (Mason, Williams and Cranmer, 2006, p.2).

Lee, Foster and Snaith's (2016, p.1) research focused on politics and international relations. :

> With some of the lowest levels of graduate employability across university campuses, and the non-vocational nature of most Politics/International Relations (IR) undergraduate programmes, the discipline faces a huge challenge in responding to the increasingly prevalent employability agenda in higher education.

An examination of Ph.D. theses on employability provided more detail in terms of participant selection. For example, Cui's (2014, p.3) research involved students and academics from three subject areas within a post-1992 HEI, explaining that: "As well as looking at the two groups separately, it also compared their perceptions and

understandings to highlight any dissonances they have…". Tomlinson (2005, p.79) interviewed staff and students from a range of subjects as part of his PhD research. Academic participants represented a variety of different roles and positions. He also aimed "to try and recruit academics of different ages and experience as well as a gender balance" (Tomlinson, 2005, p.80).

Categories such as "traditional academic subjects" and "recently established and / or rapidly growing vocational subjects" (Mason, Williams and Cranmer, 2006, p.3); or "vocational", "semi-vocational", "hard sciences", "social sciences" and "arts and humanities" (Tomlinson, 2005, p.75), have been used as a way of accessing and representing a range of opinions. There is evidence of a disparity in approaches to tackling the employability agenda within subjects. For example, Mason, Williams and Cranmer's (2006, p.3) research revealed: "…wide differences between departments and between subjects in the ways that teaching staff sought to provide employability skills-enhancing experiences". Ashe (2012, p.131) also highlights the issues raised by those working within "critical communities" such as politics and sociology. Therefore, I wanted to include a range of subjects to explore a variety of viewpoints. However, the use of categories to define the differences and similarities between degree subjects is contentious, and can lead to oversimplifications which fail to recognise the nuanced nature of subject areas. As part of the research process, I considered a variety of descriptors, including vocational and non-vocational, old and new, traditional and modern. I recognise that none of these labels are completely satisfactory as The Quality Assurance Agency's (2014, p.26) guidance on degree programmes states that a graduate should "have developed an understanding of a complex body of knowledge" as well as "have the qualities needed for employment in situations

requiring the exercise of personal responsibility, and decision-making in complex and unpredictable circumstances", indicating the dual elements of theory and practice in all programmes. However, it was important to decide on descriptors to be used throughout this project and, for the purpose of this research, subjects referred to as 'critical' tend to focus more on theory and less on the development of skills in preparation for a specific career. 'Career-focused' subjects are those which still engage with theory but are also geared towards a particular route into work. Although not entirely ideal, it was important to make a decision around categories.

Generally, a purposive approach to selecting participants was adopted which is deemed a suitable approach for qualitative research (Creswell, 2013; Cousin, 2009; Basit, 2010). Basit (2010, p.52) describes it as using "our discretion, knowledge or experience to choose the sample which we think suits the purposes of our study". Both Basit (2010) and Cousin (2009) emphasise the limits of purposive sampling, in that the aim is not to "seek to represent the wider population or claim generalisation" (Basit, 2010, p.52) and that in selecting groups of participants "you are not trying to exhaust any possible variation – this is not the goal of qualitative research" (Cousin, 2009, p.79).

Rubin and Rubin (1995, p.66) provide detailed advice on selecting interviewees and state: "they should be knowledgeable about the cultural arena or the situation or experience being studied; they should be willing to talk; and when people in the arena have different perspectives, the interviewees should represent the range of points of view". They continue by emphasising that "getting one side of the argument is not sufficient. You have to go for balance in your choice of interviewees to represent all the

divisions within the arenas of study" (Rubin and Rubin, 1995, p.69). By selecting academic staff from both critical and career- focused subjects, this will go some way to meeting the demands set out by Rubin and Rubin (1995) to represent a range of views. However, within the limits of this project, it will not be possible to explore the full spectrum of perceptions, views and experiences which will exist within a HEI. Therefore, although range is important, it is not possible to reach the point at which "you are not hearing any new points" (Arksey and Knight, 1999, p.58), or "data saturation" (Fusch and Ness, 2015, p.1408). Yet Gubrium *et al* (2012, p.244) note that there are "vague guidelines on the use of saturation" and Fusch and Ness (2015, p.1408) state that it is a "concept that is hard to define". More importantly, the idiographic nature of IPA does not warrant saturation; but rather celebrates individual voices.

Arksey and Knight (1999, p.57) state that qualitative interviewers should avoid focusing "on high-status informants and those who readily come forward to be interviewed" as there is a "danger of not hearing the private or silent voices". This issue requires consideration as there may be those who do not wish to be interviewed on this topic; they may not see it as their concern or responsibility, or they may be concerned about speaking about a university policy led and driven by senior management. In contrast, those responsible for developing and leading the employability agenda may be more willing to discuss the issues - although they may be keen to present the corporate view, rather than express their personal opinions. However, the decision to interview people from three key groups facilitates the identification of diverse, institutional conversations around employability.

As the interview process progresses and ideas develop, it may be appropriate to identify new participants (Rubin and Rubin, 1995, p.70). A degree of flexibility is therefore required, and I was keen to ensure I was able to take advantage of any opportunities to discuss issues with those willing to do so. For example, several interviewees have voluntarily offered to be interviewed following informal conversations.

Participants were categorised into three groups and given pseudonyms to protect anonymity, as explained in appendix 2, page 153- 154.

3.11 Insider researcher

It is important to address the issue of insider/ outsider research as I am completing this project within the institution where I am employed, which raises particular concerns and challenges. At the outset of this project, I considered myself to be an insider researcher. However, further reading has demonstrated that insider / outsider researcher is a complex concept and there are a variety of definitions of insider offered. For example, Cumming-Potvin (2013, p.217) explains that "'insiderness' evolved in the second half of the twentieth century as anthropologists observed familiar practices in their own societies". In a similar vein, Corbin Dwyer and Buckle refer to Asselin (2003, in Corbin Dwyer and Buckle, 2009, p.58) who suggests that insider researchers "share an identity, language and experiential base with the study participants". Mercer (2007) references Griffith (1998), who is more specific, and suggests that an insider is "someone whose biography (gender, race, class, sexual orientation and so on) gives her (sic) a lived in familiarity with the group being researched" while an outsider is "a researcher who does not have any intimate

knowledge of the group being researched, prior to entry into the group" (Griffith, 1998, in Mercer, 2007, p.3). Humphrey cites Coughlan and Barrick's (2005, in Humphrey, 2013, p.572): "research conducted by people who are already members of the organisation or community they are seeking to investigate as a result of education, employment, social networks or political engagement". There is a plethora of explanations of what it means to be an insider or outsider in terms of research, but there is no universally-agreed definition. The debate has moved away from attempts to describe researchers as either insiders or outsiders towards recognition of the blurring of the boundaries and fluidity between the two positions. According to Mercer (2007, p.3) many "reject the insider/ outsider dichotomy proposed by Olsen (1977) in favour of a continuum…" and Hellawell (2006, p.490) goes further by suggesting that he is "not talking about one continuum but about a multiple series of parallel ones". Corbin Dwyer and Buckle (2009, p.60) agree that an insider / outsider "dichotomy" is too "simplistic" as "holding membership in a group does not denote complete sameness within that group. Likewise, not being a member of a group does not denote complete difference". Instead they offer the "notion of the space in between" explaining that we can sometimes feel more of an insider than an outsider but ultimately occupy a place between the two.

Attempting to self-define as either an insider or outsider is oversimplifying what is a much more complex issue. Depending on the situation, I could be defined as an insider or outsider for a variety of reasons. For example, as a female academic I could describe myself as an insider when interviewing other female academics and an outsider when interviewing male members of staff within the university. Similarly, I could describe myself as an insider when interviewing other academics within my own

discipline but an outsider when interviewing managers or academics from other disciplines. Such issues are explored by Acker (2001) in her analysis of qualitative feminist research, examining the role of female academics. She analyses her research team's position by adapting Banks's (1998, in Acker, 2001, p.160) typology and referring to "insider-indigenous", "indigenous-outsider", "external-insider" to "external-outsider" (Acker, 2001, 160 -161). Acker (2001, p.169) emphasises that "my typology will be most useful if not taken too literally as four discrete boxes, but as a heuristic guide…". I agree that the movement of the researcher between positions should be accepted and recognised as part of the reflexive research process. As Mercer (2007, p.4) states: "some features of a researcher's identity are innate and unchanging" while others are subject to change. Arguably, my task as a researcher is not to attempt to define my position in these terms, but recognise the variety of roles I occupy and, furthermore, acknowledge that these roles are continually in flux and that this should be welcomed. As De Guerre (2002, p.333) states: "a pure insider is too caught up in the action to practice reflexivity and a pure outsider is not close enough to understand what is really going on".

Despite accepting that I am occupying a plethora of roles and am sometimes insider, sometimes outsider and sometimes in between, much of the literature which addresses conducting research within one's place of work continues to describe this scenario as insider research. There are a variety of issues raised within the literature in terms of insider research with Morse (1998, p.61) specifically advising against this type of approach: "the dual roles of investigator and employee are incompatible and they may place the researcher in an untenable position". Both Brannick and Coughlan (2007) and Mercer (2007) highlight the range of criticisms levelled at insider research.

Branick and Coughlan (2007, p.60) refer specifically to accusations of insiders "…being too close and thereby, not attaining the distance and objectivity deemed to be necessary for valid research". A thorough analysis of the research can be hindered if the researcher is not sufficiently reflexive and conscious of making "taken for granted assumptions" (Asselin, 2003, p.100). I have provided evidence throughout this chapter with specific reference to closeness and will continue to further justify my approach via discussions around reflexivity and trustworthiness.

Marshall and Rossman raise Alvesson's (2003, in Marshall and Rossman, 2006, p.62) issues with conducting research in one's own workplace, referring to, for example, "ethical and political dilemmas; the risk of uncovering potentially damaging knowledge and struggles with closeness and closure". Humphrey (2013, p.581) describes the process of conducting insider research as "walk(ing) a tight rope" referring to difficulties such as managing the differing roles an insider researcher occupies; using the data gained in an appropriate way; and the issue of "self-censorship" due to a fear of the consequences of publicly criticising one's own employers (Humphrey, 2013, p.578 – 581). The potential issue of dealing with damaging information has been a particular concern for me. However, I believe such dilemmas are not unique to insider research, but would be relevant to any research which uncovers sensitive information. Petschler (2012, p.171) suggests that there are benefits to being an insider researcher when faced with similar situations and describes how she dealt with negative feedback about her organisation: "My role as insider allowed me to see this in an absolute sense, to resist overstating the criticism or generalising the effects of other parts of the school culture, as advised by Walford (2007, p.158)". While Petschler's (2012) insight

into dealing with criticisms is useful, I have personally taken Cousin's (2009) advice in order to address such issues and developed an ethical framework, discussed below.

I also believe that there are significant benefits derived from insider research and they are recognised within the literature. Marshall and Rossman (2006, p.62) lists some of these advantages which include "relatively easy access to participants; reduced time expenditure for certain aspects of data collection; a feasible location for research; the potential to build trusting relationships". Corbin Dwyer and Buckle (2009, p.58) identify similar positives when referring to a potentially "more rapid and more complete acceptance by their participants". Hewitt-Taylor (2002, p.35) also suggests "a potential to gather a greater depth of data and the possible availability of more contextual detail" as further benefits. I have been able to take advantage of the opportunities described above throughout the process of undertaking this research: colleagues have been willing to invest time in being interviewed, as well as consider the findings of the research.

In summary, I would suggest that both insider and outsider research is subject to such advantages and disadvantages and that the key issue is ensuring that the research is trustworthy.

3.12 Reflexivity

Adopting a reflexive approach is one way in which a qualitative researcher can deal with accusations of subjectivity and claims of bias. Cumming-Potvin (2013, p.219) suggests that the "importance of reflexivity is no longer contested" but acknowledges, there is little advice on how to achieve this. Although it is difficult to locate discussions

about what it means for a researcher to be reflexive, there are some suggestions within the literature: Cousin (2009, p.35 - 36) provides a list of fifteen ways in which the researcher can ensure a reflexive approach in terms of the data analysis; Hamilton and Corbett-Whittier (2013) emphasise the importance of keeping and maintaining field notes and Gillham (2000) suggests maintaining a research log, both of which become part of the data itself. Bryman (2016, p.388) states: "…social researchers should be reflective about the implications of their methods, values, biases, and decisions for the knowledge of the social world they generate. Relatedly, reflexivity entails a sensitivity to the researcher's cultural, political and social context".

Other suggestions include approaching colleagues independent of the research to become involved in the process of analysing and checking the data (Asselin, 2003; Humphry, 2013), as well as "member checks", which allow the participants to consider the analysis (Lincoln and Guba, 1985, in Asselin, 2003, p.101). Member checking of the data was completed as part of my research, providing participants with the opportunity to comment and add to my interpretations and this issue is discussed further in a later section.

Mauthner and Doucet (2003, p.413) agree that the "practicalities and methods" of reflexivity are "rarely addressed", but offer a reflection on their own research experience, and an explanation of how they adopted a reflexive approach at the stage of data analysis as one potential solution. Cumming-Potvin (2013, p.225) offers a more holistic approach to reflexivity which encompasses the research design and "involves viewing phenomena through a nuanced lens of self-awareness and social, political and cultural awareness (see Patton, 2002)". I have attempted to adopt a

reflexive approach throughout my research. Such an approach has not only explicitly recognised my own position with my research, but also acknowledged the multiple versions of socially-constructed reality presented by the interviewees and the fact that my interpretations and analysis of the research are “re-presentations” of reality (Cousin, 2009, p.12). Being reflexive is a process which runs through the whole research process and which requires a proactive approach. As Mauthner and Doucet (2003, p.425) suggest, the researcher should identify “dedicated times, spaces and contexts within which to be reflexive”.

3.13 Ethics

As suggested within the literature (Cousin, 2009; Basit, 2010; Creswell, 2013) ethics is an ongoing concern and not something to be considered solely at the outset of the project when completing relevant ethics forms and documentation. Basit (2010, p.56) notes that ethical considerations “must be kept in mind throughout the study – at design stage, in gaining access to the sample, in collecting and analysing the data, in writing up the report, and in disseminating the research findings”. The British Education Research Association (BERA) (2018, p.2) guidelines state: “We recommend that at all stages of a project – from planning through conduct to reporting – educational researchers undertake wide consultation to identify relevant ethical issues”. In terms of this research, ethical considerations were prioritised from the beginning and included as part of detailed discussions with supervisors throughout the whole process of completing the thesis. I am continually aware that participants are engaging in conversations about their experiences of their place of work and that this presents numerous potential ethical dilemmas. Therefore, protecting identity and assuring anonymity was an ongoing concern.

Guidance on “responsibilities to participants” (BERA, 2018, pp.6 – 26), offering advice on issues such as privacy and anonymity is important. I adhered to Cousin’s (2009, p.20) guidance on ethics, paying particular attention to her advice on being reflexive; including “enough data in the report to support the plausibility of the analysis”; and ensuring the “report protects the rights, dignity and confidentiality of the research participants”. Cousin (*ibid*) also refers to “corroboration” and asks “Have you shared your analysis with research subjects and / or other researchers?”. Member checking was part of my research process and is discussed later.

Ethical approval was granted by the University’s ethics committee. Details about the research approach and ethical implications; handling and storing the data; maintaining confidentiality and protecting the identity of participants were provided. As this research takes place within one institution, every effort has been made to protect the anonymity of participants: no information has been given which would knowingly allow them to be identified, an approach taken by Holland (2012) in her research. All participants completed a consent form and, before each interview, I explained that I was committed to protecting anonymity, but also clarified that the nature of conducting research within one institution meant that this was impossible to guarantee. As Miles and Huberman (1994, p.293) state: “Confidentiality and anonymity are usually promised – sometimes very superficially – in initial agreements with respondents”. The BERA guidelines (2018, p.21) also recognise that “anonymity may not be possible in some cases or contexts.” Therefore, participants were asked if they were still happy to take part on the basis that anonymity could not be guaranteed. I assigned pseudonyms to each participant and offered participants the opportunity to see transcripts with my notes and interpretations before the thesis was submitted.

The aim, therefore, has been to avoid a tick box approach to ethics, but to attempt to demonstrate an ongoing commitment to an ethical approach. However, as Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009, p.54) state: “There is no exhaustive list of ethical solutions to the problems thrown up by qualitative research”.

3.14 Data analysis: interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)

Smith, Flowers and Larkin’s (2009) advice on data analysis was followed and I have presented the key steps taken in appendix 3, page155, outlining the process of analysis of each interview or “case” (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009, p.4). Although presented in a linear fashion, conducting the analysis was non-linear as transcripts, notes and themes were repeatedly reassessed and reconsidered, described as an “iterative and inductive cycle” (Smith 2007, in Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009, p.79. Once step five had been completed, the process was repeated for each case, before “looking for patterns across cases” (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009, p.101).

Step 1: The aim of step one is to become as familiar as possible with the content of the interview. I completed all transcriptions myself and read each transcript, as well as listen to the audio recordings, several times. Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009, p.82) recommend purposively “slowing down our habitual propensity for ‘quick and dirty’ reduction and synopsis”, ensuring close inspection of the data. I recorded my thoughts about each interview in an attempt to “bracket them off for a while”, which is also recommended, “thus allowing your focus to remain with the data” (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009, p.82).

Step two: is a lengthy process and involves coding the data, making descriptive, linguistic and conceptual comments. I imported each transcript into a table with three

columns: the middle column included the original transcript and the right hand column was used to make descriptive, linguistic and conceptual comments, represented by different colour fonts. Descriptive comments serve to highlight “understanding of things which matter to the participant (the key objects, events, experiences in the participant’s lifeworld” and are “about taking things at face value” (Smith, Flowers and Larkin 2009, p.84). Linguistic comments focus on the language used by participants in order to gain a better understanding of the meaning individuals attach to their experiences. Making conceptual comments moves the analysis forward and requires researchers to be more analytical (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009, p.88). At this stage, it is important to stay true to the original words of the participants, while allowing an interpretation which “was inspired by, and arose from, attending to the participant’s words rather than being imported from outside” (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009, p.90). As recognised within the IPA literature, this stage allows for creativity and freedom: “There are no rules about what is commented upon, and there is no requirement, for example, to divide the text into meaning units and assign a comment for each unit” (Smith and Osborn, 2007, p.67).

Step 3: The next stage is to identify emergent themes. Smith and Osborn (2008, p.68) explain: “Here the initial notes are transformed into concise phrases which aim to capture the essential quality of what was found in the text”. At this point, I developed and noted emergent themes in the left hand column of each table, using the notes made during step 2. Appendix 4, page 156, is an extract of the analysis completed with one participant.

Step 4: In order to identify patterns, I produced a list of emergent themes, printed it out and then cut out each theme individually (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009, p.96). I examined each of them and moved related ideas around to identify super-ordinate themes. A variety of tactics to enable the development of super-ordinate themes are suggested (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009, p.96 – 99), and my approach mainly encompassed abstraction, described as "putting like with like and developing a new name for the cluster"; subsumption, which is "similar to abstraction but it operates where an emergent theme itself acquires super-ordinate status as it helps bring together a series of related themes"; and numeration, which "reflects the frequency with which emergent themes appear" (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009, p.96 – 98). However, as Smith and Osborn (2007, p.72) suggest: "This form of analysis is iterative and involves a close interaction between reader and text" and required continual reassessment, moving to and from the original data to ensure that there was evidence for the themes. Appendix 5, page 157, is evidence of how I completed step 4.

Step 5: Once super-ordinate themes were developed for the first case, I then moved to the next case and repeated the process described above. Having completed the process for all participants, patterns across the cases could be identified. The aim was to develop super-ordinate themes (and subordinate themes within them) which highlighted commonalities between participants, without losing individual narratives and experiences: "Some of the best IPA has this dual quality – pointing to ways in which participants represent unique idiosyncratic instances but also shared higher order qualities" (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009, p.101).

Larkin and Thompson (2012, p.104-105) suggest: "…you will want to be able to draw your themes together in to some kind of structure (this might be a table, a hierarchy, like a family tree, or amore circular diagrammatic representation)…". My table of themes can be seen at figure 5, p.105. However, in order to ensure that the analysis remained true to the original text, Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009) suggest that documentation is produced which includes evidence from the transcripts. This also provides a paper trail, allowing the reader to follow the analytical process through the various stages. Again, I followed this advice: appendix 6, page 158, is an extract from the master table, documenting themes, alongside evidence from participant interviews.

3.14 Issues of quality

The quality of qualitative research is an ongoing debate within the literature (Denscombe, 2002; Flick, 2006; Creswell, 2013) and this section will outline the ways in which I have attempted to produce research which can be viewed as trustworthy.

As Smith (2011, p.23) notes, IPA research has become the chosen methodological approach for a growing group of researchers and is now being adopted by an ever-expanding disciplinary pool (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009, p.1). However, Braun and Clarke (2013, p.183) state that IPA research has been criticised for being overly descriptive and insufficiently interpretative. In their evaluation of IPA, they suggest one of the weaknesses is a: "lack of concrete guidance about higher level (interpretative) analysis; analyses are often limited to simply describing participants' concerns" (*ibid*). In light of this criticism, Smith (2011) completed a critical review of IPA research papers, and produced criteria against which IPA research could be assessed. Yet Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009, p.179) warn against relying on "check lists" as a way

of monitoring quality, but instead advocate an approach which draws on the work of Yardley (2000) and which “presents four broad principles” (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009, p. 180). They are: “sensitivity to context”, “commitment and rigour”, “transparency and coherence” and “impact and importance” (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009, p.180 – 183). Larkin and Thompson (2012, p.112) reference Smith’s (2010) criteria and suggest that the following is important in producing good quality IPA research:

1. Collecting appropriate data, from appropriately selected informants
2. Some degree of idiographic focus (attention to the particular) balanced against ‘what is shared’ within a sample
3. An analysis that:
    a. transcends the structure of the data collection method (e.g., the schedule for a semi-structured interview)
    b. focuses on ‘how things are understood’, rather than on ‘what happened’
    c. incorporates and balances phenomenological detail (where appropriate) and

       interpretative work (where appropriate) to develop a psychologically relevant account of the participants’ ‘engagement-in-the-world’
4. Appropriate use of triangulation (can be via methods, perspectives, data, analysts, fieldwork) or audit and/or credibility-checking (can be via respondents, supervisors, peers, parallel sample) to achieve trustworthiness
5. Appropriate use of extracts and commentary to achieve transparency (claims should usually be referenced to data; data should not usually be left to ‘speak for

themselves'; there should be substantive engagement with, and commentary on some longer extracts of data

6. Appropriate level of contextual detail – for the extracts, participants, researchers and study
7. Attention to process; including both analytic and reflexive components
8. Appropriate pitch and engagement with theory (in making sense of the analysis).

I have attempted to adopt the guiding principles set out within the literature and, in particular, the advice above. I have addressed points one to three and point six throughout chapters three and four of the thesis, with a detailed rationale for the selection of participants and a clear explanation of the data analysis process. The findings section below will continue to demonstrate how individual voices have been allowed to emerge and remain within the analysis, alongside common issues across the participants.

A concern addressed by Larkin and Thompson (2012) relates to the interpretative nature of IPA and the fact that it is subject to the influence and thoughts of one researcher. My interpretation is one of many that could be applied to the data and it is important to ensure that researchers' interpretations do not lose sight of the participants' voice. Therefore, in order to address point four of Larkin and Thompson's (2012) criteria, I engaged with a process of member-checking the data with participants (although they also suggest member checking is not essential as IPA is an interpretative activity (Larkin and Thompson, 2012, p.112)). As Cousin (2009, p.22) states: "What matters is what you have made of what they said and what they think of this making". The decision to follow this route was also related to a desire to pursue

an ethical approach to the research, as noted by Cousin (2009): I wanted to ensure that participants felt their experiences were being appropriately reflected. As Braun and Clarke (2013, p.282) suggest member checking is often done by researchers who: "are aiming to 'give voice' to participants' experiences, ensuring that there is a good fit between their interpretations and representation of their participants' experiences and the participants' *own* understandings of their experiences". They also (2013, p.284) outline some of the potential problems with member-checking, one of which is that participants disagree with the way in which the data has been interpreted. Despite this possibility, as my participants had agreed to discuss issues around their place of work, I felt it was important to give them the opportunity to see what would be included in the final thesis. The aim was not to dilute the findings but to ensure that they reflected the true experiences and meaning-making process of the participants. In summary, member checking facilitated both an ethical approach and a way of addressing the quality of the research.

Point five refers to the need to demonstrate the link back to data to evidence themes, something which was done as part of the analytical process and described above. As the table of super-ordinate themes was produced, associated quotes were identified and included.

Point seven is also dealt with in chapters three and four, as I examine the issue of reflexivity in detail, recognising the need to deal with this issue throughout the research process, from the design through to the analysis and writing up of the research.

Finally, point eight is part of the discussion chapter, recognising and evaluating how my research related to relevant literature.

Chapter 4: Findings

In line with other IPA research (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009, p.112), my results are presented within a separate findings and discussion section. This section outlines the findings, describing the themes that have emerged from the data through the IPA analysis, using extracts from the interviews to demonstrate the presence of the themes. Following the completion of nine semi-structured interviews, five super-ordinate themes were identified, within which were seven related subordinate themes, presented in the table below.

Figure 5: Themes from the data

Super-ordinate themes	Subordinate themes
Understanding employability	
The Ubiquity of Change	The purpose of a university Employability and loss of agency Fractured academic identity
Differences and divides	Subject-specific issues Two camps
One size does not fit all	
Employability as a process	Additional pressures Promoting employability

Smith, Flowers and Larkin, (2009, p.109) explain:

> Sometimes there will be a clear hierarchy where each super-ordinate theme has a set of nested themes, each applying to each participant. In other projects the

> super-ordinate themes may be more powerful as an organising device and it may be that, by the time of writing up, the important thing is to show how the super-ordinate theme is present for each participant, and that lower level themes have become redundant.

The analysis of my data led to the development of overarching super-ordinate themes which provided structure, but also fostered a conceptual analysis and interpretation of the findings. The order in which the themes are presented is indicative of the prevalence and importance of the themes. Most of the themes include subordinate themes, but some of the smaller themes were better contained within one overarching super-ordinate theme. Such an approach has been taken elsewhere (see, for example, Holland, 2012, p.83).

The analysis of all of the cases is presented within one overall section. Consideration was given to presenting the findings of each group (academics, middle managers and senior leaders) separately, before examining overarching themes. However, Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009, p.108) suggest: “Just as with every other stage of IPA there is no single right way to write up an IPA analysis”. Therefore, I have highlighted differences and commonalities between the groups of participants, as well as between individuals throughout, but presented them in one combined section. The data is explored as a collection of individual experiences, contributing and leading to a clear and coherent overarching narrative of the cases as a whole, and ultimately portraying the institutional conversations taking place around employability.

Commonalities between participants' experiences and views emerged, as well as tension and difference. The heterogeneity of lived experiences was not solely evident amongst those occupying different positions within the institution: there was a range of views and opinions across the cases and within roles, reflecting the idiosyncratic nature of the interpretation of participants' experiences and interpretations. The way in which participants made sense of the employability agenda was therefore complex and nuanced.

In order to foreground participants' experiences and voices within this section, reference to relevant and wider literature is explored within the discussion chapter, as recommended by Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009, p.112).

4.1 Super-ordinate theme 1: Understanding employability

This super-ordinate theme encompasses participants' perceptions and conceptions of employability. It was important to obtain their views in order to address the first research question, but I also wanted to explore claims made in the literature that there is debate and confusion around the term (Cranmer, 2006; Small, Shacklock and Marchant, 2018).

When providing subjective definitions of employability, several participants interpreted the term as the development of skills. Little discussion took place around the specifics of these skills, other than that they were those appropriate to enable students to pursue their chosen careers. Ensuring students are ready to enter the workplace following graduation was seen as a key role of HE. Sue and Lizzy, for example, used the word 'ready' several times during their interviews and Jonathan said: "it's ensuring

that our students are as best prepared as they can be to engage the world of work and then ultimately give them every assistance we can to gain employment" (lines 51 – 54). Specifically, those participants with more instrumental views around education perceived HE as preparation for the students' working life, and they suggested that their pedagogic practice and management strategies were geared towards achieving this goal. In these cases, the employability agenda was prioritised and clearly driving and influencing their working practices.

Three of the participants emphasised that employability was not simply about attaining the first job post-graduation, but about equipping students with the skills which would be useful in the long-term. For example, Robert talked about "lifelong career management" (line 173) and Sophie said: "I mean employability to me is lifelong sort of skills" (line 101 – 102). Lizzy added: "employability is all about giving our students er the skills to be employed, the skills for work, the skills of their future" (lines 120 – 122). These participants suggest that way in which the university works with students to address employability is potentially transformative, enabling them to progress to manage an unpredictable and changing workplace. The impact of employability initiatives are perceived as powerful and enduring, in contrast to other, more sceptical participants who viewed employability initiatives as pedagogically questionable and of less value than subject-specific content and material.

Jonathan was keen to emphasise that student support at the institution did not stop at the point of graduation but continued into the long term. However, there was also recognition that identifying the appropriate skills and jobs involved some element of "future-gazing" (Sophie, line 189) and Tim said: "so there's a tendency for people to

focus on their specialisms not on the broader educational needs erm and future needs of erm individual students partly because you can't actually, you can't predict what individual students will need" (lines 148 – 152). Such comments reveal the difficult and increasingly complex task afforded to the HE sector: institutions are expected to develop initiatives to prepare a diverse body of students for an indeterminate workplace. Yet, the employability initiatives are being implemented by staff with a range of experiences and knowledge who are, themselves, navigating a turbulent working environment.

Despite broad agreement around the definition of employability, there was also evidence of differences in understanding of the terminology. Sophie and Robert, for example, noted that employability and employment are often used interchangeably, with the DLHE statistics seen as a measurement of employability. Many HEIs reference such statistics as the institution's employability success rate within the public-facing employability discourse; effectively, they are used as a marketing tool for the institution. However, Sophie noted: "cause there's a big difference isn't there between employment and the DLHE returns and employability?" (lines 96 – 98). Both Sophie and Robert called for a better understanding, both internally and externally, of the holistic nature of employability. Within the institution, for example, there was a wide range of activities to support students and foster the development of skills and Robert felt that they should be recognised when institution-wide targets were set:

> I think it's when erm when targets and KPIs and strategic direction is set, I think that's where issues arise because us getting people jobs and numbers of

students getting jobs in terms of employment is quite different to how we would evaluate our service and delivery around making them employable

(Robert, lines 186 – 191).

Externally-imposed measurements and targets, driving the public discourse, can lead to a narrow definition and conception of employability, which is adopted by many HEIs and several participants within this research. For some, employability was simply about developing skills and securing a job. However, for participants such as Sophie and Robert and Lizzy, employability initiatives potentially have a significant impact on the students' lives. The language used by Sophie and Lizzy, in particular, demonstrated the responsibility they felt towards their students in terms of their overall development and progression, and how employability is an essential element of the package of support she and her colleagues provide for them. For some participants, therefore, work around employability is often not about simply meeting an agenda or improving statistics, it is about a wider responsibility they feel towards their students. These issues are discussed in more detail within super-ordinate theme 4. Obviously, this does not mean that other participants are unconcerned about their students' welfare: however, they interpret and conceive the agenda as another example of increased bureaucracy and surveillance, issues discussed in detail below.

4.2 Super-ordinate theme two: The Ubiquity of Change

This super-ordinate theme represents the pervasive nature of change, dominating the wider Higher Education environment and, importantly, the everyday lives of the members of staff working within the case study institution, irrespective of their role.

The majority of interviewees referred to the issue and impact of change on their working lives in some way. All participants recognised that wider economic, social and political changes were driving the development and implementation of employability policies and strategies. Overall, increased accountability and monitoring of activities both externally by Government, and internally within the institution, were seen as a consequence of the instrumentalist agenda infiltrating higher education, but the response to this surveillance was also varied.

The employability agenda was therefore experienced and interpreted as a change process for the majority of participants: new legislation resulted in new initiatives being introduced. Again, the lived experiences of these changes were varied, particularly amongst academics. Some (for example, Sue and Lizzy) took the opportunity to proactively develop new modules and initiatives, while others experienced these changes as stressful and pressured. Although Sue and Lizzy were required to implement new employability initiatives, they emphasised that they had been focusing on employability since joining the institution and saw it as key to their academic role. For these participants, change was perceived as something others had to experience and accept in order to meet the needs of the employability agenda.

There are three subordinate themes within this super-ordinate theme: the purpose of a university, employability and loss of control, and fractured academic identity. Each of these subordinate themes will now be discussed in turn.

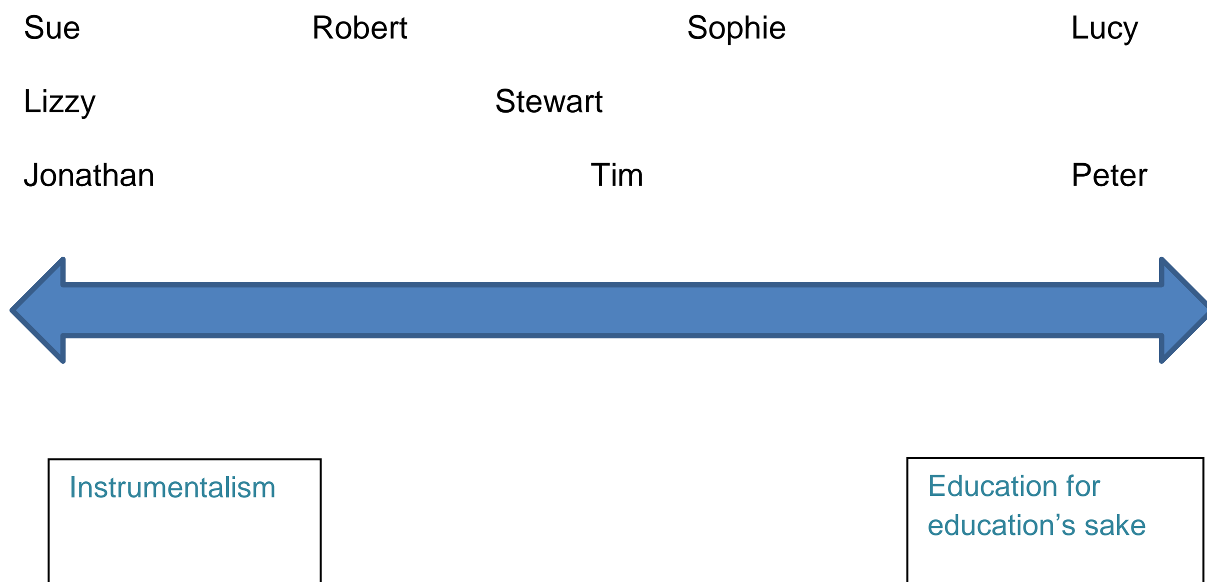
4.2.1 Subordinate theme 1: The purpose of a university

This subordinate theme captures important discussions around participants' conceptions of the role of a university within wider society. These discussions were

triggered by the experience of working within a changing HE environment, which is heavily influenced by instrumental agendas such as the employability one.

The heterogeneity of staff views was clearly evident within this theme. Staff occupied a range of positions: from those whose views were instrumentalist, to those who favoured a 'valuing education for education's sake' perspective, reflecting traditional Humboldtian values. Figure 6 is a diagrammatic representation of my interpretation of these varied views (at the time of interview), positioning each participant on the continuum based on the interviews.

Figure 6: The purpose of a university



However, the continuum (figure 6) should be understood as fluid, rather than representing a fixed position: some participants moved along the continuum, in both directions through the course of the interview. Therefore, this diagram is a simplification of the varied and complex participant perceptions and conceptions of

employability yet it provides an interpretation of the broad views and position of each participant.

All interviewees recognised and described a dominant instrumentalist discourse surrounding higher education: “you know the purpose of it government-induced er is that er now that’s changed, you know, it’s become more instrumental” (Tim, lines 595 – 597). The increase in tuition fees was noted by some staff (and particularly emphasised by senior leaders) as a turning point in higher education and seemed to provide a justification for an increasingly instrumentalist approach. Jonathan, for example, commented: “like anything, as soon as you pay a significant sum of money for something understandably the issue of value for money starts to raise it’s, you know, quite rightly so well what are you getting for that” (lines 519 – 523). Overall, senior leaders held views that could be construed as reflecting the Government’s instrumentalist agenda, emphasising the idea of students as consumers and they talked of students getting a return on the investment they were making. Robert said: “I think education has followed a more American style than a European style of education erm and it’s made erm, it’s made higher education much more commercial” (lines 302 – 305). However, Robert also suggested that his personal beliefs were not aligned to such an approach but that, professionally, it was necessary: “I’m all for that model, not the commercial model er where you have time to explore yourself and do your subject and all the rest of it but now we’re not in that game, we’re being measured by how many of your students get employed” (lines 726 - 730). This dissonance between Robert’s private and public views, suggests that his own values have to be set aside because of the demands of the dominant instrumentalist HE agenda and the need for the university to respond to externally-driven requirements. This conflict

between the public and the private was apparent during interviews with academics, specifically Peter and Lucy, who were critical of neoliberal policies but were having to implement them as part of their roles.

Middle managers occupy the middle ground on the continuum, as depicted in figure 9, page 88. Tim stated: “my main interest is in supporting students and obviously I do that through teaching but erm they’re here for a broader experience” (lines 96 – 98). Sophie, whilst focused on meeting the requirements of various employability strategies, called for a balanced approach between addressing the need to develop technical and practical skills, in addition to acquiring core, theoretical knowledge:

> I do think that we’ve got to again not be driven by that agenda but see it as the practice whichever avenue you’ve gone into doesn’t exist without the theory, if you don’t have that underpinning it’s very weak and it’s very thin and you’ve got nothing to ground it in
>
> (lines 695 - 700).

Some academic staff fully supported the instrumentalist paradigm, particularly Sue and Lizzy. In the following extract, Sue suggests that her students’ reasons for attending university provide her with a rationale and further justification for her position and approach to practice.

Sue: I think they think that’s what we do. We help them get a job

Interviewer: So do you think that's what they're expecting then then they come into university? That's what they, that's why they're coming to university and that's what..

Sue: Absolutely I believe that's probably for 99% of them that's why they're coming to university. There is an occasional anomaly that is there for the academic or the errm learning for learning sake scenario yeah but it's just so rare now in in what we teach

(Sue, lines 64 – 73).

Here, Sue indicates the relevance and importance of subject in terms of her beliefs and attitudes to employability. Subject-specific interpretations and conceptions of employability are key to this research and are discussed in a later section.

At the other end of the continuum, Peter seemed resigned to the fact that the instrumental agenda was integral to the HE environment, but was unconvinced that this was the right approach: "so it's very, it's a very kind of instrumentalist, you come to university to get a graduate job and I think that's an issue because I do not necessarily think that's what education should be" (lines 133 – 137). For Peter, in particular, his lived experience of the dominant instrumentalist employability agenda was disconcerting and often in direct opposition to his personal beliefs.

Several participants, from each of the three groups, challenged the claims and assumptions that are routinely made as part of the current employability discourse. At senior management level, Robert suggested that many employers are unclear about the skills they require: "another interesting debate which I would throw on the table

would be the question does, do companies really know what they're wanting when they're recruiting?" (lines 281 – 283). Peter and Tim also suggested the messages conveyed around employability and HE can result in additional pressure and unrealistic expectations for young people. Tim commented: "so erm a lot of our students er they've been sold the idea you go to university erm and you come out the end and you get this wonderful job" (lines 813 – 816). Peter added: "but is that creating a pressure on young people to get degrees cos they feel that's the way they should and they feel that it makes them more employable and get a better type of job afterwards" (lines 462 – 466). By taking a critical approach to employability, Peter and Tim highlight the potential damage the employability rhetoric is having on those individuals the agenda specifically purports to help.

A further challenge to the current discourse was centred upon what Peter and Lucy perceived as a narrow focus on practical, technical skills. Peter emphasised that critical and analytical skills were equally useful and relevant: "I think that makes you eminently employable but I don't think that's acknowledged fully in the discourses around employability in the higher education system" (lines 258 – 262). Lucy also noted: "you need to be able to erm if you like deconstruct arguments so you need to be able to problematise things" (lines 842 – 843). The suggestion from these conversations is that the employability agenda is representative of a wider shift in HE towards prioritising subjects which directly lead to vocations, above critical subjects with less clear or direct employment routes. Participants felt compelled to defend and justify critical subjects, indicating that the employability discourse has led to judgements being made in terms of the value of these subjects and, therefore, the work in which participants are engaged.

Despite the range of positions occupied by staff, it should be recognised at the outset that all participants felt that higher education has a crucial role to play in terms of helping graduates secure employment. As Peter stated: “so we want to prepare students to be in the workplace and I think that should definitely be offered to students; that should be part and parcel of what is provided for students within the wider university context” (lines 373 – 377). However, there was clear disparity around the issue of the implementation of employability agendas and its impact on the curriculum. Peter suggested that embedding employability within modules was not the answer, whereas Sue and Lizzy believed it should be core to their courses: “I think there should be an employability skills module in each of the years and they should be forced to do it, whether they want it or not cos it’s so important” (Lizzy, Lines 181 – 185). Yet, at the time this research was being conducted, university-wide initiatives were being embedded in all courses across the institution, causing concern for participants such as Peter whose values were not aligned with aims of the employability agenda.

During the interviews, participants constructed polemic representations of the ‘old’ and the ‘new’. Employability was seen as integral to contemporary HE culture, although some were uncomfortable with this. An approach which simply valued education for education’s sake was perceived by several participants as indicative of a bygone era, with Sue suggesting there is a “different model” (line 306) and Jonathan stating: “higher education today is a well obviously it’s a radically different place than it was a hundred years ago but even ten years ago” (lines 511 – 513). Therefore, it seems that participants who do not subscribe to this philosophy of education potentially feel alienated as the instrumental approach to the employability agenda drives current policy and practice.

In summary, this subordinate theme demonstrates that discussions around the employability agenda inevitably led participants to reflect on wider, macro questions such as the purpose of a university within society. Overall, participants made sense of the employability agenda with reference to the wider political agenda, with the perception that higher education was becoming increasingly instrumentalist, particularly since the increase in tuition fees. Yet such conversations ultimately turned to the articulation of an individual's beliefs and values, taking the debate from a public to a private issue: participants used discussions about the employability agenda as an opportunity to articulate their personal, philosophical beliefs about education, with some critiquing the political and policy agendas within which employability is prioritised.

4.2.2 Subordinate theme two: Employability and loss of control

Common to all participants' experiences of the employability agenda was a loss of control or agency: academics were required to change practice and senior management had to develop strategies which were driven by the need to meet externally-imposed criteria. In terms of pedagogic practice, Sue and Lizzy initially offered a narrative of freedom and being proactive in response to the increased focus on employability. They had taken the opportunity to re-evaluate their approaches and curriculum content: in addition to meeting the requirements of institution-wide initiatives, they developed employability-focused curricula. Lucy, who was sceptical and initially resistant to institution-led employability initiatives - "I was very, very disgruntled about the fact that we had this very prescriptive list of these things that you had to do" (lines 193 – 195) - had a positive experience of implementation. Within the boundaries of the institution's policy, Lucy had taken a creative approach, in

collaboration with a member of the careers team, and transformed a "very, very dry subject" (lines 28 – 29) into an engaging one. The unexpected consequence of embedding employability within a module for Lucy was an improved curriculum, more innovative assessment and a positive response from students: "they were lovely, you know, er, the students had worked really hard, the standard was good you know, and I was so surprised that you know in week six they could do that" (lines 214- 217). There was evidence, therefore, of some creative, localised responses to standardised, top-down employability initiatives.

Several participants acknowledged that they could adapt employability initiatives. Tim commented: "you've got to have some freedom and you've got to have some creativity to say how do I fit this in without it seeming like some incredible unwieldy thing that is coming in" (lines 374 – 377). Stewart agreed: "I mean, I might not like the fact that we're being made to do it but I understand why we're being made to and we have autonomy over how we do implement it so" (lines 1109 – 1115). There was some suggestion, however, of a compliance approach: "I do as I'm told" (Stewart, lines 1294 – 1295) and this lack of agency was also evident in Peter's and Lucy's accounts of implementing employability initiatives. The top-down approach to implementation was criticised by several participants, including the employability advocates. Ultimately, there was no choice for participants: the employability initiatives had to be implemented and several participants experienced their implementation as an intrusion on practice and as calling their expertise into question. Sue said: "…when these strategies do come through it's kind of like yeah yeah we know, we're doing it, we're doing this stuff already" (Sue, lines 356 – 360).

All participants referenced ways in which their every-day practice was subject to increased scrutiny and that priority was given to meeting targets and developing ways in which activities could be monitored: “The trajectory has been towards you know driven by a kind of neoliberal agenda you know and the fact is that everything has to be audited now” (Peter, lines 326 – 329). Senior leaders also described external policy dictating agendas within the institution:

> Every university in the UK now erm is assessed against a number of different metrics whether we’re talking about teaching metrics or research metrics or we talk about hat will be introduced later this year erm knowledge exchange metrics, we are judged against a series of metrics which ultimately influence our future performance and well being
>
> (Jonathan, lines 549 – 556).

The policies surrounding the employability agenda encompass ways of measuring and holding HEIs to account. For example, KIS data and DLHE statistics are presented to the wider public as assessments of the quality of HE provision and, therefore, a considerable amount of effort is expended on working towards improving performance, year on year. Sophie said: “I think that’s probably where the performativity agenda drives things doesn’t it cos it’s about erm the figures, the NSS data erm then you get those results you think oh you know our employability data isn’t good what can we do about that” (lines 527 – 532) and Robert stated: “I’m judged on numbers” (line 939). However, several participants questioned the validity of increased auditing. Lucy commented: “alright erm quality has to be maintained, it has to be monitored but are, is

all of the box ticking we do actually affective in maintaining standards, keeping standards high? That I don't believe" (lines 496 – 499) and Robert described the requirement to produce certain statistics to akin to being in "a straitjacket" (line, 705). Participants, therefore, didn't object to being held accountable (in fact it was welcomed by several interviewees) but some questioned whether the systems in place were useful and appropriate: "even ethics has to be audited now and of course when you're dealing with kind of abstract and critical thinking that cannot be audited in that sort of way and therefore it's not valued in quite the same way as stuff that can be easily counted" (Peter, lines 337 – 342). Tim also challenged the way in which HE was increasingly subject to standardised measurements: "just because something can be measured, doesn't mean you should measure it yeah and just because something can't be measured, it doesn't mean it's not important" (lines 771 – 774).

4.2.3 Subordinate theme three: Fractured academic identity

The focus on employability within the institution has served to highlight the changing nature of the role of the academic and caused participants to reflect on academic identities, recognising the plethora of roles they occupy. All groups of participants reflected upon this issue, including senior leaders. Jonathan said: "I think we're in a time where the role of the academic will continually change to be perfectly honest with you" (lines 720 – 722). Academics now have to widen their remit to include increased engagement with industry, as well as embedding employability within the curriculum. Jonathan was keen to emphasise the need for closer collaboration with industry stating:

> I'm not trying to simplify this whatsoever but you know the concept of erm just teaching students I think well hasn't existed for some time to be perfectly frank with you erm and very much it's about how how academic colleagues are in some shape or form both continuing to develop their knowledge and apply that knowledge er not only in the classroom so providing academic colleagues with opportunity to engage with our sector to develop their knowledge for example and then demonstrating how they can apply that knowledge both through the teaching programmes but through research
>
> (Jonathan, lines 724 – 735).

For some academics within this research, such responsibilities have always been a part of the role and, therefore, did not represent significant change. Both Sue and Lizzy discussed the benefits of working with employers and using their industry experience to ameliorate their learning and teaching practice. Lizzy, for example, talked enthusiastically about using her previous work experience and knowledge in the classroom: "that's handy when you're teaching cause you can talk about what you do in large companies" (lines 74 – 76). Therefore, some participants are dealing with more significant change to their practice than others who, as a result, felt under more pressure from the demands of the employability agenda.

Smith, Flowers and Larkin suggest that "identity appears as a key construct in much IPA research" (2009, p.205) which is apparent in this project. For some, employability is distinct and separate to the role of an academic and should remain so. For example, when asked whether he felt employability was part of his role, Peter was

clear: “No, I’m an academic” (line 539). Peter refuses to accept that the successful implementation of employability initiatives are part of his responsibility, or that it should be used to assess his performance as an academic. For other academics, employability was embraced as part of their role or fundamental to it. Despite Stuart’s ambivalent view of some initiatives, he felt that employability was “part of the pastoral aspect of my role” (line 119 – 120) and was committed to advising students in this area whenever possible. Tensions arose, however, when initiatives were imposed upon him and he drew on his own academic expertise to critique the pedagogical value of them. For Sue, employability was a crucial part of her identity: she stated that part of her academic role was to be a “careers advisor” (line 49). Prioritising this aspect of her academic identity influenced her whole learning and teaching approach, in stark contrast to other participants such as Peter and Lucy, who perceived it as outside of their remit.

From a managerial perspective, senior leaders believed employability was integral to the role of an academic, but there was recognition that support was required: “it’s about how we take the academic colleagues on that journey as well and help them develop their knowledge of their chosen sector and give them opportunities to further re-engage with the sector” (Jonathan, lines 460 – 465). Ultimately, senior leaders require staff to respond to the employability agenda (with support or in collaboration with others, as appropriate). Further changes are indicated with Tim suggesting: “I think erm what we haven’t done is erm actually made it erm (pause) made it a part of the fabric of what we do and the area where we should do it is in erm personal tutoring” (lines 542 – 545). Yet the journey referred to by Jonathan is a euphemism for

change which some academics do not want and which they struggle to accept, creating tension and concern for some.

As employability strategies are prioritised within the institution, it seems the role of the academic is being developed and redefined, suggesting the employability agenda has significant impact on the lived experience of participants and will continue to do so as the focus on implementation continues.

4.3 Super-ordinate theme 3: Difference and divide

The participants' lived experience of the employability agenda within the case study institution could be difficult and challenging, as HEIs' agendas are often contested and reworked. The focus on employability has revealed and highlighted tensions between certain groups within the institution, and led some academics to reassert their belonging to a subject or discipline area as a way of challenging the agenda. Within this super-ordinate theme, therefore, subordinate themes of subject-specific issues and two camps are established.

4.3.1 Subordinate theme one: Subject-specific issues

The findings of my research demonstrate that subject area is important to participants in terms of their own identity and how they interpret the employability agenda. For example, Robert noted that some subject areas were more resistant to the implementation of an institution-wide employability initiative than others. Although there are differences evident between subjects, the divide is blurred and nuanced, painting a complex picture of the participants' responses and interpretations. For

example, Lizzy, who teaches a career-focused subject recalled a meeting with colleagues where:

> I'd say the room of 20 people was divided in half on that so you had a group of people agreeing, yeah, it's just about knowledge for knowledge sake, who cares whether it's useful of not, and another half of the room going no, no, no, no, no what's the point in coming to uni and getting a degree if you can't use it
>
> (Lizzy, lines 442 – 450).

Tim also emphasised: "So it's, it's not because somebody is in that particular subject area, it's because some people are more able to see it as what's the bigger picture" (lines 161 – 163). It is not possible to state that belonging to a specific subject determines whether an individual will be supportive or resistant to employability, and such generalised claims would not suit research of this nature (qualitative IPA with small samples). Academics representing both career-focused and critical subjects questioned the value of employability initiatives and some called for further evidence that they are successful. For example, Lucy commented: "One of the things that irks me is that there is often a lack of erm empirical evidence that these initiatives actually work" (Lines 518 – 520) and Peter stated: "I don't want those kind of concrete tangible kind of employability skills to detract from what we're trying to do, what I'm trying to do in the modules themselves" (lines 718 – 721). This statement indicates Peter views employability teaching and learning as both separate and inferior to subject-specific content, in contrast to Sue and Lizzy who place equal value on both aspects of the curriculum.

Belonging to a particular subject, however, seems to provide some participants with a rationale and defence for their specific approach to employability. Sue, for example, differentiates her subject from others, explaining that while other subjects may take an approach which emphasises education for education sake "it's just so rare now in in what we teach" (lines 72 – 73). At the other end of the continuum, Peter states: "I think people working in the humanities and social, what I would call broadly humanities and social sciences, they're teaching more kind of abstract skills" (lines 160 – 164).

Lucy's comments provide additional evidence of the perceived difference between subject areas:

> I mean some subjects are inherent, are vocational you know they're, employability is inherent in them, you know even if you look as I mentioned already at some subjects closely related to mine *(subject removed to protect anonymity)* erm and some subjects are largely theoretical, largely you know to do with critical thinking
>
> (Lucy, lines 821 – 826)

Therefore, several participants suggested that subject plays a crucial role in terms of conceptions and perceptions of employability; they interpret the employability agenda through the lens of their specialist knowledge. Some participants referenced their subject or discipline as a way of justifying their approach to the agenda and initiatives, reasserting their identity and loyalty to and strong connection with their subject.

Several participants ultimately called for a subject-specific approach to employability, arguing that institution-wide initiatives were not always relevant for all areas.

4.3.2 Subordinate theme two: Two camps

This research revealed ways in which the employability agenda created, or was the catalyst, for creating tension within the institution, in various ways. Linguistically, the participants' descriptions of situations further signified the presence of rifts. Language such as 'split culture' and 'two camps' was frequently used to describe situations within the institution; with several participants linguistically creating binaries throughout the interviews. Robert said:

> I think you get two camps erm and you get the camps of anybody can do careers, everybody knows how to do a cv, everybody can tell you what you need to be doing and then you get the nervous that ain't part of what I do and they're quite extreme camps
>
> (Robert, lines 1085 – 1089)

Three participants, for example, discussed the divide between teaching and research and theory and practice, and how this influenced approaches to and views on employability. Sophie suggested that academics in "placement-heavy" (line 425) subjects were more likely to be positive about the employability agenda: "they are entrenched if you like in employability and what that placement what the strategy behind and why we have that placement there" (lines 370 – 372). Sue recalled discussions on employability which initially caused division between researchers and teachers "so staff yeah they were feeling really undervalued and that I didn't value anything they did and I was feeling like they weren't seeing the bigger picture and they

weren't understanding what I was trying to say about employability" (lines 449 – 453). Ultimately, detailed discussions and negotiation helped to bridge the perceived distance between the researchers and teachers within the department. Perceptions around value and recognition therefore emerged as important for participants identifying with both sides of the research and teaching divide. For example, Stewart said: "I think it undermines the good quality training courses that we do if that's not valued" (lines 657 – 660).

There was some evidence of tension between roles occupied by participants in this research. For example, the PLs responsible for employability indicated that persuading staff to engage with the employability agenda was key to their role, but sometimes difficult. However, Sophie's overall experience seemed to be less turbulent than Tim's who recalled being in some uncomfortable situations and described speaking to staff about employability initiatives in the following way: "I remember standing up like a coconut shy" (lines 424 – 425). This vivid description positions Tim as the target for criticism from academics who are resistant to institution-wide initiatives, often because of the additional work created. Yet, Tim justified the confrontational nature of some of the encounters as evidence of staff working under increased pressure.

A linguistic interpretation became an important part of the analysis, an approach which is encouraged within IPA, particularly in the early stages of initial noting (Smith et al, 2009, p.88). Through the narratives and choice of language used by participants, a profile of employability supporters and resistors was constructed, particularly of the former. For example, Peter referred to himself as a "dinosaur" as he was less willing

to accept an instrumentalist approach to education. In contrast, employability supporters were more likely to be perceived by some participants as proactive and dynamic in their approach. When discussing how employability initiatives are developed, Lizzy said: “Definitely from the ground up, so it’s sort of like-minded people that have just thought this might be a good idea, let’s just give it a go, you know” (Lines 864 – 867). Sophie reported: “we’ve got some erm people with very strong erm ideas and you know they’ll come forward into these meetings and they’ll lead on things, they’ll initiate erm” (lines 279 – 283). Tim described those willing to get involved in employability initiatives in the following way:

> They tend to that sort of person tends to have lots of connections, involved in all sorts of different things because they see it as more complex than delivering those and so because of the way they are, their interest and their energy etc, I naturally come into contact with them
>
> (Tim, lines 304 – 309).

Finally, Robert said: “you get really positive academics that want to be involved and they see the relevance and they’ll go the extra mile” (lines 1089 – 1091). A couple of participants (Sue and Lizzy) seemed to distance themselves from those supporting an education for education’s sake view of HE. For example, Lizzy expressed genuine surprise that colleagues would not recognise the importance of employability “but it had never occurred to me that people would come to uni just for knowledge sake” (lines 455 – 456). Therefore, staff working within the institution, who were seen as employability advocates or supporters, were more likely to be described using positive

language by those engaged with the employability agenda, whereas those who were more resistant were referred to by supporters (and sometimes themselves) as less willing to adapt to change.

Participants' narratives also revealed a split between those who were seen as competent to teach employability and those who lacked expertise. Some participants felt that they themselves, or other academics, were not confident about teaching modules which focused on employability as they lacked the expertise to do so. Several participants, including Peter, suggested that recent experience of working in industry was crucial in terms of being expert in this area and many academics had spent many years working within HEIs and building subject expertise, rather than working in business. He said: "if members of academic staff who have got more experience of the workplace than I have feel competent to do that I think that's fine but it should be up to the individual academic to make that sort of decision" (lines 573 – 578). Managers seemed to recognise such concerns amongst academic staff. Jonathan responded:

> it would be erm unfair to expect all academic staff to be experts on employability and we're not so we then erm support them with other people who are expert in that field to ensure that you know that the students taught on those courses are then presented with opportunities to engage in the workplace
>
> (Jonathan, lines 426 – 431).

Tim added: "it's winning them over because you're not, we're not expecting you to be an expert we just want you to creatively include this in what you do" (lines 385 – 388).

There seemed to be disagreement amongst managers and academics on the issue of employability expertise. Managers questioned the need for expertise in this area, but there was an expectation that academics should take on the responsibility of teaching employability skills as part of their role. In contrast, academics felt prior industry experience and skills were crucial to the teaching of employability, revealing a gap in perception between the groups of participants.

4.4 Super-ordinate theme 4: One size does not fit all

The employability agenda can be seen to both divide and unite and this super-ordinate theme united participants. It reveals corresponding views on the need to take account of both the nature of the institution and the student body when developing employability policy. Participants were critical of the standardised way in which the employability agenda is implemented through Government policy. Robert said: “it’s all very controlled and it’s all very narrow whereas we need to encourage more comparison and more comparison in terms of like-minded institutions” (lines 435 – 437). The majority of participants believed that the case study institution faces specific challenges and issues, as well as opportunities, and that attempts to impose cross-sector targets and standardised measurements of quality and success are inappropriate and, at times, unfair. It became clear through the development of this super-ordinate theme that for many participants, the employability agenda is not the problem; the issue for some participants is the way in which the agenda is imposed and implemented.

Two significant factors were important to participants in terms of how the employability agenda should be addressed and managed: the nature of a post-1992 institution and

the nature of the students, many of whom are local to the institution and represent the first generation in their families to attend university. Discussions around these issues revealed that several participants were interpreting the employability agenda through the lens of social justice; they were able to align their employability initiatives with their beliefs around, for example, widening participation. Lizzy said: “but in this university, certainly this university is about widening participation, it’s about giving people opportunities, it’s about creating a better future for them, in the home town in which they study and live surely” (lines 464 – 469). Sophie concurred and framed discussions around employability within a narrative of social justice: “it’s erm also looking at the uniqueness of our situation at (removed to protect anonymity) and the local area, the erm, you know the demographic of the local area and the investing back into that” (lines 71 – 74). Tim agreed and said: “and er the things that the VC is currently doing about focusing us on our area erm I applaud those” (lines 741 – 742). Sophie went further by suggesting that staff felt a “moral duty to make sure that their students go on and do well and make progress” (lines 333 – 337). Although focusing on the economic benefits, Robert stated: “I do think a university should play a role in its local economy and the growth of that local economy because erm basically if your garden’s richer the flowers are getting better do you you know it’s all much, much better for everybody” (lines, 1392 – 1396).

The location of the institution was also seen as significant in terms of employability. The social and economic challenges of the region in which the research took place, such as high unemployment rates, were emphasised by several participants and senior leaders, in particular, noted the relatively low number of graduate jobs, compared to other regions in the UK. Robert stated: “there’s not an abundance of

graduate level jobs, there's not an abundance of opportunity necessarily, we have to create that" (lines 192 – 194).

Participants, therefore, developed bespoke approaches to employability policy, which aimed to meet specific challenges and develop opportunities. The institution was taking a proactive role in the creation and sustainability of jobs in the region, as suggested by Jonathan when describing new university projects and developments: "so you've sort of got the model of generating young people to go and work in the businesses we attract… *(removed to maintain anonymity)* and you get that cyclic model" (lines 405 – 408). The nature of the student population within the institution means that the majority remain in the region following graduation and, therefore, investment in the local economy benefits graduates. Jonathan, Tim and Robert noted the prevalence of SMEs in the region in which the institute is based and described how this provided opportunities for both students and local businesses. Robert said: "I think creating opportunity is about talking to SMEs and telling them about the erm er the benefits of taking on graduates erm and giving them a taster through sending somebody to placement or to do a project for them" (lines 519 – 523).

Several participants noted that many students are local to the area and often the first generation to attend university in their families. Stewart stated: "they haven't got somebody at home that they can ask about how to go about getting a graduate type position and I think it's essential that we do help them with that" (lines 98 – 106). For Lizzy, this provided more evidence for the need to focus on employability:

> So you know that means we've quite a different mix of students that perhaps haven't had the opportunities or need more support for whatever reason when they first get here, particularly in our own university whatever, so I think it's a brilliant thing, it's a good thing
>
> (Lizzy, lines 662 – 668)

Robert discussed the different experiences and opportunities for students, compared to students from other institutions suggesting that they may not have the "career networks that those students have, so as an institution we really need to put effort in the work that we do through *(removed to protect anonymity)* into creating those opportunities erm and making sure that we get our students out there" (lines 565 – 569).

It should be emphasised, however, that the overriding narrative of participants regarding the student body was not one of deficit, simply that a bespoke approach was required responding to the needs of the students based on their experiences and circumstances. Sophie welcomed the opportunity to work with a diverse group of students: "they're a very different and diverse body erm and I think really that's what attracts me to, you can't say this is going to work for everybody, it doesn't, there's not one size fits all and there are different challenges within that" (lines 54 – 57). Robert also noted: "once they're out there they progress quicker, they get on with it, they do well but we have to do a lot more in the middle than maybe other institutions" (lines 583 – 585). The message from participants was that some students have to overcome barriers, often exacerbated by a lack of social and career networks. Many students

are often unable to widen their search for work outside of the region, and are then seeking employment in a region challenged by specific economic and social issues.

In summary, this super-ordinate theme reveals that participants are meeting mandatory requirements to produce data and work towards standardised targets, all of which could be referred to as the public-facing employability agenda. However, beneath the surface, there is also some evidence of employability strategies being adapted and creatively interpreted, by participants from all groups. In doing so, participants are able to exert and protect academic freedom, but also align initiatives with personal and institutional beliefs and values of social justice and widening participation.

4.5 Super-ordinate theme 5: Employability as a process

Interviews with participants revealed that the employability agenda had to be actively managed as part of their everyday roles, often creating additional work and responsibilities. The experience of participants was that a proactive approach to employability was required in order to engage both staff and students. Two subordinate themes will be explored within the final subordinate theme: additional pressures and promoting employability.

4.5.1 Subordinate theme one: Additional pressures

For several participants in this research, the implementation of the employability agenda had created additional work and, often, pressure. Stewart said: “so I made a decision that I was going to do it myself and I re-worked the materials” (lines 250 – 252), and Lucy referred to the period when developing and designing employability materials and content as a “struggle” (line 269) and that she had felt “exhausted” (line

278). The creation of additional work is perhaps understandable with any new initiative; however, the lived experience for some participants in this research is that the additional work associated with employability modules and initiatives is ongoing. Lizzy indicated this was the case with the following comment:

> I think that after 12 years, it's time for someone else to take that module, nobody wants it so that probably sends a message that people either don't want it because it's quite involved and quite interactive or whatever or they don't want it because they don't see the meaning of it
>
> (Lizzy, lines 978 – 984)

Sue agreed and suggested that the fact that some staff were taking on additional work also caused some tension. She said some people "feel like they're doing all the hard work and dealing with all the employability" and Lizzy stated: "there's certain people maybe in each school that have got employability as the priority in the forefront of their mind and are more likely to drive it and there's other people that aren't…" (Lizzy, lines 955 – 960).

Generally managers and senior managers recognised the "colleagues are all working very hard" (Jonathan, lines 424 - 425) in dealing with the employability agenda. Tim was cognisant that some staff felt increased pressure as a result: "you know stress of deadlines and working on 27 different things in a half an hour that is the you know the erm adrenalin equivalent of being hit on the head er with a hammer er five or six times" (lines 445 – 448). However, some managers suggested that a minimal amount of

additional work was required to meet employability requirements, as existing material could simply be used or adapted. When referring to a specific institution employability initiative, Sophie suggested: "you're asking for it anyway as part of your module" (lines 442 – 443) and Robert added that some elements: "may be in the course already" (lines 809). Despite these claims, the perception amongst academics seemed to be that employability initiatives mean extra work, on top of what is already a demanding role, as indicated by Stewart: "and that was your year gone, you'd be lucky if you could get your annual leave in" (lines 690 - 692). This theme therefore serves to highlight another gap in perception between managers and academics in terms of the impact employability initiatives have on the lives of academic staff.

4.5.2 *Subordinate theme two: Promoting employability*

This final subordinate theme explores the perceived need to actively promote employability to stakeholders within the institution. Several participants indicated that they had to 'sell' employability to both staff and students. When discussing his experiences of working with academic staff, Robert was clear: "and we've gone about selling it and we use the term selling it" (lines 645 – 646). Convincing academics to engage with the employability agenda seemed to be part of the role for the PLs responsible for employability. Tim said: "my job is to convince as many of them as I can that there are other things that should be happening for those people" (lines 272 – 274) and Sophie stated: "it's unpicking with them what employability is" (lines 447 – 448).

Some participants noted the reluctance of students to engage with employability modules. Stewart explained: "erm I struggle sometimes to, I have to sell it to the

students" (lines 318 – 320) and Lucy said "maybe it's down to me to articulate it better for them" (lines 671 – 672). Lizzy had similar experiences on employability-focused modules: "I bounce around the room saying you know this is your opportunity to build on your strengths and develop you know" (lines 148 – 150). However, senior management views of the student response differed from the academics. For example, Robert suggested that once students had experienced some of the employability-focused sessions, the feedback was positive: "the other uptake for example for mock interviews is overwhelming once we've been into class" (lines 820 – 822). When asked about the issue of student engagement, Jonathan suggested that a staged approach was appropriate as students may feel overwhelmed in their first year: "I think it's about how as a university we don't try and overload them in year one with the employability agenda but start to introduce it more, increase it more as they go through" (lines 272 – 274). Therefore, despite the rhetoric surrounding the employability debate, there is evidence within this research of resistance to the employability agenda amongst key stakeholders, including students.

4.6 Summary of findings

The findings highlight individual experiences and give voice, whilst also identifying common threads and themes across the cases. The analysis revealed that the way in which participants made sense of the employability agenda was influenced by a range of factors, including their own background, knowledge and experience, their role within the institution and their disciplinary area. Consideration of the notion of employability led participants to contemplate broader philosophical issues, such as the purpose of a university and their role in wider society, reflecting on a changing society and the political, economic and social factors driving the changes. It simultaneously triggered

questions around the role of an academic and their own identities and identity and agency were central to this analysis. Key to understanding academic identity was being part of a subject, and this was used as a reference and rationale for some participants' position on employability. The employability agenda sometimes caused conflict between the private and public, with participants having to engage as part of their role, despite their own values and beliefs sitting in contrast to the fundamental principles driving the employability agenda. The findings have revealed several examples of opposing views between management and academics: the notion of employability expertise; students' attitudes around employability; and whether employability creates extra work. These issues are revisited and addressed as one of the recommendations identified within section 6.3.

In terms of agency, it is clear that some participants, within all roles, felt their autonomy was challenged by the policies and regulations being imposed from outside of the sector and / or the implementation of institution-wide strategies. However, there was evidence of some participants exercising freedom and adapting standardised policies, pursuing their own beliefs around social justice and the institutional aims of widening participation.

The rhetoric surrounding the employability agenda often presents a simplistic model of higher education and securing employment, suggesting that obtaining a degree is a reliable route to an appropriate job, yet this research has demonstrated that the reality is far more complex, with several participants challenging the current discourse. Specifically, participants seemed to challenge the move towards standardisation dominating employability policy and called for an approach which recognised the

idiosyncratic nature of institutions and the student body, rejecting a one size fits all approach.

Chapter 5: Discussion

This section provides further analysis and interpretation of the findings, in the context of wider literature, and is structured around the research questions. There is an imbalance between the research questions, as RQ2 provoked more detailed discussions of complex issues, such as identity. Therefore, more space is devoted to this particular question. Although much of this section draws on literature highlighted within the literature review, Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009, p.113) suggest that new literature can be introduced at this stage as "it is in the nature of IPA that the interview and analysis will have taken you into new and unanticipated territory". Key themes emerged during the interviews and the analysis, which were integral to the participants' accounts and therefore warrant significant additional discussion and analysis. For example, identity; loss of control and freedom, increased pressure and power are integral to the lived experiences of participants in this research. Therefore, theories of academic identity are explored in more detail, as well as the various works of Michael Foucault and Stephen Ball to develop ideas around power and performativity.

5.1 Research Question 1: How is the employability agenda perceived and conceived by academics, middle managers and senior leaders within the institution?

Participants' perceptions and conceptions of the employability agenda were varied and can be seen to be influenced by a combination of both personal and social factors, such as: previous experience, philosophical beliefs around education, the nature of the institution, the political and social context and the subject and discipline area. Guihen (2017, p.198) developed a diagram as a useful way of demonstrating the "factors involved in my participants' career decision-making" in her IPA research, and figure 7

below illustrates the various influences on my participants' understandings of employability. In fact, these influences can be seen to permeate much of this research, impacting on the construction of participants' identities and interpretations and sense-making around the employability agenda.

Figure 7: Influences on the perceptions and conceptions of employability

At the beginning of each interview, participants were asked to provide a brief summary of their professional experiences before joining the institution and, generally, those who had previously worked in the industry related to their subject area, or had significant commercial experience and expertise, were more positive about the current focus on employability within HE. An individual's philosophical beliefs about the purpose of education also coloured their views on the agenda, with those emphasising the social and cultural values of education more likely to contest the employability rhetoric. This reflects Priest's (2016) research which highlights the purpose of a university as a key issue in this debate. Most participants referenced their subject area in terms of the justification for their views and approach to employability. However, the nature of the institution was also important, with several participants highlighting their desire to work for an institution that valued widening participation and provided support for students with diverse needs.

The majority of participants also seemed cognisant of the wider social and political context and its significant influence on the agenda. Ultimately, the employability agenda in HE has emerged as a result of neoliberal education policy, which foregrounds human capital theories, and provides a rationale for the focus on this agenda. Overall, participants were aware that these events were driving a culture within HE that prioritises preparing students for the world of work. The amalgamation of these key factors led to the participants' constructions of perceptions and conceptions on employability depicted in figure 7, page 142, and many of these issues are discussed in detail within the following sections.

Definitions of employability were influenced by these wider narratives, with several participants referencing the increase in tuition fees as justification for significant efforts to address employability. There are other potential influencing factors in terms of making sense of the employability agenda, but those depicted above emerged as key in terms participants' constructions.

Some participants' views of employability chimed with public discourse, suggesting that it was about developing appropriate skills to enable the student to secure an appropriate graduate job. However, some academics, such as Lizzy, were clear that such skills were potentially transformative for the student. Such views are represented in Priest's research (2016, p131), and Barrie's (2006, p.229) research with academics, by those who conceived of graduate attributes as an "enabling conception". For this group, "…once developed graduate attributes are perceived to provide a reusable framework that enables students/graduates to acquire and shape new knowledge as required – even in the context of other disciplines" (Barrie, 2006, p.230).

Yet Knight and Yorke (2002, p.263) suggest that "there is a danger of tokenistic thinking, with employability being reduced to 'key skills'" and several participants were also mindful of the complexity of graduate employment, with Jonathan, Robert and Sophie keen to emphasise the range of factors influencing the path to securing a graduate job, as reflected in the literature:

> Research literature reveals two contrasting constructs that attend employability: first, personal characteristics that enable individuals to secure and maintain employment, hence an *individual responsibility*; second, a complex construct

> encompassing the wider *personal, social, economic and labour market circumstances*
>
> (Sin and Neave, 2016, p.1449).

This summary reflects the “relative” and “absolute” dimensions of employability, discussed in Brown, Hesketh and Williams (2003, p.110) and was raised by several participants as crucial in terms of understanding employability within a post-1992 institution, based in a region with economic and social issues. It also relates to several authors’ Bourdieusian analyses of employability (see for example Clark and Zukas; 2013; Morrison, 2014; Kalfa and Taska, 2015). They apply notions such as habitus, field and capital as a way of reconceptualising the term, all of which are useful when considering the issues raised above. Clark and Zukas (2013, p.217) explain:

> Bourdieu’s conception of habitus can help us move beyond accounts of employability that neglect the embodied nature of skills and knowledge. Similarly, habitus encompasses potentially important aspects of employability such as class, ethnicity and gender. Relating habitus to the relevant field allows us to move beyond consideration of generic skills to focus on the specific capitals, whether cultural or social, that will help graduates to be effective in a specific field.

Tomlinson (2017, p.339) draws on well-rehearsed notions of human and cultural capital in relation to employability, then offers an alternative model of graduate employability which encapsulates five types of capital: “human, social, cultural, identity

and psychological". Researchers (Morley, 2001; Brown, Hesketh and Williams 2003; Clark and Zukas; 2013) and participants in this research have therefore recognised the plethora of issues potentially impacting upon students' employability and Tomlinson's (2017) graduate capital model calls for a more holistic understanding of the influencing factors.

Discussions around definitions of employability often turned to ways in which it was measured within the sector. Sophie and Robert, for example, were keen to highlight the distinction between employment rates and employability which dominates current discourse, an issue also highlighted by Tomlinson (2017, p.12). Bridgstock (2009, p33) recognises this issue within Australian and UK universities, suggesting there is a focus on first destination data and "this suggests that graduate full-time employment rates have become, in many instances, easily measurable proxies for graduate employability". Tomlinson (2017, p.12) also notes the "key conceptual challenge is picking apart distinctions between employment and employability". Yet employability continues to be predominantly interpreted and understood within public discourse as helping graduates to secure employment, with the ultimate aim of improving DLHE statistics. Arora (2015, p.638) explains: "Positivist approaches to the analysis of the employability agenda, arguably, result in somewhat narrow analyses". Robert and Tim acknowledged this, but also highlighted the flaws with the current system, calling for a different approach which takes account of the specific factors impacting on a post-1992 institution, based in an area which incorporates pockets of social and economic deprivation. Current definitions and ways of measuring employability were seen as inadequate and inflexible by several participants in terms of recognising the idiosyncratic nature of HEIs. Standardised policies do not take these wider issues into

account and comparisons are being made between institutions where students potentially do not face such obstacles. An evaluation of an institution's employability achievements and success is subsequently made, effectively assessing institutions as a homogenous group.

In answer to RQ1, participants perceive and conceive of the employability agenda in complex, nuanced ways, influenced by several factors, some of which are personal and specific to the individual, some of which are externally-influenced and developed.

Employability perceptions and conceptions are often aligned with public discourse with several participants referring to the acquisition of skills and securing an appropriate job following graduation. Yet there is debate and disagreement around definitions, ways of measuring and evaluating (also noted within the literature – see, for example, Morely, 2001; Cranmer, 2006; Moreau and Leathwood, 2007; Boden and Nedeva; 2010) and the wider agenda, which remain unresolved and are a cause for concern for some participants.

5.2 Research question 2: What are senior leaders', middle managers' and academics' lived experiences of the employability agenda within the institution?

Participants' lived experiences of the employability agenda were varied and complex, yet common issues emerged around loss of control and lack of agency, shifting or fractured identities and increased pressure, all of which are explored below. Inherent within this agenda, therefore, is the issue of power and a Foucauldian analysis of the

employability agenda is possible and appropriate, although Foucault (1982, p.777) emphasises that:

> I would like to say, first of all, what has been the goal of my work during the last twenty years. It has not been to analyze the phenomena of power, nor to elaborate the foundations of such an analysis. My objective, instead, has been to create a history of the different modes by which, in our culture, human beings are made subjects.

There is insufficient space within the limits of this thesis to provide a detailed Foucauldian analysis, but this section will further explore Ball's (2003; 2012; 2013; 2016) work, and others who apply Foucault's ideas to interpret education policy and analyse teachers' experiences, as a way of illuminating the issue of power within the employability agenda.

Loss of control

Common to the majority of participants' experiences, including senior managers, was a loss of control as a result of the focus on employability within HE, and the perception that they were subject to increasingly stringent and inflexible policies encroaching on their working lives. The employability agenda is experienced as increased standardisation, auditing, surveillance and officious; all participants recognised that HE was increasingly driven towards targets and externally-imposed measurements, as recognised within the literature (Deem, 1998, 2004; Välimaa, 1999; Ball, 2003; Houston, Meyer and Paewai, 2006). Harris (2005, p.424) notes that: "the marketization of education and research has brought into question the autonomy and

expertise traditionally enjoyed by academics" which reflects the perceptions of those interviewed. Participants spanning the continuum depicted in figure 6, page 113, emphasised that accountability was necessary and appropriate, yet several interviewees questioned the type of employability measurements in place, their effectiveness and appropriateness.

Ball's (2003) notion of performativity, which describes an increasingly target-driven culture of accountability subsuming education, is therefore pertinent in terms of this research. He (2003, p. 216) defines performativity as: "a technology, a culture and a mode of regulation that employs judgements, comparisons and displays as means of incentive, control, attrition and change – based on rewards and sanctions (both material and symbolic)". Clearly, performativity is entwined throughout the employability agenda, with auditing and monitoring at the centre, and a system of measurement which rewards those institutions with high employability statistics, via the TEF assessment, for example. Yet Ball (2003, p.216) suggests that performativity impacts on teacher values: "teachers, as ethical subjects, find their values challenged or displaced by the terrors of performativity". In line with this view, some participants in this research had to set aside their personal beliefs in order to meet the requirements of the wider employability agenda and institutional employability strategies. As Harris (2005, p.425) states: "instrumental and economic values rather than educational values are becoming central in defining professional identity and professionalism". Sophie specifically referred to the dominance of a "performativity agenda" (line 528) leading to a narrow understanding of employability. However, she warned against such agendas dictating practice and called for an approach which involved "paring back and going back to what you believe in" (lines 729 – 730), seemingly resisting the

challenge to her personal beliefs. Ball (2003, p.223) suggests that this is difficult as "beliefs are no longer important – it is output that counts. Beliefs are part of an older, increasingly displaced discourse". However, such a bleak portrayal does not take into account the views of employability advocates who believe that the agenda should be at the heart of higher education. In these instances, their beliefs seem aligned with the current discourse and Lizzy, for example, interpreted the employability agenda in a way which also allows her to realise personal values around widening participation.

The majority of academics are being forced to change their pedagogic practice or curriculum content in order to implement institution-wide employability initiatives. This issue is raised by Osborne and Grant-Smith (2017, p.59) and Frankham (2017, p.631), who interviewed academics about employability, and reported: "Academics described delivering sessions focused entirely on the subject, requirements to 'embed' employability targets across all lectures/modules in a degree and contributing to short courses on the subject". However, some participants in my research were already proactively changing curricula with the aim of embedding employability. Others were reluctantly complying, raising concerns, for example, about detracting from subject content, a concern noted but challenged by Knight and Yorke (2002, p.264). They suggest their USEM model, which encompasses a focus on "understanding, skilful practices, efficacy beliefs and metacognition", is "both valid and academically respectable" (Knight and Yorke, 2002, p.274). However, some participants require more convincing that the employability agenda is academically credible and academics' concerns about employability initiatives is also raised by Frankham (2017, p.632) and Priest (2016, p.203).

Some participants questioned the way in which institution-wide strategies were developed and implemented, seemingly resisting a top-down approach which is also criticised within the literature (Trowler, 1998; Brown, 2012). Even the most ardent employability supporters experienced the requirement to implement management strategies as intrusive as they perceived themselves as the experts in their subject area. Ball and Olmedo draw on Foucault's idea of "processes of confrontation" and his suggestion that "people criticise instances of power which are the closest to them, those which exercise their action on individuals. They do not look for the chief enemy, but the closest enemy" (1982, in Ball and Olmedo, 2013, p.90). Although most participants recognised the imperative to develop such strategies was as a result of external requirements, internal strategies were often criticised. However, concerns raised by participants are consistent with literature which suggests a focus on employability erodes academic freedom (Rostan, 2010, p.73).

Olseen (2006, p.23) provides a detailed analysis of Foucault's work, and some of these ideas can usefully be employed as a way of analysing the assimilation of the employability agenda in HE. For example, Olssen (2006, p.29) states:

> At the end of *The History of Sexuality,* Volume 1, Foucault proposes that power in modern society increasingly take the form of *bio-power*. By bio-power he means the collective macro-social functions of power-knowledge in the regulation and investigations of populations.

He (2006, p.29) continues: "For Foucault, the aim of bio-power is normalisation. It aims to regulate individuals through increasingly rationalised means, utilizing

technologies such as statistics and political arithmetic". Perryman (2006, p.152) applies the notion of normalisation to understanding how schools are assessed and measured:

> By 'normalisation', he means the establishment of rules and judgements around the idea of a norm so that rather than coercing subjects, forcing them to follow 'the rules', institutions are judged as successful in so far as they educate people to obey particular regimes. For schools, this is linked to assessment, appraisal and evaluation, as teachers become agents and subjects of measurement.

Similarly, ways of measuring HE institutions based on DLHE statistics and KIS data can be seen to have been normalised within the current environment, giving greater power to Government and less power to institutions and ultimately staff operating within them. Arora also (2015, p.639) suggests: "The shaping of policies as common sense and the manufacture of consent are key Gramscian concepts that contribute to an understanding of the power dynamic between the state and civil society". All participants in this research were subject to increased pressure to respond to the requirements of external policy, irrespective of their position within the institution. This focus on data and improving statistics echoes Perryman's (2006) comments above.

Such analyses of the employability agenda depict a HE culture and environment which is increasingly micro-managed. However, Perryman *et al* (2017, p.746) also note:

> Foucault used governmentality to describe a range of procedures and techniques used to guide and control conduct. Governmentality is not just about

national and local political control, but also refers to the self, so is also how and why the self shapes its own conduct in particular ways.

Here, the pivotal role of the individual in terms of the power relationship between the individual and the state is key. The following sections develop this issue further with discussions around identity and Foucault's (1988) technologies of the self, in particular.

Identity

Central to my participants' lived experience of the employability agenda is the issue of identity, and specifically, academic identity. Senior leaders, middle managers and academics initiated conversations around this issue, as part of wider discussions around employability. Participants were keen to explain their conceptions of the role of an academic, which excluded or included responsibility for the agenda. Predictably, those who were positive about employability insisted that academics had a responsibility to address the issue as part of their role. Those opposing the focus on employability rejected claims that academics should take the lead in this area, or even that it should be part of the curriculum.

The volume of literature on identity is vast, testimony to the complexities of this concept. Archer's (1995; 2000; 2003; 2007) work provides one possible theoretical framework within which to examine the issues faced by participants. The following section will further consider her research, alongside other analyses, which explore the specific issue of academic identity and the way in which events in HE can be seen to

impact on staff, and therefore, my participants. Issues such as agency, power and communities of practice are discussed.

Several researchers have applied Archer's work to analyses of academic identity (see Ashwin, 2009, O'Byrne, 2015) and while such a detailed analysis cannot be undertaken within the restraints of this thesis, it is important to acknowledge key issues raised. O'Byrne (2015, p.224), for example, provides a useful summary of parts of Archer's work: "The process of forming personal and social identities begins with the emergence of the 'self' and of 'self identity'". She continues: "This is followed by the formation of personal identity. The individual human being, in possession of a sense of self, must operate in the world" (*ibid*). Archer (2000, p.10) explains that "our personal identity" is formed through "inner conversation", often referred to as the "internal conversation". In her discussion of agency, she suggests: "It starts with our involuntary placement as Primary Agents. At birth we are assigned to positions on society's distribution of resources, which means that we become members of *collectivities* who share the same life-chances" (Archer, 2000, p.11). The fatalistic nature of the primary agent is set aside when individuals are able to become "Corporate Agents" and ultimately "a personalised actor" (Archer, 2000, p.117). Corporate agents are proactive and "its typical powers are capacities for articulating shared interests, organising for collective action, generating social movements and exercising corporate influence in decision-making" (Archer, 2000, p.266). My research exposes the interplay the personal and social aspects of identity. Participants can be seen to be influenced by past experiences and histories, yet have then elected to 'join' communities as corporate agents, as noted by O'Byrne in her research (2015, p.227). Their consequent behaviour and practice or choice of "projects" (O'Byrne, 2015, p.224)

is influenced by these choices. As explored below, belonging to these communities is important for many participants and allows them to express opinions around employability in the confidence that they are aligned with their community's beliefs and attitudes.

While also recognising that individuals have agency, Billot (2010, p.711) notes that: "Over time, academics have developed a professional sense of self, an identity that is now being challenged by institutional change". In this research, it is the employability agenda which has served as a catalyst to revisit and further contemplate academic identity for participants. Consistent with the findings of this research, Henkel (2005, p.159) suggests that significant changes within the HE environment resulted in those involved in HE to "review their assumptions about roles, relationships and boundaries in that environment". It is clear from participants' experiences that the employability agenda requires them to expand their role to, for example, encompass engagement with industry (although some participants have been doing this since joining the institution) and implement employability initiatives within and outside of the curriculum.

One of the consequences of a changed HE environment is the drive to more closely align "academic identity" with "corporate identity", as noted by Gale (2011, p.216) who says "there also seems to be a simultaneous move in the opposite direction with an increasing fragmentation of roles, and hence identities, within the institution". My research also reveals a sense of flux and instability around the issue of identity amongst participants. Nixon (2015, p.10) recognises the evolving nature of being an academic and states: "Consistency is no longer the defining feature of identity. From this perspective, academic identity is a bricolage, an assemblage, a pragmatic

accommodation to contingent events. It is necessarily provisional and unfinished". Such a description summarises the current situation of my participants, whose roles have widened and changed to accommodate employability responsibilities. Finally, Macfarlane (2011, p.59) also suggests there has been an "unbundling" of the traditional role of the academic and the emergence of the "para academic"; individuals "who specialise in one element of the tripartite academic role". Some participants were working with non-academic staff delivering and developing employability material in collaboration, but their perception was not that the academic role had narrowed - their changing role and need to encompass employability into their repertoire, with or without support, triggered feelings of increased pressure, stress and increased workload for some.

The changing HE environment impacts on professional relationships inside HEIs, as suggested by Winter (2009, p.121) who states that the corporate culture fostered within academia has led to an "identity schism in the academic workplace as denoted by the identities of 'academic manager' (values *congruent* with the managerial discourse) and 'managed academic' (values *incongruent* with the managerial discourse)". Similarly, Churchman and King's (2009, p.507) research highlights "corporate" and "private" "stories". These comments point to further divides within universities between managers and employees, and there is some evidence of this within my research. For example, Sue suggested that she was the expert in her area and could, therefore, develop appropriate employability initiatives, without direction. Tim's experience of working with staff resistant to the employability agenda positioned him as a representative of management, implementing management policy, with which some disagreed and which caused tension. The role of the middle manager is seen as

important within HEIs (Ramsden, 1998; Pearson and Trevitt, 2005) and for PLs in this research, negotiation and, in Tim's case, resilience in the face of resistance were important skills.

Despite the clear, institution-wide focus on employability, there was some evidence of a divide between those who were identified as employability supporters and employability resistors or adaptors. Employability supporters were described by participants who also supported the agenda using very positive language, portraying these individuals as dynamic and proactive, understanding the demands of the contemporary higher education environment. Although generational differences arose during a couple of interviews, Archer's (2008) research does not suggest that new academics are necessarily more accepting of the neoliberal approach dominating HE. She chose to interview staff below the age of 35 as "most studies to date have focused on older (mature) academics and their responses to the new performativity" (Archer, 2008, p.265) and her research suggests that "aside from identifying positive changes, all the younger academics were also strongly critical of the impact that the new public managerialism has had on higher education", citing the perceived preoccupation with auditing and surveillance (Archer, 2008, p.272). Tim also suggested that there were academics actively engaged in employability initiatives who had been at the institution for many years.

In terms of employability expertise, Frankham (2017, p.632), as part of interviews she conducted with academics, said that they "described being drawn into areas they felt were outside their control – and this represented a quite radical shift in respect of their responsibilities towards students". Other authors (de la Harpe *et al*, 2000; Ashe, 2012;

Frankham, 2017) have referred to the reluctance of academics to engage with the employability agenda, but this research highlights the specific concern around a lack of employability expertise, rather than an issue of disengagement. A lack of employability expertise is also raised by Laughton (2011) and Speight, Lackovic and Cooker (2013) as part of their interviews conducted with academics. As with the University in which this research is based, the response at Laughton's institution was to attempt to reassure academics that such expertise is not necessary. Senior managers emphasised the support and collaborative work with other departments, such as careers, as a way of addressing such issues. Despite reassurances from management that expertise was neither required or expected, it remained a concern for some participants, particularly those who personally felt that they lacked expertise, but also those who identified as proficient in the teaching of employability and felt that others were not.

The discussion above suggests that academics have less control in terms of defining their roles and developing their identity, raising the issue of power. Foucault (1982, p.780) suggests a useful way of analysing power is by considering resistance, and Ball and Omeldo (2013, p.92) pursue this idea in terms of teachers' identities: "More fundamentally, these struggles have to do with the right to define ourselves according to our own judgements, or, in other words, to develop a particular *technology of the self* according to our own principles, an aesthetics of the self (Foucault, 1992, 2010b)". Foucault (1988, p.18) defines the concept as follows:

> Technologies of the self, which permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies

> and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection or immortality.

A more emancipatory interpretation of Foucault's (1981) technologies of the self is therefore possible: for example, Markula (2003, p.87) discusses a body of feminist research which explores "the technologies of the self as a possibility to reconceptualise the self, agency and resistance in feminist theory and politics". Such interpretations render individuals as active agents. Relating these ideas to this research, it is clear that some participants are under pressure to rethink and redefine their roles as a result of the employability agenda, with seemingly little influence in the process and consequent definitions of what it means to be an academic. However, adapting initiatives so as to align them with their personal values is perhaps one way in which participants are reclaiming control over the construction of their identities.

Returning to the issue of wider influences on individual identity, Nixon (2015, p.6) states that "institutions shape and form us" and Baker and Henson (2010, p.64) suggest that the nature of an institution is an indication of how it will respond to the employability agenda, as "teaching-centred universities" tend to be more positive than "research-intensive" HEIs. Mason, Williams and Cranmer (2006) and Boden and Nedeva (2010) also note the varied approaches to employability amongst different institutions. My research, which was undertaken within a so-called teaching-centred institution, generally supports these findings in that all participants noted the important role of addressing employability within the institution. However, belonging to a particular discipline or subject was also important to the majority of participants, in

terms of identity and the interpretation of the employability agenda. The selection of participants for this research was partially driven by the employability literature, which suggested that there was disparity in terms of responses to and perceptions of the agenda amongst subjects and disciplines (Mason, Williams and Cranmer, 2006, p.3). For example, Ashe (2012, p.129) refers to the resistance to the agenda that "has been marked by pedagogical approaches that reduce issues relating to graduate employment in a challenging economic context to individual career planning…" amongst "critical subject areas such as politics and sociology; disciplines that have a history of focusing on the political, economic and ideological causes of unemployment (see, for example, McQuaid and Lindsay, 2005)". Generally, in this research, those most critical of the employability agenda belonged to or identified with humanities and social science subjects, whilst employability advocates taught more career-focused subjects. Robert also revealed some subjects in humanities and social sciences had been more resistant than others to the implementation of an institution-wide employability initiative. Archer's (2000, p.117) notion of "corporate agent" is relevant here as participants can be seen to have forged links with their communities. Wenger's (1999) influential work on communities of practice (CoP) is also applicable, as it highlights the correlation between practice and identity. He refers to:

> …learning as social participation. Participation here refers not just to local events of engagement in certain activities with certain people, but to a more encompassing process of being active participants in the *practices* of social communities and constructing *identities* in relation to these communities
>
> (Wenger, 1998, p.4).

Wenger (1999, p.4) suggests that: “such participation shapes not only what we do, but also who we are and how we interpret what we do”, noting that being part of a CoP informs and influences identity formation. Participants in this research frequently referred to their disciplinary CoP to help them justify their role and responsibilities. O’Byrne’s (2015, p.230) research also reveals that: “Both the pre- and post-1992 humanities lecturers demonstrated a tendency to align themselves with external networks of academics in their specialist areas, since these provided them with a community of peers…”. These findings are consistent with the attitudes of participants in my research belonging to humanities subjects, revealed during discussions on employability.

Yet, Jawitz (2009, p.250) notes the possibility that several CoPs can exist within one discipline, leading to “to competing notions of academic identity and a range of identity trajectories”. His research, within a Design department of a university in South Africa, recognises the free will of individuals in terms of developing their own identities and reminds us that identify formation is not straight-forward. Wenger (1999, p.154) also notes the “temporal” nature of identity. As discussed within this section, participants referred to various binary constructs around identity, including researcher and teacher and manager and academic, indicating multiple CoPs. Therefore, while there is some evidence that individuals associated with humanities and social science subjects will be less accepting of the employability agenda than those from other subjects, it is perhaps unwise to conclusively deduce from these findings that academics teaching these subjects will be resistant and that those teaching career-focused subjects will be supportive of the employability agenda. This sweeping generalisation was refuted by both Lizzy and Tim, as highlighted in the findings section. However, participants

regularly referenced their subject area throughout discussions on employability, often as a way of justifying their opinions: they inferred that their wider academic community was united in their beliefs around employability.

In summary, conversations around employability and identity often led to binary conceptions and they highlight tensions that focus on 'either/or' instead of ‘also/both'. Participants’ use of teacher and researcher, senior management and academics; theory and practice; employability enthusiast and adaptor are examples. The construction of dichotomous descriptors and identities by some participants highlights the tensions that exist around the experiences of the employability agenda and the potentially contentious impact of employability policies and strategies within the institution.

Increased pressure

Speight, Lackovic and Cooker (2013, p.119) conducted research with stakeholders involved in the employability debate, including academics, and found: “For some academics, their reluctance to take responsibility for learning for employability was linked to concerns about workload and currency of knowledge”. Frankham’s (2017, p.632) interviews with academics also revealed some academics were investing considerable time and resources into employability initiatives with minimal benefit. These findings are consistent with my research in that several participants suggested that additional workload was generated by the requirements of the employability agenda, not only in the initial stages of embedding new modules or initiatives, but in the long term. Amongst the group of academics, those positive and opposed to employability being embedded in the curriculum highlighted the increased feeling of

pressure in having to contemplate ways in which initiatives would be incorporated into programmes, as well as the reality of implementation.

However, some employability literature suggests that the return on investment, if employability is appropriately embedded within the curriculum, is significant. Baker and Henson's (2010, p.73) research suggests that "appropriate teaching methodologies" have to be employed and "although this may be a more time consuming way of teaching, the impact it has on student learning is far greater". Knight and Yorke (2003a, p.14) agree that embedding employability throughout the curriculum can be challenging, but insist it is one which is ultimately hugely beneficial:

> Some will find that they go on to become designers of programmes and learning environments that combine a concern for good learning with the development of student employability. We have presented this as a worthwhile, but complex task which requires creativity and good educational understandings.

Lucy's experience seems to reflect this assertion, as she felt that her module was significantly improved as a result of the creative approach she had taken to embedding employability. Therefore, despite recognition within the literature of the additional demands placed upon staff, the benefits are presented as far outweighing the negatives, in a large section of the employability literature. However, there are also authors, such as Cranmer (2006), who warn of the lack of evidence that HE initiatives to improve employability are successful. This reflects the ongoing debate and disagreement around the issue, which is consistent with the experiences of participants in this research.

Ambivalence around the employability agenda is evident in the fact that several participants felt that there was a need to invest time in promoting employability and selling the benefits, to both some staff and students. The need to persuade some staff that employability initiatives are worthwhile is perhaps expected and noted by Zaitseva *et al* (2008, p.8). Overall, the employability literature does not tend to highlight a lack of student engagement, but instead suggests that they have accepted and adopted the instrumentalist discourse (Tomlinson, 2008). However, Lee, Foster and Snaith (2016) raise the issue and Frankham's (2017, p.633) research is consistent with my findings as she states: "It was quite commonplace in academics' descriptions of employability initiatives to describe how students were lacking in enthusiasm in relation to the provision…". Yet, she is also keen to emphasise that academics were the source of this information (*ibid*), not students, something which I have also noted. It may be that the direct response from student differs, but this issue warrants further consideration as it was raised by both employability advocates and adaptors within this research. Therefore, despite the efforts and enthusiasm of employability supporters, the perception is still that there is a lack of engagement from some students.

In conclusion, participants' lived experiences of the employability agenda are, as expected, varied, sometimes difficult, challenging, or viewed as a positive development. However, there are common experiences across the participant group, irrespective of their role or seniority within the institution. A sense of reduced control and freedom, coupled with increased external influence was clear from participants' accounts, with concerns around increased pressure being raised. Central to all participants' accounts were discussions around identity, and specifically, academic identity. It is clear that that the employability agenda represents significantly more

than new policies or strategies to participants: it provokes reflection on what it means to be an academic and leads some participants to reassert their beliefs, referring to the beliefs of their subject communities, as further justification.

5.3 Research question 3: How are senior leaders, middle managers and academics making sense of and interpreting the employability agenda as part of their role within the institution?

Participants in this research often made sense of their experiences of the employability agenda with reference to the broader political and social landscape, discussing the impact on the sector and them personally. There was recognition by the majority of participants that Higher Education has undergone, and continues to experience, a period of unprecedented change. As Clark states (1997, p.291): "The universities of the world have entered an age of endless turmoil" and this thesis has positioned the issue of employability as a key aspect of the wider change agenda, driven by a neoliberal approach to education, a position which is supported by other authors on this topic (see Boden and Nevada, 2010; Osborne and Grant-Smith, 2017). The current pursuit of neoliberalist policies has served to redefine the basic purpose and function of a university within society (Olssen and Peters, 2005, p.313) and participants offered conflicting views around this change. For some, personal values were in direct conflict with the ideas promoted within the employability agenda, creating tension as the public demands of the role and their private beliefs collided. Conflicting and competing accounts within HEIs are highlighted in other research: "Organisations are sites of multiple narratives which range from dominant public stories to private identity-related stories" (Churchman and King, 2009, p.508).

Participants who supported an instrumentalist approach to education advocated a focus on employability and accepted and justified the dominance it has in HE. Again, participants' interpretations of the employability agenda can be seen to be influenced by their personal histories, subject area and the nature of the institution, as described. However, their position or role within the institution also influences their views and the way in which they make sense of the agenda as explored below.

Although academic staff within HE have traditionally held multiple roles, two of the key ones being teacher and researcher, there is evidence of the difficulty of managing these roles (Houston, Meyer and Paewai, 2006, p.18). For some participants, the pursuit of the employability agenda caused division between those who identified as researchers and those who saw themselves as teachers. Harland notes (2016, p.462): "it was not, however, until the change to mass higher education in the 1960s and the neoliberal reforms of the 1980s that the research-teaching divide became a widespread concern". Stuart, Sue and Lizzy all questioned the 'value' either the institution or other colleagues attributed to career-focused courses, employability content within the curriculum, and employability-focused modules, indicating that subject-specific research was often viewed as more valuable. Harland (2016, p.463) states that research is valued within HE and that, in response, there have been attempts "to resurrect the status of teaching so that it achieves greater parity with research". Peter believed the "dominance of positivism" (line 280 -281) within the HE sector, devalued critical and analytical skills, developed and prioritised by humanities and social sciences. Yet Helyer (2007, p. 2) argues that "although humanities qualifications are viewed as non-vocational the reality is that the skills humanities students have are the most useful of all, as they allow you to articulate what it is you

know or think", a view supported by Peter. Becher and Trowler (2001, p.xiv) state that "the 'special' significance of disciplinary knowledge has been diminished". Yet, Sue also felt that her industry expertise and knowledge was not recognised within an environment which prioritised academic research, and Stewart suggested that career-focused courses were seen as less valuable than the more theory-driven courses. Therefore, questions around self-worth and value were evident from those teaching both career-focused and critical subjects. Ball (2003, p.220) also offers potential insight into such experiences stating that: "Day to day practice is flooded with a baffling array of figures, indicators, comparisons and forms of competition. Within all this, the contentments of stability are increasingly elusive, purposes are made contradictory, motivations become blurred and self worth is uncertain". It seems that neoliberal education policies, characterised by instrumental agendas, promoting a culture driven by targets and increased accountability can lead to confusion and feelings of uncertainty and self-doubt amongst some working within the HE environment, irrespective of their subject specialism or role.

Yorke and Knight (2006, p.14) acknowledge that "one size does not fit all institutions, as far as employability is concerned. Contexts, student recruitment patterns, envisaged labour markets and traditions are four variables that influence the embedding of employability in curricula". Boden and Nedeva (2010, p.49) also emphasise the difference in terms of the implementation and development of employability strategies within HEIs. They state: "…whilst Oxford develops a highly coveted cadre of 'employers' with significant social and cultural capital, Anglia Ruskin produces a re-trainable, flexible workforce with very specific skills on behalf of employers". Differentiation between institutions was also raised in this research. A

diverse group of people access higher education in the UK and, although the literature often refers to students as a homogenous group, the employability issues and concerns of a part-time mature student, for example, are likely to be different to the 18 – 21 year old group of students. Age is not the only factor which impacts on employability, as Harvey (2001, p.103) recognises. He notes the plethora of issues that impact on a student's ability to secure a job, including social class and gender, as well as "previous work experience" and "subject studied". Moreau and Leathwood (2007) and Morley (2001) also highlight many issues, including those listed above, as well as disability and where the student studied. The impact of the economic conditions are highlighted by Brown, Hesketh and Williams (2003). Yet, the message seemingly conveyed to young people, through the current employability discourse (which is reinforced and perpetuated through the marketing activities of HEIs publicising, for example, the percentage of graduates in employment six months after graduation) is that obtaining an appropriate job at the end of degree is likely. 'Employability' statistics promoted within the sector are very high and the discourse has developed, therefore, in such a way that HEIs are viewed as environments where appropriate skills are nurtured and developed, enabling graduates to be ready and able to enter the workplace. However, other factors are likely to undermine this seemingly straight forward process, but are notably absent from the rhetoric. This view is highlighted in Priest's (2016, p.193) research with one employer raising the issue of "…mismanaging expectations". While some participants also challenged this narrative, others supported the instrumentalist discourse. The majority of participants were clear that it was not appropriate to impose blanket policy on employability and that the nature of the institution, its geographic position and the student body are all relevant factors which should lead to the development of a bespoke solution.

Participants were cognisant of the diversity of the student body and the need to consider an approach which addressed, not ignored, such issues. For example, senior management were actively investing in projects and initiatives to attract businesses to the region and encourage them to take on local graduates, who consequently remain in the area following graduation. Such a response is similar to those academics involved in Trowler's (1998) research. As described in the literature review, Trowler's (1999, p.126) identification of four categories, developed as a result of the implementation of a new policy, highlighted "policy reconstruction" as the largest group. Similarly, participants involved in this research were involved in a process which allowed them to "reinterpret" and "reconstruct" employability policy (*ibid*).

Boden and Nedeva (2010, p.48) suggest that the "…employability agenda is largely legitimised in terms of social justice. This argument embodies an approach to social justice narrowly characterised only in terms of one's capacity to become an economic citizen…". Yet, several participants within this research have interpreted and developed a response to the employability which successfully widens this narrow approach. Research by Archer (2008) and Clegg (2008) supports the fact that that academics are managing to exercise some freedom and operate in a way that remains true to their own beliefs and values, despite the dominance of a neoliberal, public management agenda. Clegg's (2008, p.343) research on academic identity, for example, demonstrated: "individuals have created spaces for the exercise of principled personal autonomy and agency". Driven by a belief in widening participation, a strong desire to support and nurture students and a responsibility for the wider community, several participants within this research were pursuing and interpreting employability within the framework of social justice, or at the very least urging this type of response

from the institution; and senior management were developing strategies which included such values at the core. Therefore, there was evidence of consistency in terms of wider goals being pursued as part of the employability agenda. Such aims are aligned with recommendations from the literature on the need to take account of widening participation issues when addressing employability. For example, Thomas and Jones (2007, p.9) highlight some of the difficulties faced by “students from non-traditional backgrounds” from the point of accessing information about HEIs and the range of courses on offer, through to securing an appropriate job. Layer (2004, p.18-19) also notes:

> It is evident from feedback and interest within the HE sector that employability is becoming recognised as an increasingly important facet of widening participation. Alongside this cultural shift is a recognition that a more generally diverse student population challenges the traditional notion of preparing a student to move into and through employment.

Both Layer (2004, p.19) and Thomas and Jones (2007) advocate an approach to employability which is ongoing, or throughout the “student life cycle” (Thomas and Jones, 2007, p.35) and Layer (2004, p.19) provides recommendations for ensuring approaches are relevant and specific for students. Such approaches reflect the beliefs of several participants within this research that one size does not fit all.

In answer to RQ3, participants in this research interpret the employability agenda in a range of ways, yet all are cognisant of the wider social and political agenda which

dominates current policy and drives an instrumentalist discourse around employability. Within this contextual framework, participants are meeting the requirements of a neoliberal agenda, working hard to provide the required information of the various auditing procedures. However, participants' interpretations, as with their lived experiences, are complex. Again, there is evidence that participants are drawing on their own beliefs and values, as well as the institutional values, to offer an interpretation of the agenda which encompasses issues of, for example, social justice. Therefore, for several participants, one way in which the employability agenda is interpreted is as an opportunity to demonstrate responsibility for the wider community.

Chapter 6: Conclusions

Conclusions to each research question are included within the previous chapter and so this section includes brief, final remarks. Several key issues have emerged in terms of the lived experiences, interpretations and sense-making of the employability agenda of the participants. They are: change and the impact of change on participants; identity; loss of control; tensions and increased pressure; and the call for bespoke employability policies from both government and the management of an institution. The research has revealed that the employability agenda can be seen as a barometer of the wider change agenda impacting on the HE sector. Key characteristics of this changing HE environment and culture are a focus on monitoring, auditing and accountability. Participants in this research have experienced and responded to this environment in a variety of ways: some participants welcomed the instrumentalist focus driven by the employability agenda, while others challenge and question the discourse which leads them to feel compromised in terms of their own beliefs.

It is clear that the employability agenda cannot be conceived by senior management within HEIs as just another policy or strategy to be implemented. It is inextricably linked to a neoliberal change agenda which, for some, poses a threat to their values and beliefs around education, their identities and academic freedom. Therefore, the way in which participants working within higher education make sense of the employability agenda is personal and involves a complex interpretation, influenced by several key factors. This research has identified the pertinent factors for the participants involved, as depicted in figure 7, page 142.

Participants in this research were united in their call for tailored, localised strategies which recognise nuances at the level of the institution, department and student body. A one size fits all approach to employability measurements, policy and strategy was rejected.

As discussed within this thesis, participants' interpretations of employability are influenced by a range of factors and this is equally relevant to the pedagogical approach they employ to implement such strategies.

As the employability agenda continues to dominate the HE environment, used as one of the measurements to hold universities to account; to evaluate success and determine value for money, it is clear that more work needs to be done with and between key constituent groups within HEIs to address concerns and manage processes effectively. Suggestions are made in the recommendations section on how HEIs can achieve this.

6.1 Limitations of the research

The impact of my research on practice is a key consideration when developing recommendations: "Professional doctorates are associated with the acquisition of knowledge and research skills, to further advance or enhance professional practice" (Lee, 2009, p.6). However, IPA is a methodological approach which focuses on individual experiences and advocates small sample groups which brings concerns about transferability to the fore. Yet scholars insist that IPA researchers are not precluded from making general claims; in fact Alase (2017, p.17) suggests: "Ultimately, the aim of an IPA research study is to produce transferable and verifiable research

findings with quality data collection procedures". Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009, p.4-5) state: "Immediate claims are therefore bounded by the group studied but an extension can be considered through theoretical generalizability, where the reader of the report is able to assess the evidence in relation to their existing and professional knowledge". Finally, Brocki and Wearden (2006, p.96) claim that: "Whilst an IPA analysis may not strive for generalisability, neither should it merely be the retelling of respondents' accounts". Therefore, subject to rigorous and appropriate research design, data collection and analysis, which embed processes to establish "trustworthiness, member-checking, triangulation, and auditing" (Alase, 2016, in Alase, 2017, p.17), IPA research can be seen as transferable. Scholars such as Brocki and Wearden (2006) emphasise that making links between the findings of research and wider relevant theories and concepts may facilitate claims of generalisability. Yet, I am aware and convinced that claims should be made "cautiously" (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009, p.29) or as Bassey (1996, p.46) suggests: "fuzzy generalisation", which "says that something may happen but without any measure of its probability. It's a qualified generalisation, carrying the idea of possibility but no certainty".

In terms of this research, I am not aiming to generalise from one institution to another. Although one could identify common characteristics between certain HEIs (for example, post 1992 institutions, teaching-intensive universities, Russell Group institutions and so on) there will also be a myriad of differences between those in these categories and each will have individuals within the institutions developing and implementing strategies in their own way. Yet, fuzzy generalisation would suggest that other, similar HEIs – for example, post-1992, teaching-intensive universities, with a diverse student population - could use the lessons learnt in terms of implementing their own policies. These possibilities are explored within the recommendations section.

IPA is a highly interpretative methodology (although Larkin, Watts and Clifton (2006, p.102) also note that such research has been criticised for being “simply descriptive”) and my analysis provides just one interpretation of the data; other researchers would undoubtedly offer different conclusions (Brocki and Wearden, 2006, p.98). By adopting a reflexive approach to the research and by fully documenting the research process, in addition to providing evidence of analysis within the appendices, readers are able to track the process and asses the trustworthiness of the research. I have therefore, recognised that there are limitations with this research, but have attempted to address them where possible.

6.2 Contribution to practice

This research has explored the perceptions, conceptions, lived experiences and interpretations of the employability agenda of participants working within a post-1992 HEI, and I make three, clear claims to contribution to practice. Firstly, and fundamentally, an IPA approach to education research is still relatively uncommon (as recognised by Holland (2012) and Guihen (2017)), and unusual in terms of employability research, providing a unique perspective to current research in this area. Much of the employability research undertaken to date has been quantitative in nature (Arora, 2015). In contrast, I have taken a qualitative approach which has enabled a rich, in-depth analysis of the lived experiences of participants. Specifically, the IPA approach has facilitated a thorough exploration of individual experiences, and by interviewing participants within one HEI, I have been able to build a picture of the institutional conversations taking place around this agenda. I have given voice to participants who arguably have been under-represented within the employability research, providing new insights into this increasingly important area for HE.

Secondly, interviewing people occupying different roles relevant to the employability agenda has allowed for the exploration of a range of experiences, through different lenses and perspectives. It has revealed the often hidden conversations around the debate, and the challenge the agenda makes to the identity of academic staff, in particular, is important in terms of the successful implementation of employability policies in the future. The identification of commonalities and difference across the participants' experiences sheds light on the challenges, demands and opportunities for those working in the current HE environment.

Thirdly, this research offers further insights into the ecology of a post-1992 HEI, which could be useful to other similar HEIs developing their own responses to the employability agenda. For example, the factors which influence participants perceptions and conceptions of employability, depicted in figure 7, page 142, could be used as a tool by managers tasked with developing employability strategies. An understanding of these influencing factors, which acknowledges that responses to employability are complex, personal and nuanced, could aid in the future development of appropriate strategies, implemented in large, multi-faceted HEIs. Such strategies, which are tailored and take into account the requirements of subjects, the specific needs of the student body, and the values and aims of both the institution and staff, may be better received by those responsible for their implementation, in the current climate. Additionally, those staff tasked with working alongside academics, such as careers advisors, could employ this tool when collaborating to develop employability initiatives.

6.3 Recommendations

The findings of my research potentially provide managers and those responsible for developing and implementing responses to the agenda, within similar institutions, with insights into how best to navigate this complex and challenging policy area. The ongoing pressure on HEIs to focus on the employability agenda, and provide data and information relating to employment rates, means that they have to develop appropriate responses. There is little choice for institutions operating in a culture which prioritises monitoring and auditing, and which influences the public discourse around the purpose of a university. In light of this context, the following recommendations have been developed:

1. *Facilitate the development of local strategies and policies* – perhaps the most important message to emerge from this research is the need to develop localised and tailored employability strategies and initiatives. HEIs which facilitate and empower staff to develop such responses will potentially address some of the concerns raised by participants in this research. These concerns arise at both an individual and institutional level. In terms of individual impact, the erosion of academic freedom, loss of control and agency and fractured identities are key issues. Values and beliefs around education are important to participants and support for initiatives is more likely if they are closely aligned. As Churchman and King (2009, p.514) state: “The presence of the corporate story does not necessarily have to be at the cost of the personal stories shared by academic staff, rather a recognition of these stories and the existence of safe institutional spaces to share them could facilitate a more diverse and collegial set of academic voices”. Employability initiatives which reflected values of social justice and widening participation, for example, were valued by

participants. For the institution, a localised response would take into account the subject area, the nature of the HEI and its position within the local community and region. Furthermore, the specific needs of the student body would be accommodated.

2. *Bridge the gaps in perception between key groups within HEIs* - this research has revealed some gaps in perceptions between both managers and academics, and between those who are keen to develop employability-focused curricula and those who object. For example, those participants involved in implementing employability initiatives highlight the significant impact on workload, yet some managers suggest minimal additional work is required. Such divergence in opinion is likely to exacerbate tension and therefore should be addressed at the outset of discussions around employability implementation. Closer collaboration between managers and academics to undertake a realistic evaluation of the resources required to manage initiatives would be beneficial. Ongoing support and appropriate mechanisms to allocate time to undertake employability responsibilities could also help prevent tension within institutions.
3. *Avoid a top-down approach to employability implementation* – closely linked to the first recommendation, collaborative approaches to employability development may address issues of loss of academic freedom and agency. This thesis has framed the implementation of the employability strategies within a change agenda, and the literature on change within HE suggests a top-down approach is least acceptable to the academic community. The findings reveal that participants who are able to adapt and develop strategies to meet the needs of, for example, their students and subject requirements, drawing on their pedagogic expertise, reflect more positively on their experiences. Using middle

managers as mediators, providing feedback both to senior management and to academics might facilitate a smoother implementation process.

4. *Involve students in the development of employability initiatives* – some staff indicated concerns around a lack of student engagement with employability initiatives. Therefore, involving students in the early stages of policy design and development, through to implementation could be useful. However, more research with students is required to fully explore attitudes and opinions, as my participants were exclusively staff, not students.
5. *Staff development opportunities* – the issue of 'employability expertise' was raised by participants and is one which could be addressed through staff development opportunities. Sessions which comprehensively address the concerns raised in this research, and provide opportunities for academics to develop strategies and initiatives alongside colleagues from their subject areas, would potentially smooth the implementation process.

6.4 Suggestions for further research

Employability is a well-researched area, but as policy continues to be developed and discussions around higher education are dominated by the future employment prospects of graduates, ongoing research is important to contribute to and shape the debate.

Further research with students, examining their responses to the agenda and experiences of employability initiatives, would be particularly useful. The findings of this research (and also noted by Frankham (2017)) suggests a lack of student engagement with employability initiatives and therefore warrants further exploration as initiatives continue to be introduced across HEIs.

A similar piece of research could usefully be conducted in a different type of institution to ascertain the experiences of those institutions outside of the post-1992 category. As discussed within the literature review, the suggestion is that some universities have not had to focus on employability to the extent of others as reputation has ensured that students move more easily into the workplace. However, as the policy arena develops and places further requirements across the sector, this position may change and it would be useful to examine the experiences of staff within these types of institutions.

In terms of developing my research, it is clear that sense-making around the employability agenda is influenced by ontological beliefs, background and knowledge. Participants were asked to briefly describe their journey into academia, and further research which explores the personal histories of academics and the influence on their approaches to employability and models of education would also be useful.

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Appendix 1: Key milestones relating to employability

Date	*Publication / event*	*Link with employability*
1992	Further and Higher Education Act 1992	Led to the creation of The Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), which was responsible for managing the Government funding provided to HEIs
1997	Dearing Report	Called for the development of skills: communication, literacy, IT, learning to learn
1999	Bologna Declaration	Common vision for the European Higher Education Area. Key focus on the fostering of employability skills for graduates
2006	Leitch Review of Skills	Highlighted the need to improve engagement between universities and employers
2009	Higher Ambitions: the future of universities in a knowledge economy	All HEIs to describe how they will enhance student employability
2010	The Browne Report	Linking employability outcomes to the possibility of increasing fees
2011	Students at the Heart of the System	Key information Sets (KIS) data to be produced on employment and earnings outcomes for students
2012	The Wilson Review	An evaluation of how universities work with business
2016	Success as a knowledge economy: teaching excellence, social mobility and student choice	Introduced the TEF framework – one of the key metrics is employability
2017	The Higher Education and Research Act	Enabled the Office for Students and the UK research and Innovation to be established

Appendix 2: Participant information

Group descriptors

Group 1: The participants in group 1 have strategic responsibility for developing the institution's employability strategies and policies and monitoring their implementation across the university.

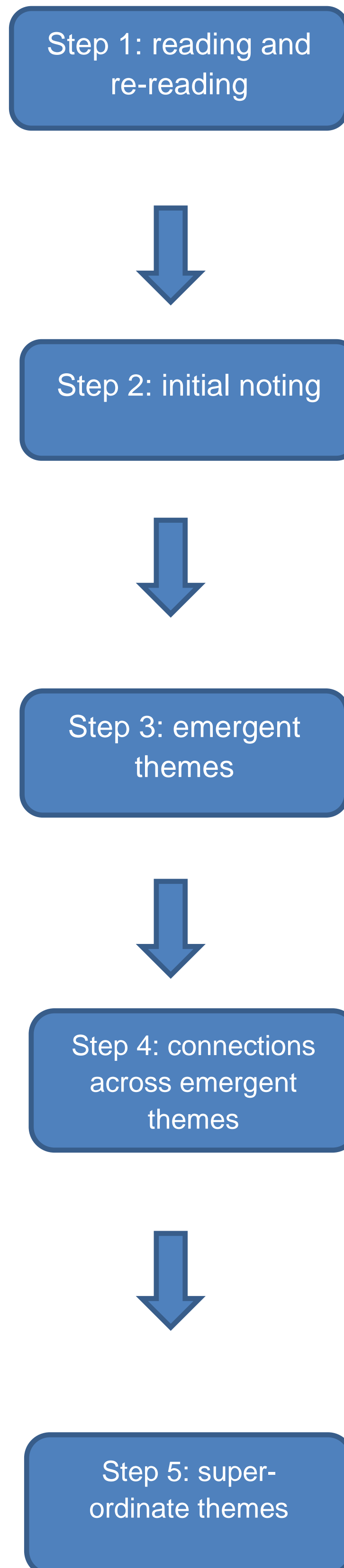
Group 2: I decided to interview two PLs as part of this research; one PL who leads on employability within a faculty teaching career-focused subjects and another who leads on employability within a faculty teaching mainly critical subjects. This approach reflects the approach taken to the interviews with academics and supports the rationale of exploring views from these two main categories.

Group 3: Academics teaching critical subjects and those representing career-focused subjects were approached. My position as an academic within the institution has afforded me some benefits in terms of access to interviewees, and through the course of my work, I had discussed my research with individuals who had said they would be willing to be interviewed. This provided the starting point for the interview process and from which I contacted other individuals through recommendation, or on the basis of the subject being taught.

Each participant was given a pseudonym, as follows.

Group 1: Senior leaders	
Jonathan	Senior leaders with strategic responsibility for employability
Robert	
Group 2: Middle managers	
Sophie	Principal Lecturer with responsibility for employability. Based in department teaching career-focused subjects.
Tim	Principal Lecturer with responsibility for employability. Based in department teaching critical subjects.
Group 3: Academics	
Sue	Nine and a half years' experience of teaching in HE. Teaches career-focused subject.
Lizzy	Twelve years' experience of teaching in HE. Teaches career-focused subject.
Stewart	Around twelve years' experience of teaching in HE. Has taught career-focused and critical subjects
Peter	Around 18 years' experience of teaching in HE. Teaches critical and career-focused subjects.
Lucy	Almost 20 years' experience of teaching in HE. Teaches critical subject.

Appendix 3: The IPA process

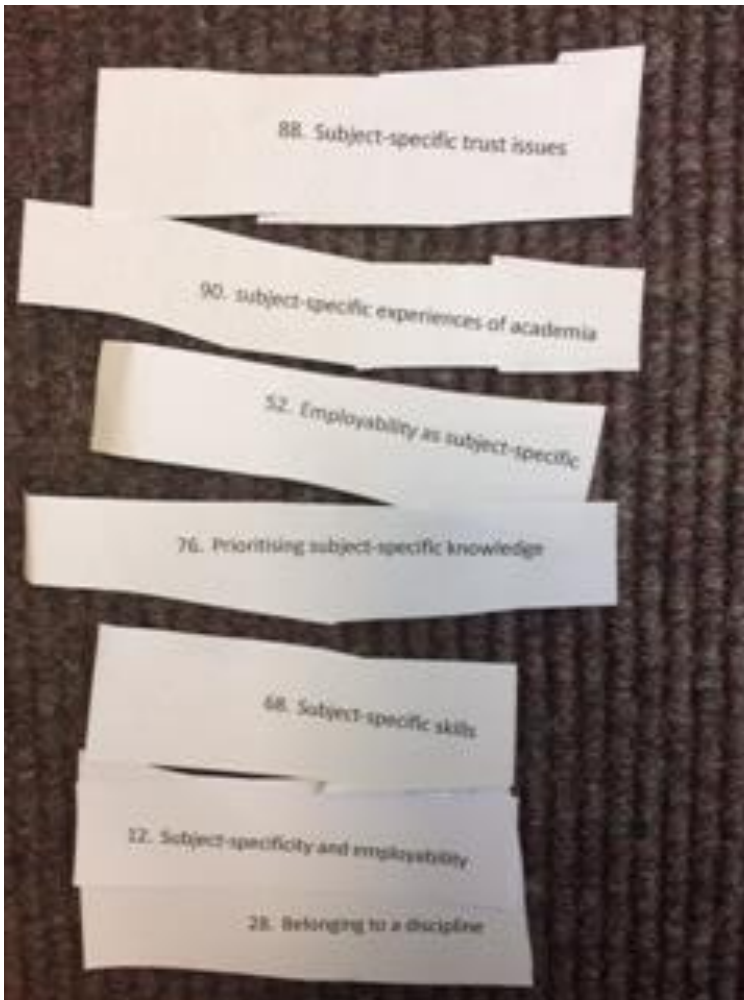


Appendix 4: An extract from the analysis of a participant interview

	160. → to conferences and stuff like that, I think	
The value of abstract and practical skills	161. → people working in the humanities and social,	
	162. → what I would call broadly humanities and	
	163. → social sciences, they're teaching more kind	Differentiation between abstract and practical skills – *is this another example of creating binaries, as with the first interview*
	164. → of abstract skills that are just as important if	
	165. → not more important than those kind of	
Skills in the employability discourse	166. → pragmatic and practical skills but are not	
	167. → perceived as such, as directly related to	
	168. → making people employable after they	Practical skills given priority in employability discourse
	169. → graduate.	Abstract skills devalued
	170. → Interviewer – so where do you think some of the	
	171. → abstract skills are more important, what kind	
	172. → of skills do you think?	
	173. → Peter – well I would broadly call it critical,	
	174. → analytical thinking and also communication	
	175. → skills erm can you communicate your ideas	
	176. → clearly by verbal forms and written forms	
Critical employability	177. → erm obviously there's some emphasis on	Critical analytical skills should be prioritised
	178. → that but it's the critical analytical thinking	
	179. → you know. For me coming from a humanities	*Call for redefinition of employability skills – a critical employability*
	180. → perspective, I would locate myself in the	
	181. → humanities, it's about creating a space for	
University as a space	182. → young people or mature students to be able	
	183. → to stop and think about the world, to stop	*University as a space for contemplation and critical thought*
	184. → and think about aspects of their own lives	
	185. → and the lives of others they take for granted,	
	186. → to think about why we think about the	
	187. → world in particular sorts of ways. And I think	
Critical skills for the workplace	188. → those are really important, not only basic	
	189. → human skills but also make you a better	
	190. → employee if you can have that kind of critical	
	191. → thought that you can engage. You know	
	192. → let's face it if we're talking about xxx, you	

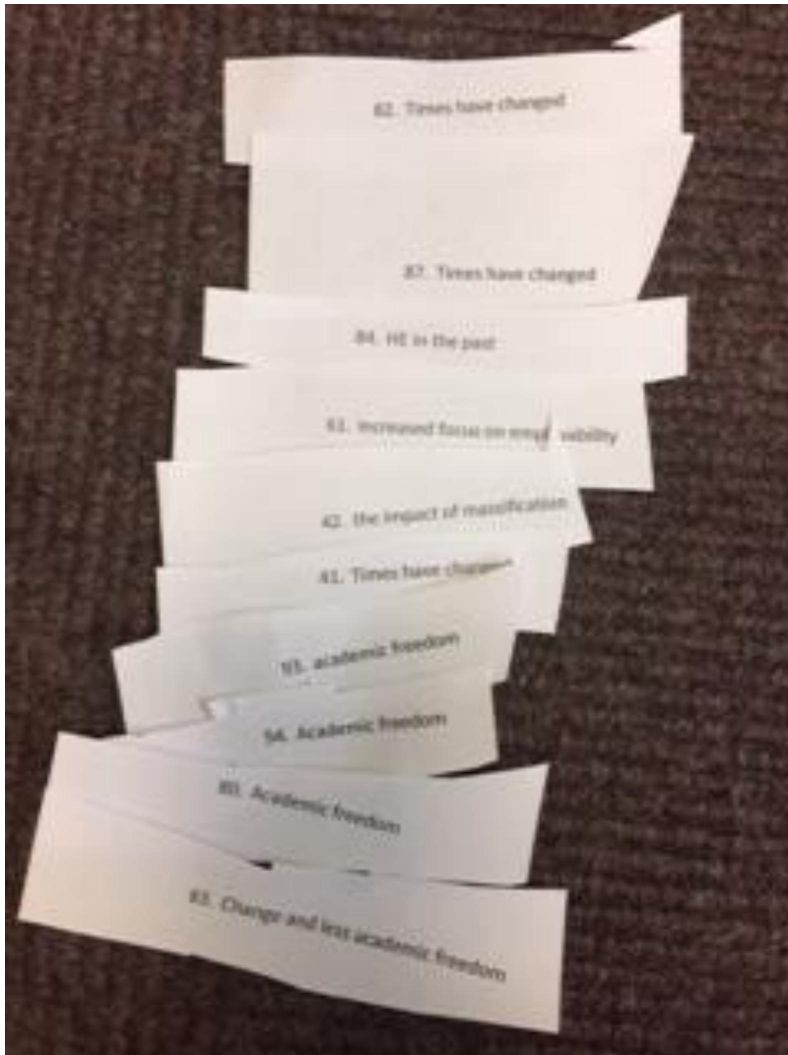
Appendix 5: From emergent themes to super-ordinate themes

Below are examples of how emergent themes were developed into superordinate themes. A list of emergent themes were produced, cut up so that each theme was on a separate piece of paper and techniques of abstraction, subsumption and numeration used to develop the super-ordinate themes. The text box incorporates my initial comments about the theme.



Superordinate theme: Subject specific issues

Again, as with other participants, issues relating to the subject the participant taught were seen as important. This participant identified as a humanities lecturer and believed that key critical and analytical skills were developed within these subjects which are useful for the workplace. However, he believed that they are not recognised or valued within the current employability discourse which prioritises practical skills. He believed that this was the case across the sector, not just this HEI.



Superordinate theme: Change within academia

This academic talked about change, as did others, referencing massification etc as having a major impact on the sector. However, this academic talked specifically about the employability agenda and wider neoliberal policies having an impact on his personal experience of academia. This is closely linked to a decrease in academic freedom and an increase in accountability and bureaucracy etc.

Appendix 6: An extract from the master table of themes, demonstrating themes identified across the cases, alongside evidence from participant interviews

Master themes / super-ordinate themes across participants

In order to develop a set of master themes, I examined all of the super-ordinate themes for each participant, along with the emergent themes within them. I looked across the data to ascertain similarities and connections, grouping together key super-ordinate themes and identifying subordinate themes within these master themes. During this process, some themes from the individual data sets have been discarded as they are not useful / relevant to the research questions or they were not sufficiently prominent within the overall data. Other categories have been re-examined and renamed to bring the analysis together and create a set of master / superordinate, along with subordinate themes. The table below illustrates the five master themes, subordinate themes within them, as well as the emergent themes and illustrative quotes from across the data set. It was important to include all information here so as not to lose sight of the individual voices within this research.

Super-ordinate theme: The Ubiquity of Change

Subordinate themes	***Emergent themes***	***Illustrative quotes***
The Purpose of a university	Learning for learning sake	“Absolutely I believe that’s probably for 99% of them that’s why they’re coming to university. There is an occasional anomaly that is there for the academic or the errm learning for learning sake scenario yeah but it’s just so rare now in in what we teach” Sue, lines 69 – 73
	The purpose of a university	“and a couple of professors were saying no no but that isn’t the purpose of a university, the purpose of a university is to impart knowledge…” Lizzy, line 432

	The purpose of a university	"so it's very, it's a very kind of instrumentalist, you come to university to get a graduate job and I think that's an issue because I do not necessarily think that's what education should be" Peter, lines 133 – 137
	Times have changed	"I don't know the answer and I've been asking myself this for years and sometimes I think back to the old days when we ha universities, I mean universities traditionally, basically you know traditional academic ones or subjects like mine in many ways were training them to be postgraduates aren't we" Lucy, lines 784 – 789
	University as a broad experience	"my main interest is in supporting students and obviously I do that through teaching but erm they're here for a broader experience" Tim, lines 96 – 98
	Value for money	"like anything as soon as you pay a significant sum of money for something understandably the issue of value for money starts to raise its you know quite rightly so well what are you getting for that" Jonathan, lines 519 – 523