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A Post-Structural Analysis

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**THE EXPERIENCES OF HIGHER EDUCATION  
STUDENTS IN FURTHER EDUCATION COLLEGES:  
A POST-STRUCTURAL ANALYSIS**

**LAUREN NIXON**

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

The University of Huddersfield

October 2019

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## **Abstract**

The overall aim of this thesis was to consider and critically analyse the discourses that shape students' experiences of HE-in-FE. This research analysed the discourses drawn upon by students and staff within a small FEC to describe their experiences in order to analyse how such discourses enable and constrain the experiences of the students. The research aimed to trouble the taken for granted discourses, in particular, those of widening participation, vulnerability and support, to highlight how such discourses may be enabling and constraining the HE-in-FE students' experiences and identities.

The drive to increase participation in HE in England and the focus on widening participation in HE has resulted in the expansion of the provision of HE-in-FE. Such provision traditionally attracts non-traditional students, that is, those from working class backgrounds who are usually first-generation entrants to HE. The widening participation discourses within which these non-traditional students are located shape their experiences as students. There is little research which analyses how these students' experiences are shaped by the discourses.

In order to meet the research aims a post-structuralist approach was taken to the research. A case study was conducted within a small Further Education College (FEC) in the north of England. A range of research methods were employed within the study including interviews, non-participant observations, photo elicitation group interviews and documentary analysis. Using this data, the discourses used to describe the experiences of HE-in-FE students were captured and analysed using discourse analysis.

The findings of this research suggest that that the widening participation discourse shapes the experiences of HE-in-FE students in contradictory ways. HE-in-FE students have been placed within a deficit discourse which influences the students' confidence and self-esteem, shaping their identities and experiences. This works to reproduce social disadvantage and as such the provision of HE-in-FE may act as a new mechanism for maintaining inequality. At the same time however, widening participation positions students as having potential. This has the contradictory effect of shaping students' identities positively. Students construct an identity characterised by a sense of independence and determination to improve.

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## List of abbreviations

DfE – Department for Education

DfEE – Department for Education and Employment

DfES – Department for Education and Skills

FD – Foundation Degree

FE – Further Education

FEC – Further Education College

FSM – Free School Meals

HE – Higher Education

HE-in-FE – Higher Education in Further Education

HEFCE – Higher Education Funding Council for England

HEI – Higher Education Institution

HIVE – Higher Vocational Education

HNC – Higher National Certificate

HND – Higher National Diploma

NNEB – Nursery Nurse Exam Board

OFFA – Office for Fair Access

OFS – Office for Students

QAA – Quality Assurance Agency

STEM – Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths

# Chapter 1 - Introduction

Widening participation in higher education (HE) has been a consistent and increasing focus of education policy since the late 1980s (Mulrenan, Atkins and Cox, 2017). This emphasis has increased with successive Governments and the focus has shifted from increasing participation in HE, to widening participation, and implementing policies designed to remove barriers to accessing HE for those who have the potential to benefit from a university education (HEFCE, 2015). Further education colleges (FECs) have made a significant and important contribution to the Governments' targets to both increase and widen participation in HE (Bathmaker, 2016). The provision of higher education in further education (HE-in-FE) has increased significantly over the past ten years. There has been a 75 per cent increase in the number of students starting foundation degrees (FDs) within FECs since 2007-08 (HEFCE, 2017). Foundation degrees are level five qualifications which are designed to widen participation in HE while offering vocational knowledge and skills (Herrera, Brown and Portlock, 2015). One in ten HE students in the UK studies within an FEC, despite this significant proportion, the HE-in-FE sector has previously been under-researched and neglected (Rapley, 2018).

Students who study foundation degrees within FECs are often classed as non-traditional learners (Tett, Cree and Christie, 2017). Non-traditional learners tend to be older than the average age of traditional students and are usually returning to learning following a break in education. They will often have responsibilities in addition to their studies including work and caring duties (Rocks and Lavender, 2018), studying HE part time as a result. This thesis examines how, by labelling HE-in-FE learners as non-traditional they are being located within a deficit discourse that pathologises them and both shapes and constrains their identity and experiences.

Research which has previously examined the provision of HE-in-FE has sought to uncover truths about the experiences of students, looking through the discourses as it does (Maclure, 2003). This research suspends this usual way of examining HE-in-FE, instead focussing on discourse and how this shapes the students' experience, discourse is therefore central to this thesis. A Foucauldian approach to discourse has been adopted within this study. Following such an approach, discourse has been conceptualised within this thesis as more than simply language and written words. Discourse describes statements and categories of language which are historically and socially situated, and which hold power (Foucault, 1972). The conceptualisation of discourse within this thesis is considered further in chapter three. The table below indicates the multiple ways in which all of the discourses mentioned within this thesis link to the dominant ones identified earlier within the abstract. These dominant discourses are linked and are interact with each other, they are interrelated. Relationships, sense of belonging and support are also closely intertwined. Although it is useful theoretically to categorise them, in practice this isn't as clear. Theory and practice don't always align, as such, theoretically we can more easily separate the dominant discourses, the smaller ones are not as easy to categorise. As a result of this, there is overlap between the discursive constructions highlighted within the thesis and the different dominant discourses.

Table 1: An overview of the discourses mentioned within the thesis.

Dominant discourse	Discursive constructions highlighted within the thesis
Widening participation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Traditional students</li> <li>Non-traditional students</li> <li>Diversity</li> <li>Sense of belonging</li> <li>Potential</li> </ul>

	Determination Independence Dependence
Support	Sense of belonging Comfort Confidence Independence Dependence Value for money Peer support
Vulnerability	Sense of belonging Comfort Potential Relationships Confidence

### ***1.1 The aims of the research***

The aim of this thesis is to consider and critically analyse the discourses that shape part time students' experiences of HE-in-FE. This research analyses the discourses drawn upon by students and staff within a small FEC to describe their experiences. The purpose of this is to consider how such discourses enable and constrain the experiences of the students. The research aims to trouble the taken for granted discourses, in particular, those of widening participation and support. The aim of doing so is to highlight how such discourses may be enabling and constraining the HE-in-FE students' experiences and identities. These aims will be addressed by the following research questions.

## **1.2 Research questions**

The research seeks to address the following research questions:

Q1. How do discourses shape the identities of HE-in-FE students?

Q2. How do discourses shape the experiences of students studying HE within an FE learning environment?

Q3. How do discursive framings of support work to enable and constrain the actions of HE-in-FE students?

## **1.3 Background and context of the research**

The increase in the provision of HE-in-FE stems from the 1997-2010 Labour Government's target to increase participation in HE to 50% for all 18-30 year olds (DfES, 2003) and the birth of widening participation. Such targets have been driven by the belief that up skilling the workforce promotes economic and social wellbeing (Fisher and Simmons, 2012; Avis, 2013). FECs were an important feature of this strategy, although they had previously offered some HE in the form of Higher National Certificates (HNCs) and Higher National Diplomas (HNDs), their role was expanded to include the delivery of FDs (Bathmaker, 2016).

A shift in policy under a newly elected Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition Government (2010-2015) saw a move from widening participation in HE to an approach that promoted different types of HE for different types of students, endorsing vocational education as a better choice for many students. Under this Coalition Government there was also a



significant shift in the way universities are funded. A radical funding policy for HE in England increased tuition fees and transferred the full cost of university tuition to students. This was with the exception of the science, technology, engineering, and maths (STEM) subjects which still received some Government funding (Whiteley, 2012).

In 2015 when the majority Conservative Government was elected the cap on student numbers, which had previously limited the numbers of students that each university was permitted to accept, was removed and there was a return to political aims to both increase and widen participation in HE. The diverse market of HE continued however with FD's provided in FECs making a significant contribution to widening participation and offering a more accessible route into HE (Bathmaker, 2016). These efforts to widen participation have arguably had the beneficial effect of granting non-traditional students access to HE where they would have previously not been accepted onto HE courses. However, such non-traditional students are only being granted access to a part of an extremely hierarchical HE system. The structure of UK HE is differentiated and stratified enshrining structural inequalities with institutions regarded as highly esteemed, such as Oxford and Cambridge universities, at the top of the hierarchy and providers of HE-in-FE at the bottom (Bathmaker and Thomas, 2009). HEIs have become increasingly engaged in competition for status positions within this highly stratified and hierarchical HE system (Brankovic, 2018). Although widening participation has opened up access to HE and arguably diluted its currency, different forms of HE have different status and value, the hierarchical structure within which HEIs are located mean that institutions are not equal in relation to each other (Bathmaker, 2017). Thus, despite the changes in the HE system to fit the widening participation agenda, the new arrangement may still be selective and may result in the students who have entered HE as a result of widening participation being filtered into less advantageous places within the HE system. Being granted access to the lower end of the hierarchy does not equate to more equitable outcomes and as such does not promote social

mobility or address inequalities (Donnelly and Evans, 2019). Widening access to students by allowing them to access only the least valuable institutions reproduces the hierarchical structure of the HE system and perpetuates the social inequalities both within the system of HE and more widely (Evans et al, 2019).

In spite of these issues of social mobility, it could still be argued that widening participation strategies have been successful. In 2017, 20.4% of 18 year olds from areas with low HE participation started HE, a figure that rose from 11.2% in 2006. In addition, students who had received free school meals (FSM) when in school were 83% more likely to go to university in 2017 than they were in 2006 (Universities UK, 2017). With the previous Coalition Government's drive to replace the widening participation agenda with the introduction of vocational pathways and what they describe as 'higher vocational education' (HIVE), delivered mostly in FECs, and the current, 2015 elected Conservative Government's goal of increasing competition by creating a diverse market of HE with foundation degrees providing a more accessible route into HE, such students are likely to end up studying these, less valued vocational qualifications (Bathmaker, 2014) with less chance of social mobility. It is the overarching system of HE that creates the process of stratification and social selection rather than the individual HEIs. The network of HEIs and relationships between them create hierarchies of esteem and value and as such, when studying the experiences of students studying HE-in-FE, one must examine them in the context of debates about the wider HE field.

#### ***1.4 Research Justification***

Research already undertaken in HE-in-FE has predominantly focussed on students' transitions from their level 5 study in FE into their top up year at university (Mytton and Rumbold, 2011; Greenbank, 2007; Pike and Harrison, 2011) and on HE-in-FE pedagogy

(Harwood and Harwood, 2004; King and Widdowson, 2012). However, the available literature on the experiences of studying HE-in-FE is limited. What research has been undertaken does not consider how the support offered to students studying HE-in-FE, resulting from policy discourses of widening participation, vulnerability and dependence, may be constraining rather than enabling students' progression. There is also very little research to date that examines HE-in-FE students' experiences from a post-structuralist perspective, examining the discourses which shape the students' identities and enable and constrain their experiences. As such this is a gap in the literature, which this thesis aims to contribute to.

### ***1.5 Structure and overview of the thesis***

This thesis consists of five chapters. The first of these is this introduction which provides an overview of the aims of the research and research questions as well as the background to the study. This introduction also outlines the structure of the thesis as a whole providing a brief overview of each chapter.

Chapter two provides a critical review of the literature most relevant and pertinent to this research. The literature has been drawn upon in designing the research questions and theoretical approach to the study. It has highlighted the theoretical perspectives employed most often when examining issues relating to HE-in-FE. Finally, the critical review of literature has highlighted gaps in knowledge that suggested areas for further research that could make an original contribution to knowledge.

Chapter three provides an overview and justification of the post-structuralist approach taken to the research and of the case study design. An overview of the case is provided along with an introduction to the participants and an explanation of how they were selected.

A description of how the research was conducted is provided along with an outline of the research methods employed. The chapter concludes with a discussion relating to researcher positionality and reflexivity and considers how issues of ethics were addressed throughout the research.

Chapter four presents the findings of the research and is split into three distinct sections, the first of which outlines the key discursive constructions that have emerged from the analysis. The second section considers how the discourses identified shape the experiences of students studying HE-in-FE. The final section of chapter four considers structures of support in place to help students studying HE-in-FE, examining how support is conceptualised and how discourses of support work to 'other' non-traditional students and constrain their experiences.

Chapter five concludes the research. It begins by presenting an overview of the research methods and a critical discussion of the process before drawing together the key findings of the research and highlighting the original contribution to knowledge made by the thesis. Finally, recommendations for future research are outlined.

The findings documented in this thesis add to the body of knowledge on the experiences of students studying HE-in-FE and increase awareness of the impact of the deficit discourses of widening participation, vulnerability and support in enabling and constraining learner identities. This research is important as without challenging the dominant, deficit discourses within which HE-in-FE is situated, inequality will continue to be maintained and social mobility will be obstructed.

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

This chapter considers key literature relevant to the aims of the thesis. The chapter begins by outlining the purpose of reviewing the literature; it then provides an overview of the strategy adopted. The chapter goes on to provide a historical review of the provision of HE within the FE sector before critically examining previous research most pertinent to the research questions, including studies relating to widening participation and the experiences of students studying HE-in-FE. The chapter concludes by identifying the gaps in the literature and providing a rationale for this research.

### ***2.1 A Background to HE-in-FE***

The FE sector has been delivering HE qualifications for over 60 years (Scott, 2009; Parry, 2012). Indeed, this represents a significant proportion of the HE cohort. In the 2017-18 academic year, 151,000 students studied HE-in-FE in England (AOC, 2017); a significant increase from the 87,339 students in 2008 (Ingleby, 2014). In spite of the numbers of such students, the nature of HE-in-FE provision is inadequately understood (Parry, 2012) and the experiences of part time HE-in-FE students such as those in this study are relatively unexplained (King, Saraswat and Widdowson, 2015). This thesis aims to fill this dearth in knowledge by examining the experiences of such students and analysing how these experiences are shaped discursively.

In the context of a worldwide race to gain economic advantage, policy makers in advanced nations contend that developing a workforce with high levels of skills and knowledge enables countries "to compete successfully in globalised knowledge economies" (Bathmaker, 2017, p1). HE has been identified by policy makers and economists as a key driver in

increasing productivity and economic growth whilst overcoming social inequalities and improving social mobility (Webb et al, 2017; Ingleby, 2017). HE-in-FE has also been positioned as a key mechanism for increasing access to HE for those from disadvantaged backgrounds (Wheelahann, 2016). UK Government policy aims to widen HE participation in a 'socially inclusive direction' (Elliott, 2018, p65). Such an approach has led to an increase in the provision of HE-in-FE which has become a key focus of policies to widen access to HE and ensure greater social mobility. Whilst these policies work to widen access to HE, the extent to which the provision of HE-in-FE reduces inequality has been questioned. Students enter HE who may not have done so previously but they are only granted access to certain types of HE, most likely at newer universities or in HE-in-FE which doesn't provide the same opportunities as those studying at more prestigious HEIs. Different HEIs prepare students for different types of occupation with varying levels of reward thus reproducing inequalities (Wheelahann, 2016).

283 out of 303 FE colleges in England offer some HE provision. However, half of all such provision is accounted for by only 52 of these, with numbers of HE students in such colleges ranging from 1,000 to 4,000. Conversely, the smallest FECs have fewer than 100 HE students (Parry et al, 2012). Where HE students are a small minority within their FEC, they are less likely to have dedicated HE resources, classrooms and study space. This, in turn, is likely to impact significantly on their experiences as a HE student. In the context of a changing policy landscape, it is important to research and question whose interests are being served by changing policies and practices and to explore whether the expansion of HE-in-FE reduces, reproduces, or produces new systems of inequality (Bathmaker, 2017). Such structural issues shape students' educational experiences and there is a lack of research examining the role of discourses such as widening participation and non-traditional learners in reproducing inequality in education.

Although there has been a substantial amount of research conducted on the topic of HE-in-FE in recent years, particularly on related policies, little has investigated the experiences of such students (Rapley, 2018). Indeed, much of the research undertaken has focused on the transitions of foundation degree students into their 'top up' year at university (Mytton and Rumbold, 2011; Greenbank, 2007; Pike and Harrison, 2011) and on the teaching practices and pedagogy of delivering HE within an FE environment (Harwood and Harwood, 2004; King and Widdowson, 2012). HE-in-FE learners' perceptions and identities, along with their experiences of such study, have remained an under-researched area. Moreover, the issues facing HE students in smaller FECs has not been addressed at all. There is a need for research to understand the experiences of students studying HE within small FECs, to explore the social organisation of HE-in-FE in such contexts, to consider how the student experience and students' identities are shaped by the discourses in which they are embedded and to explore whether HE-in-FE is promoting social mobility or acting as a "new mechanism for reproducing social inequality" (Wheelahan, 2016, p34). This thesis aims to contribute to closing this gap in knowledge by examining how discourses shape the identities and experiences of students studying HE within a small FEC.

## ***2.2 HE-in-FE Policy***

This section of the literature review will explore official literature which relates to HE-in-FE including Government Green Papers, White Papers, review findings and outlines of strategy. In doing so this section will highlight the policy discourses which are present within the official literature relating to the provision of HE-in-FE. Conducting an analysis of dominant discourses within Government policy is important in understanding how students are being conceptualised and how the discourses are shaping the provision of HE (Brooks, 2018).

In 1963 the Robbins report recommended a significant expansion of HE to accommodate all those who had the necessary ability to undertake higher level study (Committee on Higher Education, 1963). Robbins argued that HE should be accessible to everyone who has the ability and desire to study. The Robbins report detailed the scale of predicted HE expansion claiming that "this would achieve remarkable social change" (Committee on Higher Education, 1963, pg 2), however the report provided no further explanation of what the proposed social change would entail. Robbins recommended expanding the numbers of students entering HE but made limited recommendations in relation to the types of students, merely that the numbers should increase. Despite this, the report clearly reflects a vision of greater social mobility and equality through widening access to HE (Bathmaker, 2003). In recommending an expansion of HE for all who have the ability to achieve, Robbins produced the first officially sponsored report to include a discourse of widening participation.

The Dearing Report on Higher Education (NCIHE, 1997) examined and reported on the UK HE system for the first time since the Robbins report in 1963. In the time between the publication of these reports HE student numbers expanded rapidly, leaving the system of HE in financial crisis (Bathmaker, 2003). The Dearing Report raised concerns regarding participation rates of students from lower social classes, identifying raising participation amongst this group as a key priority. Dearing's recommendations were adopted by the New Labour Government, which directed funding to HEIs recruiting from under-represented areas.

The Government endorsement of widening participation continued with the publication of the White Paper, *The Future of Higher Education* (DfES, 2003), which ensured that institutions maintained their focus on widening participation (Greenbank, 2006). This White Paper is a significant document which took up recommendations made by Dearing (NCIHE, 1997) to both increase participation in HE and improve access for groups who are under-

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represented, including those from socio-economically deprived backgrounds. The report stated that “there are still significant barriers of aspiration facing young people from non-traditional backgrounds” (DfES, 2003, p69). As can be seen from this extract, a key focus of the approach to widening participation set out in this White Paper was on the need to identify and remove barriers that prevent disadvantaged students from entering HE. The report conceptualises these barriers as individualised, emphasising the internal nature of the barriers such as poor aspirations and decision-making abilities (Finn, 2015), thus overlooking potential social, institutional and structural factors. The White Paper also stated that

there is no simple means of achieving wider access. Success in opening up higher education to all who have the potential to benefit from it depends on building aspirations and attainment throughout all stages of education. Higher education institutions need to be supported in their efforts to reach out to students from non-traditional backgrounds, and provide them with the right pastoral and teaching support; young people and their families need to be encouraged to raise their aspirations and achieve more of their potential (DfES, 2003, p68).

As demonstrated here, the Labour Government’s policy discourses place an emphasis on the need to raise young peoples’ aspirations, locating the problem of access at an individual level. Such policy discourses position students as potentially academically able but prevented from being successful by barriers, most significantly, their aspirations. These discourses individualise structural inequalities, pathologise disadvantaged students and position them within a deficit discourse, lacking the ambition required to be successful in HE. Such dividing practices are a way of exerting power which have an effect on how individuals perceive themselves. These labelling practices could have a disempowering effect on non-traditional students (Spohrer, 2011) leading them to believe that they need to

be supported in order to access HE. Positioning non-traditional students within a deficit discourse in Government policy leads to perceptions of such students as lacking in the skills and knowledge required for HE and as a result, requiring support. Such discourses blame students and frame them as fully responsible for their own choices and experiences, failing to attribute responsibility to institutional and structural causes of inequality (O'Shea et al, 2016). This framework of deficit thinking affects widening participation practices which on the one hand aim to integrate non-traditional students into HE by encouraging them to adapt, and on the other, places the focus on institutions to respond to and support the new and more diverse body of students.

The argument that Government policy on raising aspirations frames students wholly in terms of deficit has been challenged. Spohrer, Stahl and Bowers-Brown (2018) argue that such strategies portray non-traditional students in contradictory ways, students are located as both 'deficient' and as having 'potential' (p337). Although policy documentation depicts non-traditional students as lacking in some way, such students are afforded agency and are encouraged to develop their dispositions. This enables them to become more socially and psychologically mobile with benefits for the individual as well as economic benefits to society as a whole.

Policy discourse highlights the benefits of HE-in-FE and advocates the potential contribution to the UK's economic prosperity. This is identified in the discourses of marketisation and globalisation in 'the vision' outlined in the Foster Report (DfES, 2005, p1) which is underpinned by the assumption that education is important for economic development. Although most of the emphasis of the Foster report is on the economic and business benefits of HE-in-FE, there is a continuing emphasis on supporting vulnerable and

disadvantaged students. "The need for an outstanding FE college network is not just about national prosperity. It is also about how far countless individuals in this country value themselves, enjoy being who they are and having fulfilling enjoyable lives". The Report continues positioning disadvantaged students within a deficit discourse using language such as poor self-esteem and disappointment which persist in individualising the difficulties facing non-traditional HE students and locating them within a discourse of vulnerability.

The focus and goal of widening participation in HE was called into question when the Coalition Government were elected to power in 2010. There was decreasing support amongst policy makers, the media and some researchers for what have been termed, "College for All" (Bathmaker, 2014, p2) policies, both nationally and internationally. Against a backdrop of austerity in the UK, the widening participation agenda lost much of its support and its funding. The principles of consumer driven change and competition which emerged in previous Labour Government policies were driven further under the Coalition Government.

The 2011 White Paper, *Students at the Heart of the System* (BIS, 2011) was published following the Brown Report (*Independent Review of Higher Education Funding and Student Finance*, 2010). The report drew on discourses of student choice and competition and presented the notion that having a diverse range of institutions charging differing fees would lead to increased choice, increased fairness and increased social mobility. The report reflected an underlying philosophy which moved away from widening participation towards a notion of fair access. This was based on the assumption that there were very able students each year with the ability to attend the most selective institutions who didn't attend them resulting in 'lost talent' (McCaig, 2015, p4). The 2011 White Paper (BIS, 2011, p54) proposed a new framework for widening participation and fairer access to HE. Discourses moved from widening participation for all to removing the "significant barriers in the way of

bright young people from the most disadvantaged backgrounds” preventing them from accessing HE. The focus here being on the ‘brightest’ students rather than all who have the potential to benefit.

In the Coalition Government policies, there is an increased emphasis on discourses of fairness and a drive towards a more meritocratic approach. However, although attempting to take a fairer approach appears commendable, amalgamating fairness with transparency in admission procedures and policies works to mask the social and cultural processes that both influence what HEIs seek in terms of merit and affect students’ capacity to prove their ability (Finn, 2015). As a result, although the change in policy may impact positively on some students from disadvantaged backgrounds, they are unlikely to have a positive impact on those who are not likely to apply. This ideal of meritocracy and fairness being achieved through students’ participation and achievement in HE silences the structural causes of disadvantage and inequality.

There are also othering discourses present within Coalition Government policies and a tendency to promote a different type of HE for non-traditional students. In the 2014 shared strategy on higher education the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) and the Office for Fairer Access (OFFA) outlined their approach in the national strategy for access and student success in higher education, stating their vision is “that all those with the potential to benefit from higher education have equal opportunity to participate and succeed, on a course and in an institution that best fit their potential, needs and ambitions for further study” (BIS, 2014, p7). Positioning non-traditional students in this way reinforces constructions of ‘normal’ HE students within policy discourses and pathologises the non-traditional students, directing them to less valuable positions within the HE hierarchy.

Within the Coalition Government policy, the discourse of social justice appeared to almost completely disappear legitimising social mobility in “purely individualistic and economic terms” (Finn, 2015, p110). Towards the end of the Coalition Government’s administration, constructions of students as ‘future workers’ (Brookes, 2018, p750) pervaded policy documentation. Such constructions are built on assumptions that the primary objective of HE is to ensure that students are work ready and that for students there is a focus on improving career prospects and future earnings. It is in the language and structure of coalition documents that this notion of students as future workers are constructed. In the Green Paper ‘Fulfilling Our Potential: Teaching Excellence, Social Mobility and Student Choice’ (BIS, 2015, p10-11), there is a key focus on students being employment ready. The first section, entitled “The Productivity Challenge” outlines the important role HE has to play in increasing productivity and overcoming the UK’s economic challenges. This section is followed by “The Transparency Challenge” which states that to enable students to make effective choices regarding where to study, they need access to “information regarding the quality of teaching they are likely to experience and what this is likely to mean for their future employment”, this suggests that being work ready is as much of a priority for students as it is for the Government.

Consumerist discourses across the Government policy documents are strong (Brooks, 2018; Ingleby, 2017) with emphasis placed on the investment that students make in their education and the repeated use of discourses of choice and value for money. In the foreword of the Coalition’s 2015 Green Paper they state that “we must do more than ever to ensure that they (students) can make well-informed choices, and that the time and money they invest in higher education is well spent” (BIS, 2015, p8). The Browne Report (Independent Review of Higher Education Funding and Student Finance, 2010), in it’s principles for reform argued that students are inadequately informed and insufficiently prepared when choosing their course of study. The report highlights that students have no

sight of how money is being spent in HEIs. It suggests that students should be put at the heart of the system, well informed about the range of HE options available and positioned to shape the HE landscape by making more informed decisions thus impacting on where funding is directed. Evidence has suggested that despite the dominance of consumerist discourses in educational policy, economic factors have limited impact on how students make HE choices, where as social factors have a much greater effect (Tavares and Cardoso, 2013).

There was a re-emergence of the widening participation agenda when the Conservative Government was elected in May 2015 (Bathmaker, 2016). Later that year the Conservative Government published a Green Paper called Teaching Excellence, Social Mobility and Student Choice, in which they set out targets to double the proportion of disadvantaged students entering HE by 2020 (BIS, 2015). In the subsequent White Paper, Success as a Knowledge Economy: Teaching Excellence, Social Mobility and Student Choice, this target was confirmed. A series of actions were agreed to improve widening participation including the creation of the Office for Students (OfS) which was tasked with taking over from the OFFA in ensuring equality of opportunity across the 'lifecycle' of disadvantaged students (BIS, 2016, p19). Provisions were also made to make it easier for new HE providers to start up and receive university title status. Despite the re-emergence of widening participation, the focus of educational policy has shifted from improving access for disadvantaged students to institutions that had traditionally low representation from these groups, to expanding the system of HE to widen access to a broader range of providers.

The Coalition Government and subsequent majority Conservative Government have promoted HE-in-FE as a preferred route for specific groups of students. Students are discursively constructed as vulnerable within the Government policy documentation (Brooks, 2018). The publications position students as dependent and in need of support and

protection. This is most recently evident in the publication of 'Unlocking Talent, Fulfilling Potential: A plan for improving social mobility through education' (DfE, 2017, p36) in which non-traditional and disadvantaged students are positioned as requiring support to ensure that they are not "left behind".

### ***2.3 Widening Participation***

There is as yet limited available research on the experiences of students studying HE-in-FE (Rapley 2018), however, many related issues have been discussed in the broader literature on widening participation. As outlined in the Introduction, the policy focus on widening participation has moved to promote a fast and more accessible route for non-traditional students to enter HE (Webb et al, 2017). However, the related expansion of HE-in-FE provides limited opportunities for social justice and social mobility (Avis and Orr, 2016; Webb et al, 2017). Policy changes in relation to HE have positioned students as consumers, as a result this consumerism has become a key discourse shaping HE (Ingleby, 2017). The rise in consumerism has resulted from an increasingly marketised field of HE and an increasing emphasis on choice. Students are positioned as informed choosers within a diverse market of HE. English widening participation policy is underpinned by notions of equality of opportunity, ensuring that there is equal access to educational opportunities and that students are able to make informed decisions (Donnelly and Evans, 2019). This approach changes how students perceive their relationship to HE, with more of a consumerist orientation students frame their experiences in terms of value for money. This reframing has implications for the development of students' identities and for changing their experience of HE (Tomlinson, 2017).

Much of the widening participation literature has focussed on the reasons for non-participation in, and dropping out from HE. This literature tends to conceptualise learner identities in individualised and psychologised ways, as a framework for understanding non-

traditional students' participation. Such an approach suggests that the prior experiences of students in low socioeconomic groups leaves them with reduced confidence and fragile learner identities, and that these students can therefore become hostile to education, with less commitment to the process and less desire to become fully engaged (Crossan et al, 2003). When considering barriers to HE, this approach locates responsibility with the students who decide not to participate in HE, ascribing this to reasons such as low aspirations and lack of motivation, and so viewing the barriers to participation at an individual level. Such a perspective fails to take into account the various institutional and other factors, which affect the opportunities available to individuals and the choices that they make (Thomas, 2001).

A less 'deficit' approach which considers the role of students' agency in their decision making has been taken to researching the experiences of students who do transition into HE. Quinn et al (2005) examined the experiences and perceptions of young, working class, first generation entrants to HE who lived in disadvantaged areas and who had dropped out of university. The study examined the impact of working class drop out on students' identities and their feelings of failure and disappointment. At the same time, this process of dropping out is discussed as one of self-discovery, allowing students to 'redefine their priorities and their directions' in spite of dropping out being a 'traumatic experience' (Quinn et al, 2005, p 50). Dropping out of university is thus conceptualised as a rational act and a learning experience for students, in which students take control of their situation and display a significant amount of agency (Quinn, 2010). This in turn suggests that transitions into HE are construed in policy in fixed and inflexible ways, which do not account for the 'permanent flux' of life (Quinn, 2010, p123) or 'capture the fluidity of our learning' (p127). However, the way in which this literature conceptualises learner identity still fails to consider the effects of social structures or institutional factors. Critics of this approach to learner identity argue that too much emphasis is being placed on building the self-esteem of



those deemed to be more vulnerable or fragile, and that this leads to pedagogical strategies more akin to therapy than learning (Ecclestone, 2004).

The concept of vulnerability is difficult to define and as such there is no single accepted definition. It is a vague term that is drawn upon often within educational policy and research with no clear grasp of its meaning (Jopling and Vincent, 2016). It has been suggested that there is an emerging 'vulnerability zeitgeist' (Ecclestone and Rawdin, 2016, p 378). This developing culture of labelling individuals as vulnerable is not limited to the sphere of education. The effects of such prevalence of vulnerability in policies and practices are contradictory. On the one hand they provide a source of inclusion and the opportunity to reduce social inequality. On the other hand, they pathologise and marginalise those considered vulnerable (Ecclestone and Goodley, 2016). As a result of such emphasis being placed on students' perceived 'vulnerabilities', reduced expectations of individuals' autonomy and resilience begin to become embedded into institutional practices and ideologies (Ecclestone, 2007). The post 2010 Coalition Government and the post 2015 Conservative Government have adopted such an approach, which sees vulnerability as an individual deficit and understands individuals as "architects of their own disadvantage" (Potter and Brotherton, 2013, p7) who are placing a burden on the state.

Both individually and collectively, this new sensibility casts people and their behaviours in pseudo-psychological terms, where past experiences and dysfunctional traits 'explain' a growing range of behaviours (Ecclestone, 2004, p122). In viewing vulnerability as a psychological condition suffered by individuals, attention is diverted away from the various causes of inequality such as class, gender, race and stratification in the education system (Ecclestone, 2004). This thesis takes, therefore, a post-structuralist approach to examine how discourses, such as those of vulnerability, shape the experiences and identities of students studying HE-in-FE. Such an approach considers how discourses shape the way

individuals understand themselves and, more particularly, whether discourses of vulnerability mean that HE-in-FE students are more likely to develop an identity of doubt, a sense of lacking, and feelings of anxiety (Ecclestone and Goodley, 2016).

There is a strand of the literature which does foreground issues of inequality and the role of wider social structures and discourses in shaping how students understand themselves. In transitioning HE from an elite system to an almost universal one, HEIs have been involved in 'positioning' themselves and defining their place in the system of English HE (Bathmaker and Thomas, 2009, p120). As highlighted in the Introduction, this positioning adds to the creation of a stratified system of HE. The result of this is that the structure of English HE has not transitioned from an elite to a universal system at all; rather it has transitioned to a system which incorporates 'elite, mass and universal features all at the same time' (p121).

Widening access to particular higher education institutions and widening participation in HE are not the same thing. If the outcomes of participating in HE are unequal, then widening participation by extending the range of universities to include lower status ones and increasing the type of degree to include lower level vocational ones limits the impact on social mobility (Webb et al. 2017). As non-traditional students are supported to gain access to an unequal system the widening participation agenda is reproducing inequality and the existing social hierarchy. HE-in-FE is at the bottom of the hierarchy and as a result the outcomes of widening participation policies will not increase social mobility and being located within widening participation discourses will limit non-traditional students' identity, experience, and opportunities.

## ***2.4 Fit and belonging***

The non-traditional students in this study are all working class females. Such students often struggle to fit in and develop a sense of belonging within HE. How these students construct

their identity and make sense of themselves and others is shaped by how they have been positioned within the discursive construction of class. Constructions of class position working class women such as those in this study in a way that limits their access to economic and cultural capital, legitimates material inequalities and produces negative responses. Working class women are born into and raised within structures and discourses of inequality which limit their movements within educational spaces (Skeggs, 1997) and this leads them to develop dispositions which don't fit within HE, as well as acting as an organising principle enabling and constraining social movements. Categories of class are equally reproduced at an intimate level in the way they work to structure an individual's feelings with anxiety and doubt informing their individual subjectivities leading to a sense of not fitting in within HE.

Even those women who are successful in education struggle with fitting in, working class women who attend and succeed in university do so with unresolved conflicts. Their success depends on their acquiring middle-class traits which results in a "physical, social and psychological split" (Plummer, 2000, p10) that leaves them feeling inferior, like they don't fit in or belong. Class has a significant effect, even on educated working class women. The women don't feel accepted outside of their working-class environment. Passing does not lead to belonging.

Walkerdine, Lucey and Melody (2001) suggest that social class is a key factor which significantly divides girls and women in relation to their educational achievements and life journeys. They found that middle class women are successful in education often leaving with a degree from an established university where as working class women rarely make it to a similar university by straightforward means. Working class women's subjectivities can sometimes mean that they lack the confidence to pursue higher education. Middle class girls are told from birth that they are intelligent, that they are destined to attend university and to become professionals, "this is certainly not the destiny of working-class girls, nor is it

presented as such" (Walkerdine, Lucey and Melody, 2001, p162). As a result, working class girls, such as those studied within this thesis, don't perceive that they belong within HE.

## ***2.5 Social justice and social mobility***

The policy rationale given for widening participation has been framed in both social and economic terms (Archer, 2007), as a method of boosting local and national economies and promoting social mobility and social justice. Such notions of social justice and social mobility are difficult to define (McArthur, 2014). They are often used throughout policy discourses with a 'feel good flavour' (Brennan and Naidoo, 2008, p287) which obscures the lack of a precise meaning. This section of the literature review will problematise the notions of social justice and social mobility in order to unpick what the concepts mean, how they are used in widening participation policy, and how they are helpful in understanding inequality in a HE-in-FE context (Wilson-Strydom, 2015).

Widening participation in HE has long been portrayed as a key driver for social justice (Waller et al, 2014). It has been argued that those who have studied HE benefit from higher future earnings, increased job opportunities, better physical and mental health, and lower levels of poverty (Bracke, Van De Straat and Missinne, 2014; Baum, Ma and Payea, 2013). However, this correlation is not straight forward. The expansion of UK HE has also led to an 'increased fuzziness' in graduate work (Brynin, 2012, p284) and an increase in graduates failing to achieve an economic return on their investment in HE. In addition to this, research has shown that studying within higher status and more elite institutions is related to better health and health related behaviours as well as lower BMI (Bann et al, 2017). This suggests that where you study HE impacts on the potential benefits giving less credence to the social justice argument for widening participation by promoting and providing HE-in-FE.

Students from socio-economically deprived backgrounds are likely to do less well in school and are less likely to access HE (Parker et al, 2012; Strand, 2014). Widening participation has been promoted as a means of reducing this inequality by supporting non-traditional students to access HE. It is thus seen as a social justice endeavour. The use of social justice as a positive 'mantra' (Wilson-Strydom, 2015, p143) in widening participation discourse can mean the term loses its meaning and value in understanding inequality in HE. As such, this term needs interrogating to ensure that the meaning adopted within this research is clear. When drawing on the concept of social justice within educational research there is a danger of assuming that we have, from common sense, an understanding of what is meant by the term, and that this understanding and meaning is shared (McArthur, 2014). The theoretical landscape of social justice is complex (Wilson-Strydom, 2014), particularly when considering the notion of widening participation and the experiences of HE-in-FE students. This complexity necessitates a reflection of the key theories of social justice and their implications for research into HE-in-FE.

Bell (1997, p3) defined social justice as

Full and equal participation of all groups in a society that is mutually shaped to meet their needs. Social justice includes a vision of society in which the distribution of resources is equitable and all members are physically and psychologically safe and secure.

According to Bell's definition, social justice firstly relates to individuals being able to participate equally in society, and secondly, involves consideration of distributive issues. One key social justice theorist who proposed a theory based on distributive justice is John Rawls. Rawls presents his Theory of Justice (1971) in which he argues that in order to understand what a socially just society would look like we need to imagine ourselves in the

'Original Position' (1999, p11). This position is hypothetical and is entered into in order to create a certain conceptual understanding of justice. When in the original position we are placed behind a 'veil of ignorance'. We have no knowledge of our place in society, class position or financial resources. In addition, we have no knowledge of our individual abilities, strengths, intelligence, or our concept of good. The principles of justice are chosen from behind this veil and as a result no one is advantaged or disadvantaged by the choices made. All individuals are equal. Thus, the idea of justice as fairness conveys the meaning that the principles of justice are agreed in a situation that is fair.

Rawls' theory of social distribution is based on two principles. The first of these is that individuals are free and independent with equal rights according to the law, this sets the foundations for social justice. Rawls' second principle is the difference principle which specifically deals with issues of distribution. This argues that social and economic inequalities are just if they benefit the least advantaged members of society the most (Rawls, 1999). Rawls' approach to social justice can be applied to understanding widening participation and the provision of HE-in-FE. Such an approach argues that policy decisions should be made based on having the most positive impact on the least well off. Following this approach developing widening participation policies which allow non-traditional and disadvantaged students the ability to take advantage of the opportunity to study HE is socially just. This is because it is benefitting the least well off in society. This approach has been criticised however as it fails to account for the extent to which individuals are able to take advantage of the opportunities provided. HE-in-FE has been positioned as a more accessible HE option for non-traditional students. Additional resources are provided in the form of support, however there may be a difference in how individual students are able to access and utilise the resources provided. As a result, approaching social justice from the perspective of distribution of resources conceals key causes of inequality thus potentially reproducing injustice (Wilson-Strydom, 2015).

Rawls' approach to social justice limits the concept of social justice by focussing solely on distributive elements. This approach has been criticised by other social justice theorists including Young (1990), who argues that focusing on the distribution of resources conceals the social structures and contexts which determine the patterns of distribution that impacts on social justice. Young contends that the distribution of resources is important, but not in itself sufficient. She recognises that distributive justice is a significant issue facing education (Young, 2006) but contends that approaches such as Rawls' focus too narrowly on issues of distribution. She argues that we must consider the social conditions and structures that define injustice. According to Young (1990) these are oppression and domination. Young identified exploitation, powerlessness, marginalisation, violence and cultural imperialism as the five faces of oppression. These are the conditions that create injustice.

Young's theory of social justice considered oppression to be a condition of groups. This can help to explain the experiences of students studying HE-in-FE as they would become the unit of analysis. HE-in-FE students have been positioned by social structures that constrain and enable their lives in a way that is mostly beyond their control (Young 2001). As a group these non-traditional students may lack decision making power and be disadvantaged by dominant norms (Young, 2006). Young's approach however, fails to account for individual agency. Examining the experiences of groups of students, for example, those studying HE-in-FE or those categorised as non-traditional students is important. It is also important however to take account of individual differences and agency to identify how specific students are being disadvantaged. Although there will be commonalities between groups we cannot assume that all HE-in-FE students are facing the same issues. As such Young's approach to privileging the group over the individual reduces its analytical value in understanding injustice in HE (Wilson-Strydom, 2015).

Whilst Rawls' approach has a limited focus on distributive justice and Young's privileging groups as a unit of analysis is limited in its account of agency, the capabilities approach provides a theory which bridges these gaps. The capabilities approach was developed by Nussbaum (2011) and Sen (1999). It focusses on the wellbeing of individuals and their quality of life as a starting point considering the extent to which individuals can do and be what they value. This approach rejects the procedural focussed understanding of social justice and emphasises the importance of the reality of daily life and the need to make choices which are socially just (Sen, 2010). Instead of being preoccupied with and focussed on perfect justice which is impossible, we should aim for less injustice (McArthur, 2014). Two core features of this approach are functionings and capabilities. Functionings involve an individual being and doing what they have reason to value, this could be education for example. Capabilities, though closely linked to functionings are different, capabilities refer to an individual's freedom and ability to achieve the functionings that are needed for their wellbeing. Agency is central to this approach although it is not afforded superiority such that structure and context are not sufficiently accounted for (Wilson-Strydom, 2015). The capabilities approach foregrounds agency alongside its interaction within social contexts.

Sen recognises that the lack of individual capabilities can closely link with low income and that whilst low income can be a cause of ill health and poor education, better health and education help individuals to earn high incomes. Whilst these connections need to be explored, there are also other factors which influence the basic capabilities and freedoms that individuals possess. Whilst socio-economic disadvantage is significantly correlated with capability deprivation, it is not enough to think that the former will tell us enough about the latter (Sen, 1999). Sen's capabilities approach uses a notion of conversion factors (Sen, 1999) to bring together structure and agency. People's individual differences will affect the extent to which they are able to convert opportunities into functionings. Although individuals may be provided with additional resources in a given situation, conversion



factors such as personal differences will impact on the extent to which they are able to make use of those resources to achieve functionings and capabilities. Being aware of and paying close attention to conversion factors can provide a mechanism for understanding what is needed for students to achieve functionings. Within the context of the disparate system of HE, being aware of conversion factors can enable the formulation of ways to enhance the capabilities of those with limited choice. Providing additional educational resources or widening provision to offer HE-in-FE is needed, however, it is not enough to ensure a socially just system of HE. In order to assess whether the provision of HE-in-FE is socially just we need to consider the relationship between the resources available to students and the 'ability of each student to convert these into valued capabilities and then make choices which will inform their actual functionings (outcomes)' (Wilson-strydom, 2015, p151-152). This approach informs the understanding of social justice within this study. In order to understand the experiences of students studying HE-in-FE we need to understand their everyday lives and the personal, social and economic conditions that both enable and constrain their functionings and wellbeing. Such an approach suggests that whilst it is critical to widen access to HE for non-traditional students, it is not sufficient to increase the numbers of students accessing HE. The conversion factors that enable or constrain the students functionings need to be analysed to highlight where disadvantage may be being reproduced.

The terms social mobility and social justice are interlinked. In contemporary society social mobility is increasingly considered to be a key method of facilitating social justice. Reay (2013, p661) argues, however, that 'a strong version of social justice requires much more than the movement of a few individuals up and down an increasingly inequitable social system'. Reay draws on Tawney's egalitarian philosophy (1964) to argue that social mobility does little more than recycle inequality. This approach contends that a socially just society is one with high levels of social cohesion where all individuals can live a life with dignity and

culture, whether they are socially mobile or not. Social mobility is not the solution to achieving a socially just society, however this view is at odds with current Government policy rhetoric on widening participation in HE. The individualist nature of social mobility fails to compensate for large scale structural inequalities. Policy should instead focus on equality as a collectivist approach that works for the benefit of society as a whole. Such an approach would value education and the study of HE-in-FE as an end in itself, not merely to facilitate the progression up a social hierarchy. Instead, through use of the term social mobility, education is propagated as a way of solving the problems of inequality.

Social mobility is underpinned by the notion of meritocracy, this is the idea that the UK education system is based on merit. If a student is intelligent and works hard, they can achieve anything that they want, irrespective of their background. This, according to Reay (2018a, p325) is a 'delusion' which is operating as 'a 21<sup>st</sup> century opium of the masses'. Rather than providing the opportunity it is used to signify, meritocracy obscures the real challenges facing society and further embedding inequality. This includes the widening gap between rich and poor and the promotion of individualisation and self interest. Despite Britain having relatively low levels of social mobility when compared with comparable countries, British people share a strong belief that they live in a meritocratic society. However, this merit is a myth, in unequal societies such as that in the UK, individual merit is never merit, it is simply 'accumulated privilege' (Reay, 2018a, p326). Such privilege is accumulated through a process of 'cultivation' where middle class parents use their resources to cultivate their children's proficiencies and develop their talents. Despite this, meritocracy validates inequality by creating the impression that wealth is a fair reward for ability and effort. Littler (2018, p217) argues against meritocracy, stating that the language of equality of opportunity has been mobilised to limit the possibilities of this for the masses. Instead she argues for 'equality of outcome' and suggests that it is critical to understand the languages of opportunity being mobilised. Littler's equality of outcome calls for human

potential not to be constrained and for individuals to engage in activities and occupations which enable them to flourish without being defined by the context in which they were born. Littler (2018, p3) offers a critique of the social mobility offered by meritocracy. 'Meritocracy offers a ladder system of social mobility, promoting a socially corrosive ethic of competitive self-interest which both legitimates inequality and damages community by requiring people to be in constant competition with each other'. This suggests that the most influential factor affecting where individuals end up economically is the position they are born into in the first place.

Despite the limitations of the notion of social mobility, it continues to play a significant role in contemporary British social justice discourses in policy and in the literature surrounding HE-in-FE (Robinson, 2012; Webb et al, 2017). Avis and Orr (2016) argue that HE-in-FE has limited power in enabling social mobility but that it does have a significant role in promoting social justice. They recognise the dangers of reducing social mobility to a technical issue which conceals wider issues of social justice and enables society's divisions to remain in place whilst allowing a minority of deserving individuals to climb over them. Avis and Orr (2016, p58) conclude that 'while HE-in-FE has widened participation, it has not systematically enabled relative upward social mobility, at least as measured by income'. In suggesting that HE-in-FE can play a role in widening participation and promoting social mobility, policy discourse conflates the two concepts and masks the difference. In regard to social mobility, the Government's intention for HE-in-FE is unachievable. In order to truly address the inequality and issues of social justice, policy needs to reduce the income of the top 1% of earners and increase that of the lowest earners (Littler, 2018). Education cannot address this political issue but it can still be a resource for working towards social justice. Whilst it cannot act as a resource for upward social mobility, it can reveal opportunities and enlighten the lives of some students and whilst 'it may not change society...it might change lives' (Avis and Orr, 2016, p61).

## **2.6 Identity**

Like the concepts of social justice and social mobility, there is no single agreed notion of what identity is or what identities are. The concept's meaning has been debated across a number of disciplines. These debates vary between conceptualising identity as something internal to the individual that is measurable, and conceptualisations of identity as co-constructed through interactions (Monrouxe and Poole, 2013). As a key research question involves examining how HE-in-FE student identities are shaped through discourse, it is important to unpick this complicated term to ensue clarity around its meaning.

Understanding how HE-in-FE students' identities are both informed by and inform their experiences is essential in understanding how individual agency acts as a mechanism for students benefitting from their HE study.

Identity has been conceptualised from an individual, psychological perspective, as a file or a schema stored in memory. Such an approach sees identity as something internal to the individual but fails to take into account the social factors and discourses shaping identity (Monrouxe and Poole, 2013). Social cognition theorists suggest that identity is a way of categorising individuals and argue that identity is made up of a number of labels to be applied. These labels however are value laden and it could be argued that individuals would aim to ascribe to labels with more value (Martin et al, 2014).

In contrast identity has been conceptualised as fluid and multi-dimensional with some elements which are temporary (Martin et al, 2014). Constructing an identity within the HE environment is both "complex and contradictory" for non-traditional students (O'Shea, 2014, p137). Non-traditional students who enter HE may find that there is a discord between their previously constructed identities and the new social context resulting in them being required to alter their identity to fit the positions available. Use of the term 'learner

identity' (O'Shea, 2014, p138) has been suggested to highlight the complex relationship between learning and identity. This approach recognises that students' learning identities often exist alongside their other adult identities. In this study, for example, many of the learners were also employees, employers, mothers and wives with their multiple identities influencing and being influenced by their identity as a learner.

This approach to conceptualising identity goes beyond the social cognition approach to consider how identities are constructed. When conceptualised in this way however the term identity, still individualises and psychologises the concept, ignoring the structural factors, discourses and power imbalances that shape student identities.

Whilst this thesis accepts that identities are constructed, it argues that this process is shaped through discourses. It suggests that non-traditional students' identities are shaped by discourses of widening participation and vulnerability. Being located within these deficit discourses shapes the development of learner identities, which lead them to believe that they require support to access HE. "Assuming an individual to be the acting agent, identities are formed in the relation between agency and structure" (Thunborg, Bron and Edstrom, 2013, p181) and are shaped by discourses and the structuring power of language. HE-in-FE students' identity is constructed in interaction with peers and staff, established in "political power-laden processes" (Tolstrup Holmegaard, Ulriksen and Moller Madsen, 2014, p25), and mediated through the structuring effects of language. The approach taken in this thesis is that identity is fluid and changing, shaped by the discourses that individuals are located within.

## ***2.7 The notion of 'real' HE***

Some of the literature around widening participation focus on the notion of 'real HE' (understood as HE delivered in Universities) and concepts of 'HEness' (a notion of HE ethos,

culture and environment). In particular, it has been argued that the notion of institutional autonomy is essential in developing an understanding of the cultural differences between HE- and FE-based provision (Feather, 2016; Lea and Simmons, 2012). Such a perspective highlights the lack of autonomy of FECs with regard to degree-awarding powers and quality assurance mechanisms. A critical mass of HE students studying in FE may indeed lead to enhanced study spaces, libraries, scholarly activity and so on, but this only provides an 'outward appearance of a core essence of HEness' (Lea and Simmons, 2012, p189). Another difference between HE and FE in relation to 'HEness' is in the way in which knowledge is viewed. 'FE knowledge' tends to be associated with 'what is' (that is, what is already known) whereas 'HE knowledge' is associated with 'what might be' (that is, questioning what is already known). The division is problematic, not least because, along with the issue of autonomy, it impacts directly on the way that the professional identity of staff in each sector is conceptualised, and, in turn, how students are taught and how they see themselves (Lea and Simmons, 2012).

Some authors (see for example Grenfell, 2008; Bathmaker and Thomas, 2009; Colley, Chadderton and Nixon, 2013) have interrogated this concept of 'real' HE by employing Bourdieu's theoretical tools of field, habitus and capital (Bourdieu and Waquant, 1992). The questions posed include whether the field of HE is only made up of institutions called universities and whether a new field has been created. If the field has changed, has the game of HE changed, or does the 'doxa' (the implicit, taken for granted beliefs and assumptions, inextricably linked to the field and habitus) (Grenfell, 2008) still dominate? The doxa of traditional higher education propagates a notion that higher education delivered in further education is not 'real' HE and is underpinned by an assumption that 'there is a uniform experience named as Real Higher Education delivered and preserved by universities' (Leahy, 2012, p170). The experience offered in FECs is viewed as being limited by a lack of physical space and an inability to teach for independent learning. This is 'a

negative comparison with universities, not an appreciation of the potential distinctiveness' (Leahy, 2012, p170) of HE-in-FE provision. This distinctiveness is associated with a range of factors, firstly linked to the types of student that usually studies within HE-in-FE. Typically, HE-in-FE students are more likely to be older, part time, and from areas of low HE participation. HE-in-FE institutions are responsive to the needs of the communities in which they serve; they play a key role in making HE accessible to those who want or need to study locally. Finally, the distinctiveness of HE-in-FE arises from the learning culture with students benefitting from more classroom contact (Bathmaker, 2016).

## ***2.8 Student experience of HE-in-FE***

The widening participation literature has examined student experience whilst taking into account the role of wider social structures in shaping such experience, but has failed to examine the experiences of students attending what are arguably the least valued institutions; that is, those offering HE-in-FE. One study which does examine such experiences, and how these are shaped by wider influences, has found that HE-in-FE students tend to be dissatisfied with the predominating FE culture and how their HE student status is perceived by others (Rapley, 2014; Rapley 2018). However, this research was undertaken in two land-based colleges, these are specialised FE colleges providing education and training for rural economies. The research draws on information gained from students studying animal/equine studies foundation degrees. This is a very niche sector of HE-in-FE and tends to attract students from more affluent backgrounds making it distinct from other forms of HE-in-FE provision. The amount of UK research comparing the student experience in different parts of the HE sector, particularly working-class students' experiences is thus limited (Reay et al, 2010). There is a clear case for research to be conducted into the nature of HE within FECs and the impact of this on the students (Creasy, 2012). This research therefore investigates the experiences of students studying HE within a

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small FEC, and in a predominantly FE environment; and considers how wider discourses rather than social structures shape such experiences.

The literature presented so far highlights very important issues which do need to be taken into account. However, some of this more critical literature (Leahy, 2012; Bathmaker and Thomas, 2009; Colley, Chadderton and Nixon, 2013) fails to account for the learner experience of studying HE-in-FE. Reay et al (2010), by contrast, does take the discussion further and considers identities and experience, exploring how they are shaped by institutional aspects, policy and employers. Their research illustrates that working-class students who study at colleges and universities with a majority of peers from a similar class background may be further disadvantaged because they lack middle class peers to learn from and acquire cultural capital. There are also fewer social and cultural demands at post-1992 universities and colleges because students choose to live and study with others who are similar to themselves (Crozier et al, 2008). Studying HE within a 'new' university means that students 'retain the concepts of the familiar but often at the cost of developing as confident learners' (Reay et al, 2010, p111). Their experience is qualitatively different from those attending more elite institutions, since it is 'characterised by continuity rather than the change and transformation of working class habitus in the more elite universities' (Reay et al, 2010, p112). HE-in-FE is perceived to be more accessible by working class students because the environments differ from universities in that the classes are smaller with higher levels of support (Wheelahan, 2016).

It follows that class can be modified and reinforced through going to university as students learn and acquire cultural capital from their middle-class peers. Research which has examined how learner identity and class are modified by university study has concluded that 'the rewards and recognition of being a university student are powerfully differentiated across the higher education field' (Reay et al, 2010, p120). Students from working class



backgrounds end up in lower status institutions which means that they experience neither the rewards nor the recognition. Reay et al (2010) use the term 'identities' to describe the concept of learner identity combined with how students are positioned in relation to their peers, the wider university and their subject. As highlighted earlier within the literature review, this terminology has been associated with individualised and psychologised understandings. Within this thesis, the term identity is conceptualised as Reay et al (2010) understands the term. Identity is not a fixed psychological condition, instead it is shaped by wider social structures and discourses, it is thus fluid and changing.

Much of the widening participation literature which does consider the role of wider social structures in examining student experience has been situated within discussions around social class. Students entering HE from a middle class background have learnt dispositions which enable them to fit in within a university environment and to further develop their habitus through social interactions generally. Working class students have fewer opportunities to do the same (Crozier et al, 2008). Social class is also one of the factors affecting HE choice. In making their decisions, prospective HE students have 'widely disparate access to the range of resources necessary to decode the field' (Reay, 1998, p520). There are several factors at play in the decision-making process including social and cultural capital, social perceptions and practical constraints (Ball et al, 2002). The divided structure of HE provision sustains inequality of access to HE. Working class students are more likely to select post-1992 universities or to study HE-in-FE, whereas middle class students are more likely to select pre-1992 universities (Reay, David and Ball, 2005).

## ***2.9 Choice and decision making***

Social and cultural factors are vital in influencing individual decisions about whether or not to apply for HE level study (Elliott, 2018). Recent changes to the amount charged in tuition fees for undergraduate provision in England make decision-making around HE study a

particularly important area of research. Recommendations made by the Browne Review (Independent Review of Higher Education Funding and Student Finance, 2010) have led to a significant increase in the amount charged with students now paying up to £9000 per annum for their undergraduate course fees. Students from less affluent backgrounds who approach HE study with already embedded 'debt-averse values' (Burchell, 2011, 26) are more likely to select HE-in-FE where they can live at home and pay reduced tuition fees (Holmwood, 2014). In addition to this the amount students pay for their higher education is likely to impact on how they perceive their experience of HE (Bates and Kaye, 2014).

It has also been argued the HE provision in FE settings is more accessible due to its smaller classes, increased support and emphasis on helping the unprepared students to get ready for university by helping to develop the required skills (Wheelahan, 2016).

HE-in-FE choice and decision making can only be understood in relation to an individual's life history within which their identity has developed in interactions with others and with the culture they are situated within (Hodkinson, 1995). This culture includes their socially and historically situated understandings, norms and values developed through their life histories which they take for granted as their way of life. Decisions about careers, education and training are made within horizons for action (Hodkinson, 1995; Hodkinson and Sparkes, 1997). Horizons for action refer to the scope an individual has to make decisions and take action.

Horizons for action are influenced by an interrelation between an individual's habitus and the opportunities provided by labour marked structures (Hodkinson and Sparkes, 1997). From childhood, individuals build schemas, these are conceptual structures through which they are able to understand their experiences. These schemas enable individuals to make sense of the world, their array of schemas adds to the dispositions that construct their

habitus. As an individual faces new experiences, their schemas change to incorporate the new information, their understanding of the world changes with the changes to their schemas. In this way their life history is shaped by and shapes their experience.

In making decisions about careers and education individuals, including non-traditional students, draw upon their schematic understanding, as such, decision making is always within the context of their life history (Hodkinson, 1995). Because individuals filter information through schemas, horizons for action both enable and constrain our perception of the world and the choices we are able to make (Hodkinson and Sparkes, 1997). Such an approach contends that the reason why non-traditional students choose not to attend university is that what they are told about HE doesn't fit within their perceptions of educational opportunities or their schematic view of themselves and their abilities. In short, going to university is outside of their horizons and as a result, non-traditional students choose to study HE-in-FE which is within their horizons for action. Discourses such as those studied within thesis shape students' interactions with others and the culture within which the students are situated. In doing this they will also shape the students' horizons for action. It is important to examine how dominant deficit discourses operate as they affect young people's decision making processes, their educational experiences, and their futures.

### ***2.10 Non-traditional students and deficit discourses***

Many HE-in-FE students are classed as non-traditional students. The term 'non-traditional' refers to first generation university entrants from working class backgrounds who may struggle to fit in at university because of their limited understanding of the workings of the system (Holton, 2018). The language and discourses used in representing non-traditional students could become a barrier to HE. The language used by powerful members of high-status institutions reflects their norms and values. These discourses define the 'codes of

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understanding' (Cleland and Palma, 2018, p514) needed to gain access, something that is unavailable to non-traditional students. Such students are thus positioned as needy, requiring support to fit in to a space that is not really designed for them (Fowle, 2018). Discourses which 'other' non-traditional students and reinforce deficit conceptualisations need to be acknowledged (Cleland and Palma, 2018) in order to examine how they shape the experiences of students studying HE-in-FE.

### ***2.11 Conclusion and case for research***

This chapter has demonstrated that the increasing provision of HE-in-FE as a result of the widening participation agenda has increased access to HE. However, because employment and salary outcomes are poorer for FEC graduates, this increase in access does not equate to an increase in social mobility. Such provision may in fact contribute to the reproduction of social inequality because not all HEIs are equal (Wheelahan, 2016). Expanding HE by increasing the participation of non-traditional and disadvantaged students in HE provided in lower status institutions widens access, but it does not promote mobility. Instead it enforces the hierarchies between HE provision and its role in reproducing social inequality. As Duckworth et al (2018, p502) have argued:

The education curriculum across nations has a strong utilitarian function, which selects and distributes dominant education in different ways to different social groups, reproducing class inequalities which fail to address issues of power relations in the learners' lives.

There is a lack of research into the effects of discourse on reproducing such social inequalities. A detailed analysis into the different relations of power which can be hidden and implicit in concepts such as social mobility and individualism is required (Duckworth et al 51

al, 2018). Research needs to be 'prepared to question what Grubb and Lazerson (2007) call the "education gospel" that sees education, and vocationally oriented education in particular, as the remedy for social and economic problems' (Bathmaker, 2017, p6). It is important for research studies, therefore, to interrogate whether promises of success for all through hard work and education can be readily delivered by policy reforms.

# **Chapter 3: Methodology**

## ***3.1 Introduction***

This chapter reiterates the research questions before providing an overview of the qualitative methodology and justifying the philosophical approach within which this study is located. The chapter then provides an explanation of the research design and an overview of 'The Case' including an explanation of the site selection and issues involved in gaining access. A summary of how the participants were selected is provided, followed by an introduction to the study's participants. Following this an explanation of the research methods is offered, as well as an explanation of the Foucauldian approach to discourse analysis and a description of how the data analysis was carried out. Finally, ethical issues associated with the research are addressed.

## ***3.2 Research Questions***

The research seeks to address the following research questions:

Q1. How do discourses shape the identities of HE-in-FE students?

Q2. How do discourses shape the experiences of students studying HE within an FE learning environment?

Q3. How do discursive framings of support work to enable and constrain the actions of HE-in-FE students?

### **3.3 A Qualitative approach**

In order to address the aims of this study and the research questions, a qualitative methodology was used since such an approach is concerned primarily with meaning-making and how people make sense of their experiences (Creswell, 1998). This research aims to contribute to an understanding of how HE-in-FE students make sense of their educational experiences. In taking a qualitative approach this research can examine the language used by HE-in-FE students and those working within FECs to analyse how discourses are shaping the construction of students' experiences. Qualitative research designs usually involve fieldwork, obtaining accounts from individuals and trying to discern meanings and understandings. This process is inductive and these data are used to build concepts and theories (Creswell, 1998; Henn, Weinstein and Foard, 2006). This differs from quantitative research already conducted in this field (Parry, Calender and Scott, 2012) which uses large-scale but less in-depth or situated data to investigate broad trends. This research takes an in-depth, qualitative approach to examine how students in a particular FE setting experience HE and how their identities are shaped discursively.

A key strength of qualitative research is the opportunity it offers 'to collect and rigorously examine narrative accounts of social worlds' (Silverman, 2011, p144). Such narratives are important in examining the discourses within which HE-in-FE students' experiences are located. By collecting students' accounts and perceptions of their experiences of studying HE-in-FE, the language which students draw upon was analysed to examine how discourses were shaping their experiences of studying HE within an FE environment.

The qualitative approach adopted within this study aimed to elicit rich data about the experiences of students studying HE-in-FE and their identities as learners.

### ***3.4 Theoretical orientation: social constructionism***

The aim of this study was to trouble the taken for granted HE-in-FE discourses, and to highlight the instability of meaning. At each stage in any given study, researchers infuse a set of assumptions. This includes assumptions about human knowledge and about realities which can be encountered. These assumptions shape the meaning of research questions and the purpose of research methods (Crotty, 1998).

In considering their ontological position, researchers need to reflect on what they believe to be the nature of reality (Creswell, 2007). This research adopts a relativist ontology which contends that there is no single reality, instead, reality is constructed intersubjectively through meanings and understandings which are developed through social interaction and experience (Guba and Lincoln, 1994). Individuals construct knowledge through their interactions with others within their society.

This thesis assumes a social constructionist position based on this relativist ontology and epistemology. There is no single stance or feature that defines a social constructionist position. Instead, there are a number of key assumptions that researchers within this philosophical orientation would follow. One key assumption is that social constructionists take a critical stance towards a taken for granted knowledge and understanding of the world. This approach challenges the view that our knowledge of the world is objective and unbiased and opposes empiricism. Following this stance, there is no one objective reality, rather there are multiple constructed meanings of reality and thus multiple versions of knowledge. All knowledge is derived from looking at the world from a particular perspective and in the service of a particular interest (Burr, 2015).



Another key assumption of the social constructionist approach is that knowledge is historically situated and culturally specific and that language is a precondition for thought and understanding.

Our ways of understanding the world do not come from objective reality but from other people, both past and present. We are born into a world where the conceptual frameworks and categories used by people in our culture already exist.

(Burr, 2015, p10)

Each individual acquires concepts and categories as they learn to use language. These understandings are reproduced daily in the interactions of those who share a culture and a language. As a result, the way in which an individual thinks is affected by the framework of meaning produced by the categories and concepts which are shaped and produced through language (Burr, 2015). This can be applied to thinking about HE-in-FE students as non-traditional. This notion and way of categorising students is culturally and historically specific and this way of understanding comes from others, past and present, and their understandings of the notion of traditional.

Social constructionism focusses on interaction and social processes rather than focussing on individuals to explain social phenomena. Such an approach argues that the focus of research should be on the social practices that individuals engage in and the interactions between them. For example, a student who lacks the confidence in their abilities to study in a university may apply to an FEC where they perceive there is more support. A more narrow, individualised understanding would locate this as a psychological vulnerability in the student. Social constructionists would view this as a construction that emerges through the student's interaction with others such as their teachers, family and others. This then

relocates the problems away from the individual and avoids pathologising and essentialising them by seeking dispositional explanations for their behaviour (Burr, 2015).

The processes involved in constructing meaning are conceptualised by Burr (2015) as either micro or macro. Micro social constructionism sees the social construction of meaning as being created in discourse between individuals in every day interaction. From this approach multiple versions of reality are potentially constructed, none of which can be said to be truer than others. In contrast, macro social construction acknowledges the power of language in constructing reality, however, it sees this as inseparable from social structures, realities and institutional practices. The key focus of this form of social construction is thus on power. Although distinct, these two versions of social constructionism are not necessarily mutually exclusive. It is possible for research to 'take account of both the situated nature of accounts as well as the institutional practices and social structures within which they are constructed' (Burr, 2015, p26). This thesis aims to take account of both macro and micro constructions in examining how meaning is created in discourse between individuals in HE-in-FE and in how overarching policy discourses shape these constructed realities.

### ***3.5 Case Study Strategy***

Case studies become the preferred method where the study involves attempting to answer a how or why question relating to a contemporary phenomenon over which the researcher has little control (Yin, 2014). This research involved capturing the perspectives of its participants to shed light on their experiences of higher education within further education. As such, a case study strategy was deemed to be the most appropriate way to answer the research questions.

Stake (1995) considers case studies to be difficult to define because of the number of disciplines across which case studies are conducted. Different practices exist across different disciplines thus making it difficult to give a detailed definition of the case study. According

to Stake, case studies are bounded; definitions should refer to the object under study rather than the processes. Yin (2014) argues that such an approach to defining case study research does not sufficiently establish the foundations for case studies to be accepted as a research method. Stake, however, counters that there are opposing descriptions that exist for any title and that it is important to acknowledge that not all researchers will use words or methods in the same way. Stake describes the case study as "the study of the particularity and complexity of a single case, coming to understand its activity within important circumstances" (1995:2, cited in Bassey, 1999: 27).

This research adopted an intrinsic unique case study design. Stake (1995) defines this as a case study which arises from an interest in a particular case, not to learn about others or to solve a general problem but because there is an intrinsic interest in that particular case and a need to learn more about it. An intrinsic case study approach suited this research because the focus of the research was on finding out about the experiences of students at one particular small further education college. The research was born out of an intrinsic interest in this particular case.

Since researching the students' accounts of their experience through interviews, observations and documentary analysis was a time-consuming process, the research involved small scale, in-depth research. Although concerns have been raised regarding the generalisability of small scale qualitative interpretive research (Stark and Torrance, in Somekh and Lewin, 2005), it is hoped that the theory developed within the research will be transferrable and will enable explanation of the experience of individuals in similar situations. By deconstructing the discourses of widening participation and support shaping the students' experiences within this particular case, this will highlight and reveal how language is operating to structure students' experiences more broadly. Many definitions of case studies suggest that they are unable to provide reliable information that can be

generalised to wider classes but that they can be a useful tool in the preliminary stages of an investigation to provide a hypothesis. Such definitions locate case study research as subordinate to larger studies. However, case studies provide detailed examinations of case examples and whilst they are able to provide hypotheses in preliminary studies, this is not their only purpose and it is misleading to suggest that the method's only purpose is to prepare for larger studies (Flyvberg, 2011, in Denzin and Lincoln 2011). Case studies are used to gain highly valid and contextualised data, not principally reliable data. This is why it is the most appropriate method for this research as it provides the type of data that the research questions demand.

Generalisation is not the purpose of this case study, rather transferability is key. One can often generalise on the basis of a single case, and the case study may be central to scientific development via generalisation as supplement or alternative to other methods. However, formal generalisation is overvalued as a source of scientific development, whereas "the force of example" and transferability are underestimated (Flyvbjerg in Denzin and Lincoln, 2011, p305). It has been argued that research findings and knowledge can be transferrable, even when they are not generalisable in the positivist sense (Flyvbjerg in Denzin and Lincoln, 2011, p305). Such research findings can still contribute to the accumulation of knowledge in a given field.

Case studies examining informal learning spaces in HE have suggested that relatability rather than generalisability in case study research is critical (Turpin et al, 2016). Bassey (1981, P85) presented a case for 'relatability' arguing that case studies should be judged on the extent to which educators working in similar situations can relate their decision making to that described in the case study. He argued that relatability is more important than generalisability in evaluating case study research. Turpin et al's (2016) research adopted such an approach and argued that their research is valuable such that its findings can be

interpreted at a local level and that it increases dialogue with others involved in similar research. It is hoped that, in highlighting how the identities and experiences of students within this small scale study are shaped by discourses of widening participation and support, this research will contribute to the accumulation of knowledge in this field. Additionally, educators working in similar HE-in-FE contexts will, it is hoped, be able to relate the findings to their own particular context. The aim of case study research, as in this case study, is to understand the case itself. This case study's relatability, that is, the relatability of its findings to other settings offering HE within a small FE college, should be considered the most important outcome of this case study (Opie, 2004).

According to Stake (1995) the real purpose of case study research is not generalisation but particularisation. The objective of such studies is to select a particular case and undertake research to know it well, not to draw comparisons with others but to focus on the uniqueness of the case. It is widely recognised that case studies provide rich, detailed, contextualised, and valid data, which specifically relate to the individuals within the case. As such this is an appropriate research design as it enables me to study local constructions of knowledge within the case study site and allows a detailed examination of the language used by participants to describe their experiences within this particular context.

### **3.6 The Case**

#### 3.6.1 Description and Site Selection

The FEC in which the research was conducted was selected because it was a strong example of an institution offering predominantly FE courses with a very small minority of HE provision delivered on the same campus. The college will be referred to as 'Valley College' throughout this thesis in order to maintain anonymity and to protect the confidentiality of

participants. The FEC is a small to medium general further education college located within an area of high economic and social deprivation. In the last National Index of Deprivation, 34 Enumeration Districts in the local Metropolitan Borough Council fell within the top seven per cent nationally with seven of these being located within the college's immediate catchment area (Valley College, 2017). There are also extremely low HE participation rates in the local area when compared with the rest of the country. The most recent data published by HEFCE shows that 14 local catchment wards have HE participation below 25% and 7 wards have HE participation below 15%. These figures are significantly below the 45.2% average HE participation rates in England as a whole (HEFCE 2014, cited in Valley College 2017, p1).

The college predominantly delivers further education qualifications with the majority of learners studying courses at entry, foundation and intermediate levels. Due to the nature of the local area, the college also offers a range of programmes for unemployed adult students; these work skills programmes support unemployed adults to up skill and re-join the workforce. The part time and full time higher education provision at the college has increased over the past five years however it is still only a small fraction of the total number of students on roll. At the college's last HE Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) inspection the college had almost 1500 students enrolled onto vocational further education courses and only 164 students enrolled on higher education courses. The students who are being studied as part of this particular piece of research are studying for an Early Years Foundation Degree. Part time HE students such as these account for only 35 of the almost 1500 students on roll. During the inspection, the QAA's judgments about the HE provision within the college were all good; the college either met or exceeded each of the expectations. This included maintaining the academic standards of the awards offered on behalf of the degree-awarding body, providing high quality opportunities for learning and providing high quality

information about its provision which meets UK expectations (Quality Assurance Agency, 2014).

There are very few HE-specific facilities within the college. HE and FE students share a Learning Resource Centre, Guidance Centre, most classrooms and dining facilities. Students who study part-time and in the evening face a reduction in the services provided; for example, although the Diner is open, the dining services are not. In addition to this the Guidance Centre closes at 4:30pm. As such, any part time students wishing to access the services they offer must attend in the daytime. This is often impossible for those who work or have childcare responsibilities. The college is located on the outskirts of a small village and in the centre of an industrial estate. Other than call centres and warehouses there is nothing immediately around the college site. The local village is a 20/25 minute walk or short bus ride away.

### 3.6.2 Gaining Access

A significant advantage that 'insider' researchers generally have over 'outsider' researchers is the relative ease with which they are able to gain access and build rapport with the research participants. However, once gained, this must be secured and continuously maintained (Nelson, 2012). Maintaining access became a particular difficulty within this research when I resigned from my position as teacher within the college and difficulties were anticipated in conducting a third round of interviews with the foundation degree students on which the research is focused. As a result of this, the third round of interviews was brought forward and a group interview was held at the end of the students' second year (in June, 2016) shortly after I had ended my employment with the college.

### 3.6.3 Selection of participants

Purposive sampling was employed within the research study to select students who would have experience of studying HE-in-FE and who could be followed throughout their HE programme. The sample was made up of those situated in the discourse of interest (Starks and Brown, 2007); that is those studying part time HE within a small FEC. As suggested by Wetherell (2001) a sample of participants was selected which was typical of HE-in-FE students rather than being exceptional. The sample selected were typical in that they were all mature students, all were working alongside studying HE-in-FE, and all were first generation HE entrants. The students within the sample fit within the overarching umbrella of the widening participation agenda. The students have several characteristics which are underrepresented in HE, they are working class females from a socioeconomically deprived area with traditionally low participation in HE.

Each element of the fieldwork studied the same participants who were all members of a particular cohort of Early Years Foundation Degree Students. This particular FD was selected as it adheres to all of the key characteristics of foundation degrees with a core focus on flexibility (evening delivery), accessibility to HE, work based learning and employer involvement in curriculum design (Longhurst, 2010). Students were studied in both the first and second years of their course. All participants were female and were between the ages of 21 and 46 years. The table below provides a summary of the student interview participants.

Table 2: An overview of participants

Participant Number	Age (years)	Gender	Job Title
1	26	Female	Nursery – room supervisor



2	21	Female	School – teaching assistant
3	46	Female	Children’s Centre – part time nursery assistant
4	21	Female	Private Day Nursery – Nursery Nurse
5	21	Female	Private Day Nursery – Nursery Nurse
6	29	Female	Private Day Nursery – Deputy Manager
7	29	Female	Children’s Centre – Early Years Assistant
8	22	Female	Private Day Nursery – Nursery Nurse

The initial sample was of 8 foundation degree students who were studying towards a foundation degree in early years within the FEC. The interviews were conducted in two sweeps. Each student was interviewed once in the first sweep for up to 45 minutes. This took place in the first year of the students’ foundation degree during their first term, between September and December 2014. The main focus of the questions during this first sweep of interviews was on how the students came to be studying HE in a small FEC, on entering the HE-in-FE environment, and on the students’ initial experiences. The second sweep took place in the second year of the students’ course, again in the first term of the year, between September and December 2015.

Although the research originally planned to use sequential sampling to allow for the selection of participants who were likely to provide the most valuable information to enable me to further refine the developing theory (Teddlie and Yu, 2007), a number of the students were extremely unwilling to take part in the study. As a result, I had to accept all students who had self-selected to take part. As they were all HE-in-FE students it was hoped that they would still be able to illuminate the language and discourses which shaped their experiences of HE-in-FE.

In addition to the foundation degree students, one lecturer who taught and managed the programme was interviewed alongside one library assistant and the college librarian. The purpose of these interviews was to gain a deeper understanding of the learning environment, how it is shaped through discourses and how those discourses in turn are understood to shape the students' experiences. Interviewing the course tutor and librarian allowed me to triangulate the findings gained from the student interviews to support the collection of highly contextualised, valid data (Denscombe, 2014).

The fieldwork was originally planned to take place over a three-year period to allow me to follow a group of foundation degree students through their degree course and to explore their perspectives at different stages of their experience. The research was thus longitudinal in nature. Originally a total number of 38 interviews were planned. However, the research plans had to be changed for a number of reasons. Firstly, the number of respondents had to be reduced as many of the group were extremely reluctant to take part in the research. In addition to this, when the data collection began I was employed at the research location and as such access was easily negotiated, this changed near the end of the second year of data collection.

### **3.7 Research Methods**

This section provides an overview of the research methods adopted and how they contribute to answering the research questions. Each method is then discussed in turn giving a detailed account of how the research was carried out. The data collection was conducted over a period of twenty-two months ranging between September 2014 and June 2016. The case study involved conducting 14 individual semi-structured interviews with 8 Early Years Foundation Degree students. The semi-structured interviews were conducted within the Further Education College, in a classroom with only the interviewer and interviewee present.

One semi-structured interview each was conducted with the course tutor, librarian and library assistant. In addition to the individual interviews, a photograph elicitation interview was carried out with a group of seven of the students. Two unstructured, non-participant observations were also carried out of students in their classroom, library and dining area and documents including photographs and student council minutes were obtained from the case study setting.

Semi structured interviews were selected as the primary method of data collection because they allow people to describe and explain their experiences using particular discourses. The interview schedules (See appendix 1) included questions, which asked about their experiences of studying HE at the college, the support they received and their opinions of the learning environments (Research Questions 1, 2 and 3). A tutor was also interviewed to gain a deeper understanding of their learning environment, the discourses used to describe it and how this shapes the environment and the students' experiences (RQ 2).

Non-participant, unstructured observations were used to gain an understanding of the learning environment and the students' experiences of studying HE-in-FE (RQ 2). Although observations were not the main method of data collection, they enabled the data to be triangulated via the different participants' generated narratives putting them into perspective. Obtaining and examining the participants' narratives is key to analysing the discourses that shape the students' experiences. Non-participant, unstructured observations were carried out in the classroom, as well as in other areas of the learning environment including the library, the dining area, and the 'street', a corridor area leading to the classrooms. The data generated from the observations were documented in the form of field notes. In total, four hours of observation were carried out involving the whole cohort of Early Years Foundation Degree Students, including 13 students in total. The observations began in the students' classrooms and they were followed as they moved around their learning environment. This included observing them in the library, canteen, the corridors and classroom.

The photograph elicitation group interview (Gabb and Fink, 2015) was carried out once towards the end of the data collection phase of the research. Although this wasn't one of the original planned research methods, it provided detailed accounts of the learning environment (RQ 2) along with students' experiences of HE-in-FE (RQ 1).

In addition to observations, interviews and focus groups with foundation degree students and college staff, documentation from the programme was analysed (including photographs and notes of student council meetings). These documents were also analysed with the aim of uncovering their role in preserving and promoting inequitable social relationships (Henn, Weinstein and Foard, 2006) and discourses shaping the experiences of the students.

Triangulating the findings of a study involves using more than one research method or data source in order to study a social phenomenon (Bryman, 2012). This particular study draws on the range of research methods, including interviews, observations, photograph elicitation group interviews, and documentary analysis to examine how discourses shape the experiences of students studying Higher Education within a small Further Education College. Methodological triangulation using similar kinds of methods, in this case all qualitative methods, enabled me to make comparisons between the findings and the different perspectives. The justification for this is that if similar methods produce similar findings, conclusions can reasonably be drawn that the findings are accurate and authentic, and they are not merely the artificial result of the method employed. The validity of findings can also be checked by using different sources of information, including comparing information provided by different respondents or using information collected at different times (Denscombe, 2014).

### 3.7.1 Semi-structured interviews

Throughout the designing of this research project, careful consideration was given to how to access the discourses in which the HE-in-FE experience could be understood. This was essential in developing 'epistemological integrity' (Marshall and Rossman, 2006, cited in King and Horrocks, 2010, p8) and a good degree of congruence between the nature of the study, the methodological approach and the methods. A post-structuralist approach was taken in this research because of its appropriateness in allowing the aims of the research to be met.

Qualitative interviews are a notably prominent method in qualitative research, leading to an assumption that they are a preferred qualitative method. This, however, should not be the case in good, well-executed research. The selection of methods should be justified in terms

of the rationale for the research; that is, the researcher should consider what they are aiming to find out and how can this be known (King and Horrocks, 2010).

Interviews were selected as the primary method of data collection within this research because they lend themselves best to studying the experiences of individuals; they allowed me to explore the respondent's perceptions of their experiences of HE-in-FE and the language and discourses they draw upon to describe it. They also provided a method for studying society and culture in that qualitative interviews provide data which reflect the respondents' social construction of their world. However, to get a more complete picture it is important to obtain data from other methods such as observations (Brinkman, 2013).

Qualitative interviews offer the rare opportunity of gaining access to the everyday world as it is lived by the interviewees (Kvale and Brinkman, 2009) and illuminating the discourses they draw upon to describe their experiences. Although the researcher should be knowledgeable about the interview topic so that they can interpret the meaning of what is said, they are required to bracket any presuppositions that they have and be open to unexpected phenomena. Such an approach views the interview as an interactive, constructive process where the interviewer and the interviewee are co-constructors of the knowledge produced (Kvale and Brinkman, 2014).

In post-structuralist approaches to research interviewing, the emphasis is on the social construction of knowledge. In post-structuralist philosophy, the notion of knowledge mirroring an external reality is replaced by the idea that reality is socially constructed. Such an approach to qualitative interviewing sees knowledge as perspectival, depending on the values and viewpoint of the researcher. The qualitative research interview is seen as a site of production for such knowledge (Kvale and Brinkman, 2014). In interviewing the staff and students within the case study institution, knowledge is produced which is constructed and

shaped by language and discourses. The data produced can then be analysed to discover how discourses are shaping what is known.

Semi-structured interview schedules were devised consisting of a series of themes to cover during interviews, avoiding any presumption of the nature of the interviewees' responses and allowing them to raise unforeseen issues (Creswell, 1998). This allowed for the participants to voice their opinions and concerns while staying focused on the research questions. The interview questions were designed to elicit the views and perceptions of students and tutors regarding their experiences of HE-in-FE in order to enable analysis of the language and discourses the participants used to describe and explain their experiences.

There are three main sources which can be drawn upon when devising an interview guide (King and Horrocks, 2010), these are the researcher's own personal experience of the research area; the research literature on the subject area; and findings from preliminary work obtaining information from individuals with experience of the subject area. The interview schedules for this research drew on information from my own personal experience of working in HE-in-FE alongside a review of the literature in the subject area.

Transcription is the process of converting the audio recordings into text and is a necessary procedure prior to analysis. In order to properly prepare a transcript for analysis, it is necessary for the transcriber to be aware of contextual issues beyond the verbal responses and to understand the context within which the responses are made (King and Horrocks, 2010). As such, to prepare for analysis, the interviews were audio recorded and transcribed, verbatim, by me. This was beneficial as meaning and nuance can be lost when transcription is undertaken by a third party. Although this was a time-consuming process, it allowed me the opportunity to become fully immersed in the interview data, developing awareness of

the contextual issues and context of the interview data. The table below provides a summary of the interviews that took place.

Table 3: An overview of respondents

Year of Study	Respondents role	Number of respondents	Approximate length of interviews (Minutes)
Year 1 (November 2014)	First year foundation degree students	8	30-60 minutes
	Course Tutor	1	60 minutes
	Library Assistant	1	60 minutes
Year 2 (November 2015)	Second year foundation degree students	6	30-60 minutes
	Librarian	1	120 minutes

### 3.7.2 Non-participant Observations

Non-participant observations (Pole and Morrison, 2003) were adopted as a research method as they allowed me to see the real-life experience of being an HE student in a small FE setting. The aim of collecting observation data was that it should complement, add to, and triangulate that obtained from the interviews and enable me to better make sense of the interview data and improve validity of the findings.

A non-structured, non-participant approach was taken to the observations. It is important to remember when undertaking an observation that the information that researchers’ perceive through their senses is not absolutely objective; information is perceived through filters.



These filters can be relevant to the research, for example in applying analytical frameworks. The filters can also be simply down to preconceptions and be a result of the researchers' backgrounds, socially and culturally, and of whom they are (Angrosino, 2007).

My identity as a researcher was openly acknowledged allowing me to witness the experience first-hand. This approach has the ethical benefit of allowing me to gain informed consent (Pole and Morrison, 2003). The purpose of the observation was discussed with the group prior to the observation taking place; verbal consent was obtained from all students agreeing to participate. The observations took place in the classroom, corridor, canteen and in the library. The specific sites were selected as it is important to choose a site where 'the scholarly issue you are exploring is most likely to be seen in a reasonably clear fashion' (Angrosino, 2007, p30).

A meticulous approach was taken to recording the observation data. Each field note was headed with the date, place and time of observation along with a brief statement about the setting and the number of participants (Angrosino, 2007). In order to protect anonymity and confidentiality, codes were used to identify participants (e.g. IP1 – Interview participant one). Events were recorded in sequence. When writing the field notes, different colours were used to denote objective observations and my own thoughts, when typed. These were italicised in order to distinguish them from what was actually seen.

Throughout the note taking, efforts were made to write down conversations as near verbatim as possible in order to convey a sense of being there (Angrosino, 2007). A benefit of observing within an educational setting meant that me making notes within the classroom was an accepted norm. This enabled the collection of detailed notes in the field. Notes were made in a draft format during the observations, they were then typed fully as soon as possible following the observation. This is important as our memories are selective

and fragile and any delay in writing up the notes can result in an inaccurate recall of the observation (Pole and Morrison, 2003).

Visual data and documents can include a variety of materials including photographic evidence, videos, posters and advertisements (Henn, Weinstein and Foard, 2009). Visual data was generated during the observations using the 'Photo-observation method' described by Arthur et al (2012). During the observations a series of photographs were taken of what was observed. Still cameras were used to photograph the spaces which were observed and which were discussed during the interviews with participants to support and help to provide context during analysis of the interviews and observations. The table below provides a summary of the observations that took place.

Table 4: Summary of observations

Date	Time	Length	Location	Participants present
5.11.14	5pm	1 hour	College Room C101 Library	13 students in total, all female, ages 20-40 years. One female tutor present.
19.12.14	4:30	3 hours	College Room 101 Canteen	13 students in total, all female, ages 20-40 years. One female tutor present.

### 2.7.3 Photograph Elicitation Group Interviews

Photo elicitation involves presenting a photograph to the respondent during a research interview (Rose, 2012). Introduced by John Collier, a photographer and researcher at Cornell University, photograph elicitation interviewing was initially proposed to solve a practical issue; researchers could not agree on categories for the quality of housing in the area. Collier (1957, cited in Harper, 2002, p13) found in the research that using photographs during interviews made the respondents' memories clearer, he also found that using photographs made the interviews longer producing more comprehensive responses and reducing respondent fatigue. Participatory visual research methods are the most used and most influential methodological genre in contemporary visual research. Photo elicitation involves using photographs and images during interviews to stimulate a response. This is the most common method used in participatory visual research. Such an approach can be used to 'break the ice' between participant and researcher when there is a significant imbalance in power, (Prosser, 2011). This is important when attempting to take the student's perspectives as a focus.

Interviews can use words alone or words alongside images, participants respond differently in interviews when presented with this form of media. There is a biological basis for this, from an evolutionary perspective; the parts of the brain which process visual information are older than those parts which process verbal information. As such, when the brain is processing images as well as words, more of the brain's capacity is used than when processing words alone, evoking deeper areas of consciousness. Photo elicitation doesn't simply provide more information; it provides a different kind of information (Harper, 2002). The focus of research using visual methods is on what is seen. How we see is part nature and part nurture. Like our other senses, how we see is governed by our perception which is in turn influenced by our language, culture, history and physiology. Visual research uses the

term 'visible' to refer to images which can be seen, focussing on the physiological and ignoring the meaning. In contrast to this, visual is not about the image itself, but rather it is concerned with the perceptions of and meanings attributed to the image (Prosser, 2011). The value of using photographs in interviews is that they engage participants and allow for richer data collection. Descriptive emotions and experiences which may otherwise have been forgotten are drawn out in a more explicit and discursive form facilitating the respondents use of discourse and in turn allowing for a richer data set and more valid discourse analysis (Roger, 2017).

In photo elicitation interviews, photographs are often introduced into the interview context by the researchers; there are a range of approaches to this. The researcher needs to decide who will take the photographs. Some researchers take, organise and present the photographs to the respondent, as was the case in this research. There are many benefits of such an approach. The researcher may be able to capture aspects of the respondent's life which are taken for granted, which then prompts discussion. There are also disadvantages and limitations as researchers may limit the discussions by missing essential aspects of the research setting (Marisol, 2004).

This disadvantage was evident during the group interview which was conducted as part of this research. I had selected a range of images of different locations across the research site. These were selected to portray the environments that the students encountered and were presented as collages during the interviews to prompt discussion. Twenty five photographs were presented in the collages in total. These photographs were grouped together and presented images of the college building from outside, the diner, the new classroom, the old classroom, the learning centre, the student services centre and the street. However, I had failed to consider the importance of the 'online' environment which

became evident during the interview. The respondents spoke passionately and at length about the online environment of which I had produced no images.

Researchers must also be cautious to avoid photographing only visually striking images which stand out or are unusual. Instead, researchers should focus on what is likely to be meaningful for the respondents. Outsider researchers may have a tendency to capture the beautiful (Marisol, 2004). In an attempt to avoid this, a series of photographs were selected which aimed to reflect the different environments that the students had talked about in their first round interviews.

There are other limitations of using photograph elicitation interviews. Insider connections or institutional support are considered prerequisites for gaining access (Marisol, 2004), as an insider researcher this didn't pose a significant difficulty for the research but it is important to be aware of the importance of and potential difficulty of obtaining permission before taking photographs of the research site.

The photograph elicitation interview was conducted as a group interview. This was in part because of time constraints and the changes in my role within the college. It was also to encourage the students to discuss their experiences in more detail. As the students were relatively reticent during their individual interview, it was hoped that they would be more forthcoming in a group interview. There is a potential that when conducting group interviews, the participants will all speak at once and talk over each other when presented with an image. During transcription, it can then be difficult to identify who is speaking (Marisol, 2004). This was a particular difficulty in this research. Where participants felt strongly, they began to speak over each other. This difficulty was overcome during the interview by reminding the students not to speak over each other and ensuring that everyone had the opportunity to contribute. This ensured that there were no power

imbalances and all voices were equally heard. Where students did speak over each other this was overcome by careful transcription and although it made transcribing the interview more difficult, it did not pose a significant problem.

Although these are limitations of photograph elicitation interviews, they are outweighed by the very many benefits which can help the researcher to overcome some of the pitfalls of conventional interviews. In this case, photograph elicitation interviews were selected as a method to overcome difficulties faced in the first two rounds of interviews. The respondents were extremely reluctant to talk during the interviews. They were unforthcoming and unusually unwilling to talk about their experiences. Using photographs during interviews can help to ease the rapport between me and the respondent (Marisol, 2004). A key benefit of using photographs during research interviews is that the participants can feel less pressured when discussing sensitive topics. This is because they are not speaking directly about a subject that makes them feel vulnerable. Instead they talk through a photograph or image which acts as a go-between and enables them to recount difficult memories and powerful emotions (Prosser, 2011). The use of photographs worked extremely well in breaking down these barriers. Where students had been very reluctant to discuss their experiences in their individual interviews, they were loquacious in discussing their experiences in the different areas of the college.

Building effective communicative dialogue between two people who rarely share the same cultural background is a challenge in any in-depth interviewing; using photographs anchors the dialogue in an image which is at least partially understood by different parties. This understanding should be increased during the process of the interview. Using photographs in this way has been likened to a Rorschach ink blot, highlighting that people from different cultural backgrounds will see different things and find different meanings in an image. During the photograph elicitation interview, these different perceptions can be compared

and ultimately understood to be socially constructed by each viewer (Harper, 2002). Visual methods can be employed as a tool to enable the researcher to suspend their own preconceptions of spaces familiar to them and to facilitate the development of an understanding of the unique views of the participants (Mannay, 2010). A key benefit of photo elicitation interviewing is its ability to 'prod latent memory, to stimulate and release emotional statements about the respondent's life' (Collier, 1957, p858, cited in Harper, 2002, p14). This reveals discourses within which the respondents create their reality.

Photographs can be used to provide structure to an interview by creating a semi-structured interview schedule (Marisol, 2004). As photo elicitation was used in a group interview in this case, the images were presented to the group as collages, each collage representing a different area of the college; the images were presented both on an electronic whiteboard and as printed copies to the respondents. This provided both prompts for discussion and structure to the interview as a whole. Each participant was handed a booklet containing the photographs at the beginning of the photograph elicitation group interview. Students were given red, amber and green smiley face stickers and asked to look through the photographs before the interview began and stick one of the stickers on each photograph to show how they felt about the place depicted in the photograph. Students were told that they could make notes on the photographs too if they wished, explaining their thoughts and how they felt about the photographs. The aim of this was to prepare students for the interview questions and allow them to start thinking about how they might respond, as stated previously, providing photographs acts as a prompt for interviewees, it was hoped that the stickers would prompt students to share their thoughts about their experiences so that the discourses and language used would provide rich data for analysis.

A strength of photograph elicitation interviewing lies in its ability to rebalance the power relationship between researcher and respondent, the dialogue produced is based more on

the authority of the respondent than the researcher (Harper, 2002). 'The PEI can be a powerful tool to simultaneously gather data and empower the interviewee' (Marisol, 2004, p1509). In doing so the photograph elicitation group interview served to both empower the interview participants and enable and encourage them to produce a detailed account of their experiences of studying HE-in-FE revealing the constructive and constitutive effects of discourses and language.

Using PEI's can highlight subjects which are important to respondents but invisible to the interviewers. For example, in Marisol's (2004) study examining South Central Los Angeles children's experiences of inner-city schooling, she noticed the children's use of the sidewalks when playing outside whilst totally missing the significance of the presence of graffiti tagging of gang names in the background which were noticed immediately when shown to families during interviews. Within this study, using photographs of the physical spaces highlighted the importance to students of the virtual spaces and the strong feelings that students had about these spaces and the experiences they have within them. Students were then very keen to discuss their experiences of online learning.

#### 3.7.4 Document analysis

Documents are an important and often underutilised resource within educational research (McCulloch, 2017). The term document is used to describe a range of written, visual digital and physical materials relevant to the topic under study. In line with the aims of this thesis the documents drawn upon are textual in nature enabling me to examine the discourses embedded within. Documents and artefacts collected from the research setting can provide valuable sources of data in addressing the research questions (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016) as they are typically a "natural part of the research setting" (pg 162). Such documents have been constructed within and shaped by the key discourses under study. It should also be



recognised that the documents may have been edited to reflect the author's agenda (Yin, 2014), particularly in the case of student panel meetings such as those in collected in this study. In these minutes the account of the meeting is not recorded verbatim, rather, the minute taker has selected and summarised key information as directed by the chair.

Documents collected from the case study institution were analysed in order to triangulate the findings from the interviews and observations. The first step in the process of documentary analysis is finding relevant materials (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016). When found, these materials reveal structuring discourses in a similar way to the interviews and observations. A small number of documents were analysed; these fell into the category of public and official records (McCulloch, 2017). The documents included the college's QAA inspection report and four sets of minutes of the student panel meetings. Within the student panel meetings there are rich data. Students discuss their experiences which are shaped by the discourses under study in a way that is comparable to what is discussed during the interviews.

The documents were coded and analysed alongside the transcripts from the interviews, group interview, observations, and the comments made on the photo collages (see appendix 4 for examples of hand coded transcripts). A key benefit of including documents in the analysis of discourse is the document's stability. I was not present or involved in the document's creation and as such the information was not altered by my presence (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016).

### ***3.8 A Post Structuralist Approach to Data Analysis***

An inductive approach was taken to the data analysis. In qualitative research, theory emerges from the data, although it is not quite as simple as that. Theory isn't simply sitting

in the data, waiting to be mined. The researcher finds patterns, trends and themes in the data and, through careful and skilful enquiry, develops ideas, concepts and themes, and ways of relating them to each other. The researcher influences this process from their experiences and from the literature and so their assumptions will influence the research from designing the research questions through to undertaking the analysis (Richards, 2015).

Following the inductive nature of this study, the approach to analysis shifted according to the data. A post-structuralist approach to analysing the experiences of students studying HE-in-FE was adopted following the first round of data collection. Such an approach is appropriate to answer the research questions posed because the questions are looking at discourses whereby the human behaviour under study, that is, the experiences of HE-in-FE students, can be understood via the structure of language, this is discussed in more detail later in the chapter.

How research can make sense of the experiences of HE-in-FE students differs depending on the theoretical perspective employed. A post-structural theoretical perspective rejects the positivist notion that meaning exists inherently in objects and that research can uncover truths about student experience if the correct methods are employed (Kaufman, 2011). Instead, post-structuralism adopts an anti-realist position. It rejects the notion that truth corresponds to reality and instead promotes the idea that language works like a differential system. Post-structuralist thought provides a strong critique and re-evaluation of the taken for granted assumptions underpinning Humanism which underlies traditional accounts of a rational and autonomous self (Peters and Humes, 2003).

Post-structuralism as a contemporary philosophical movement offers a range of theories (of the text), critiques (of institutions), new concepts and forms of analysis (of power) which are relevant and significant for the study of education.

(Peters and Humes, 2003, p112).

Much of the educational research into HE-in-FE has looked through the discourse, seeking the 'truths' and facts which lie behind (Maclure, 2003). The aim of this research is to adopt a different approach; to suspend these usual ways of seeing educational phenomena by focusing on their textual status. Adopting a post-structuralist approach to research undertaken in education led to changes in epistemology and practice that lean towards local constructions of knowledge. This focus has enabled individual experience and different ways of knowing to be explored in research (Wendt and Boylan, 2008). Having said this, post-structuralism is a highly contested term. Only within the last 30 years has it emerged as a well-articulated set of theories and methods, which can be utilised to analyse the function and effects of structures (StPierre, 2000).

Post-structuralism is a difficult methodology to describe because it has taken a variety of forms and because its ontological and epistemological approach denies the possibility of producing a clear and fixed representation (Humes and Bryce, 2003). Post structuralism is not a clearly defined methodology with step-by-step guidance to follow. However, with this vagueness, comes the diversity of people's experiences of education and the multiplicity of their ways of knowing. This is valuable in understanding the experiences of different students studying HE-in-FE (Wendt and Boylan, 2008). Such an approach validates the importance of gaining in-depth understandings from participants of their experiences of studying HE-in-FE so that the discourses of support can be identified and deconstructed.

Post-structuralism questions and continues the key aims of structuralism; to inquire into a language system's organising principles. However, this approach does differ from structuralism, which is premised on an assumption that the organising principles of language can be uncovered and described through an objective and scientific approach. Post-structuralism refutes this assumption claiming that the conclusions drawn are never complete and always open to change. The idea of language as a fixed unchanging state is understood to be untenable, as the interpretive nature of language means that it is unable to produce an actual truth (Radford, 2005). Post-structuralism retains the structuralist view that the meaning of words comes from their relationship to each other rather than their relationship to reality however it places more focus on the roots of language. Where structuralism leads researchers to look for conclusive shaping factors in structural systems, post-structuralism does not (Crotty, 1998). The accounts that the students give within this study reflect their broader historical and sociocultural understandings. Each individual student constructs their own reality and as such it is vital to gain in depth understandings from individual students to understand how their identities, behaviours and experiences are enabled and constrained by discursive framings. By adopting a post structuralist perspective, the language used to describe the experiences of HE-in-FE can be deconstructed to scrutinise the accepted truths, which shape and construct students' experiences.

A key aim of post-structuralism is to analyse and deconstruct entrenched binary oppositions in order to reveal how they produce 'hierarchical tables of value' (Peters and Humes, 2003, p112) which privilege one over the other. This enables post-structuralism to reveal structures of oppression by analysing power relations and how they manifest themselves in classifications and institutions. A post-structuralist approach argues that language is central to human activity and culture (Peters and Humes, 2003). Such an approach can be used to question discursive and material structures which limit the way we think about HE-in-FE and

to examine how experiences are constructed discursively to see new possibilities in what we take for granted as natural (StPierre, 2000). Some of the key philosophical concepts relating to post-structuralism include language, discourse, rationality, power, knowledge and truth. The following sections provide a discussion of some of the key themes of post-structuralism.

### 3.8.1 Language

Post-structuralism refutes humanist claims that there is a correspondence between a word and an object that exists in the world (StPierre, 2000). Humanists argue that if words point to pre-existing objects in the world, then language is simply a way of naming them.

Language reflects reality. The difficulty with such an approach is that it is not possible to construct enough words to reflect all of the different things that exist in the world. As such, objects, things, and ideas, which are similar, are grouped into the same category, even if they are significantly different. For example, in an effort to provide order, people, ideas and objects are slotted into categories, people for example could be categorised, by race, age, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, social class etc. In the case of this study, students are categorised in a number of ways, as HE students, as FE students, as HE-in-FE students, as a widening participation cohort, as non-traditional students, as mature students etc. In order to create these categories, their essence must be defined as well as the essence of other things in the world so that things can be matched up. This action is accomplished with language; it is the search for identity which, in turn, privileges a single identity over difference. The key concern is that if individuals' differences are eroded by identity, then they are more easily slotted into a hierarchy and those who are placed at the bottom are more easily subjugated and oppressed. HE-in-FE students are understood as the opposite of students who study HE in universities. The participants in this study are arguably individuals who have been placed at the bottom of such a hierarchy as they are studying less valued

vocational qualifications (Bathmaker, 2014) within one of the least valued institutions, that is, one offering HE-in-FE.

Humanism has worked to define the essence of things, to enable us to identify and group items together producing order and regularity out of chaos and randomness (StPierre, 2000). Post-structuralism is the critique of discourse, knowledge, truth and reality; it argues that meaning is rooted in language and as such is always shifting and identity is not fixed (Wendt and Boylan, 2008). Post-structuralism conceptualises identity as meaning making, established in language. Such an approach argues that meaning and truth are always provisional and fluid (Wendt and Boylan, 2008).

Foucault (1970) outlines the history of how in humanism, language has been utilised to create hierarchies, binaries, categories and complex classification systems, which he claims, reflect an intrinsic and inherent order in the world. Such structures can clearly be seen in the system of HE. Post-structural critiques of language use deconstruction to make detectible how language functions to produce real and often damaging structures in the world. Such understandings of language trouble the concept that language mirrors the world (StPierre, 2000). The way students discuss the support they receive from college does not directly mirror their experience of support. This study considers how the discourses of support are constructed and constituted in HE-in-FE with the awareness that discursive framings of support are not benign, they have effects and it is important to consider whose interests are being served by the way support is talked about in the HE-in-FE context.

Saussure (1974) suggested that language is an abstract system, which consists of a chain of signs. Each sign consists of a signifier (a sound, word or written image) and the signified (the meaning). These two components of the sign are arbitrarily related and there is no

natural connection between the two. Meaning is not intrinsic, it is relational. Signs derive their meanings from difference. Post structuralist thought accepts Saussure's theorising that there is no correspondence between a word and a thing, and that words obtain meaning from their difference from other words. However, post-structuralist theorists reject the notion that the meaning of the signified is fixed, arguing that the meaning of the signified is never fixed but is constantly deferred. The meaning of language changes depending on the social context and as such meaning can always be disputed. In this study, the meaning of language used to describe HE-in-FE is only understood in relation to the language used to describe HE. However, these meanings are not fixed. Language has different meanings in different contexts and for different individuals. Students of HE-in-FE may have different understanding of language when compared to other stakeholders such as policy makers and teachers. Because meaning always has to be deferred, we cannot know exactly what something means. For example, the term 'widening participation' doesn't have a fixed meaning; the term is used in different ways by different individuals.

A key effect of discourse analysis is that it brings to the fore the concept that language does not merely identify pre-existing ideas and objects; rather it works to construct them and, by default, the world as it is known and experienced. The way HE-in-FE students understand their experiences is not a natural phenomenon. They have constructed the world through cultural practices and through language. There are many structures, which did not exist prior to being named, Widening Participation is a prime example here, and these structures are not essential or complete, they are created and maintained by people, as such, they are open to change.

The imagined absolutes and deeply embedded structures allow individuals to feel security and comfort, blaming the state of the world on some external principles rather than on human activity. Post-structuralism prevents us from placing the blame elsewhere and

instead requires that we consider our complicity in maintaining social injustice (StPierre, 2000). The purpose of this study is to highlight and come to understand our complicity in reproducing social inequalities and imbalances in power by analysing discourses of support to understand how they may be constraining as well as than enabling structures.

### 3.8.2 Discourse

Foucault's writings on discourse (1972, 1980) have changed the way post-structuralists think about language and how it works in producing the world. Foucault described discourse as 'practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak' (Foucault, 1972, p49). When taking a post-structuralist approach, it is difficult to think about discourse in a traditional way as simply spoken or written communication or debate. To attempt to define the concept of discourse is contradictory. The focus of post-structuralism is not to define the meaning of a concept, including that of discourse, because meaning is not found but deferred. Post-structuralism is more concerned with questions such as how discourse functions, how it is produced and what are its social effects? These questions are the types posed in analysing any structure and as such, they are embedded into the research questions of this study (StPierre, 2000). Adopting Foucault's approach enables researchers to highlight the ideas and assumptions about adult education that are taken for granted. Such an approach enables researchers to establish how power operates in HE and to highlight the effects of such operation of power (Fejes, 2008). The discourses associated with HE-in-FE are not simply language or writing, they are a historically and socially situated structure of statements, categories and beliefs that hold political significance and power. The theory proposed by Foucault suggests that language is assembled together according to socially constructed rules that permit some assertions to be made but not others. It follows that research cannot uncover the real experience of students studying HE-



in-FE, instead, research can explore how such experiences are constructed as socially and historically situated discursive constructions (Foucault, 1972).

Once a discourse becomes normalised it is difficult to think outside it. Discourses of widening participation and non-traditional students are prime examples here. The rules of a discourse mean that it only makes sense to construct meaning in particular ways; other statements become and remain incomprehensible and impossible. It is however possible to think differently; the uncertainty of discourse allows the possibility of refashioning and discovering new ways of conceptualising discourses and as such, revising accepted truths (StPierre, 2000). Discourse is not equivalent to language. Individuals making choices in language point to discourses being drawn upon. For example, choosing to define mature, first generation entrants as non-traditional students. This also highlights the ways that language works to position individuals within discourses (Wright, 2003).

Although discourse is constructive, working through educational institutions to produce realities that control the actions and bodies of individuals, it can be challenged. The theory of discourse proposed by Foucault suggested that changes in historical thought do happen when people consider different things to say. It is possible to fight, defy, and resist the discourses of power, control, and domination. Once the discourses and practices of domination have been located they can be refuted. Post-structural theories of discourse, in a similar way to those of language, enable an understanding of how knowledge and truth are constructed in language and cultural practice, they also allow us to consider how they can be reconfigured (StPierre, 2000). This focus of this study is on locating the discourses which enable and constrain the social reality of HE-in-FE; to identify how these discourses shape behaviours and activities; and to challenge the deficit discourses which serve to reproduce the power relations and inequalities.

### 3.8.3 Power

Following a humanist approach, humans naturally possess agency which gives them power to act in the world, as such, power is something that we possess, which can be deployed. Power is often considered in the pejorative, to be something that is malevolent. Those fighting for social justice may work to give away power, to empower those less privileged to avoid supremacy. Following a post-structuralist approach, power is not considered to be a negative concept, nor is it considered to belong to an individual. Post-structuralism argues that power is not a possession. It moves the focus from who has power to how power is exercised in relationships (Wendt and Boylan, 2008).

Foucault argues that power exists in relations (Foucault, 1982). It is not something that can be acquired or shared but is rather exercised from an immeasurable number of points. Foucault's theory considers relations of power and how power is always present in human relationships. These power relations are not fixed; they are mobile and they can be modified. Foucault argues that power produces reality and that it can be found in liberty as well as in domination and oppression. He argues that it is important to analyse the relations of power to discover what is being produced (StPierre, 2000).

Following Foucault's approach, power

categorises the individual, marks him by his own individuality, attaches him to his own identity, imposes a law of truth on him which he must recognise and which others have to recognise in him (1982, p781).

Such power ties individuals to their own identities, which influences the ways they respond to others. Post-structuralism allows this research to gain an insight into how HE-in-FE students make sense of their experiences by examining the discourses available to them at

a particular time and place. Such an approach argues that power is established through discourse and as such, often some discourses are silenced. The practice of discourse analysis allows the study to be sensitive to the marginalised voices of those studying HE-in-FE, and to challenge dominant discourses (Wendt and Boylan, 2008).

Power produces knowledge and so, in undertaking this research, I cannot claim to be doing so outside of power. In researching I am undertaking a professional role, which is acknowledged by society and validated by a university that also exists because it is considered to represent certain values and thus, forms of power. The activities engaged in through the course of this research are authorised by the exercising of various forms of power and the interests they serve extend beyond the pursuit of truth (Humes and Bryce, 2003). Despite these considerations, undertaking such research is important to highlight the relationships between power and knowledge. Arguably, students studying HE-in-FE are allowed access to certain types of knowledge located at the bottom of the hierarchy. Allowing non-traditional students such access acts to reproduce inequalities by limiting social mobility.

In a post-structuralist approach, power is considered fluid and so researchers understand an interview to be co-constructed between the interviewee and interviewer. Dominant discourses are present during interviews and as such researchers should consider how they can open up conversations which move beyond these discourses. Interviewees have multiple positions that they occupy; many of them within this study, for example, were HE-in-FE students but also women, managers within nurseries, mothers etc. Acknowledging these positions allowed me to move away from the notion of the student/ teacher, interviewer/interviewee relationship (Wendt and Boylan, 2008). Such an approach enabled me to overcome any imbalance of power, building a relationship with the interviewees and opening up conversations.

Taking the time to consider the power relations constituted within discourses facilitates a developing awareness of the multiple and diverse ways of knowing that shape HE-in-FE students' ways of understanding their experiences (Wendt and Boylan, 2008). In uncovering and highlighting the prevalent and newly emerging discourses that students draw on to discuss their experiences, environments and conceptualisations of support, this research aims to make suggestions about the effects that these discourses might have on the students, their identities and how their social realities are produced.

### 3.8.4 Knowledge

Post-structuralism opposes the foundationalist view that knowledge must be built from the bottom up, that it can be discovered using reasoning and that it can be used to hold together an ordered structure of truths which are logically linked (Fox, 2014). A principle of this foundationalist approach is the notion of mind/body dualism established by Descartes, the binary conceptualisation of self and other and the epistemological belief that the conscious thinking subject is the author of knowledge, the mind being superior to the senses as and the knower separate from the known. This epistemological approach belongs to a realist perspective and is rejected by post-structuralism. Post-structuralists believe that knowledge cannot exist outside the field of human activity. Knowledge and power cannot be separated, knowledge is constructed, and power is involved in the construction of knowledge. According to post-structuralism, all knowledge is socially situated. Neither the knower or the knowledge produced is impartial nor value neutral as we can never escape the power relations and grids of regularity constructed by cultural practice and discourse (StPierre, 2000).

Post-structuralism challenges established assumptions about language and meaning.

Derrida's ideas (1967) in particular have encouraged an awareness of how texts can be read

from different perspectives, at different levels leading to numerous interpretations. The relationship between reader and writer is complex and as such meaning becomes elusive. It is impossible to arrive at truth because there is always interpretation and as such there is a multiplicity of truths. Derrida's suggestion is that texts should be deconstructed to challenge common sense readings of them and problematise the meaning. To search for definitive accounts is futile as they do not exist (Humes and Bryce, 2003).

The aim of this research is to present and analyse other truths that challenge dominant discourses and educational structures and not simply to present an interpretation of HE-in-FE students' experiences. Discourses construct and are expressed through the everyday social practices that take place within HE-in-FE settings. Spoken languages and texts are not neutral; instead they are constructs that can be interpreted in an infinite number of ways. Post-structuralism rejects binary oppositions that we use to make sense of the higher education system, for example, HE and FE. Post- structuralism also rejects the notion of self as being single and stable. Instead it argues for multiple selves and ways of being. This helps to explain the variety of selves that HE-in-FE students occupy. Their identities as HE-in-FE students are multiple and are constructed within discourses. As such this research questions the role of discourses in shaping and constraining the identities of HE-in-FE students.

The position taken in this study is that HE-in-FE is historically and culturally situated and this has effects. It enables some realities and constrains others. Following post-structuralism this research focuses on finding out what makes HE-in-FE important in the English education system and what its effects are. The research aims to find out how subjects who participate in HE-in-FE come to speak and act in certain ways with regards to the environments that they find themselves in and the support they receive with their studies. Undertaking an analysis of discourses and culture is a complex task and as such, a

qualitative approach is required to reveal the discourses within which HE-in-FE is located. As described earlier in this chapter, case study strategy here is essential as it allows for intensive and in-depth exploration of this complex issue in one specific HE-in-FE institution.

### 3.4.5 Discourse analysis

Adopting a post-structuralist approach to the research led to the consideration of a range of discourse analysis techniques when deciding on a method of analysis. The focus of discourse analysis is to question the common sense and inevitable truths and reveal how discourses constrain what can be thought, said and done and to show how subjects are constructed by discourse rather than being its originator (Fadyl, Nicholls and McPherson, 2012).

Discourse analysis is a valuable methodology in the analysis of education (Maclure 2003). However, just as post-structuralism is difficult to define due to the lack of description of what it entails, discourse analysis is difficult to undertake due to the differing and sometimes conflicting opinions around the different approaches. Fadyl, Nicholls and McPherson (2012) argue that research design and methodology should be applied as appropriate to a particular area of study.

This research takes the approach that particular discourses shape our social world. In order to understand this process, it is essential to analyse the discourses to uncover any taken for granted assumptions and binary oppositions which are working to reproduce inequalities and maintain power imbalances across the education landscape. This involves examining the use of language as well as studying how students' experiences and identities are constructed by ways of thinking and speaking. Language and discourses are examined with the aim of developing an understanding of how practices shape and limit how individuals can think, converse, and act (Hodges, Kuper and Reeves, 2008).

Critical discourse analysis was considered as an approach to analysing the data because of its aim to construct and share critical knowledge and understanding that enables individuals to free themselves from types of domination by enlightening them (Wodak and Meyer, 2009). Critical discourse analysis aims not only to describe and explain, it also aims to uncover a particular type of delusion or misunderstanding which Bourdieu conceptualised as 'meconnaissance' or 'misrecognition' (Bourdieu, 1989, cited in Wodak and Meyer, 2009, p7). This is what makes such an approach critical; its ambition to demonstrate non-apparent ways that language is involved in social relations of power and domination of individuals (Fairclough in Wetherell et al, 2001). Critical discourse analysis was discounted as a method of analysis within this study, however, because of the approach's claims to objectivity and truth. Post-structuralist approaches believe that such a search for truth, clarity and simple meaning is an illusion because there will always be different perspectives that can be adopted and different meanings which will be interpreted. Where Critical discourse analysis lays claim to truth, post-structuralist approaches aim to avoid replacing one truth for another, such an approach recognises that there is no absolute truth, analysis in research is always interpretive, conditional and merely a version from a particular standpoint. Trying to produce a definitive account of the experiences of HE-in-FE students and how they are shaped by discourse is therefore a misguided endeavour (Graham, 2005). It is also important to note that the point of educational research is not simply to be critical. Post-structuralism shares the concern of Critical discourse analysis about the relationship between language, social processes and power, however, the two approaches offer different forms of analysis which simply confirms that there will always be different perspectives from which interpretation can be framed. The aim of discourse analysis is to uncover how discourses have developed, how they work to order and exclude, and what the outcomes have been for those involved (Grbich, 2013). In this case the analysis aims to identify and

track the operation of powerful discourses shaping the experiences of non-traditional students studying HE-in-FE.

A Foucauldian approach to discourse analysis has been adopted as it allows the research to challenge ways of thinking about HE-in-FE students experiences and widening participation discourses that have come to be seen as natural and thus taken for granted. It allows the research to consider how HE-in-FE student experience has come to be the way that it is and how it remains this way.

Foucault never stipulated methodological guidelines; he was committed to adapting his methodological approach to achieve the aims of each research project. Foucault actively resisted developing a specific method or recipe for carrying out discourse analysis (Given, 2008). It has been argued that the key to conducting robust research using Foucault's approach is to apply his ideas as appropriate for the research's particular focus ensuring coherence and congruence with post-structuralist theoretical and philosophical approaches. There are difficulties in taking such an approach when thinking about how to design and carry out a study. The difficulty is that there is plenty of theoretical information but very little practical advice (Fadyl, Nicholls and McPherson, 2012). Instead of specifying how discourse analysis should be carried out, Foucault developed a body of theoretical work what provides a way of understanding that underpins how research is framed within a Foucauldian approach. Such understandings provide a set of tools which can be used to shape the process of discourse analysis (Given, 2008). The aim of this discourse analysis is to make explicit the ways in which the widening participation discourse operates in HE-in-FE and the effects it has on student experience, approaching this analysis with a Foucauldian theoretical lens is thus appropriate in achieving this aim.



### 3.8.6 Process of analysis

Discourse analysis involves repeatedly going over the data, reading through the transcripts and documents and noting interesting features. This requires working through the data over long time periods, returning to them multiple times. As patterns emerge they should be noted but the researcher should carry on searching. Essential to this process is some form of coding which enables the data to be categorised into particular classifications. The key difference between discourse analysis and other data analyses is not this initial process of coding but the analytical concepts involved. As a discourse analyst I was looking for patterns in the language in use, the nature of the language, interaction and society and the relationships between them (Wetherell et al, 2001). A visual representation of the stages of analysis is provided in appendix 5 and further detail of the process is provided below.

Analysis of the data was conducted throughout the research and data collection process as is often customary in qualitative approaches to research. Leaving the analysis until after the data collection is complete can limit the findings of research as it prevents the researcher from collecting new data to fill in any gaps that emerge from the analysis. It also turns the task of analysis into a daunting and somewhat overwhelming one. Early analysis allows the researcher to move between thinking about the data collected and developing strategies for the collection of new and potentially more rewarding data (Miles and Huberman, 1994).

Analysis was ongoing throughout the research process.

Analysis started with the transcription of the interviews, group interviews and field notes in order to become familiar with the data. As Gee suggests (2014), in discourse analysis the transcript is a 'theoretical entity' (p136) forming part of the analysis. The interview and group interview data were transcribed verbatim to obtain a fully detailed account, as the research aims were to examine the discourses and how they shape identities and experiences. Abbreviating or changing words in the transcription could mean that the

responses lose some of the meaning that the respondents are trying to express (Gibbs, 2007).

The process of hand coding followed the transcription. The transcripts were read and reread to identify patterns and commonalities in the data, identifying discursive constructions (Willig, 2013) in the text. I began the analysis by reading through all of the transcripts, highlighting words or phrases which appeared interesting or significant, or which appeared to be occurring more frequently. I was looking for how discursive objects were constructed within the texts, this included the interview transcripts as well as the documents collected and field notes. This did not involve simply looking for key words, but including both implicit and explicit references in the analysis.

I then created a table containing a column for each of the categories emerging. The transcripts were read through several times and each time a recurring theme was identified it was highlighted and copied into the word document.

These categories were nuanced as the analysis progressed. Links were made between categories which led to the creation of overarching and subcategories highlighting particular discursive constructions. When a discourse analysis is performed, the researcher is working to unpick the text in an attempt to identify the discourse that is being taken for granted. There are many educational discourses which are taken for granted and accepted uncritically as the norm (Atkins and Wallace, 2012). One example of this was discourses of support and the taken for granted assumptions that non-traditional students would need to be supported and that providing such support was unquestioningly positive and beneficial for the students. Support was highlighted frequently across all data sets, this became an overarching category with peer support, tutor support, formal support and informal support included as sub-categories.

After identifying all sections of the text that add to the construction of the discursive object, I searched for differences in the constructions. This involved locating the different 'discursive constructions of the object within wider discourses' (Willig, 2013, p132). For example, when students talked about their use of support services within the college, they did so through differing discourses. Support was constructed positively as enabling the students to be successful and build a sense of belonging. However, at the same time, support was conceptualised as constraining. Students perceived that they couldn't study HE in a university because of the lack of support they perceived they would receive. Thus, the object of support is constructed as both enabling and constraining within the same text.

Having identified how the discursive objects are being constructed and located them within wider discourses I considered the 'subject positions' that the discourse offers (Willig, 2013, p132). Discourses construct the subject and as a result they make available discursive locations from which the subject can speak. HE-in-FE students are positioned by the discourses and the discourse analysis aims to explore how discursive constructions and the subject positions that they contain enable or constrain opportunities for action (Willig, 2013). In constructing a version of the world and positioning subjects within it, discourses limit what can be done and what can be said. Having considered the subject positions that discourses offer, the next stage of analysis involves examining how discursive constructions and subject positions enable or constrain 'opportunities for action' (p132). For example, widening participation discourses locate non-traditional students within a deficit discourse which locates students as having potential whilst simultaneously shaping their identity such that they don't perceive that they fit in within HE. Practices become acceptable forms of behaviour within specific discourses, for example, HE-in-FE students seeking support is a legitimate form of behaviour within the widening participation discourse. These practices then reproduce the discourses that constitute them. The final stage of analysis considers subjectivity and its relationship with discourse. Discourses construct social realities and

make possible ways of being in the world and ways of perceiving it. The final stage of analysis examines the consequences for individuals subjective experience of taking up the positions. This considers what can be thought, felt, and experienced from the subjective position. For example, being positioned within a deficit discourse of vulnerability may lead some HE-in-FE students to feel a sense of belonging within HE-in-FE, and to feel like an outsider within a university.

This section justifies the Foucauldian approach to discourse analysis used to analyse the data. It could be argued that this thesis doesn't represent a true Foucauldian discourse analysis as it doesn't engage in a conventional analysis of historical sources of text (Arribas-Ayallon and Walkerdine, 2013). Although considering a historical analysis of the development of widening participation discourse would be interesting, it is beyond the scope of this thesis. Jansen (2008) argues that Foucauldian discourse analysis provides a direction towards research rather than a recipe or method to follow when conducting research. This thesis applies Foucault's notion of discourse to analysing the data collected. The analysis has concentrated on how different versions of reality are constructed within the interview transcripts (texts) through discourses which are culturally and historically situated. In keeping with a Foucauldian approach, the analysis also considers how power operates in the relationship between discourses (Foucault, 1980) to marginalise and other HE-in-FE students

### ***3.9 Researcher Positionality and Reflexivity***

The research took place with staff and students in the Further Education college where I was employed as a Higher Education lecturer and programme leader for the foundation degree in early years. The interviews and observations were conducted with early years foundation degree students and their tutors. Although I did manage the programme, I was not teaching the cohort of students who participated in the research. This allowed me to

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have a good understanding of the programme without being too close to the students, which might otherwise impact on the data generated.

It is important for researchers to consider their position in relation to the study when conducting qualitative research. As such, I recognise that the study may be affected by my own individual background, values and beliefs (Hammond and Wellington, 2013). Researching within the FE college where I myself worked meant that I was an insider researcher, that is an educational researcher investigating the places where they work (although adopting a post-structuralist approach, it is important to note that the insider/outsider dichotomy may influence the construction of notions of positionality) (Mercer, 2007). This was particularly the case as I already had a relationship with the group and staff members being studied. My position as an insider could benefit the research as I was able to gain insights which outsiders may not. However, researching in a setting in which you work can also be difficult if the setting is so familiar that it is impossible to single out events which occur. It is difficult in a familiar setting to see anything beyond what 'everyone' knows (Delamont et al, 2010). Researchers must overcome this by making the familiar strange. They must 'fight familiarity' (p5) in a number of ways. Firstly, by revisiting studies previously carried out and using them as a lens through which the case can be viewed. This can also be overcome by analysing similar research studies carried out in other cultures and by the researcher taking a standpoint other than their own. For example, in this case, taking the standpoint of the students in the research would be more enlightening than researching from the position of a teacher/researcher.

There is a danger, with lone observations, of claiming more from the analysis of the observation data than the data itself actually suggests as the observation is 'especially vulnerable to issues of personal perspective drawn from one set of senses rather than those of multiple observers, and of the tendency to observe the 'exciting' or 'dramatic'' (Pole and

Morrison, 2003, p28). Because of this it was crucial that the research design enabled a reflexive approach, to acknowledge that I was not able to reach a truly objective position in relation to the research because I was part of the social world under study. When conducting observations, it is important to acknowledge that by being present, the researcher influences the field that they observe and that being in the field can change the observer (Pole and Morrison, 2003). As discussed previously, the research was conducted in a setting where I worked, with students who are studying on a course with which I was familiar. Brewer (2000, p61) describes this as 'pure observant participation' as I used my existing role to research a familiar setting although in this setting I adopted a new role as 'researcher' and needed to gain acceptance in my new role. The benefit of this in the setting was that I was permitted access across a wide range of events and activities and to a wide range of people in the field.

As someone who has been involved in the area of study, I had an awareness of the cultural environment which enabled me to build rapport, empathy and understanding with those being interviewed. In addition to this, being an insider can mean that access is more easily granted and that I had greater flexibility in this respect (Mercer, 2007). It can also lead to more productive interviews as the respondents may grant trust and cooperation more willingly (Hodkinson, 2006). I needed to recognise that my position may have influenced the research in some ways; for example, colleagues who were being interviewed may have been unlikely to say something negative about students, even if it is what they were thinking. There is no way of knowing if they are telling me what they believe or if they are giving me the 'party line'. Being an insider also raised issues relating to confidentiality and the impact of my working relationship on the tutors feeling pressured to take part. To overcome these issues, I reassured them that any information they disclosed or shared with me would be treated with confidence and only used for the purposes of the research. I also assured them that they are in no way obliged to take part and that they would be in no way

disadvantaged if they decided not to participate. I also engaged in the critical process of reflexivity which meant that I questioned the assumptions I brought to the research (Burke and Kirton, 2006).

Although being in a position to make sense of this social situation is a key benefit of being an insider researcher (Hammond and Wellington, 2013), 'insider complacency' may be problematic if I allow my perceived familiarity to lead me into making taken for granted assumptions, or the respondents into not volunteering information because it is taken as given (Hodkinson, 2006, p139). A researcher more distanced from the respondent might have asked more basic questions which may have led to different insights. I had to remain as open minded as possible to ensure that I was reflexive. I was careful throughout the research process, to consider how my stance may have influenced my findings (Pelias, in Denzin and Lincoln, 2011). Attention was paid to these concerns and advice and support was sought in supervision, so as to mitigate the effects of these potential influences as far as possible. Any claims that I make of my findings are stated and understood in full awareness of my influence (Pelias, in Denzin and Lincoln, 2011).

Post structuralist researchers argue that their experiences should not be separate from the data and that they will inevitably affect the research. Rather than trying to prevent this, researchers should aim to distinguish how to locate that experience within the study and to acknowledge how values and beliefs affect the data collection procedures and quality of analysis. This process is an attempt at reflexivity; this involves the researcher locating themselves in the research process, appreciating how their own being influences the act of research. This includes considering the researcher's own background, personality and perspectives and how that intertwines with the context of being an educational researcher. The researcher's influence is not conceived negatively as bias, but as a point to be acknowledged (Wetherell, Taylor and Yates, 2001).

In this case as the researcher I spent time during the research process examining my own position of power as both a researcher and as course leader within the research site. I recognised that my relationship with the participants in the research was constantly being negotiated throughout the research process. Working within the college and being known to the students as the course leader for the programme they were studying meant that the students' perceptions of me shaped the meanings produced during the interviews, even though I had not previously met the students in my capacity as course leader. The idea for the research study initially developed from my experiences as a HE-in-FE lecturer. During this time I had several discussions with students studying for their foundation degrees and HNDs within the small FEC as I was concerned about the quality of experience that the students were receiving as a HE course leader. Therefore, I must recognise that my relationship with the participants was not equal irrespective of my efforts to mitigate the power dynamics.

It is important to be reflexive about whose voice is actually being represented in research. Post-structuralism encourages reflexivity as a way to deal with dilemmas such as these. Reflexivity allows researchers to be sensitive to the context in which accounts are produced and to their position in producing these accounts. An approach suggested by Cooper and Burnett (2006, cited in Wendt and Boylan, 2008, p604) is that the participants should be involved in the analysis of data; this can be achieved by taking transcripts back to the participants and allowing them the opportunity to add to, clarify or amend their accounts. This is apposite to the post-structuralist perspective in which meanings are produced and knowledge is created through partnerships and as such this was a strategy adopted within this study. Prior to the data analysis phase of the research, interview transcripts were checked by the participants to ensure that the information given was as verifiable and the participant's accounts were as accurate as possible (Kvale, 1996; Creswell, 2009).



### **3.10 Ethical Issues**

Each researcher embarking upon a research project must consider the particular circumstances they are planning to encounter and create. They then need to consider what is ethical in those circumstances (Rose, 2012). Rules of ethical conduct are provided by the British Educational Research Association (BERA, 2018). These guidelines were given careful consideration at each stage of the research project's planning and implementation.

Obtaining informed consent from participants was a key ethical obligation for the research project. BERA (2018) considers voluntary informed consent to refer to the requirement that participants in research agree to participate, without pressure or force, prior to the research being undertaken (see also Oliver, 2010) and that researchers remain aware of and sensitive to the notion that participants may want to withdraw their consent at any time and for any reason. An information sheet about the research was given to all prospective participants in advance, including a consent form which the participants signed prior to taking part in the research (Creswell, 2009). This form explicitly stated the participants' right to withdraw from the research project at any point, that they were not obliged to answer any questions they did not wish to answer, and that non-participation or withdrawal would have no adverse effect whatsoever on students' academic progress or lecturers' professional status (a copy of the participant information sheet and consent form can be found in appendix 3 and 4). Having obtained initial informed consent from the participants, I continued to seek and negotiate the participants' ongoing permission throughout the research process (Miller and Bell, cited in Mauthner et al, 2002). Participants completed a new consent form before each round of data collection. Concerns have been raised that informed consent forms may reduce anonymity in research participation (Israel and Hay, 2006). To overcome this, the signed forms were stored securely and separately from the data collected; each form was electronically scanned and stored on a password protected memory stick; and the originals were destroyed.

In addition to seeking the informed consent of the participating students and staff, permission was sought from my employing institution which was the site of the study. They were assured that confidentiality and anonymity regarding the identity of the institution, their students, and their employees would be maintained.

Another key ethical issue to be considered was that of confidentiality (BERA, 2018), which was maintained throughout the research process. No private data identifying participants was reported and, in interview transcripts, the participants' names were changed to protect their privacy (Kvale, 1996). Part of the project plan was to audio record the interviews; this posed specific ethical issues in relation to confidentiality and anonymity. To overcome these issues the data was transcribed as soon as possible following the interviews taking place and the original recordings were destroyed. Any identifiable information was changed or removed at the point of transcription (Kimmel, 1998). Because the data are likely to contain highly personal accounts, potentially including discussions of other participants and peers, it will not be appropriate to make them available for other researchers to use in future. The data will be stored securely for up to 5 years following the completion of the project to facilitate publication of the research.

Specific ethical issues may have arisen from part of the research being conducted within my place of employment. Issues with insider research, where the researcher works and researches within the same organisation, may cause concerns that the researcher is exploiting professional relationships and their authority over others. In this case, concerns may include the researcher exploiting their authority over students (Drake and Heath, 2010). To overcome these concerns, respect was shown throughout the research process to the students, the lecturers and the organisation; assurances were made to all participants that confidentiality and anonymity were maintained, and that participation would in no way

result in any adverse effects for the students' progress or lecturers' professional status. At each point of data collection I reintroduced myself as a researcher and explained the purpose of my research, I also reminded participants at each point that they were under no obligation to take part and that they were able to withdraw at any time. These ethical issues were reviewed regularly in supervision.

Undertaking observations within my own institution meant that I confronted particular issues. For example, it was necessary to make what is a very familiar setting strange. Insider observations also pose ethical dilemmas. Although my role is overt and informed consent has been sought, there may be occasions when the students are unaware that I moved away from my role as teacher, and into my role as observer. Observations can become more covert as the researcher/ tutor may switch hats upon noticing something of interest (Pole and Morrison, 2003).

There may also be additional ethical issues arising from the classroom observations. This aspect of data generation required careful negotiation with colleagues to ensure that they understand that the purpose of the observation is not to evaluate their teaching.

Observations in FE settings are used in managerial and disciplinary procedures leaving lecturers associating observations with performative judgments being made about their practice. In order to avoid this, I was very clear with the lecturers about the purpose of the observations and I reassured them that the purpose is not to judge their performance. I also shared the observations with the staff following the pilot observation so that they were more comfortable with what I was doing.

Ethical considerations extend to the methodology and methods adopted within the research process. BERA's ethical guidelines (2018) state that the methods researchers adopt must be appropriate and fit for purpose. As a result, I ensured that there was congruence between

the research aims and questions, and the methodological approach and methods adopted within the research process.

Ethical considerations were also made during the writing of the thesis to ensure that it did not contain terminology which is biased on different grounds such as race or gender.

Working with visual materials, in this case, photographs, in research can present specific ethical dilemmas which need to be considered. Using photographs of the research location within the research makes the setting identifiable; this produces obvious conflict with the ethical consideration which involves keeping respondents' information confidential and guaranteeing anonymity. To overcome the difficulties posed by this I ensured that the photographs were not shown to anyone else during the research and that the completed thesis did not contain any of the photographs taken during the study (Rose, 2012).

### ***3.11 Conclusion***

This chapter provides a clear rationale for the methodology, research design, and data collection and analysis methods adopted within the research. In addition, the chapter outlined how ethical issues and issues of positionality were addressed and considered. The chapter justifies adopting a post-structuralist approach to examine how discourses shape and constrain the students' experiences and argues that the selection of a case study design is the most appropriate to examine the experiences of HE students in FE settings and answer the research questions, particularly given my dual role as researcher and teacher. A post-structuralist approach employing discourse analysis enabled the research to analyse how HE-in-FE students' identities and experiences have been shaped by the structure of language. An intrinsic case study design allowed the research to examine the particular discourses that shaped the experience of HE-in-FE students in a specific site.

The chapter includes a discussion of a range of data collection methods, with further justification for the use of interviews, observations and photograph elicitation group

interviews along with an explanation of how these will be analysed. Interviews and photograph elicitation group interviews allow the collection of in-depth data in which respondents draw on key discourses to describe their experiences and observations enabled cross analysis of data sets to increase validity. The chapter also includes discussion of positionality, assessing the benefits and disadvantages of insider research and outlining how associated issues were overcome. The chapter concludes by considering the ethical issues associated with the research study and describing the steps taken to ensure that all ethical guidelines are addressed.

## **Chapter 4: Research Findings**

This chapter is made up of three distinct sections that present the findings from the discourse analysis of data collected from the interviews, observations, documentary analysis and group interview that were carried out with both staff and students within Valley College. To recap, the aim of this research was to examine the experiences of students studying HE within a small FEC and to explore how discourses shape the students' experiences. In the process of achieving these aims, the research questions were as follows:

Q1. How do discourses shape the identities of HE-in-FE students?

Q2. How do discourses shape the experiences of students studying HE within an FE learning environment?

Q3. How do discursive framings of support work to enable and constrain the actions of HE-in-FE students?

The following sections of analysis address each of these questions in turn.

### ***4.1 Identity, relationships and a sense of belonging***

This first section examines how discourses have shaped the identities of learners who study HE within an FE institution. The chapter begins by discussing how widening participation discourses have shaped the provision of HE-in-FE and the identities and experiences of the students before considering how the discursive constructions of independence, relationships and sense of belonging have shaped the students' identities. The section concludes by arguing that widening participation discourses shape students' identities in binary and contradictory ways. On the one hand students have been placed within a deficit discourse, which affects their confidence and self-esteem leading them to believe that they would not

belong within a university and that they are only fit for sub degree level study, undertaken in FE. At the same time students are located as having potential within widening participation discourses. Students construct their identity within this discourse increasing their confidence and self esteem. In studying HE-in-FE, students construct a learner identity for themselves which is characterised by determination to improve.

#### ***4.1.1 Widening participation and identity construction***

Widening participation discourses were central to the students within this study. All students who took part were from low socioeconomic backgrounds and the college within which the research took place was situated in an economically deprived area. All students would be classified as 'non-traditional' as they were mature students, many returning to education following a break and all having additional responsibilities including full time work and caring responsibilities (Rocks and Lavander, 2018). These students were the subject of widening participation policy initiatives which drove the development of HE-in-FE. Poverty has been located as an issue of social mobility in English education policy and UK Government discourse. Taking this approach is different to addressing the causes of social and economic inequality (Ivinson et al, 2018). As discussed in the literature review, increasing the numbers of students studying HE-in-FE does little to promote social justice and social mobility (Avis and Orr, 2016; Webb et al, 2017).

Diversity is a discourse central to the policy discourse around widening participation.

Diversity is organised in two key ways. The first of these is how it is combined with discourses of choice in relation to the institutions; this is termed institutional diversity. The second is how it is used to indicate equality and social inclusion in relation to the students; this is termed student diversity (Archer, 2007). These two conceptualisations are linked in that the diverse student population require a choice of diverse institutions to meet their various needs and interests. Such constructions of diversity gain an important symbolic

power through the association with conceptions of equality and fairness. In aiming to increase the proportion of the population accessing HE from non-traditional and diverse backgrounds, such as those interviewed, widening participation has been positioned as a discourse that is essential to ensuring equality within society. Such an approach is centred around successive Governments' social inclusion agenda (Whiteford, Mahsood, and Sid Nair, 2013).

Widening participation is positioned as a socially inclusive project with both social and economic benefits (Geoffrey, 2018) and as a means of increasing social equality by including the most disadvantaged social groups in HE. However, it could be argued that economic priorities dominate over social justice agendas (Leathwood and O'Connell, 2003). As identified in the literature review, the diverse HE field is not entirely equal with different institutions separated in relation to their remit, their origins and their funding. Universities and colleges who offer HE are required to position themselves within the market of HE as a provider of services targeted towards particular service users. Such notions of diversity are bound up with discourses of choice and marketisation. What results is a tripartite system of HE with research-based gold standard Universities, teaching focused silver standard universities and locally orientated bronze standard HEIs such as the case study institution examined here. This highly differentiated system is justified through the employment of discourses of diversity, as well as choice. Such notions of diversity are embedded in a discourse of individualisation, where the students are perceived to require individualised provision to meet their specific needs, thus diverse provision is encouraged. This approach to meeting the 'diverse' needs of students was based on the notion of students being different but equal; this led to the introduction of foundation degrees. It could be argued that these HE-in-FE students are being offered access to HE, but in a watered down, lesser version which is not quite equal (Archer, 2007). Such educational policy is shaped by and



reinforces the dominant pathologising discourses of underprivileged individuals and their education (Ivinson et al, 2018).

Bronze standard universities including HE-in-FE providers are positioned toward the bottom of the hierarchy of institutions. The Valley College's remit is to serve the local area; an area which is considered more working class and poorer with less money, status and resources than the Silver and Gold universities working to serve national and international arenas. Widening participation agendas aim to increase participation in HE by encouraging non-traditional students to attend such Bronze standard institutions, which provides reduced reward and recognition (Reay et al, 2010) when compared to the Silver and Gold universities. Such policy agendas operate as methods of propagating immobility and are central to reproducing social inequalities. Students studying within HE-in-FE aren't being given the resources and skills required to become mobile and as such it could be argued that widening participation is being rendered more of a tool for social control than one for social justice (Archer, 2007). Although widening participation strategies aim to increase HE progression, the deficit discourses within which HE-in-FE students are located places the responsibility for progression on them. Such an approach fails to take into account the role of structure in reproducing social inequalities (Hannon, Faas and O'Sullivan, 2017). Having a diverse range of students accessing HE is not necessarily an indicator of a more equitable HE system; diversity may well be working as an ethical discourse which is suppressing other more critical discourses surrounding the widening participation agenda (Archer, 2007).

In labelling students such as those in this study as 'non-traditional', the discourses are serving to reinforce constructions of a 'normal' student. Such 'othering' discourses pathologise the non-traditional students such as those in this study and compare them with students who are perceived as rightfully having a place in higher education (Leathwood and O'Connell, 2003). This locates the issues of confidence and lack of aspiration as individual

problems rather than as social issues constructed through inequality and poverty. Rather than taking such a pathologising approach, more attention should be given to the policies and discourses that reinforce inequalities.

To be successful in HE students need to develop a positive learner identity; the development of which is a complex process (MacFarlane, 2018). The development of a positive learner identity is essential for students' engagement and achievement and for developing a sense of fitting in (Lawson, 2014). The journey to student achievement is multifarious and an integral aspect of this is forming a positive student identity. Martin et al (2014) argue that being part time and juggling work and study affects students' ability to develop student identities. However, they don't consider how the discourses of widening participation and support that HE-in-FE students are located within shape their identities. They argue that an increase in a technical approach to completing tasks and the compliance culture within FE are incompatible with deep learning and that in order for students to successfully transition to university, students need to develop an identity which values critical debate and reflection. For some students HE-in-FE fails to provide such an identity because students discursively construct their identities within discourses of widening participation and support, which leaves them unprepared for their transitions into university study. Constructions of student identity in dominant discourses seem to rest on the assumption that non-traditional students such as those in this study are only fit for vocational, work related courses in new institutions and often at below degree level (Leathwood and O'Connell, 2003; Fuller and MacFadyen, 2012). Students construct their identities in relation to the dominant discourses they are exposed to, the discourses of widening participation and support influence the development of the identity of HE-in-FE students in contradictory ways as exemplified in the paragraphs that follow.

Jill, aged 46, was the oldest participant in the study, she works part time as a nursery assistant in a Children's Centre. Jill lacked confidence in her ability to study HE, she had been out of education for over twenty years having completed her Nursery Nurse Exam Board (NNEB) training upon leaving school. "I didn't think I would ever do a uni course, I just couldn't see myself ever being at uni, I didn't think I, I didn't feel confident to be able to do it" (Jill, November, 2015). Jill talks here about not feeling confident enough to go to university, she is uncertain of her ability. Jill's response was typical and echoed in the responses from all participants in the study. Rebecca, a 21 year old nursery nurse stated "I never thought when I was at school that I would do a university course". All of the respondents felt that studying for a degree was something that wasn't an option for them. The students' identities are shaped by the discourses that they are located within. As non-traditional students they have been located as deficient in some way leaving them feeling unfitted for HE study.

Policy discourses of widening participation portray non-traditional students in contradictory ways. Although students are located as 'deficient', as highlighted above, they are also simultaneously located as having 'potential' (Spohrer, Stahl and Bowers-Brown, 2018, p337). Students perceived the opportunity to study HE-in-FE valuably, recognising the progress they have made and their potential for continuing to develop. "I feel good about myself to be honest, because I have obviously developed.....hopefully I will achieve it". (Rebecca, November 2014). Studying HE-in-FE goes some way to enabling non-traditional students to achieve their potential and to develop their confidence and self esteem. They are all in education, gaining a foundation degree which gives them the option to top up to a full honours degree, something which many of the students in this study felt would never be an option to them.

Sarah who is 29 works as a deputy manager of a private day nursery, she studied her level three within the college over ten years ago. As can be seen in the quotation below, discourses of widening participation have shaped her identity leading her to feel a need to prove herself to demonstrate that she is good enough for HE. She has constructed a different learner identity for herself.

I've never been really good at learning at school but it's because I had a poor upbringing, so I wanted to prove to myself that I could learn and do it myself and erm, and that's it really, I know I can do it here (Sarah, November, 2014).

Here Sarah acknowledges that her childhood and prior educational experiences have impacted adversely on her learning but demonstrates how she was able to construct a new learning identity for herself. Her new learner identity is characterised by determination. Sarah has constructed a positive learner identity shaped by notions of potential. This highlights the positive ways that students construct their identities through the discourses of widening participation. As identified in the literature review, notions of potential have been central to successive Government's educational policy discourses. Such discourses have positioned students as having the potential to be academically successful but requiring support to achieve this potential. Framed by this discourse Sarah has constructed an identity characterised by potential and determination. Positioning non-traditional students such as Sarah within deficit discourses could have a disempowering effect on them (Spohrer, 2011) leading them to believe that they need to be supported in order to access HE and that they are more likely to be successful studying HE-in-FE. Jess, a 26 year old day nursery room supervisor described how she would never apply to study within a university. Jess stated "Oh no, I would never have applied there (to the local university), I don't think they would have accepted me anyway" (November, 2014). When asked why not Jess said "I

don't know, I just wouldn't, I'm just not a typical uni type of student, I couldn't just do it on my own, I need the extra help so I know what I'm supposed to be doing".

It is my interpretation that pathologising discourses within which students' construct their identities have led them to feel like HE is not for them, like they need their confidence building and they require support such that they feel they would not belong in a university. This leads them to believe that they need to study HE-in-FE, thus confirming the assumption that they are only fit for work related courses studied below degree level within an FEC (Leathwood and O'Connell, 2003; Fuller and MacFayden, 2012). Being located within a deficit discourse affects students' aspirations, how they see themselves and what they can become (Krutkowski, 2017). For some students, such discourses limit and constrain their experiences of HE.

There is a less deficit conceptualisation of widening participation students which, rather than problematising these students, considers the value they can bring to HE. Such an approach sees widening participation students as more determined students who seek high standards in their studies thus challenging the deficit discourses (McKay and Devlin, 2016).

Determination is a key feature of such students; they are happy to ask questions if they don't understand and are determined to achieve. This challenges the conceptualisations of them as lacking and highlights the value they bring to HE. In short, they have developed coping mechanisms which their more advantaged peers may not.

Students demonstrated this determination to improve and develop in their willingness to ask for feedback and the assertiveness with which they sought support. As can be seen in the quote from Sarah below, her experience of HE-in-FE is characterised by both a determination to improve and a sense of being reliant upon support.

I can see I'm getting better and I just keep trying and keep asking for help. Just through support obviously, the more practice I have got with referencing and things that is getting me more marks, I am putting more references in there to back my work up. Obviously I get my work checked and ask for feedback so I can improve it so my grades have just got better through support (Sarah, July, 2016).

Students construct their identities in contradictory ways within the discourses of widening participation. Such discourses position non-traditional students such as Sarah as needy and requiring support. This shapes their identities and experiences such that instead of perceiving themselves as capable learners, students perceive themselves as lacking, and needing reassurance and support. At the same time, however, the learners are constructing their new identity with a very clear emphasis on independence and them taking responsibility for their own learning and development (Leese, 2010). Katie, a 21 year old nursery nurse stated "It's down to me really isn't it, if I put the work in and get all the support I can then I should pass" (November, 2014). In suggesting that 'its down to her', Katie recognises that she is responsible for her own learning.

Within educational policy and discourses, particularly in relation to the provision of HE, there is a powerful discourse of independent learning (Goode, 2007). There is, however, a dichotomy between the discourses of independence, considered a key feature required by HE students and developed by HEIs and the discourses of support, drawn on by the students when describing their experiences, and by HEIs when advertising their provision. As well as being a key discursive construction emerging from the data, the construct of 'independence' and the 'independent learner' are a key discourse of UK HE (Leathwood, 2006). Contemporary economic policy stresses the importance of independence for both student success in HE and for society and the UK economy. Independence is considered beneficial for both the learner and for society and it is both produced and required by

education (DFES, 2003; DfEE, 1997). Developing learners' independence and autonomy is a key learning outcome of HE across the world (Ding, 2017; Henri, Morrell and Scott, 2018). Yet this discourse of independence contradicts the discourses of support which are integral to discourses of widening participation.

The concept of independence drawn upon here is not neutral. The term is ascribed value while, in comparison, the term dependence is not. Both dependence and independence are associated with class, to be independent is to be individualistic. This is put forward as a binary opposite to being part of a collectivist culture with the emphasis placed on interdependence. Being the preserve of the white, middle-class male, independence is assigned more power than interdependence. Discourses of the individual and independence are masculine, research has shown that women are more likely to use collectivist discourses where as men are more likely to define themselves as individuals (Sparrow, 2000). There is now a powerful bifurcation embedded in UK educational policy discourse with independence valued on the one side and dependence denigrated on the other. This binary discourse leaves HE-in-FE students located within a deficit discourse of dependence, which affects their identities, aspirations and experience. This is exemplified in the following interview extracts. Stacey, a 21 year old nursery nurse and HE-in-FE student suggested that she wouldn't be successful studying in a university as she needs help that she perceives wouldn't be available. "I wouldn't know where to start if I had to go to a big uni, I like it here where its small and there are people who can help me". Another student stated "I don't think I would want to go to university after this, it's just not for me, I need too much support I think" (Jill, November, 2014), Jill demonstrates here how she perceives that she isn't independent enough for university as she needs too much help with her studies.

These extracts were typical of comments from the majority of student participants. My interpretation of the data is that they show how deficit discourses of dependence work to

reproduce social inequalities by making HE-in-FE students believe that they don't have the independent learning skills required to study HE at university. The concept of independence is not new. Its meaning is contested with a variety of terms synonymous with independent learning including autonomous, self-directed and student initiated. The range of terms synonymous with independence highlights the difficulty in defining what is meant by the term (Broad, 2006). Concepts of independence and dependency have changed and developed over time, suggesting that they are indeed social constructs. In pre-industrial society individuals were dependent on each other in a hierarchy of status, there were few individuals who had independent means and as such being dependent was an acceptable concept. However, in post-industrial society, dependence is considered a blameworthy and individual failing (Leathwood, 2006). The term also evolved during the pedagogic changes in the 1960s with the child-centered movement where the relationship between teacher and learner was altered so that the role of the teacher shifted from imparter of knowledge to a facilitator of learning (Clifford, 1999; Goode, 2007). There was also a corresponding shift for the learner from being an inactive receiver of learning to an independent learner, responsible for their own education.

Although it is often accepted that independence involves taking responsibility, different individuals will perceive differences in how much responsibility students should take (Broad, 2006). These notions of independence and dependence which have evolved, have been problematised, not only in relation to their conceptualisation, but also in challenging the binary nature of the two concepts, dependence does hold value in certain forms. However, in the current times of austerity and the under-resourcing of education (Bathmaker, 2016), pedagogical approaches which rely more on the students' independence and less on teacher contact are considered valuable. This has led to HE-in-FE students such as those in this study being pathologised within a deficit discourse of being too dependent (McKay and Devlin, 2015). Such an approach individualises learning and under values the inter-



dependence of learning as a social, collaborative venture with shared responsibilities dependent upon the relationship between students and staff. As a result, widening participation students become subject to a deficit discourse of dependency which infantilises them and characterises them as immature as opposed to agentic students who are acting rationally in accessing the support they require. Such deficit discourses blame widening participation students for their inability to cope with traditional HE. Such an approach is a 'pathologising practice' (McKay and Devlin, 2015, p348) which continues to marginalise a group of students who are positioned as lacking in the resources needed to be successful and considered a problem in what is assumed to be a fair society where they have equal opportunities.

Although over time the changing student population has had an impact on what constitutes a student or who can be a student, the identity of the student is continuously constructed through discourses. Government policy discourses through the widening participation agenda have replaced the word student with the word learner, with learners being constructed as consumers of academic and educational services who need to take responsibility for their own learning as an independent and autonomous individual (Leathwood and O'Connell, 2003). Such an approach to the independent learner is rooted in masculine and individualist conceptualisations, an individual unconstrained by domestic obligations, financial concerns and issues of confidence that the female students in this study are concerned with. The individualisation of learning which is established by discourses of independence understates the collaborative and collective nature of learning (Goode, 2007). A student's success or failure is not purely the result of efforts by the student or the teacher, rather, they are created in the relationships between the students and the activities they engage with alongside their teacher and others. Notions of independence are closely intertwined with discourses of support and relationships. Students' perceptions of independence are related to where they study because of their perceptions of

the support available within HE-in-FE, compared to universities. The perceptions that the students have are shaped by powerful structural discourses.

Students perceive that studying HE-in-FE requires less in terms of independence than studying at a university because students perceive that they will be more supported when studying HE within a college.

We do have to be independent but you get more support here I think, it's not so much as independent. Obviously I have read up on it and you've got your tutors all the time here and they are online, whereas obviously with a university you've just got to go away and do it and then go back (Rebecca, November 2014).

Rebecca's use of the term 'obviously' highlights the taken for granted nature of the way she constructs her experience of HE-in-FE. Her perception of universities is that there is little support provided whereas in college she perceives that she has access to support at all times. The findings suggested that students overwhelmingly believe that HE, even when studied in a further education college, required independence.

I'm enjoying it, I just think it's very, very independent, you've got to do it yourself and there's no one like here saying you've got to do this, you got to do that, it's all upon yourself, so you've got to be very like, devoted, and just be ready to do it type of thing. Give yourself time to do it. It's a lot more independent (Katie, November 2014).

Katie highlights how HE-in-FE students are required to take responsibility for their own learning, to work independently. This is in contrast with Rebecca's belief that HE-in-FE is characterised more by access to support than independence.

Despite their differences in conceptualising independence, all students described their experience positively in terms of the support they received from staff reflecting the collaborative nature of their experience. Although students recognise the support they receive as a strength of their experience, perceiving that it enables them to study in HE it could also be limiting their opportunities. Providing students with significant levels of support in HE-in-FE may work to constrain the students' experiences limiting their opportunities for progression by leaving them unprepared.

I think it's really the tutorials, you know like the one-to-one support that you get here, you do get a lot you know, she's [the tutor] very supportive and very helpful and I think a lot of the other staff, you could ask any one of them and they will help you as much as they can and there is a person, I don't see her but I know others do who like, you go down and she will set you like, if your assignment is due in three weeks, I want to see 500 words by then and she will read through it and check it and make sure that you are on the right lines so you have like little deadlines before your big deadline. She helps you with the writing side of it and then the referencing and the study skills coordinator I think she's called, she will help you with your spelling and make it sound posher and that sort of thing (Emma, November 2014).

As suggested previously, constructions of independence are closely intertwined with discourses of support and relationships. In the extract above from the interview with Emma, she describes the support offered within the college as 'one-to-one' support from staff who will 'help you as much as they can' suggesting that students perceive that they will be supported to achieve and that the support is readily accessible within the college. Students perceive that they need to be independent learners as HE-in-FE students.

Students construct their identities within the widening participation discourses. They perceive themselves as independent, but not always enough to study in university. This has been shaped by the deficit discourse of dependence. This can be linked back to the widening participation discourses and the 'dumbing down' discourses that they are located within. Such discourses influence students' perceptions of themselves and of HE-in-FE and university level study, they are independent, but they perceive it to be a watered-down type of independence, less than that which would be required at a university.

Staff within the college reproduce the discourse which place the students at a disadvantage. Interviews with staff within the college demonstrated the value that they place on independence as a proficiency that is both required and developed by the education that students receive. This can be seen in from the excerpt below, this was a typical viewpoint across the tutor and library staff interviewed.

It has been noticeable since we have started running FDs instead of HNDs that the students are becoming more independent, there have always been courses where people are more independent and there still is. I think it may be that the tutors lead them to be more independent. They are strongly supported independent learners and when they need help, they come and get it, and that is a good thing. That is something that has spread across the HE and it is nice because it means that the HE-in-FE is a success. At the university I worked at before, we used to have students and members of staff and professorial staff who wanted help because they weren't independent when it came to those things so it is nice to actually see the students progressing, it has always been one of the things I have enjoyed about working in education that you see people at the start of their course and you see them develop as they progress through their journey which is nice. As long as they know that when

they need help they can come and get help, I am happy with that being the case.

(Librarian, March, 2016)

As suggested by the librarian in describing HE-in-FE students as 'strongly supported independent learners', independence and support are not mutually exclusive terms; students can be independent learners and at the same time act rationally and with agency by accessing additional support and guidance to help them be successful. As proposed previously, discourses of support and independence are closely linked. The deficit discourses of dependence denigrate such collaborative, inter-dependent learning strategies and undermine the agency and autonomy that students demonstrate when actively seeking support with their studies. However, the findings suggest that learners are demonstrating their independence and autonomy by accessing help and support as and when they need it and actively demonstrating their agency. The findings indicate that support is readily available in HE-in-FE, but it is very much expected that the students demonstrate their autonomy and take ownership of their own learning.

I have contact with some students quite regularly because they access the chat very regularly so I might speak to them every week online, other students may not access that. We have tutorials, some students like to keep in contact through email, but we have a basic amount of contact that we have with them where I seek out them to check that they are alright but it is also about them taking ownership of that so some students take it upon themselves to be in contact quite regularly by email or by phone or want tutorials quite regularly, where as other students are quite happy to just get on with it on their own and they just need me to check in on them every so often. (Foundation Degree Course Tutor, July 2015)

The course tutor here talks about students taking ownership of their own learning by seeking support when needed. Such an approach to independence is closely related to discourses of support and relationships, in order for the students to demonstrate their independence in this way they must perceive the tutor to be accessible, available to them, and they must see the tutor as a partner in their learning (Tett, Cree and Christie, 2017). In order to develop as autonomous and independent learners, students need to be provided with the opportunities to develop their confidence and to act autonomously (Henri, Morrell and Scott, 2018). Such opportunities are more difficult to provide in an FE environment due to the lack of resources available, even simple independent tasks such as locating a text book in the library requires support as because of a lack of space, the text books are kept in storage so when a student wants to access them they have to ask a member of staff to collect one for them.

#### ***4.1.2 Relationships***

A key discursive construct emerging from the analysis was centred on relationships. HE-in-FE does not embellish an individual's fixed personal qualities, rather the experience of HE-in-FE is shaped by discourses and by relationships between the students themselves and others, framed also by educational discourses. Social engagement through developing relationships is important for students. It is vital that they learn to seek help and interact with others in order to fit into their HE community (Tett, Cree and Christie, 2017). Thus, students' experience of their education when studying HE-in-FE is framed by their relationships with others and the sense of belonging this builds.

Students studying HE-in-FE develop a sense of community which refers to two sets of relationships, those with students and those with staff. In their relationships with staff, students perceive them to be approachable and friendly. Within a college the numbers of staff tend to be smaller and less overwhelming than at a university (Winter and Dismore, 125

2010); as such, there is the opportunity for students to develop closer working relationships with the staff. Emma, a 28 year old FD student who works full time as a nursery nurse within a children's centre stated that "the tutor is very hands on, I think she's got quite a smaller group than you would having a bigger university kind of thing" (Emma, November 2014). Comments like Emma's were typical of the students' perceptions of their relationships with staff. Positive relationships were important to the students, contributing to their sense of belonging within the college, something they perceived that they wouldn't have in a university environment.

Several of the foundation degree students had studied within the college before and as such they had already built a relationship with the staff. Rebecca who was 21 and worked as a teaching assistant within a school had recently completed her level three within the college and had been taught by the course tutor. "I have always had quite a good relationship with the tutor because I came straight from level three being with her then" (Rebecca, November 2015). All students perceived staff to be approachable and supportive, including those who had not studied at the college before. This is exemplified in the excerpt below from the interview with Stacey.

The staff are really good, they are always there to support us and whenever we need anything we can always email them or erm, we have online on Moodle so we can always speak to them that way, erm, and we can always ring if we are desperate and can't get hold of them through email but staff are really good they are always there to help like the library staff, they are always there, you can go and ask them if you are struggling with eBooks or things like that they are always there and willing to support (Stacey, November 2015).

Students perceive teaching staff to be friendly and approachable. They felt they developed positive relationships which made them feel like they could access support. Students see university lecturers as more academic and more intelligent, this makes them appear less approachable and less accessible to some students (Greenbank, 2007). Katie exemplified this stating that she just doesn't "think they would be as nice, or as, I don't know, friendly. They are so clever, I just, I just think they would be harder to talk to. Harder to understand" (Katie, November 2014). Studying HE-in-FE appears to indicate that students are less daunted by staff.

He's lovely [the librarian], if you have got any problems you can just go to him and he will help you out and he will come to you and he will say, and he knows your name, I mean he's got all these students and he knows you by first name, he will come to you and just say, do you need any help or, have you got a problem with things or, you don't really have to approach him, if he sees you are struggling he will come and help you out (Jill, November 2015).

Jill's description of the librarian as 'lovely' indicates that she finds him friendly and approachable and not daunting or in any way intimidating, all students appeared to have this perception. The relationships between staff and students demonstrated here were typical of those demonstrated and discussed across all of the research findings. It can be seen from these excerpts that students felt comfortable in the library and in the college more generally because of their relationships with staff, this contributed to their sense of belonging in the college.

I prefer it because it is more friendlier here, like when you go into the library the librarian is friendly and remembers you from before and erm I think at university



with it being so many students they wouldn't be able to build that relationship with you, yeah so I think, they are very friendly and helpful (Stacey, November 2014).

These comments were echoed by the college librarian who believes that building positive relationships with students is important in order to be able to provide support. Having an open-door policy as described by the librarian in the excerpt below was less intimidating for the students. Again, there are links here with a sense of belonging which is developed through the relationships between staff and students.

My door is not so much always open as always approached. If I have got my door closed, students know they just knock and ask things, there is an expectation from them which I am quite pleased about that they don't think of it as, they always say 'sorry for interrupting but', there is always an expectation from them that they can come and talk to me at any point and I am quite pleased with that because that is what we hopefully engender in them that that is what we are here for, we are here to help. If that means I am in the middle of something and I have to stop and break off and do something else that's fine too (Librarian, March, 2016).

The limited number of HE-in-FE students studying within college enable staff such as the librarian to know and build a relationship with each student, the ratios of staff to students enable students to develop closer working relationships where staff know the students' names making studying HE-in-FE less overwhelming than studying within a university (Winter and Dismore, 2010). This was echoed in comments from the FD course tutor;

Fortunately, because we are such a small college, and we have really good relationships with the students, we recognise very quickly if any of them are struggling in any way. We try to be quite approachable and to seem available to

students, they know they can just come and see us at any time if they have any problems, hopefully that makes them feel supported (Foundation degree course tutor, July 2015).

This excerpt demonstrates the importance that college staff place on developing relationships, the tutor describes it as 'fortunate' that the size of the college, indicating fewer students and staff, allows positive relationships to be built with the students. The tutor wants to be seen as 'available' by the students which she perceives will enable them to feel supported. This approach by staff enables students to build a sense of belonging within the college and a sense of comfort.

It has been suggested so far that students can construct a sense of belonging within the environment by developing positive relationships. This is especially true in their relationships with their peers. By sharing common features such as being mature, part time students working in early years, the students bonded more easily (Tett, Cree and Christie, 2017), developing a strong sense of belonging. This sense of belonging has also been linked to retention. When students develop good relationships and a strong sense of community, higher student involvement and retention will result (Knekta and McCartney, 2018). Students find their peer relationships particularly important when they are struggling, working with fellow students enables them to develop as independent learners.

We help each other a lot. We just talk about what we can do to make our work better and then we will go back and tell our tutor, or, if anyone is struggling we talk about it and see what we could do too so you talk about like what they have done and then we can put our points across. It helps us to make sure we are on the right lines with our work (Katie, November 2015).

Here Katie talks about students' providing support to each other with their work, helping each other to improve and making sure that they are completing work as expected. Making sure that their work is 'on the right lines' suggests a preoccupation with knowing what is expected and meeting these expectations. Students felt that peer support enabled them to achieve this. These peer relationships were especially important for the students in feeling comfortable in the environment. The key discourses of relationships, sense of belonging and support were closely intertwined and relationships were an important part of shaping students sense of belonging and feelings of being supported. Rebecca explained that it makes her "happier as a student because I know it's there if I need it. I feel supported by the teachers and the other students" (Rebecca, November 2014). In saying that the support is there 'if she needs it' suggests that Rebecca finds this reassuring, a comfort from the knowledge that she will not be left to fail.

The peer support was not limited to within college. Students set up virtual support using social media tools enabling them to access support and extend their supportive peer relationships outside of the college environment. Students frequently raised this in their interviews as an important way they feel supported and connected to peers in the group.

Within our group we have got quite close, we have actually set up a Facebook group between us all so if we are struggling we will comment on there and get a lot of support that way, like when we were handing in we were all like, have we done it yet, have we done it? Have we all handed in and giving people support like moral support to carry on and carry on doing it so we have got quite a good relationship with the ones who have got Facebook there to include them in that, so there are some people who don't have Facebook but the people how they are close to they speak and pass things on from that (Stacey, November 2015).

This extract from Stacey suggests that the peer support goes beyond providing advice and guidance to each other, and in addition provides motivation and encouragement and providing what Stacey terms 'moral support'. Stacey talks here about how students encourage each other to meet deadlines through the use of social media drawing on the 'good relationships' between students to support each other. The students state that this support enables them to be successful which again contributes to their sense of belonging within the college. Perceptions of academic success increases and improves students' sense of belonging in HE (Pichon, 2016). As Sarah states, "you have got support if you need it off everybody else, you are not having to wait or ask for tutors help, you have got everybody's support there all at the same time" (Sarah, November 2015). Sarah's comments here suggest a collaborative approach to learning where students and staff have strong, supportive relationships and where there is always someone available to help.

The relationships that students have with both staff and their peers can make a significant difference to student identities and to how they manage their transitions through education (Tett, Cree and Christie, 2017). Students' identities and their beliefs about their capabilities can be influenced and reconceptualised as a result of their developing social relationships with staff and fellow students which changes their position from being dependent to having a greater sense of independence. Developing positive relationships with staff fostered positive dispositions and greater confidence in students' abilities, in order for this to happen, students needed to feel that staff are both available and allied to them (Tett, Cree and Christie, 2017).

#### 4.1.3 Sense of belonging

Another key discursive construct emerging as a central shaping factor affecting students' experience of HE-in-FE and linking closely with relationships, was comfort and a sense of

belonging. "Learner identity is positively linked with both the academic and social context of learning as well as with concepts of engagement and a sense of belonging in HE" (MacFarlane, 2018, p1). As HE-in-FE students tend to be recruited from non-traditional backgrounds, they require support to develop a sense of belonging in their new, challenging environment (Krutkowski, 2017). Students' identity is developed not only through learning and mastering new skills, but more importantly through the social and cultural structures of the environment. This suggests that learning is not just the development of skills, it is the creation of an identity that includes developing mutual values, similar assumptions and shared purposes with others within the HE community. This leads to a specific way of conceptualising learner identities as being sensitive to each students' prior experiences, cultural influences, and relationships (Tett, Cree and Christie, 2017). Becoming a student in a university means undoing their earlier understanding of themselves as they face an unfamiliar environment with new teaching styles and different cultural assumptions. However, HE-in-FE students are arguably avoiding this by choosing to remain in a familiar environment. Students' expectations of Universities and their predispositions may lead them to feel like they do not belong in a university, in comparison to HE-in-FE where they feel a sense of belonging. This sense of comfort may actually work to encourage students to seek spaces within which they feel they belong and avoid spaces which put them out of their comfort zone affecting withdrawal and retention.

Sense of belonging has been conceptualised in different ways in the literature, on the whole, the literature sees students developing a sense of belonging as a positive experience. Sense of belonging has been conceptualised as students feeling part of a community. There are a range of factors which affect how students develop this sense of belonging including their experiences within the classroom, the social activities that students undertake within the environment and the friendships and relationships that students develop. Relationships in this context relate to the students' perceived ability to relate to staff and peers (Pichon,

2016). Such a sense of belonging contributes to student retention as students who are socially integrated are more likely to persist with their education. Students are more likely to develop this sense of belonging if they perceive that they have the ability to do the work and be successful academically. A sense of belonging is conceptualised as students being able to make meaningful connections with staff and peers within their educational community (Pichon, 2016; Knekta and McCartney, 2018). This approach contends that a sense of belonging is about being socially integrated and can be developed by encouraging students to engage in projects which enable them to work together and interact with each other. Conceptualised as a sense of fitting in, a sense of belonging has been understood as a feeling that can be lost when entering a new HEI and one that can be regained and developed through positive relationships with peers and staff (Tett, Cree and Christie, 2017) and through sharing values and focus on progression (Knekta and McCartney, 2018). This socio-cultural perspective sees a sense of belonging as a feeling which is socially negotiated and involves developing shared values and purposes with peers and staff.

A more critical approach has been taken to sense of belonging which foregrounds issues of identity and the ways in which the cultures and practices of some universities leave non-traditional students with a sense of 'standing out' rather than 'fitting in' (Reay, Crozier and Clayton, 2010, p107). Researchers draw on Bourdieu's concepts of habitus and capital to address the experiences of non-traditional students in different types of HEI. They conclude that the academic status of HEIs, alongside their curriculum offer and cultural characteristics work to form the institutional habitus. Middle class students have the confidence and sense of entitlement which allows them to 'fit in' within this environment but, in contrast, working class students lack these dispositions and as a result are left feeling like they don't belong. Such an approach argues that non-traditional students don't feel a sense of belonging within more elite universities because they don't have the cultural capital to fit in. Non-traditional students lack a sense of entitlement to knowledge and so

they are more likely to choose a HEI where they feel that there are people like them, somewhere they feel they belong. This explanation fails to consider the effects of discourses of widening participation, vulnerability and support and how they work to construct non-traditional student identities and influence their sense of belonging.

This thesis takes a different approach to conceptualising sense of belonging. Although agreeing with Reay, Crozier and Clayton (2010) that sense of belonging is linked to identity and that non-traditional students can lack the confidence and sense of entitlement to apply to more elite HEIs, this thesis argues that it is the policy discourses of widening participation that shape students' identities. Locating non-traditional learners within a deficit discourse leads them to construct a learner identity which makes them feel that they can only fit in in certain institutions, ones which are local with a more supportive culture. This sense of belonging is shaped by discourses of widening participation, reproducing the notion that non-traditional learners are lacking in some way, that they are vulnerable, and that their specific needs are met within HE-in-FE, which is where they belong.

I was more comfortable coming to a smaller place where they offered like HE for students like me, rather than going to a big university and thinking hmmm, I don't like that (Jess, November 2014).

This excerpt is typical of the data collected across the sample. Jess claims that the college offers HE for 'someone like' her. This may suggest that she has constructed an identity of someone who shouldn't really be in university, that she doesn't really deserve to be there because she needs support. This constructed identity leads to a sense of comfort in HE-in-FE where she feels she does belong. My interpretation is that the deficit discourses that Jess has constructed her sense of self within have shaped her identity. This has led her to believe that she wouldn't fit in in a 'big university' and that she would feel more

'comfortable', having a sense of belonging, within a smaller FEC where she does belong, and which provides support and caters for students like her.

When arriving at a university, students who have studied HE-in-FE can be intimidated by the scale of the campus which they can find frightening (Winter and Dismore, 2010). Had the students within this study chosen to study in a university where the environment was not familiar and as a result, less negotiable, the students wouldn't have found it as easy to develop their sense of belonging and identity, they would have had to work much harder to develop effective ways of participating in the new knowledge practices of this unfamiliar environment (Tett, Cree and Christie, 2017). By opting to study HE-in-FE the students had selected a familiar environment with high levels of support from both staff and from their fellow students, they receive more immediate feedback and they are surer about what is expected of them. Such experiences increase their sense of belonging in the environment. In developing this sense of belonging students are less likely to drop out of study (Knehta and McCartney, 2018), however, despite this benefit it is less likely to challenge the students and prepare them for HE within a university. Jill highlights these key points in the following quotation. She explains that she chose to study HE-in-FE because there are fewer people, so she finds it is easier to access academic support. She also explains that she perceived the physical environment as easier to navigate.

Well cos like at universities there's loads of people isn't there doing like foundation degrees whereas that means we are the only foundation degrees here so that means its small so if you need access to, I don't know, someone to proof read your work it's not as hard as university and so, and college is small, so like, at university you would get lost whereas here, you would kind of figure your way out wouldn't you. It's not that big (Jill, November 2014).



Having studied within the college previously also enabled students to build a sense of belonging. "I know the tutors so I'm really comfortable, and I know college so, it's comfortable for me to come back to college" (Katie, November 2014). Here, Katie's sense of comfort and belonging in the environment related to her 'knowing' the college from previous experiences. This sense of belonging in the environment meant that she wanted "to come back to college' to study HE rather than attend a university. This 'sense of belonging' may actually inhibit the students' progression, the students suggest that feeling comfortable when studying HE is a key factor affecting their ability to study. It is clearly an important factor to the students. This sense of comfort and belonging may be misrecognised by students as a wholly positive element of their experience of HE-in-FE when in fact it limits their opportunities. Students choose to study HE-in-FE because they believe they 'fit in' in the environment and because they feel comfortable in their relationships with others and in the college environment. As a result, they develop a sense of belonging which as argued previously encourages retention (Knekta and McCartney, 2018). However, building this sense of belonging and 'fitting in' in the HE-in-FE environment acts to confirm and consolidate the belief that they wouldn't fit in within a university and in some ways this works to maintain inequalities and reproduce social class relations.

#### ***4.1.4 Section one summary***

Learners studying HE-in-FE are studying in a hybrid sector and as a result their identities encompass both FE and HE (Winter and Dismore, 2010). Understanding such notions of identity are central to sociocultural accounts of studying HE-in-FE (Solomon, 2007). This chapter has argued that HE-in-FE student identity is shaped by widening participation discourses which have contradictory influences on the students constructed identities.

Multiple truths are experienced by the students and these have been articulated by them in multiple ways throughout the data.

Widening participation policy discourses pathologise HE-in-FE students and lead them to see themselves as lacking the confidence and independence required for university study. The discourses take for granted the assumption that non-traditional students are best suited to study vocational courses at below degree level, this affects how the students see themselves and, for some students, limits their aspirations (Krutkowski, 2017). The students see themselves as independent, however they perceive themselves to have a kind of watered-down independence, one that requires them to have good relationships with peers and staff such that they can access support when required. This identity has been shaped by the deficit discourses of widening participation and dependence that they are located within. Some individualist approaches to identity fail to recognise or value the agency and autonomy with which students act when demonstrating support seeking behaviour, this alternative conceptualisation acknowledges the collaborative and collective nature of learning and the benefit of close, supportive relationships.

The widening participation discourses also shape the students' constructions of identity in positive ways. Despite positioning the students in a less favourable position within the hierarchy of HE, widening participation policies have opened HE up as a possibility to the students (Bathmaker, 2016). Students are positioned within the discourse as having potential. As a result of this, students construct an identity characterised by determination and a belief that they can be successful. Studying HE-in-FE can increase students' confidence and improve their self-esteem by providing them with positive relationships, a sense of belonging and by fostering their sense of potential and determination.

## **4.2 How the HE-in-FE students' experiences are shaped by discourses**

The previous section presented research data that identified and explored how widening participation discourses shape and influence the identities of HE-in-FE students. By identifying how students discursively construct their identities and locating this within the literature, the section offered a contextual basis for the presentation of further findings. This section thus examines how the students' experiences of studying HE-in-FE are influenced by the discourses presented. The section begins by considering how the discourses lead students to be studying HE-in-FE, before examining how they shape the students' experiences of being an HE-in-FE student. Finally, the section considers how studying HE-in-FE shapes the future experiences of the students.

### **4.2.1 How students come to be studying HE-in-FE**

As previously discussed, the discourses around students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, such as those in this study, often assume a deficit conceptualisation with the challenges they face being perceived as the fault of the individual student who is deemed to be in deficit. Such discourses work to construct the identities and experience of HE-in-FE students who then see themselves not belonging in a university (McKay and Devlin, 2016).

Studying in an unfamiliar environment with unfamiliar teaching and learning methods can lead to what has been termed 'learning shock' (Griffiths, Winstanley and Yiannis, 2005) where students feel frustrated, confused and anxious. HE-in-FE students may select to avoid such an experience when choosing their place of study. Learning shock is a phenomenon felt by many adult students when returning to study and it could be argued that students mitigate the effects of this by choosing to study HE-in-FE rather than in a

university. There are a range of factors influencing non-traditional students' choices when selecting where to study including the courses on offer, the likelihood of being selected, knowing individuals already studying within an institution and finally because of the friendliness of staff during visits. For many non-traditional students, a significant factor influencing their choice of institution is its closeness to home (King, Saraswat and Widdowson, 2015) as their travel costs and the time limitations of childcare responsibilities can make it too difficult to travel further afield to access HE provision (Leathwood and O'Connell, 2003). For many students within this study, the college was their first choice of institution because of its location and the ease with which they could access the provision. "I only live 5 minutes down the road. I chose here because I wanted a college, I wanted it to be local" (Rebecca, November 2015). This quote from Rebecca demonstrates that travelling matters to her. There are pragmatic issues of childcare and travel which need to be considered, however, this is also linked to support and a sense of belonging rather than simply being related to the distance travelled. Jess in the excerpt that follows demonstrates that she wanted to study locally, within a college, where she perceived her support needs would be catered for.

I didn't choose a university cos that's travelling again, to the city, it's the closest university and it's travelling there once a week and what with the cost of parking and petrol and things like that. Parking is free here and its so close, plus, I know I will get extra help here, there is everyone here to help (Jess, November 2014).

Emma framed her decision to choose to study within a college purely in pragmatic terms;

I looked at other colleges but I prefer it here because it's closer to home and again for my little boy its easier for me to be closer. I wouldn't have gone to a university or full time because I knew I needed to work... It's the travel because the closest

university is in the city, I don't like driving long ways and stuff, I did look into the OU and I did start it before I fell pregnant, but I struggled to get there, even without my little boy and having support off a partner (Emma, November, 2014).

Students studying HE-in-FE are more likely to be studying vocational courses in the aim of improving their career prospects or reinforcing their existing job roles (King, Saraswat and Widdowson, 2015). For all of the respondents in this study their degree choice was directly related to their employment. All were studying the Foundation Degree in the hope that they would progress to become nursery managers, or, were already working as nursery managers and wanted the degree to somehow validate them in their role.

I am obviously doing it because I want to improve my work cos I work in a nursery and I want to improve my knowledge and background to support the children I look after and to obviously further myself in my career in working with children because I do want to move up eventually and be, work in the office or in schools or things like that and not just stop as a supervisor in a nursery (Jess, November 2014).

Jess constructs her current role here as 'just a supervisor in a nursery' and perceives that studying HE-in-FE will enable her to progress in her career. This suggests that widening participation policy discourses are enabling students to progress into employment and achieve their ambition of becoming 'future workers' (Brookes, 2018, p750).

I work at a children's centre as an assistant, I used to be a deputy manager of a children's centre but you have to have your level four now, I was made redundant from that post and I wanted to progress so that's why I decided to come here (Jill, November 2014).

Adopting a capabilities approach to social justice would frame students' experience positively. The extracts from Jill and Jess above suggest that they are looking for courses to progress their careers which studying for an FD would do thus promoting the students' wellbeing and functionings (Sen, 1999). However, these reasons and explanations for coming to study HE-in-FE have been shaped by the dominant discourses. These discourses are based on the assumption that such non-traditional students are best suited to vocational, work related courses, offered within FECs (Leathwood and O'Connell, 2003) where the individual 'problems' that students bring with them such as their additional childcare commitments and their lack of confidence to travel to the local university can be 'fixed'. These dominant discourses may be shaping the students' identities leading them to perceive themselves as fixed in their existing position and not fit for university level study.

The widening participation discourses drawn upon in advertising documents of Universities such as their websites and prospectuses are likely to influence the decisions that students make about which higher education institution they should apply to (Graham, 2013). Such discourses project an accessible environment although over time there has been a shift, particularly in newer HE providers towards the quality of their provision. Newer universities tend to position themselves with wide appeal, offering 'any help necessary' (Graham, 2013, p82) to prospective students. These discourses are distinctive from those promoted by older universities which portray excellence and elitism. Such discourses are unfamiliar to many non-traditional students who don't have any experience of universities. The use of such discourses re-privileges middle class students because they are familiar with the discourses being presented. Institutions are marketing themselves in a way that is culturally familiar to particular groups of students (Shaw et al, 2007), as such, non-traditional, working class students are encouraged to apply to FE providers of HE and newer universities where they are made to feel like they fit in because of the discourses which are propagated. As such,

the FEIs are actively reproducing the deficit discourses that are shaping the students' identities.

#### 4.2.2 Students experience of studying HE in an FE environment

Students studying HE within FE environments often share the majority of spaces and facilities with the FE students. Students suggest that they would prefer to have separate HE study spaces including a library, and other academic and social spaces (King, Saraswat and Widdowson, 2015). The cohort studying their FD in this study were part time, studying one evening lesson alongside one online session each week. The students overwhelmingly claimed that they didn't like to come into college during the day and stated being outnumbered by the FE students as the main reason for them not feeling like they belong during the day.

I wouldn't like to come in through the day because you would think that you wouldn't really belong here, if you know what I mean, there isn't a place for you to belong. I think it's because, all of the groups like the level threes have their groups and they all stay in their groups, whereas you, as an independent person coming in, cos, you won't obviously always come in with people you are in class with, and just coming in to just sit on yourself in a library full of people, I think it's just, maybe a bit overwhelming but I think if they had a separate room where it was only for the older people, I think that would be better (Katie, November 2014).

Katie has constructed her identity as an HE student, as a result, she feels that she doesn't fit in at the college during the day time as it is full of groups of 'level threes', students studying vocational, A-level equivalent qualifications. This affects the students' sense of belonging which is important to the students in their experience of HE-in-FE. Having

somewhere to belong in the physical space appeared to be important to the students. This was a heated topic of discussion within the group interview Jess stated that not having a class room of their own made the students feel “not worthy, like we’ve been forgotten about basically, like the whole college is, like we’re excluded, it’s not open when we’re in” (Jess, July, 2016). Sarah agreed with this stating “Excluded is right, that’s a good word – we don’t have our own room, were not included’ (Sarah, July, 2016).

As highlighted in the quotations above which were typical of the participants’ responses, the lack of HE specific study spaces impacts on the students’ sense of identity as HE students and on their sense of belonging in the environment. Students were particularly affected by not having a particular room where they were based and they reported being taught for their second year in a travel and tourism classroom. This made the students feel excluded, affecting the sense of belonging developed in the relationships with other students and staff. This is a finding of importance for HE-in-FE practice. In providing support and building positive relationships with students the FE college enables students to construct a sense of belonging enabling them to study for their FD. However, in failing to provide separate study spaces for HE students this sense of belonging is being affected, student only feel like they belong in the college in the evening, when FE students are not present in the building. Even then, the students don’t perceive that they have their own space within the college.

Teachers who deliver HE-in-FE are also committed to delivery on FE courses. This impacts significantly on the time they have available to prepare for their HE lessons, but also on the distinctiveness of their approach to teaching when delivering HE courses (King, Saraswat and Widdowson, 2015).



I'm trying to juggle a level 3 tutorship role with HE and erm every year there is a lack of, there's less time that you can focus on it and whilst I'm aware that that is also becoming an issue in HE I don't think that it is at the same level, I feel that in order to be able to develop as a HE lecturer I need additional time to develop my own skills and my own knowledge and I think that there is more opportunity for that in a HE provision rather than an FE provision (Foundation degree course tutor, July 2015).

The course tutor here explains the key challenges of delivering HE-in-FE, she constructs her identity here as both an FE lecturer and a HE lecturer. She cites limited time as a key issue preventing her from developing her practice. The lack of time available for tutors to plan and support students studying HE-in-FE impacts on their experiences of study. As King, Saraswat and Widdowson, (2015) suggest, it also leads to less distinctive HE provision. The learning activities and experiences provided in HE-in-FE are more often more akin to FE than to HE provision. As Emma describes below.

I think it's quite similar to the level three, you know, there is still a lot of the group work and erm, so far like the stuff we do, obviously just on a more advanced thing, you've got to be in more depth (Emma, November, 2014).

Emma suggests here that the FD lessons are similar to those she attended as part of her level three qualifications with similar groups activities, she summarises the main difference as the level of depth with which they go into the topics. In providing HE courses without distinctive HE learning experiences HE-in-FE may not be properly preparing students for their transitions in to university study. Students are more likely to experience learning shock (Griffiths, Winstanley and Yiannis, 2005) described earlier when transitioning as they will be less familiar with the HE practices, and learning strategies employed within a

university. However, not all students constructed their experience in this way, Katie clarifies this below stating that the lessons are different at HE as students are not 'spoon fed' the information, rather than are 'pointed in the right direction' from which they can develop their understanding of the topic.

Obviously she doesn't go into as much depth as like level three where she would stand and give you a lecture about whatever it is and then you would have to do an activity. It's like, she will point you in the right direction and then let you find the answers yourself type of thing. Which I think is good because when you find the, find it yourself you can process it better cause it's not just somebody telling you this is what happens (Katie, November, 2014).

The differences between Katie's and Emma's account of their experiences demonstrates the multiple truths that students experience and how they construct and articulate these truths in multiple ways.

#### 4.2.3 Limiting students' opportunities for progression?

The deficit conceptualisations and discourses that students from widening participation backgrounds construct their reality within make them subject to discrimination that can have a negative impact on both their success and their progression (Devlin, 2013). The systems, processes and policies which shape students' experiences are key mechanisms by which the students who access HE-in-FE are unfairly disadvantaged. Such systems work to reproduce unfair access to, and unequal outcomes from education for such students (McKay and Devlin, 2016).

One of the discourses influencing and limiting the student's opportunities for progression into university centres around a sense of belonging. Feelings of not belonging in a university

are a barrier that is preventing entry for HE-in-FE students (McKay and Devlin, 2016). Bourdieu's concepts of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1992; Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977) and habitus (Bourdieu, 1990; 1992) have been drawn on to explain how factors can influence students' transitions into higher education. Working class students often inherit less knowledge about educational systems from their parents who are less confident in supporting their children with their educational choices relating to university. This will impact on the student's development of a sense of belonging as they are unfamiliar with the environment and as such some will not have the confidence to operate within it.

Well I've never seen a university so I wouldn't know what it's like to be honest, my mum was taught over the road for her nursing, her midwifery thing so I just thought, well it's only the same really, I knew what it was like from what she'd done (Sarah, November, 2014).

Sarah has constructed her understanding drawing on the discourses available to her, including those from her parents. She has a sense of familiarity with the college where as she 'wouldn't know' what university was like. Students who lack the appropriate knowledge and dispositions can find it more difficult when entering unfamiliar educational environments; as such they are more likely to select familiar environments for study. This will influence students' university choice and ability to assimilate into the university environment.

It has been argued that studying HE-in-FE provides a "transformative experience" for students in which they experience a shift in key attributes such as independence and confidence (Rocks and Lavender, 2018, p584). However, it is not always as straight forward as argued by Rocks and Lavender (2018), where this may be the case for some students as it develops them as confident and independent learners, it is not the case for all as it

positions them within a deficit discourse. For some students HE-in-FE does not prepare them for the transition into university; their identity and behaviours are being reinforced in a way that makes them feel comfortable in the HE-in-FE environment as a result they don't develop the independence required to encourage an easy transition into university. This lack of assimilation can be increased if the students' social, cultural, and economic dispositions don't fit with the dominant discourse of the HEI, this is often a discourse of independence (Leese, 2010). Staff delivering and supporting on HE-in-FE provision work hard to ensure that the students find them approachable, to build relationships with them and to make sure that they feel supported.

We just get along, she is supportive when you need it so that helps you and encourages you obviously if you need help and you are at your lowest you just go and see her and she helps you (Sarah, November, 2015).

In stating that she 'gets along' with the tutor, Sarah suggests an informal approach to their relationship. She also conceptualised the tutor as approachable. Such comments weren't limited to the tutor but were made in relation to library staff too. Stacey echoed comments from all participants in stating that the library staff are friendly and that they are able to build good relationships with them.

I prefer it because it is more friendlier here, like when you go into the library the librarian is friendly and he remembers you from before and erm I think at university with it being so many students they wouldn't be able to build that relationship with you, yeah so I think, they are very friendly and helpful (Stacey, November, 2014).

This is not something that happens by accident, as can be seen in the extract from an interview with the librarian below, the staff make a conscious effort to build relationships

with students and ensure that the students perceive them to be approachable and accessible.

I do try hard to make sure the students find me approachable and we as a team attempt to do that but I think that different people are, some people are more approachable than others. The students will always complain on Thursday and Friday because H is not here, they love H, she says that she is not the grandmother they have never had, she is the great grandmother that they have never had, and she is brilliant with students at all levels (Librarian, March, 2016).

It could be argued that by studying HE-in-FE, students aren't developing the skills required to fit in within a university environment, rather than challenging the students or taking them out of their comfort zones, the HE-in-FE environment makes the students feel comfortable, even providing them with the 'grandmother they never had' to provide them comfort. Although this has the benefit of developing the students' sense of belonging, it also may act to limit their opportunities for progression as it makes them less prepared for the transition to university. This may be because HE-in-FE is located within a deficit discourse which pathologises students and impacts on their identities.

#### 4.2.4 Section two summary.

The discourse of widening participation, and discursive constructions of students' sense of belonging and independence shape their experiences of studying HE-in-FE. Initially, the discourses influence prospective HE students' choice of where to study, these deficit discourses lead widening participation students to be studying work related HE programmes within FE institutions.

The discourses also shape the learning experiences that students engage with when studying HE-in-FE. These learning experiences are more likely to be similar to FE provision than HE provision and, as a result, completing a foundation degree in an FEC does not always adequately prepare the students for study within a university. Studying HE-in-FE also encourages students to develop a sense of belonging within the college. Students build supportive relationships with staff and peers which makes them feel comfortable. Although this is beneficial to the students in supporting them to complete their foundation degree, it may also have the detrimental effect of limiting the opportunities for progression for students studying HE-in-FE.

### ***4.3 Conceptualisations of support***

This final of the three findings sections examines the support structures in place to support students studying HE-in-FE. Discourses of support were highlighted frequently by students as important factors shaping their experiences of HE-in-FE. Students studying HE-in-FE value the support provided by their teachers (King, Saraswat and Widdowson, 2015). This final section of the findings chapter begins by drawing on the literature to problematise what is meant by the term 'student support' before examining how students are supported in HE-in-FE. The chapter concludes by highlighting the contradictory nature of support and how it both enables and constrains the student's experiences of HE-in-FE. Whilst on the one hand, students perceive the support to be a positive element of their experience, opening up access to HE which they never thought they would have and providing them with confidence and a sense of belonging. On the other hand, the provision of support may not be preparing students for university level study, rather the support received by the students may be perpetuating their disadvantage and limiting their opportunities for progression.

### 4.3.1 Conceptualisations of support

As with all discourses, what is meant by the term 'student support' will be different for different students and lecturers, and indeed, different HEIs. This issue has rarely been addressed or problematised in the literature. There are different ways of conceptualising the support offered to students studying HE-in-FE, these include humanistic, instrumental and therapeutic conceptualisations. Humanistic interpretations are rooted in traditional humanist ideology underpinning English traditions of education. Such an approach places much significance on the pastoral element of education and is concerned with building and maintaining individual relationships with students in the belief that this will support the students learning and development. This approach has traditionally been confined to older and more prestigious institutions in the UK where smaller class sizes with small group tutorials are a typical teaching method. Such notions of support grounded in the idea that the tutor as the expert is the primary agent of support although such an approach is dependent on the close relationships that can only develop with small class sizes (Bertram, 2009).

A different understanding of student support is the instrumental interpretation, this approach perceives support as a technical solution where students are directed away from academic staff and towards specialist support services and products (Bertram, 2009). This strategy can appear externally to demonstrate an important commitment to support, however, looking more closely it may appear that such approaches to support are performance driven. In a 'market' of mass HE, student feedback and evaluations detailing students' perceptions of the support on offer are important. Support is more auditable than ever and as such this may be driving more technical approaches to support in many organisations. Students see support as a commodity for which they are the consumers marking a significant contrast to the humanistic approaches to support. The marketisation of HE results in students behaving more like consumers, discussing their expectations of

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support within a 'value for money' discourse (Bartram, 2009). Students in this study also constructed their evaluations of the support provided within the value for money discourse. During the photograph elicitation group interview, students discussed the study skills advisor describing the support that she provided and that some of them felt at a loss when she left the college. The discussion within the group interview centred around finance as can be seen in the following extract.

Oh yeah, we need another one of them [HE study skills]. She's not being replaced, because we all pay 4 grand each a year, and all these level threes get the money spent on them, the equivalent anyway, college spend it on other stuff, there are at least 10 of us so that is like 40 thousand pounds they get off us a year, and they can't afford to employ one person to help us (Stacey, July, 2016).

Stacey constructs her experience here within a value for money discourse, she states how much each student is paying for the course and critiques the support available based on a lack of value for money. Stacey's comment was typical of the views expressed by all students taking part in the group interview. This exemplifies how the students see support as a commodity, constructed by a discourse of marketisation within HE.

The therapeutic interpretation is another way of conceptualising support offered in the literature, this approach arises from arguments that education in England has taken on a new therapeutic emphasis with concern placed on developing confidence and self-esteem (Brown, Ecclestone and Emmel, 2017). Such an approach argues that the consideration given to the feelings of students is influencing the teaching practices placing emphasis on the problems that the students are perceived to have (Bertram, 2009). This may have the undesirable effect of legitimating the deficit discourses in relation to non-traditional students studying HE-in-FE, which could also lead to students accepting and internalising this



perception thus affecting their development as an independent learner, perpetuating the perceived need for support. This continues to position learners within a deficit discourse emphasising their inadequacies and resulting in a different offer of support than a more nurturing culture would. Problems are believed to be an individual difficulty with mechanisms put in place by the institution to solve them (Roberts, Dunworth and Boldy, 2018). This shifts the provision of support from academic staff to a group of support service providers. Despite humanistic approaches to support traditionally being offered in the most elite institutions, at the opposite end of the hierarchy to HE-in-FE, the findings suggest that elements of this approach are being offered within the case study setting, in fact, elements of each type of support are being offered. The students are supported in the college, predominantly by their tutor, the expert, who offers advice and support to promote the students' academic development, however, from an instrumentalist point of view, the college offered a study skills advisor who the students were directed to with academic writing and referencing issues.

She brought it up and just showed me and told me what I had got and you know said I had done well and then just basically pointed me though you know, what I had done well and what I needed to do and then showed me on the essay bits that like, well that's where you did that, that bit is where you did that, you didn't meet that bit, that was good and then just read through my assignment now quickly like skimmed through it and just said, if I was going to tell you something, I would want you to reference, put a few more references in, you're explaining it instead of... You know, that kind of thing, just gave me a few pointers (Emma, November, 2014).

Emma here describes the support she has received from her tutor, she appears to value the constructive feedback, appreciating being pointed to the areas of strength and areas for development within her work. This is further evidence of students' determination to

improve. Alongside this tutor feedback, students were supported by a study skills coordinator who would provide support and advice in relation to the development of their academic writing. The study skills coordinator will

proof read their work, erm, again, it's the ownership of the students in terms of how much they access that, I have some students who go on a weekly basis, some who don't bother at all, but, the HE study skills coordinator can proof read their work, work with them on a specific aspect so if they are struggling with their referencing, they can help them with that, with their academic writing, erm, but what they can't do is help them with the content because they are not subject related, which they shouldn't be any way so (FD course tutor, July, 2015).

The course tutor here demonstrates how she constructs both her role and that of the study skills coordinator, where her role is to support students to develop their understanding of the curriculum, the role of the study skills coordinator is to support the development of their academic writing. The students value both types of support.

It was really good, it was really useful because we would sit down at a computer screen, and we would load the work up and she would read through it and spell check it and things like that but also I did come and see her before I had even completed my work and she helped me to structure my work so that I knew like, what I needed to put in and how many words and things like that that we needed to go into each section and like she would give me different things to go and look up and things like that so she was really good that way as well (Stacey, November, 2014).

Stacey here describes how she was supported with her academic writing both before and during the writing of an assignment. Jess agrees that this support is useful below.

She [study skills advisor] was quite useful when you emailed her though, I emailed her most of the time and she still read it and sent it you back with stuff that you needed to do like she wrote in red on it for you to do and stuff. Yeah, I don't know how the others are going to cope not having that, getting that study skills section at the start of the course though, because like she came in and spoke to us and taught us how to reference and things like that, I don't know how they are going to get on with out her (Jess, July, 2016).

Jess states here that she is not sure how new students 'are going to cope' not having access to the study skills coordinator. Referring to the college's decision not to replace the coordinator when she resigned, Jess's reference to not coping demonstrates how the students rely on the support offered and perceive that they would not be able to complete an FD without it.

Aside from being dependent on the size of the institution, budget and student profile, the support provided is ultimately a result of broader policy direction which influences college policies on widening participation and ultimately, staff behaviours. The Government's push on widening participation obliges HEIs to provide such support to those classed as 'widening participation' students (McKay and Devlin, 2016). As one element of the organization of HE institutions, student support is shaped by the same forces that shape HE more widely, marketisation, managerialism and globalisation has had a significant impact on HE provision and as such, on the way that students are supported in HE (Roberts, Dunworth and Boldy, 2018). Framed by such discourses students have been positioned as consumers and institutions have been encouraged to provide less personalised, off the shelf support

packages. Such an approach links with the findings of other studies (Smith, 2007), however the students' interview data didn't reflect those from the literature, students and tutors described an ad-hoc system of support provided on a personalised basis centred around each student's individual needs.

Obviously she [the tutor] is online where we will be able to directly ask questions to her and she will answer us straight back and she will comment on our forum chats as well when we are doing our forum how good, you can ask her anything, even if it's just before our break we will go and ask her something or at the end of the session if we say, can we just have a quick word, that's when we have our tutorials and like she will guide us through anything that we need to do and check up on us that we are doing it right (Jess, November, 2014).

You have got more of a support with tutors, you can see them at any time, you can email them if you need them. The course is online so you have still got that at home, where you can talk to them (Rebecca, November, 2014).

Both Jess and Rebecca here perceive that the tutor is accessible and available to provide support, Jess states that you can 'ask her anything' and Rebecca points out that you can talk to her any time, even at home. The contexts of support can be placed on a continuum from structured, this could be organised support from a study skills advisor, to unstructured, a chance meeting with a tutor in the corridor. The nature of support can also be placed on a continuum from formal, a lecture style interaction, to informal, a general chat (Jacklin and Robinson, 2007). The support received in HE-in-FE by students in this research appears to fall at each end of the scale. They have supportive relationships with their tutors and as such, they access support in a very informal and unstructured way,

however, more formal support structures are in place should the students wish to access them.

#### 4.3.2 Tutor support

The deficit discourses discussed in the previous sections of the analysis chapter inform teachers expectations of the students, which can lead to them lowering their expectations of the students (McKay and Devlin, 2016). As such, instead of providing the students with challenge and the opportunity and space to develop, the tutors, in some instances may be over supporting the students to prevent them from failing. Such deficit discourses leave tutors with the expectation that the students are not independent learners and that they need 'spoon feeding'. In addition to this, some tutors in FE underestimate the levels of support provided in university settings and perceive significant and prohibitive differences in the skill set requirements for students in each sector (Rhodes et al, 2002). Such perceptions can be unintentionally passed on to students influencing their perceptions and thus, their identities and experiences. Although college staff perceive that there is less guidance provided within universities, in recent times it has become common for universities to provide a range of support strategies including personal tutors, study skills support, and academic counselling. It is possible that some college tutors underestimate this support and as a result fail to properly reassure their students. Tutors and other staff within both FECs and in universities have a role to play in reassuring students that the study skills needed to be successful in a university environment can be learned and there are a range of modes of study within universities that can be accessible to non-traditional students (Rhodes et al, 2002). Being aware of the deficit discourses within which the students are located and the impact this can have on student identities, experience and progression, professionals within the sector could take steps to challenge the dominant discourses and reflect on the ways in which they reproduce them.

Students' perceptions of university study may have put them off applying to university and as a result may have directed them to study HE-in-FE. Students believe that the workload in a university is higher than that in HE-in-FE, they also believe that they would need to be more independent learners in a university (Leese, 2010). The students in this study perceived that they received a significant amount of support studying HE-in-FE that they wouldn't have gained by going to a university.

I think you get extra help here, I don't think you would get as much help as you would in, I don't think you would get extra help at uni, I think, I don't know, I think they would just expect you to do it but here that help is available (Jess, November, 2014).

Jess has constructed an understanding of what it would be like to study in a university and how much support students would be given, this in turn influences her reflection on the support she receives in HE-in-FE. Assumptions that HE provides less support to students than FE have been validated in previous studies which have found that some students feel unsupported when transitioning into university. Students who have made the transition perceive that support is available in the first week or so but after teaching begins the large class sizes preclude tutors from providing the support needed (Leese, 2010). However, other studies have suggested that increasingly within universities, support is provided to meet the needs of students, particularly those who are classed as non-traditional, widening participation students (Rhodes et al, 2002).

Students overwhelmingly reported feeling that they had almost unlimited and instant access to support from their tutor.

Well I could have twenty-four-hour contact if I wanted to, obviously with email. Erm, phone, I know I can always leave a message to be called back if I need to. It makes me happier as a student because I know it's there if I need it, I feel supported by the teachers and the other students. (Rebecca, November, 2014).

As demonstrated here by Rebecca, students feel they have instant and constant support from staff within the college which Rebecca constructs positively stating that it makes her 'happy'. The provision of this support, whilst enabling students to be successful in their studies and developing their sense of belonging, reinforces the deficit discourse of dependence. It is not clear whose interests are being served by this provision of support, however the students perceive this in a positive way as demonstrated by Katie below.

It's easy enough to email the tutor. I did the other day when I was struggling on a computer, erm, and she gets back really quickly so I think it's good communication between all the staff and us students (Katie, November, 2014).

This instant access wasn't limited to the course tutor, students reported having instant support from library and ICT support within the college.

I just asked her [the library assistant] to come and help me and straight away she did it and er, she couldn't sort it so she rung someone else up who was sorting it and it was done quickly and they were just really nice about it and erm, they were very approachable and things (Kim, November, 2014).

Kim described receiving support 'straight away' and suggested that the staff were open and friendly. Instant support may be being provided in this way because the students have been placed within a deficit discourse of vulnerability, of being needy – staff within the college

reinforce this by providing support for students instantly – rather than allowing students to develop independence. Students may be being supported to be dependent, reproducing the discourse of dependence that the students are located within and confirming their belief that they need this support in order to be able to study HE.

### 4.3.3 Peer support

In addition to the support provided by staff, students described the support offered by peers. This support formed an integral part of the student experience which contributed to their construction of a sense of belonging within the college. Peer support can enhance the transfer of a range of skills both academic and generic; the skills developed within peer relationships include a range of communication and transferable skills which support students as they progress through their education (Ryder et al. 2017).

The online learning environment featured significantly in the students' descriptions of peer support. They described using Facebook groups to support each other emotionally and academically as well as using blog spaces on Moodle as a way of providing support and encouragement. Such blogs provide a context for dialogues between active participants and readers. They provide "a solid base of shared experiences and mutual relationships" (Chang and Chang, 2014, p3) where students build a self-supporting community online. In supporting each other using online forums and blogs students develop a range of skills and positive learning outcomes. They provided students with the opportunity to see each other's questions, thoughts and ideas, which helped them to master the subject and complete their assignments. The use of blogs also enabled students to develop their critical thinking skills, improving students' overall performance and fostering the development of complex literacy skills (Novakovich, 2016).



In addition to the blogs, students used the social media platform Facebook to support each other. The use of social media and networking technologies has become endemic in younger individuals and as a result there has been an increase in interest about how they can be used in education both formally and informally (Garcia, Littlejohn and Rienties, 2015; Rehm et al, 2018). Social media has the potential to be used as a way of bridging formal and informal learning allowing students to create and take part in online learning communities (Greenhow and Lewin, 2016). The use of such technology promotes informal learning and allows students to ask and answer questions about course content which can result in improved course performance (Mikum et al. 2018).

Social media platforms allow students to take control over the learning process, they promote students' agency and autonomy in seeking to find answers and develop their knowledge and understanding (McLoughlin and Lee, 2010). However, research into the outcomes of using social media in education is contested. On the one hand social media sites such as Facebook can be used for collaboration, resource sharing, and for increasing peer support (Greenhow and Lewin, 2016). On the other hand, Facebook is primarily a social tool, although this has the benefit of increasing sense of belonging and thus improving retention, it could potentially negatively affect student outcomes as they spend less time on learning. Rebecca describes below how the students use Facebook as a tool to support each other.

People try and help, or we will post pictures of things that we have done on Facebook, like a good idea or if we have found things. Facebook is a good way to support each other, its more for the online stuff when we are struggling with the online we all post into there (Rebecca, November 2015).

Here she frames Facebook as a supportive tool used to share ideas and to collaborate, she makes no reference to using it as a forum to further develop social relationships. Stacey constructs her experience differently however, Stacey works in a day nursery with several other members of the group and perceives her relationships to be very close.

There are five of us from our setting doing this course, so we've got quite a close thing like, like we'll discuss it if we're all on dinner together or things like that, we will discuss it because obviously we are that close we will text each other or phone each other but then obviously we have got the online chat where we will discuss with everybody on a Tuesday night and the Facebook group that we use to help each other and just to share ideas and catch up (Stacey, November 2014).

There is a positive relationship between pre-existing peer relationships and group performance, students with existing social networks are likely to share more information, especially in online collaborative learning environments (Dingyloudi and Strijbos, 2018). Several of the participants in this research knew each other in various ways prior to studying HE-in-FE, some of the students worked together and some had studied together previously. These existing relationships supported the students to work collaboratively providing each other with peer support and developing their sense of belonging thus contributing to their experience of 'fitting in'. Although this promotes retention, it is also a feature that students are less likely to have in a university setting. They are more likely to be with previously unfamiliar peers and may find it more difficult to then develop social and supportive networks with them. As a result, such peer support networks developed in locally provided HE-in-FE could be acting to prevent students' progression into universities and ultimately reproduce social inequalities.

#### 4.3.4 Section three summary

With the expansion of HE encouraging students from a wide range of backgrounds to engage in higher study, they must be supported (Leese, 2010), however, the findings suggest that such non-traditional students are being directed into lower status institutions because the discourses of widening participation marginalise them and position them as deficient. The students are then over supported preventing their progression and reproducing inequalities. Students overwhelmingly report that the support provided in HE-in-FE is a key strength of the provision, however, it is possible that whilst this support is enabling students to succeed within FE, it is at the same time, constraining their progression into HE.

Progressing from a foundation degree within FE to an honours degree within a university is becoming an increasingly popular route through higher study (Winter and Dismore, 2010). However, studying HE within FE colleges is not necessarily preparing students for university study. This is largely due to the distinctive approaches to teaching and learning in the two sectors. Where students studying HE-in-FE receive significant levels of support with their studies, students who study in universities are provided with less support. There is also a more academic approach in universities with more emphasis on independent learning. Teaching in universities is more teacher centred with more students per class and less small group discussions (Greenbank, 2007). In comparison with HE, students who study HE within very small FECs enjoy accessible lecturers with small teaching groups, high-class contact hours and friendly and supportive staff. It could be argued that this could make the students' transition to university more difficult as the colleges are not preparing students for the university environment.

The research examining the amount of support provided within universities is conflicting. On the one hand, studies suggest that FE promotes a culture of support not offered in

universities with FE lecturers accessible during working hours unlike university lecturers who are trying to engage in research, potentially off site, when not teaching (Greenbank, 2007). This leaves HE-in-FE students ill prepared for their final year of study. Students entering their top-up year faced similar issues to conventional HE students entering their first year of study (Winter and Dismore, 2010). However, other studies seem to suggest that cultures of support within universities are changing, particularly in post 1992 universities, where students are being provided with a range of support (Rhodes et al, 2002). Some of the literature suggests that the support structures in place in HE-in-FE are different from those in Universities with support in colleges more likely to be provided by the lecturers, which less confident students may prefer because they want the reassurance from the person who is marking that they are doing it right. In contrast, in universities, the support is often centralised with the lecturers sometimes perceiving that it is not their job to provide the support (Greenbank, 2007).

It is not clear from the previous research conducted whether HE-in-FE students' horizons are broadened or limited by their experiences of studying within a college environment (Winter and Dismore, 2010). It could be argued that without HE-in-FE, students would not access any form of HE (Bathmaker, 2016). In accessing support, students act with agency. Students feel they are 'active agents in their learning' (Mckay and Devlin, 2016, p358) who are capable of identifying when they need help and where to go to find it. Such agency is not often highlighted in the literature. It provides a different way of conceptualising independence.

Ascertaining which forms of support are most appropriate for students is difficult considering the varying contexts within which students are studying in HE-in-FE and progressing on to university study (Winter and Dismore, 2010). Students need to be supported to overcome the barriers they face but at the same time they need to be

prepared for university. However, it could also be argued that HE-in-FE provided as part of a system that promotes different types of provision for different types of people will only serve to reproduce social and economic differences (Bathmaker, 2016). The discourses of widening participation, independence and support will shape the students' identities and experiences thus limiting their horizons and making them feel like they don't fit in within HE.

#### ***4.4 Findings chapter conclusion***

These findings are important because HE-in-FE providers and HEIs need to be aware of the discourses at play and the negative impact on non-traditional and widening participation students (Mckay and Devlin, 2016). It is only by highlighting the effects of such discourses that their impact can be challenged.

In outlining these findings, it is important to be mindful not to oversimplify what is a very complicated issue (Mckay and Devlin, 2016). It would seem sensible to tentatively recommend that FECs adopt a more academic approach to prepare HE-in-FE students for university. However, this may fail to meet the requirements of foundation degrees set out by the QAA and may also prove to be less effective in meeting the needs of the students (Greenbank, 2007). Although HE-in-FE does widen participation for individuals, achieving the Government's policy objectives, it could be argued that this new access isn't as fair and equal as the discourses of diversity would seem to suggest; instead such an approach to widening participation may be working to "reflect and reconstruct classed inequalities" (Leathwood and O'Connell, 2003, p598).

It is vital that beyond the discourses of widening participation efforts are made to ensure that actions don't replicate social inequalities (Leese, 2010; Reay et al, 2002). The findings of this study indicate the contradictory nature of discourses of support. Students are

overwhelmingly positive about the support they experience when studying HE-in-FE, this contributes to their sense of belonging enabling them to develop their confidence and independence. At the same time their experiences of HE-in-FE, the relationships they develop and the support they receive doesn't prepare them for their transition to university. This supports findings from the literature which argue that HE-in-FE students who become direct entrants into the second or third year of an undergraduate degree at a university experience comparable transitions to those students who enrol onto the first year of a degree directly from their A-Levels or equivalent L3 qualification (Christie, Barron and D'Annunzio-Green, 2013). In many ways the difficulties experienced by direct entrants are intensified because they have limited opportunities in which to adapt to the new environment and new demands. The students have to adapt to the new learning environment and increased emphasis on independence and autonomous learning, something that they find difficult following on from their prior study.

# Chapter 5 Conclusion

## ***5.1 Introduction***

This thesis has adopted a post-structuralist approach to examine the experiences of higher education students studying within further education environments. Discourses of widening participation shaped the students' experiences and relationships leading them to seek comfort and a sense of belonging. This shaped the students' experience of choosing and studying HE. It is argued that students have been placed within a deficit discourse which influences the students' confidence and self esteem, shaping their identities and experiences. This works in contradictory ways, on the one hand, to support students to study HE and to develop their confidence and self esteem. On the other hand, this works to reproduce social disadvantage by constraining the actions of non-traditional students, acting as a new mechanism for maintaining inequality.

## ***5.2 An overview of the research***

The post-structuralist approach adopted within this thesis suggests that HE-in-FE is a language mediated set of processes and structures that exist in discourse (Chouiliraki, 2008). Such an approach contends that the experiences of students studying HE-in-FE cannot be understood without an analysis of the discourses within which these experiences are shaped. Power penetrates and organizes these discourses, which work to reproduce inequalities in the education system.

Foucauldian discourse analysis has been employed to analyse how these discourses shape the students' experiences. This process of analysis aims to establish how dominant structures of thought emerge through discourse. This approach to analysis has enabled this

thesis to highlight the discourses within which HE-in-FE students are located and to analyse how they position such students within a deficit discourse. Such deficit discourses when employed throughout educational policy work to maintain power imbalances and reproduce social inequality and as such need to be highlighted and analysed to enable them to be challenged.

A range of research methods were employed within the study including interviews, non-participant observations, documentary analysis, and photo elicitation group interviews. The latter of these was selected later in the research process to overcome difficulties in encouraging participants to engage in dialogue with me. Given that the research focus was on analysing the discourses it was important to encourage the participants to discuss their experiences in as much detail as possible. Roger (2017, p5) suggested that "people averse to being part of research overall appear to love photos in order to move into the research space". This was particularly the case in this research. The participants were especially reluctant to take part in the research and when they did agree to be interviewed they were highly unwilling to give in-depth responses to questions. The use of photographs encouraged participants to respond immediately and with rigor. A combination of the use of photographs and being in a group situation appeared to stimulate emotions in the respondents and prompt their use of discourse to describe, in detail and depth their experiences of HE-in-FE.

The sample size selected to conduct this research was relatively small and was only conducted within one institution. However, the purpose of the research was not to collect significant amounts of data which can be generalised from but to collect valid, in depth information which could be used to analyse the discourses from HE-in-FE students and staff within one particular case study institution.



The findings of this thesis have highlighted how the discourses are shaping and, in many ways, limiting the students' experiences of HE. However, the difficulty with discourse analysis is that because discourses are constantly changing and don't mean the same thing to different people, the approach doesn't provide a way to improve or overcome the issues of inequality highlighted in this thesis.

As meaning is never fixed, the discourses emerging from this thesis and the arguments made are open to interpretation and negotiation. This is a difficult and challenging concept as no analysis is ever complete. Each new reading will give rise to further critique (Morgan, 2010) which can lead to analysis going around in circles and never reaching a useful conclusion. Seeking to find closure in this way by producing the only possible reading would conflict with the central tenets of the methodological approach employed (Given, 2008). This thesis aims to contribute a partial perspective of the reality of HE-in-FE student experiences. It is important to acknowledge that this thesis is also a text and is thus a product of discursive understandings of such student experiences and productive in shaping understandings.

### ***5.3 Summary of the key findings***

The key discourses that emerged in the analysis were not isolated from one another. There was a great deal of overlap between them and as a result, it was difficult to establish clear boundaries. However, the key discourses emerging included the widening participation policy discourse as well as discursive constructions of relationships, comfort, a sense of belonging, and independence. Discourses generate reality and can produce change (Ecclestone, 2017), thus the widening participation discourse shapes the students' experiences of HE-in-FE and both enable and constrain what is possible.

Discourses have the potential to constrain and limit prospects and oppress individuals and groups, however, at the same time, they can 'open up' (Wall, 2010, p3) opportunities by providing new perspectives and pathways. The findings of this thesis reflect this contradictory nature of discourse. Widening participation policy discourses influence how students discursively construct their reality which simultaneously enables and constrains HE-in-FE students' experiences and opportunities for progression.

Non-traditional students studying HE-in-FE are located within a deficit discourse which pathologises them and shapes their student identity. By using terms such as non-traditional student, the widening participation discourses reinforce the construction of a 'normal' student. Such discourses 'other' students such as those in this study by comparing them with existing students who are perceived to have a right to their place in HE (Leathwood and O'Connell, 2003). By considering widening participation students as deficient and 'othering' them it reinforces the traditional students' right to their place in HE thus reinforcing the inequality (Cleland and Palma, 2018).

The widening participation discourses within which the students are located lead them to perceive themselves as lacking in the confidence and independence required to study within a university and believe that they are better suited to vocational study at sub degree level. The discourses locate these issues as psychological problems of the individual rather than issues that are socially constructed through inequality and poverty. The way non-traditional students are pathologised by the discourses as different, lacking the knowledge and skills needed to succeed, leads them to be considered as needing support (Cleland and Palma, 2018).

The students studying HE-in-FE do perceive themselves to be independent learners. They perceive that studying HE-in-FE requires a type of independence, more than is required in

FE. However, because they are located within a discourse of dependence, they perceive this to be a kind of watered down independence, not quite enough for studying within a HEI. The nature of these effects is contradictory. At the same time as limiting students' confidence, the discourses position students as having potential. Students actively seek support and seek to build supportive relationships; such acts, when considered outside of the deficit discourses within which the student experience is located, could be considered to reflect the collaborative and collective nature of learning. However, when studying HE-in-FE the non-traditional students are located within the discourses of widening participation which fails to recognise or value the agency with which the students act when seeking support. The development of students' identities is affected by the dominant discourses that they are exposed to. Successive Governments' approaches to widening participation have opened up the possibility of HE to the students in this study, many of whom believed this would never be an option to them. However, in positioning these students as vulnerable and dependent these pathologising discourses have shaped the students' identities leading them to believe that 'real HE' is not for them. Students don't believe that they belong in universities and as a result they are more likely to apply to study HE-in-FE. Such a pathologised approach to vulnerability suggests that structural problems are instead seen as individual outcomes, a result of psychological weakness, a lack of resilience and impaired agency (Ecclestone, 2017). Located within this discourse the HE-in-FE students within this study sought comfort and looked for a sense of belonging in their HEI. The widening participation discourses led them to feel this sense of belonging in an FE institution where they felt more comfortable, supported, and found it easier to build relationships with both students and staff.

Relationships were important to the students studying HE-in-FE. There were perceived differences between the HE-in-FE teaching staff and university lecturers who they believed to be more academic, more intelligent and less approachable. In contrast they perceived their HE-in-FE teachers to be more accessible, they were less daunted by them and as such

they were able to build supportive relationships with them. Students generated a sense of belonging within the FE environment by building positive relationships with the staff and their peers. These relationships influenced the students' identities, enabling them to reconceptualise their capabilities giving them an increased sense of independence (Tett, Cree and Christie, 2017). This sense of belonging and feeling of comfort is born from the students' predispositions shaped by discourses that lead them to feel like they don't belong in a university, students seek places where they belong and avoid places out of their comfort zone. Students' experiences in HE-in-FE of building supportive relationships, knowing what is expected of them and receiving immediate feedback increased their sense of belonging. This has contradictory effects, positively enabling non-traditional students to access HE, to develop confidence and be successful. However at the same time, providing support and enabling students to develop a sense of belonging may actually inhibit the students' progression and limit their opportunities.

Students studying HE-in-FE were located within a pathologising deficit discourse of being too dependent (McKay and Devlin, 2015). This thesis has highlighted the binary nature of discourses of independence and dependence with independence valued over dependence. Students perceived that less independence was required for studying HE-in-FE when compared with studying in a university. These discourses of independence and dependence shaped the students' identities, they perceived themselves to be independent but not quite enough to study within a university. This links back to the discourses of widening participation which locates non-traditional learners as vulnerable and thus dependent and affects how and where they develop a sense of belonging.

The discourses identified from the data shape students' identities and experiences leading them to study HE-in-FE. Students create their identities within these deficit discourse in which they face an individualised approach where they are blamed for the challenges they

face. Students are constructed as deficient resulting in a sense of non-belonging in university, this subsequently shapes students' choice of where to study. The discourses lead students to believe that they are best suited to vocational, work related courses offered within FECs (Leathwood and O'Connell, 2003), this affects students' experiences leading them to feel more comfortable in FECs and enabling them to develop a sense of belonging.

The discourses that Universities use to market themselves to students further reinforce these inequalities. Newer universities and FECs offering HE market themselves as accessible and supportive, this is distinct from the discourses drawn upon to market older and more prestigious universities which portray elitism and excellence (Graham, 2013). These discourses contribute to non-traditional students feeling like they don't fit in within the more elite institutions and instead encourages them to apply to FE providers of HE thus actively reproducing the deficit discourses. This sense of not belonging constructed by the widening participation discourse is a barrier that prevents students from applying to HEIs. Such discourses work to reproduce the inequality and unfair access to education for students deemed to be non-traditional.

Support was a key discursive construct emerging from the research. Students frequently highlighted support as a key factor shaping their experience however this thesis has problematised the support offered to HE-in-FE students. Students overwhelmingly perceived the support offered to them as a positive aspect of their experience allowing them an opportunity to succeed in HE that would otherwise not be available to them. The benefits of supporting such students and the students' perceptions of them as positive are clear. However, this thesis offers an alternative explanation, suggesting that the discursive construction of support may be constraining at the same time as enabling the opportunities afforded to students studying HE-in-FE. Support is operating in binary and contradictory ways. On the one hand, enabling students to develop a sense of belonging, to

be successful in HE-in-FE and to develop confidence and a sense of determination. However, on the other hand, instead of preparing the non-traditional students for university level study, the support provided by HE-in-FE perpetuates the disadvantage of the non-traditional students by leaving the students unprepared and thus limiting their opportunities for progression.

It has been recognised that there are different ways of conceptualising support, one way that is offered is a therapeutic interpretation arising from arguments that education, including HE, is taking a therapeutic turn. Such conceptualisations reinforce and legitimate the deficit discourses in relation to non-traditional students studying HE-in-FE. Students internalise these discourses, they shape their identities constructing their perceptions of their independence which emphasise their inadequacies. In addition to the impact on student identity the deficit discourses influence the tutors' perceptions and expectations of HE-in-FE students (McKay and Devlin, 2016). As a result of this the tutors provide little challenge for the students and over support them to avoid failure. This leaves students unprepared and lacking the skills to succeed within a university.

The HE-in-FE students within this thesis have been located in a deficit discourse which limits student experience and negatively affects their identities. Such discourses position them as vulnerable and in need of support. In every day discourse as well as at policy level, individuals and groups can be labelled as vulnerable due to a wide range of factors. The concept of vulnerability, as with other discourses, is vague and malleable. As a policy concept the term carries implicit meaning. It is normative in that its use implies some deviation from normal, traditional students. The use of 'psycho-emotional' conceptualisations of vulnerability have increased in educational policy and in every day educational practices (Ecclestone, 2017, p443). Vulnerability is tied up in long running debates about social justice in education. The concept of vulnerability plays an increasingly

prominent role in contemporary society and in social policy. Both in the UK and internationally, notions of vulnerability dominate policy and practice contexts and inform a broad range of approaches to social problems not least in education (Brown, Ecclestone and Emmel, 2017). Political discourses have, over the past twenty years, progressively presented risk and vulnerability as vital for building resilience. Despite coming and going over the past sixty years, vulnerability as a policy concern has never been as prominent and extensive as it is now. This growth in official meanings of vulnerability runs alongside the way vulnerability is routinely used across the media and in everyday conversation to describe those who need sympathy and support. In everyday discourses, notions of vulnerability are tied up in ideas of impaired agency, risk and harm (Ecclestone, 2017). It has been argued that academics need to have a better insight into the way inequalities are lived and how this shapes the students' learner identities which goes beyond presentations of vulnerability that other and pathologise students from non-traditional backgrounds (Ecclestone, 2017).

The disengagement and exclusion of non-traditional students from HE has been cast as a psycho-emotional outcome of vulnerability. Such an approach presents societal issues as individual and psychological deficiencies and then offers therapeutic pedagogy as a form of social justice to address these individual problems (Ecclestone and Brunilla, 2015). Ecclestone and Brunilla (2015) have argued that therapisation is more ubiquitous and inclusive than simply a new form of psychological governance. It's prominence and power result from it's ability to transcend different and often incompatible ideological perspectives. Discourses of widening participation position students as vulnerable, a deficit discourse positioning students as psycho-emotionally sensitive to social and economic inequalities. Therapisation adds to this vulnerability in a precise yet profound way. Discourses of vulnerability conceptualised under therapisation would encompass everyone. Although some marginalised groups may be regarded as particularly vulnerable to structural conditions. A

collective sense of vulnerability is elaborated by therapeutic theories which highlight the hidden psycho-emotional effects of our past experiences. Such an approach provides an alternative way of conceptualising vulnerability that aims to resist the pathologising approaches. Notions of vulnerability have been proposed that take a 'universal approach' (Brown, Ecclestone and Emmel, 2017, p498) which conceptualises vulnerability as an elemental attribute of all individuals which is influenced by and connected to the economic, social and personal situations and conditions that they experience at different points throughout their lives. This approach to vulnerability proposes that all individuals are vulnerable by nature of their corporality, however, the extent of each individuals' vulnerability varies across their life course.

There is a growing concern about the normative employment of vulnerability discourses, and their increasing prevalence, which, it has been argued, can reinforce the pathologising of difference rather than challenging it. Such approaches side line the potential human agency and increase the tendency to implement initiatives, which can be imposed upon those, deemed to be vulnerable. HE-in-FE students are deemed to be vulnerable by nature of their non-traditional status. Widening participation strategies including a range of support mechanisms are imposed upon them (Brown, Ecclestone and Emmel, 2017). Focusing on a universal approach to vulnerability can expose the way support structures put in place through widening participation strategies to improve access to HE for non-traditional students fails to improve the inequality and disadvantage these students face. This is because they are founded on a discourse that falsely propagates the notion that students who are traditional are autonomous and independent adults, such a discourse 'others' non-traditional students. This approach blames the individual for failing to take advantage of the opportunities afforded to them. Taking a universal approach to vulnerability shifts the critical focus onto institutions and the state, examining their role in redressing the balance of disadvantage. Mackenzie, Rogers and Dodds (2014) have emphasised the need for a



relational understanding of shared vulnerability. They propose a 'taxonomy of vulnerability' (p7) which includes inherent, situational and pathogenic forms of vulnerability. This taxonomy supports a theorising of vulnerability which aims to promote a balance between individual agency and society's obligations to protect the disadvantaged (Brown, Ecclestone and Emmel, 2017).

#### ***5.4 Original contribution to knowledge***

The literature on HE-in-FE provision has been developed by a relatively small number of authors, however, few of these have specifically addressed the experiences of students studying HE-in-FE (King, Saraswat and Widdowson, 2015). Previous work tends to focus on the scholarly activity of staff delivering HE-in-FE and how a culture of HE can be developed within FE. Although there is a limited set of studies that have examined the experiences of students studying HE within FE environments (see for example Rapley, 2014; Robinson, 2012, Parry, 2012 and Greenbank, 2007), this research still provides an original contribution to knowledge. This research is original as it adds to the body of knowledge on HE-in-FE in a way that has not been done previously (Murray, 2011). This research approached the experience of students studying HE-in-FE in an original way by taking a post-structuralist approach and focussing on the discourses that shape the experiences of students studying HE-in-FE, thus contributing to understanding their experience.

There is power that lies behind all of the discourses highlighted in this thesis. Although discourses such as widening participation appear to have a social justice agenda, they could potentially be concealing a hidden agenda to reproduce social class relations and educational outcomes to maintain the status quo and potentially even exacerbate inequalities.

The findings of this thesis have contributed to further nuancing the concept of 'sense of belonging'. Previous conceptualisations of the notion of sense of belonging have drawn on Bourdieu's concepts of habitus and capital to explain why non-traditional students don't 'fit in' within the more elite universities (Reay, Crozier and Clayton, 2010) suggesting that middle class students have a confidence and sense of entitlement which enables them to fit in within a university setting, something that their working class peers lack. This thesis contends however that it is being located within deficit discourses of widening participation, dependence and support, that shapes students' identities and leads them to perceive that they fit in within a college environment, rather than a university environment. Being located within a dominant deficit discourse of dependence leads non-traditional students to perceive that they require support and guidance in order to access HE. HE-in-FE provide that support and the nurturing relationships with staff which meets the students perceived needs, however, these are needs which have been shaped by the discourses. This thesis makes an original contribution to knowledge in highlighting the contradictory nature of discourses of widening participation in both enabling and constraining non-traditional students' experiences of HE.

The research is also original in that it specifically examines the experiences of HE students studying in predominantly FE environments, rather than in larger HE units in big FECs, an area which has not been studied previously. Students studying in small FECs with a minority of HE students are likely to have a qualitatively different experience from those studying in large FE colleges with a large proportion of students studying HE qualifications. As such, the empirical findings of the research provide a valuable and original contribution to the body of knowledge on the experience of studying HE-in-FE.

## ***5.5 Recommendations for future research***

The issues and discourses examined in this thesis provide scope for further research.

The findings of this research indicate a shift in the education sector with an increased focus on widening participation and on supporting students from non-traditional backgrounds to access HE. This shift has placed such students within a deficit discourse that may be impacting on their identities and experiences. The impact of these changes and moving to a therapeutic culture (Ecclestone and Brunilla, 2015) demands further research to examine the impact that the political climate has had on student identity.

Discourses of widening participation have located HE-in-FE students as vulnerable and thus in need of support. Although vulnerability is gathering momentum politically and culturally, there are limited empirical studies examining how it is operationalised in specific contexts, including the provision of HE. Much of the research undertaken focuses either on theoretical aspects of vulnerability or policy critiques. Research into the lived reality of vulnerability from the perspective of stakeholders, including HE-in-FE lecturers and students, is more limited (Brown, Ecclestone and Emmel, 2017). As notions of vulnerability are increasingly used as a policy mechanism with a role in shaping understandings of the relationship between individuals, social practices, institutions and Governments, it is crucial that a clearer awareness and appreciation of discourses of vulnerability and its normative dimensions are developed. Brown, Ecclestone and Emmel (2017, p499) argue that examining the pathological implications of the increasing popularity of vulnerability discourses and a 'more robust deployment of vulnerability' would take steps towards limiting the risks of the normative effects of the discourse and interventions. There is very little literature which aims to bring together the theoretical and practical conceptualisations of vulnerability. As such, this is a recommended area for further research.

All of the discourses highlighted within this thesis have both shaped and been shaped by the changes to Government policy on education and the drive to widen participation. From the Robins Report (1963) highlighting the inequalities present in HE at the time, to the changing structure of HE with the amalgamation of all HEIs into one system, othering discourses have shaped the experiences of non-traditional students. Labour's 50% HE target and their shift in policy definitions of vulnerability placed further emphasis on widening participation. This othering discourse continued under the Conservative led Coalition Government and continues to dominate educational policy and practice under the current Conservative Government.

These changes have undoubtedly made HE more widely accessible to those with non-traditional backgrounds, however, this access is not equitable as the othering discourses shape the experiences for those from disadvantaged backgrounds who are likely to end up in less valuable positions within the HE hierarchy. The literature and research available on issues of social justice such as this has failed to constructively engage with education policy making (Ivinson et al, 2018). This failure has been in part as a result of a lack of clarity in relation to what social justice in education looks like in practice. This lack of clarity stems from the hierarchical structure of the education system in the UK and a limited recognition of the binarised nature of the system (Francis, Mills and Lupton, 2017). In order to undertake the empirical research required to overcome inequalities in education, clarification is required to confront the issues inherent in the binarised system and its impact on social justice.

Policy development in relation to the provision of HE-in-FE is fluctuating with a very recent emphasis on competition and choice and a shift in focus from social mobility to increasing the expectations on high ability students from disadvantaged and non-traditional backgrounds to attend more elite universities (Webb et al, 2017). Further research on the

effects of these changes in policy on the discourses of HE-in-FE and widening participation, and on the identities of such students, is needed to fully understand the impact of these fluctuating policy developments.

This research goes some way to highlighting the effects of widening participation by contributing to an understanding of the way discourses act to enable and constrain the students' experiences and reproduce inequalities. However, this analysis needs to be extended to ensure that the discussion constructively and critically engages with policy making so that the impact of policy on the development of learner identity and the experiences of non-traditional students is fully realised.

It may be useful to look to systems in other countries to see how our own approach could be improved. In Germany for example, vocational institutions have a more similar status to universities resulting in a model that promotes social mobility (Webb et al, 2017). There are also examples from Australia and Denmark where certain forms of vocational and technical education are gaining a higher status and reputation (Bathmaker, 2017). Examining the status differences in the UK between HE-in-FE and university provision and how they are shaped by deficit discourses are important areas of focus in examining the relationship between social mobility and widening participation. Drawing on examples and approaches from other countries could help to further the discussion.

## ***5.6 Conclusions***

This thesis has contributed to the literature which examines the experiences of students studying HE-in-FE and highlighted the discourses which shape such experience.

Undertaking research into the discourses that shape HE-in-FE students experiences has highlighted the contradictory ways in which the discourses shape the experiences of HE-in-FE students. The widening participation discourse positions non-traditional students as

having potential, such students construct their identities within this discourse which as a result are characterised by determination to improve and a sense of independence.

Students are supported within HE-in-FE by both peers and staff. They develop relationships and a sense of belonging which increases their confidence and enables them to study HE. However, this research also revealed an underlying deficit discourse which 'others' these students and positions them as vulnerable and lacking the skills required to study 'real HE'. Being located within these discourses shapes the students' identities, which leads them to perceive that they fit in within a college environment, rather than a university environment. In shaping students' identities and sense of belonging, these discourses are working to reinforce and reproduce social inequalities by encouraging non-traditional students to enter a form of HE, from which they will receive fewer economic benefits. Although widening participation discourses are promoted as a way to improve social mobility, they may in fact, as a result of placing students within a deficit discourse, be promoting and reproducing inequalities.

# Appendices

## ***Appendix 1***

Interview schedule

### **Interview Schedule**

For each question probe the interviewee to:

**Describe** – tell me more

**Explain** – how it happened

**Evaluate** – what do you think about that; your opinion; do you value it; how do you feel about it?

1. Tell me a bit about who you are and how you came to be studying this course?
  - i. where are you working; educational background; have you studied here before; sense of community; economic circumstances; career history; family history/family status
  - ii. What was the purpose of you doing it?
  - iii. Did you think about applying to university or elsewhere?
2. How have you found the experience of doing the course so far?
  - i. a week in the life of....
  - ii. tell me about the college, give me a tour as you see it.
  - iii. what are the main benefits of studying here?
  - iv. what are the main challenges?
  - v. How does it fit in with the rest of your life and work?
3. What is the teaching like?
  - i. how are you expected to learn?
  - ii. how does HE compare to other types of teaching and learning?
4. What about the course content?
  - i. level
  - ii. relevance
5. What contact do you have with staff and other students?
  - i. on your course and others in college?
  - ii. distinctness – fe students
6. Are HE students like yourself treated differently than other students?
7. What difference does it make to be studying in a college rather than a university?
  - i. where have you heard this form?
  - ii. How have you found out about that?
  - iii. do you have friends who have been?
  - liii. have teachers told you about university study?
8. What do you hope you will get out of the course?
  - i. where do you see yourself by the end of the course?
  - li. what about two years after completing it?



## ***Appendix 2***

Participant information sheet

Research Project:  
The Experiences of Higher Education Students in a Small Further Education College

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**Participant Information Sheet**

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**What is the research about and what are its potential benefits?**

This research project forms part of my doctoral studies at the University of Huddersfield, which are supervised by Professor Helen Colley. It aims to explore the experiences of higher education students who are studying in small, further education colleges, so that provision for such students can be improved. It has been granted ethical approval by the University of Huddersfield. You have been asked to take part because you are studying for a foundation degree within a small college.

**What will I have to do?**

If you agree to take part in the study, you will be invited to take part in a face to face interview with me (Lauren Nixon), early in the first year of your foundation degree. You will also be invited to take part in two further interviews, one in the second year and one in the third year of your FD. If you take part in the first interview, you are under no obligation to take part in the second and third rounds of interviews. The interviews will last between 30 and 60 minutes depending on your availability which will be arranged at a time to suit you. During the interview you will be asked about your views and perceptions of your experience of studying for your Foundation Degree at college.

**Do I have to take part?**

No. There is no obligation for you to take part in this research. Your participation is entirely voluntary. If you do decide to take part, you will be asked to sign a [consent](#) form (attached) which gives your consent to take part. However, you can still withdraw from the research at any time, even after the interview, without giving any reason.

**What will you do with the findings of the research?**

The data that I collect from the interviews will be analysed to give me a better understanding of how students experience higher education in small further education settings. I will write about this in my doctoral thesis, and I also hope to publish the findings more widely in academic journals and in forums that college teachers and managers use.

**Will I be personally identified in the research?**

No. All information that you provide will be kept strictly confidential. The information that you provide will be anonymised in your interview transcripts. When the findings are published in my thesis, direct quotes from the interviews may be included. These too will be anonymised.

**Will my information be kept confidential?**

Yes. As described above, all information will be anonymised. In addition to this, all data will be stored securely: paper documents will be kept in a locked filing cabinet and computer records will be password protected.

**Will taking part have any detrimental effect on me?**

I do not foresee any disadvantages for you in taking part in my research. Your contributions will enable better understanding of the experiences of students taking HE courses in an FE college.

**What should I do if I have any questions?**

If you have any questions at all you should contact me and I will be happy to answer them for you, both before and after taking part in the study. My contact details are listed below.

**Contact Details:**

**Lauren Nixon**



If you have any complaints about the study or your participation in it, please contact my research supervisor:

Professor Helen Colley, University of Huddersfield, Queensgate, Huddersfield HD1 3DH  
Tel: 01484 478114 Email: h.colley@hud.ac.uk

**I hope that you will consider taking part in this study. If you would like to participate in the research, please read and complete the attached consent form and give it to the researcher prior to the interview.**

Thank you for taking the time to read this information.

Yours sincerely,

Lauren Nixon

### ***Appendix 3***

Participant consent form

The Experiences of Higher Education Students in a Small Further Education College

**Interview Consent Form**

	<b>Please Tick</b>
<b>I understand the aims of this research and what I will be asked to do. I consent to taking part in the research.</b>	
<b>I understand that I have the right to withdraw from the research at any time without giving a reason. I also understand that I can withdraw my data at any time should I want to.</b>	
<b>I give my permission to be quoted anonymously and understand that direct quotes may be used in future publications and conference presentations.</b>	
<b>I understand that the interview will be audio recorded and that this recording will be kept securely and will be destroyed after the completion of the project. No one will have access to this recording other than the researcher who will transcribe the audio.</b>	
<b>I understand that my identity will be protected by the use of a pseudonym and that no information will be used that could lead to me being identified.</b>	

<b>Name of Participant:</b>	<b>Name of Researcher:</b>
<b>Signature:</b>	<b>Signature:</b>
<b>Date:</b>	<b>Date:</b>

Two copies of the consent form should be completed: The participant and the researcher should each retain a copy.

## ***Appendix 4***

Example section of an individual interview transcript and group interview

time, we don't know what is going to happen when we get here, are you just going to be sent to the library for the whole three hours or...

PS6: When I first started here I used to look forward to coming to college and now I just, I dread it because I know I won't get what I need and also I won't be doing any work.

LN: The next image, the learning centre, what stickers did you put on that one?

PS2: I've put green and I've put a red.

LN: That's interesting, can you explain that?

PS2: I really like the learning centre, I think the staff are really good, it gives us chance to actually, do some of our work and get prepared but the amount of text books there are for our specific areas (PS5: Yeah, they are not even relevant are they?) for our course. And I struggle with online reading so I prefer to have the book and I just don't think there are enough.

PS3: Its all level three books isn't it. You pick a book up and you think, I can't use that it is level three.

PS6: and I don't enjoy looking at books, I can't look at each book.

PS5: and it is when they try and test you by moving it round (laughs) half way through the year, when you have just got used to it (all laugh)

PS2: I mean the staff that are in there are really good, they are really helpful, they make you feel happy.

PS5: I do like that lady, she has always worked there but she is doing evenings now, I think she is really really helpful (PS6: Is it the one with the blonde hair?) yeah the older one (all: yeah). She does really try to find you book and if you are struggling with, as basic as it is, the photo copier or the printer, she is there and she gives you the time and helps you

PS2: Yeah, it's a happy place, its just frustrating that there aren't the text books to back up what we are doing, you know to physically read a book.

PS3 I can never get on Dawsonera

PS2: I don't mind Dawsonera, I can get on it I just can't read online I find it really hard.

PS1: I can't and you can't print them off you know, you can't print a chapter. I quite like it on a night, you know when there are not many people in, I don't think I could cope during the day, with everybody in there, I think that would do my head in dealing with teenagers, shouting and

Interview transcript 7

LN: So, can you start by telling me a little bit about you, who you are, what you do, and how you came to be studying this course?

IP7: Oh, erm, I don't like talking about myself. I work at a children's centre, er, as an early years assistant. Erm, I used to be a deputy manager of a children's centre but, you need your level four now, I got made redundant from that post, you need your level four and I wanted to progress so, that's why I decided to come here.

LN: Right, so what happened when you were made redundant?

IP7: Well I was made redundant and then I had a year off, because I've got a little boy and then I applied for another job, I took a drop in pay but, I knew I wanted to do this anyway so.

LN: so what about your educational background then, what did you do after school?

IP7: I came here, I wanted to be a nurse, believe it or not, and, I started on my level two and I had a placement in a school and decided to go that way, the nursery nurse way, and I went all the way up to my level three.

LN: So did you do your level three here as well?

IP7: Yeah.

LN: Was that with S?

IP7: Yeah, we went all the way through school together me and S, we went to college but we couldn't figure out if we had come to college together or not so we, I asked one of our other friends and then we were like, oh yeah, we were in the same group at college and then, we didn't realize that each other were doing the course and then.

LN: So what was your level three like here?

IP7: Do you want me to be really honest?

LN: Yes

IP7: It wasn't very good, and I wouldn't have thought I would have ever come back to this college.

LN: Right, so why is that, what was it about it?



IP7: Well we didn't have proper tutors and everything was just up in the air when I was here. I enjoyed the course and the placements and when that bit was sorted it was fine but for a little bit it wasn't very good.

LN: So can you give me some examples from your experience?

IP7: Yeah different tutors all the time, they were all sick and not coming in and changing, there was a lot of change and going through the process of change while we were here and changing the course and stuff which was difficult, just trying to stay focused, especially at seventeen.

LN: But you passed it?

IP7: Oh yeah, yeah, I passed it all.

LN: What were your placements like?

IP7: Fab, I enjoyed all of my placements to be honest, we did private nurseries schools, and SEN one, erm, that's it, I know some people went to a child minder but I didn't, I went to a nursery again.

LN: So what did you do when you finished college? You got your Level three, what did you do from there?

IP7: I went and worked at erm DVDN for a few months, because that's where my final placement was, and then I got a job at RM children's centre when that opened and since then I have been in children's centres, like I say I've been in R, I worked my way up to deputy manager, now I work in B, and I dropped down.

LN: How do you find working in children's centres?

IP7: I prefer it, I enjoy it, it, its, I don't know, you know where you are in a children's centre, you've got your manager, you've got your contracts, you've got your budget, you've got (laughs) you can just go and ask where as in like private its like, oh we cant ask for that, cant ask for that, cant have that (laughs) (LN: so what kind of things?) oh its like equipment and even basic stuff like uniform and stuff, I just, I don't know I just like, the majority of my experience is children's centres so I'm going to say... I only worked up there for four months, and then, the other ten and a half years I have worked in the children's centre.

LN: So comparing your experience to others who work in day nurseries, would you say your experience compares favorably?

IP7: I don't know about favourably because a lot have changed haven't they, to come up, to be like centres, and the standards have improved from when I

started so, I'm not against them, because I did go and look at them for my son so I'm not, not saying, I'd rather have them, in, I would rather work there, if an opportunity came, for a private nursery and it was a good opportunity I wouldn't frown upon it, I would definitely look round but I think the pay structure is better for the council (laughs)

LN: Are there any other employment benefits, in terms of working for the council instead of a private company?

IP7: I think it's the pay structure, erm, your hours, are a lot, from my experience because I was working ten hour days, where as some, we wouldn't do that now, breaks and stuff are better, and yeah,

LN: So what's the purpose of you doing this course?

IP7: It's a bit, its kind of a personal achievement, I do, I hope this doesn't sound daft (laughs nervously) I do a lot for everybody else and I want to do something for me that I know I am going to benefit from. Because I, because I have been ill as well, my focus is on everybody else and it always has been and I was like, no I want to do this for me, because I know I am going to benefit from it in the long run and I know Ashton is, like my little boy but, its for me, if that makes sense

LN: Did you think about applying anywhere else or did you specifically want to come here?

IP7: I looked at other colleges, but I would, I prefer it here because it is closer to home, and , again, for my little boy, its easier for me to be closer, I wouldn't have gone to a University or full time. Cos I knew I need to work.

LN: So you need to work for financial reasons?

IP7: Yeah,

LN: So if there was a University course that was part time and fitted around your work and your little boy would you apply for that?

IP7: erm, it's the travel, because the nearest uni is Sheffield,, that's all it is for me. Because I don't like driving long ways and stuff I did look into the OU and I did start it before I fell pregnant and I struggled to get there, even without a little boy and, and having support off a partner. I did struggle with that

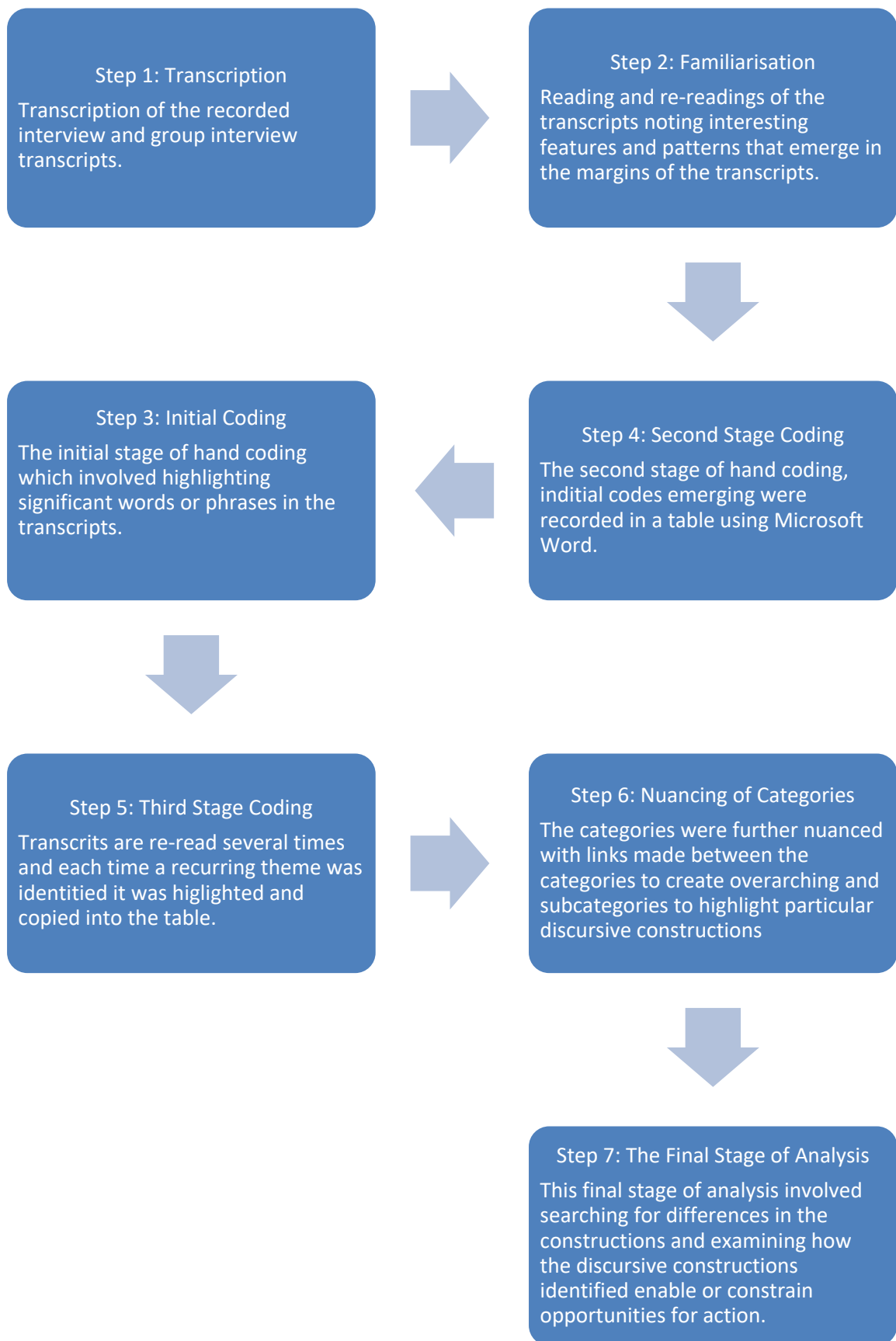
LN: How old is your little boy?

IP7: He's four, he's a little nightmare (laughs)

LN: So you started through the OU but it didn't fit very well?

## ***Appendix 5***

Visual representation of the stages of analysis



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