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The transition of adult students to higher education:
communities, practice and participation

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Doctor of Philosophy

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Abstract

This thesis investigates the distinctive characteristics of adult students' experience of transition to higher education. It addresses a gap in the current academic literature which, driven by concerns about the economic, social and personal implications of 'problematic' or 'failed' transition, often conceptualises transition to higher education in narrow, instrumental terms and frames it as a predominately linear process with a discernible beginning and end. By highlighting what falls within normative parameters of transition, this approach arguably obscures its heterogeneity. The research presented in this thesis suggests that it particularly lacks the flexibility to illuminate the more diverse experience of adult students whose individual histories, responsibilities, social networks, fears and dreams are – in general – very different to those of 'traditional' younger students around whose needs most models of transition support are primarily shaped. By adopting a more radical conceptualisation of transition which sees it as the lifelong ebb and flow of change in response to the multiplicity of factors that impact and shape human experience, the research highlights two overarching aspects of adult students' experience of transition which have received relatively little attention in the relevant literature. First, it highlights the ubiquitous presence of risk and the anxiety it engenders in adult students' experience of transition. For the vast majority of adult students their decision to enter higher education later in life is accompanied by a heightened awareness that the expectations behind that decision may not be fully realised. The research suggests that the anxiety that frequently accompanies this awareness permeates their whole experience of transition to higher education and has the potential to intensify concerns about mastering its valued practices. Second, the research highlights the significance of adult students' social networks outwith higher education. Managing the interaction between these and higher education networks and communities is challenging for some students, particularly when the identity shift inherent in transition entails an element of distancing from longstanding supportive networks. Overall, this research points to the need for a widened perspective on adult students' transition which moves the focus beyond problem solving towards a more nuanced approach that more fully acknowledges the sheer diversity of the factors involved.

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Author's Declaration

I declare that, except where explicit reference is made to the contribution of others, this thesis is the result of my own work and has not been submitted for any other degree at the University of Glasgow or any other institution.

Signature _____

Name Douglas Sutherland

Chapter 1

Introduction

The justification for this research project emerged from two strands of scholarly research in education. The first of these is the considerable body of work which examines the participation of mature students in higher education. To a significant extent, this approaches adult student participation from the perspective of their minority status and focuses heavily on the barriers they have to overcome to gain access to and subsequently participate in higher education. Many of these barriers are related to facts of adult life which mean that mature students – in general – have more external commitments and responsibilities than ‘traditional’, young students. Much of the research adopts a sociological perspective and focuses on how social class shapes the experience of adult students. The second strand of research focuses on transitions between educational contexts. This research reflects the growing interest in transition across the lifecourse which is arguably an increasingly important aspect of life in late modernity: as social and economic conditions lose much of their traditional stability, major and often unanticipated transitions in life become much more common (Giddens, 1991).

From a personal perspective, my experience as an adult student and tutor has stimulated my interest in this research. Returning to higher education after more than twenty years, I took a postgraduate course in adult education at the University of Glasgow, and for my practice placement taught history on a further education access course. Having realised that this is where my interests and ambitions lie, I applied for and was awarded a full scholarship to undertake this research by the University of Glasgow. While conducting the research, I was asked by Glasgow’s Department of Adult and Continuing Education to design and deliver a social and economic history option on its Access course, a role which I continue to fulfil. My interest in this research has, therefore, been significantly augmented by my experience of assisting to facilitate access and transition to higher education. It is worth noting, however, that the collection of data was complete by the time I assumed this role, so it played no part in the research design. I am fully aware, however, that my subsequent experience may have had some impact on the analysis and interpretation of the data.

Underpinning the current interest in transition is the continuing problem of retention in higher education. Statistics show that universities in Scotland have a particular problem with retention: for 2010-11 Scotland had a non-continuation level after the first year of 8.9%, compared to 7.4% across the UK as a whole. For mature students the situation is even more challenging: 13% withdrew during or after the first year (HESA, 2013). This represents a significant waste of financial resources and, as important, a waste of individual aspirations and potential. Withdrawal from higher education is statistically most likely to take place during or at the end of the first year which clearly suggests that – outwith external factors or students simply making a wrong decision – transition proves to be an insurmountable hurdle, or series of hurdles, for some students. This research, then, seeks to investigate the process of transition as it is experienced by adult students in Scotland. Having identified that non-continuation figures are higher for mature students it is, however, important to point out that the research will not simply look at problematic aspects of transition. Large numbers of adult students successfully negotiate transition to higher education in Scotland every year, so the research will also seek to identify aspects of their adult status which may contribute positively to that experience.

In what is, in some respects, an age of mass higher education (Scott, 1995) there has been a huge expansion in the number of university places available. Much of this expansion has taken place in newer institutions which gained university status after 1992, and there is clear evidence that these institutions have attracted the highest level of adult participation (Field, 2003). Older universities, in contrast, have proportionately lower numbers of adult students, so a second aim of this research is to investigate if there are significant differences in the experience of transition in different ‘types’ of institution. Outwith the traditional route to university education (based on Scottish Highers or their equivalent) there are three different pathways to higher education in Scotland: university access courses, further education access courses and articulation between further and higher education. Another aim of the research is, therefore, to investigate the possible impact of the particular educational path students have followed on how they negotiate and experience transition. Finally, moving away from more instrumental, curricular concerns, the research seeks to identify what higher education means to adult students, and to ascertain how their conception of it shapes and is shaped by the experience of transition.

Outline of the thesis

Chapter 2 of the thesis presents an extensive review of the relevant literature. First, it examines the literature on adult student participation in higher education much of which focuses on barriers to and problematic areas of their participation. Second, it looks at specific models of student retention and withdrawal and other theoretical concepts which have been applied to the participation of non-traditional students in higher education. Third, it examines the recent focus in the literature on transition to higher education. Finally, it discusses two major theorisations of learning which provide the theoretical framework underpinning this research. Chapter 3 discusses methodological issues and outlines the research design. Chapter 4 presents an extended review of the policy documents that determine the shape of Scottish higher education and have a significant effect on the overall experience of its students. Chapter 5 begins the analysis of the research data and discusses several themes relating to adult students' negotiation of the practices of higher education. Chapter 6 continues this analysis and examines the major theme of identity in transition. Chapter 7 presents an extended discussion of the research findings, identifies some of their possible implications for higher education institutions, and suggests several areas worthy of further research. Chapter 8 presents a brief summary of the main findings of the research and reiterates some of its possible implications.

Chapter 2

Literature review

Overview

This review of the literature has two broad aims: first, to review the existing literature relevant to the transition of adult students to higher education and, second, to examine the theory which will provide the conceptual framework for the analysis of the research data in this thesis. Part one examines the rich literature on the experience of adult students in higher education. Since much of this relates to research conducted during a time when far fewer adults participated in higher education, it often focuses on the particular barriers to participation adults have had to negotiate. However, it arguably retains its relevance: contemporary adult students may account for a higher proportion of the university population, but many of the problems they face are similar to those their earlier counterparts encountered. Part two shifts the emphasis towards wider issues – in the sense that they affect all students – of student retention and adaptation to university life. This body of literature is central to this research since it identifies several important theoretical approaches to understanding student integration, and examines factors which militate against the full participation in higher education of students from non-traditional backgrounds. An awareness of the wide range of issues that most students face enables a clearer focus on the aspects of adult student experience that are particular to them. Acknowledging one of the more recent trends in higher education research, part three examines the growing literature on transition to higher education and discusses a range of theoretical models which have been developed to explain the experience of transition. Part four presents an extended discussion of the two major theoretical frameworks – communities of practice and ecological systems theory – that underpin this research and the analysis of the research data. Given that both theories contain specific concepts and terminologies that require clarification it seems appropriate to undertake a detailed introduction here.

1. Adult students in higher education

There is an extensive body of literature which deals with the specific problems faced by adults who choose to return to education. Cross (1981) produced a classic theoretical model of barriers to learning which has subsequently been employed and adapted by other writers considering these problems (McGivney, 1996; Bamber, Ducklin and Tett, 2000). She describes three types of barrier - situational, institutional and dispositional. Situational barriers are associated with the circumstances of an individual's life and can include such things as a lack of money and problems with childcare. Institutional barriers relate to the difficulties students experience interacting with their college or university on issues like timetabling, facilities and assessment. Dispositional barriers relate to how students feel about themselves and can arise when they have doubts about their ability to learn effectively or pass exams. In their examination of a scheme aimed at widening access to Edinburgh university, Bamber, Ducklin and Tett (2000) have shown how a combination of dispositional and situational factors (like a lack of confidence combined with childcare difficulties) can militate against the extension of access. Despite much of the recent rhetoric of widening participation, many of the institutional barriers which confront adult students remain intact: universities are still predominantly organised to suit traditional students coming straight from school for whom being a student is, at that time, the dominant role in life. Mature students, especially women, are, in contrast, taking on yet another role which may have to compete with that of parent, partner or employee (Bourgeois et al., 1999). In relation to the emotional dimension of participation in higher education, Reay (2004) argues that women are more engaged than men in the 'emotional labour' (p. 59) of family life and that this may have an impact on their ability to negotiate the undulating pressures of higher education. Research has also highlighted the difficulties many adults (again, primarily women) continue to face in arranging childcare which gives them the freedom to participate fully in higher education. From an institutional perspective, it is not only that most universities fail to provide sufficient on-site childcare, but that many still organise their timetables to suit traditional students rather than parents who may have to drop off or collect children at set times (McGivney, 1996; Bamber et al, 2000; Osborne et al., 2004). Participation in higher education can also place a strain on the personal relationships of mature students

(Bolam and Dodgson, 2003). Looking at the effects of returning to education on couples' relationships, Leonard (1994) found that some men regarded the participation of their partner or wife in higher education as a threat to their position in the household. In a few cases the ensuing difficulties caused relationships to collapse and even led to domestic violence and divorce. The same study suggested that male students are generally less restricted by domestic responsibilities and have a greater amount of free time to devote to their studies. Commenting on the different experiences of male and female mature students Jane Thompson suggests:

In almost every other respect women who embark on courses without men fare better than those who have to square what they're doing with husbands, partners or lovers. Men who re-enter education as mature students probably need to make some adjustments too, but it is unlikely that their initiative is seen as anything other than important by their wives and children. Working class women's return to education – if it is tolerated at all – is usually condoned if nothing noticeable changes at home. Women still retain the major responsibility for child care and domestic work and often feel they have to 'do it even better' so that their absence at college doesn't become a major source of grievance (1997, p. 65).

Confidence in their own academic ability is also an issue for many mature students (McGivney, 1996). Most adult students who enter university through access courses are aware that their pathway to higher education is an unconventional one, but research suggests that effective access courses increase learner self-confidence and help to establish social networks which may be an important source of support for former access students in higher education (Powney and Hall, 1998). However, it was also found that some Scottish Wider Access Programme (SWAP) students were unsure of their readiness for university studies and were especially concerned that access courses had not prepared them for the more demanding forms of assessment they would face at university (Munn, Johnstone and Robinson, 1994; Powney and Hall, 1998):

Students who eventually succeed in their higher education programme, acknowledge the vital part SWAP played in their academic development. There seems however to be a mismatch between the demands of higher education and the resources available to support students at the level possible in SWAP (Powney and Hall, 1998 p. 60).

Johnstone and Cullen (1995) found that SWAP students worried about their lack of experience of examinations, and were particularly concerned about the uncritical

nature of the criterion-referenced assessment on SWAP courses. In an examination of the effectiveness of a university access course, MacKenzie and Karkalas (1996) concluded that, in comparison with some other access courses, Glasgow University's in-house course facilitated a smoother transition to higher education. This course uses teaching and learning methods more closely related to those in higher education and students are assessed through a combination of continuous assessment and examinations. Walker (2000) also found a strong positive link between attendance at Glasgow University's summer school and subsequent academic success.

Moving away from the effects of structural and operational factors on the transition of mature students to higher education, Murphy and Fleming (2000) examined the conflict between the educational philosophy of adult education and the arguably more instrumental philosophy of higher education:

This conflict rests on two very different educational philosophies, which encompass two juxtaposed notions of educational content and process: one, the adult education philosophy – with a student-centred, experientially based learning process, with an elevation of subjective knowledge as the generator of other knowledges; and the higher education philosophy, with its subject-centred processes and focus on objective factual data (Murphy and Fleming, 2000 p. 87).

This 'clash' of educational philosophies has particular significance for mature students making the initial transition to higher education. Students who gained entry to higher education through courses aimed specifically at adults – which frequently encourage them to relate their learning to their own experience – find that they have been transported to a new educational landscape where the link between experience and the synthesis of knowledge appears to be less explicitly valued.

Reay's (2003, 2004a) analysis of adult student participation focuses on the direct impact of social class on students' confidence in their ability to prevail in higher education. Acknowledging the huge expansion of higher education provision that has taken place, she cogently argues that the enlarged system remains rigidly hierarchical in nature and that social class continues to impact the university experience of previously underrepresented groups:

The advent of mass HE has created spaces within academia for working-class students but it has also led to the creation of new stigmatised universities and new

stigmatised identities. This elitist, hierarchical and highly class-differentiated field presents working-class students with a difficult conundrum. Entwined with desires for self-advancement for working-class students are difficult impulses, which raise the spectre of both desire and pathology: a pathology that implicates both self and others like oneself (Reay, 2003, p. 58).

Drawing extensively on the work of Bourdieu – which is considered further below – she posits that working-class adult students are generally less equipped with the cultural capital which has high value in higher education, and that the dissonance between their experiences and dispositions and the social characteristics of higher education may give rise to a sense of existential unease – a feeling that one does not belong to or deserve to be part of the cultural milieu of higher education – which Reay (2002) describes as ‘impostor syndrome’. The extent of this mismatch is often linked to the relative representation of students from less traditional backgrounds within individual institutions: where these numbers remain low, particularly in older and elite universities, social class arguably continues to have more of a deleterious effect on the integration of non-traditional students. In an examination of the experience of mature working-class students at such an elite institution – Edinburgh University – Tett highlights how these students are acutely aware of their otherness in relation to traditional students, and argues strongly that rather than simply allowing students access to higher education, universities must focus far more carefully on the accessibility of their educational provision:

... if the entrenched inequalities in participation in and across HE are to be properly addressed, and systematically dismantled, there is a need to understand issues of process and structure, and exclusion and choice, in all their complexity. Ultimately, it means creating a system that challenges, rather than reinforces, classed, raced and gendered inequalities (Tett, 2004, p. 262).

Similarly, Baxter and Britton (2001) argue that for working-class, mature students their social class is no theoretical abstract, but, in Williams’ (1977) terms, provides a ‘structure of feeling’ which shapes and colours their experience as they strive to adapt to the unfamiliar demands of higher education.

Other studies have highlighted the remarkable capacity of mature students to subvert their minority status within higher education: Bourgeois et al. (1999) found that mature students are particularly adept at forming student sub-cultures through which

they support one another socially and academically. On the other hand, when there are particularly few mature students in a class they may feel isolated and intimidated by the younger majority (Bourgeois et al., 1999). From a teaching perspective, lecturers and tutors frequently welcome the presence of mature students who can help their 'seminars to become interactive and dynamic' (ibid., p. 119). Younger students can be passive and unresponsive, and the presence of more loquacious adults can help to create a more relaxed atmosphere which may, in turn, increase the willingness of young students to participate in discussion. Older students have more life-experience to relate to their learning and this can, in appropriate circumstances, enhance the learning experience of everyone involved (Brookfield, 1996).

Finally, the most difficult and often insurmountable problems which adult students face at university are those related to 'facts of life' (McGivney, 1996). Chief among these are financial problems which mature students occasionally find so difficult to overcome that they are forced to withdraw from their course (McGivney, 1996; Yorke, 1999). In general, adult students – particularly those with dependent family members – have more pressing financial commitments than their younger counterparts and these can constitute a significant barrier to their participation in higher education. (Osborne et al., 2001). Yorke (1999) argues that financial problems have been exacerbated substantially by the replacement of student grants with loans and it seems that even the administrative complexity of the financial support which is available to adult students can deter participation (Bolam and Dodgson, 2003). Mature students, unlike many of their younger counterparts, are often unable to undertake part-time work because of other demands on their time, and single-parents are particularly vulnerable to financial difficulties (ibid.).

2. Theoretical models of student retention and adaptation to higher education

Given the economic, social and personal implications of student failure and attrition, it is hardly surprising that this is one of the most extensively researched aspects of higher education. Before examining some of the theoretical models which have been used to examine student retention, it is important to stress that such models are often based on research involving young, white, middle-class, predominantly residential college students, and that application of these research findings to contemporary,

pluralistic student populations can be highly problematic. One of the most influential models of student retention was first outlined by Tinto in 1975, and his model has provided the theoretical framework for a significant body of subsequent research into student withdrawal from higher education (Braxton and Hirschy, 2004). Tinto's sociological approach to student integration centres on the idea of transition from one culture to another and draws heavily on Durkheim's focus on social integration in his work on the sociology of suicide. The model is longitudinal in that it demonstrates how relationships between students and their institutions develop over time, and it is interactionist in that it emphasises the central importance of a complex set of interactions between student and college (Tinto, 1975). Students arrive at college with personal characteristics (like academic achievement, family background and career aspirations) which influence their initial commitment to both the institution and the final goal of graduation. These initial commitment levels help to determine the extent of students' social and academic integration into college life and this, in turn, affects – positively or negatively – subsequent commitment levels and determination to progress. Social integration relates to the extent to which the student becomes immersed in the social systems of the educational institution – for instance, a student staying at home and commuting to the university would generally be less likely to form close social links with other students in a predominantly residential college. Individual personality traits are also important – students who are reserved or less gregarious may find social integration more difficult. Academic integration is both structural and normative. Structural integration takes place when the student is able and willing to comply with the explicit requirements of the college or university (like attending lectures and fulfilling assessment requirements), while normative integration depends on the extent to which the student is in sympathy with the sometimes implicit values and priorities of the academic system (ibid.). The effect of academic integration on subsequent goal commitment is one of the 13 testable propositions in Tinto's theoretical model. Braxton et al. (1997) suggest that although the model does have internal logical consistency only five of these propositions have been substantiated empirically. Braxton (2000) suggests, for instance, that initial institutional commitment has limited impact on social integration: through the UCAS clearing system, for instance, a student might gain entry to a university to which she or he has had no explicit commitment and still experience a high level of social integration. Tinto's neglect of the psychological dimension of student retention has

also attracted considerable criticism, and Bean and Eaton (2000) argue that the dominance of his theory has created a sociological bias in cognate research. According to Pascarella and Tansini (1991), Tinto's model is undermined by its failure to take account of developmental theory such as Perry's (1970) work on the intellectual and ethical development of college students. Similarly, Bean and Eaton (2000) have identified four strands in current psychological theory which, they argue, are particularly relevant to understanding student retention. First, attitude-behaviour theory links attitudes and beliefs to behaviour and might, for instance, contribute to our understanding of the difficulties many working-class students face in attempting to integrate into a predominantly middle-class milieu. Second, coping behaviour theory examines how individuals deal with similar problems in different ways. Third, self-efficacy theory is concerned with an individual's perception of how capable they are of acting to achieve a desired outcome such as an honours degree. Finally, attribution theory – typified by Rotter's (1966) concept of the 'locus of control' - helps to understand how individuals see various aspects of their life as within or outwith their own control. However, in their comprehensive study of student retention Yorke and Longden (2004) support Tinto's relegation of psychological factors to a subsidiary role in explaining student retention:

Once the sociological is brought into play, then student departure is the outcome of transactions between student and institution (and student and student), in which a breakdown can be interpreted from the perspective of either party. The psychologically-based perspective does not require that the 'blame' for withdrawal be attached to the student – it simply makes it more difficult for other possible interpretations to be admitted into consideration (Yorke and Longden, 2004, p. 78).

Braxton and Hirschy (2004) have suggested a revised version of Tinto's theoretical model which has dispensed with the demarcation between the social and academic dimensions of integration and proposes a single strand of social integration that, in turn, impacts on commitment to the institution. Social integration is governed by three areas of student interaction with the college or university. First, social integration will be enhanced by a clear institutional commitment to student welfare which is demonstrated through the readiness of administrative and teaching staff to offer guidance to and interact with students. Second, institutional integrity - where the university's actions match its words – has the potential to increase student integration.

If, for instance, an institution's prospectus highlights its extensive information technology and library facilities but new students find it difficult to access computers and borrow books they need, then its integrity will be questioned. Third, drawing on the work of Kuh and Love (2000), Braxton and Hirschy point to the significance of an institution's communal potential through which students perceive opportunities (or the lack of them) for interaction – both academic and social – with other students with whom they would like to associate. While Braxton and Hirschy's theoretical revision of Tinto's model is as yet empirically untested, Yorke and Longden (2004, p. 88) suggest that it 'illustrates the important interplay between theory and methodology that is necessary if understanding is to be advanced'.

Pierre Bourdieu's extensive work on social reproduction has been used as a theoretical framework by a substantial number of writers examining the experience of students in higher education (McDonough, 1994, 1997; Reay, 1995, 1998, 2002, 2003, 2004a, 2004b; Berger, 2000; Thomas 2002; Yorke and Thomas, 2003). Bourdieu's (1973) concept of cultural capital posits that along with financial capital members of higher socio-economic groups generally possess cultural resources – both tacit and explicit – that enable them to more successfully negotiate the social and cultural intricacies of certain organisations and institutions. Thus students from middle-class families with a history of participation in higher education will generally be more familiar with the conventions and expectations of university life. As McDonough (1997) suggests, cultural capital has no value in itself other than the way in which it can be employed to gain access to other socio-economic resources and forms of capital. From this perspective, cultural capital is seen a conduit through which access to professional employment and the usually concomitant economic capital is facilitated. The potential value of the various forms of cultural capital is closely linked to the complex nature of the social situation, which Bourdieu describes as the *field*, in which it operates – middle-class cultural capital would have little validity amongst the inmates of a prison for whom an entirely different set of norms and standards of acceptable behaviour prevails. Thus cultural capital is only of value within the particular social groups or institutions where it has currency and the interaction of cultural capital and field gives rise to a distinctive habitus which can be defined as a transposable set of dispositions, collective norms, values and practices. Thomas (2002) suggests that many universities and colleges are organised in ways

which attach greater value to the previous knowledge and experience of traditional, middle-class students. Thus in an elite university the dominant habitus (arguably, historically and continuously transposed from middle-class schooling and family backgrounds) may require a far greater degree of adjustment from a working-class student. Similarly, a mature student may experience a degree of alienation from a habitus where entry into higher education immediately or shortly after leaving school is the norm.

However, such a brief and straightforward description of how habitus may operate in educational settings belies the subtlety, complexity and elasticity of the concept:

The conditionings associated with a particular class of conditions of existence produce *habitus*, systems of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, as principles which generate and organize practices and representations that can be objectively adapted to their outcomes without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends or an express mastery of the operations necessary in order to attain them. Objectively “regulated” and “regular” without being in any way the product of obedience to rules, they can be collectively orchestrated without being the product of the organizing action of a conductor (Bourdieu, 1990a, p. 53).

Reay (2004b) identifies four distinct aspects of habitus which underpin its role in social reproduction. First, habitus is embodied and not just a collection of attitudes and ways of viewing the world: it is demonstrated in the way we walk, stand, speak and even eat. Second, countering the charge of determinism that has been levelled at much of his work because of its tendency to focus on structure, Bourdieu has stressed that the concept of habitus is flexible enough to take full account of human agency and that any given habitus may give rise to a wide range of potential actions. Thus the prevailing habitus of Oxford University at the beginning of the twentieth century simultaneously produced graduates who moved seamlessly into the establishment status quo and others, like RH Tawney, who sought to democratise education and promote social change (Goldman, 1995). However, Bourdieu is careful to emphasise that although habitus allows agency it also constrains it:

The habitus, as a system of dispositions to a certain practice, is an objective basis for regularity of modes of behaviour, and thus for the regularity of modes of practice, and if practices can be predicted...this is because the effect of the habitus is that

agents who are equipped with it will behave in a certain way in certain circumstances (Bourdieu, 1990b, p. 77).

Third, Reay suggests that in relation to the question of whether habitus operates most powerfully at an individual or a collective level it is for Bourdieu, 'a multi-layered concept, with more general notions of habitus at the level of society and more complex, differentiated notions at the level of the individual' (Reay, 2004b, p. 434). An individual from a middle-class background may question the equity of a class-based society while, at the same time, continuing to exhibit and favour the norms of middle-class behaviour and taste in their private life. In a similar vein, a self-made man from a working-class background may embrace some of the external trappings of wealth (like private healthcare and education for his family) while maintaining that he is still working-class at heart and disparaging what, for him, are the more effete aspects of middle-class culture (Cannadine, 2000). Fourth, habituses are in a constant process of development through the effects of the life histories of the individuals who are affected by them and, at the same time, play a part in their reproduction. Habitus is first shaped by family influences but as children venture into the outside world it becomes more subject to normative influences like schooling which inculcates certain dispositions and moves its charges towards 'a cultured habitus' (Bourdieu, 1967). However habitus carries within itself the seeds of its own transformation: when it moves to a field that shares many of the characteristics of the field in which it was created the potential for change is limited, but when it encounters a very different field the potential for transformation is heightened and the expectations of the individuals involved may be raised or lowered accordingly.

Bringing together these four characteristics of habitus, it can be seen as a dynamic, complex set of interacting social principles which shapes the experience of those who interact with it. Choice is central but that choice is always constrained to some extent, and the habitus is sustained by a series of internalised attitudinal matrices which effectively govern which possibilities of change are indeed possible, which are likely, and which are highly improbable. These matrices are, in turn, transposable so that even in entirely new fields their influence continues to constrain our view of what change is realistically possible (Lizardo, 2003 cited in Reay, 2004b). Bourdieu also focuses on the often tacit nature of the mastery of the 'rules of the game' in habitus: there is a seemingly effortless performance of our adherence to these rules without

explicit recognition that such rules are being followed. He asserts that '[t]here is an economy of practices, a reason immanent in practices, whose "origin" lies neither in the "decisions" of reason understood as rational calculation nor in the determinations of mechanisms external to and superior to the agents' (Bourdieu, 1990a, p. 50). The ability to apply appropriate strategies in a given situation is dependent on the acquisition of generative principles intimately linked to social position. Early experiences shape future responses: the generative principles we have already acquired are used to enable us to deal with new experiences (Bourdieu, 1990a). When these generative principles underpinning the habitus begin to operate within a new field with familiar characteristics then the process of transition to that field can be relatively smooth: 'when habitus encounters a social world of which it is the product, it is like a 'fish in water': it does not feel the weight of the water and it takes the world about itself for granted (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, p. 127).

Bourdieu's conceptualisation of habitus has not been without its critics. As briefly mentioned above, it has been charged with placing too much emphasis on structuralism and determinism, and focusing inadequately on human agency (Alexander, 1995; Jenkins, 1992). Bourdieu responded to this charge in later work, which focused specifically on the dispossessed, by carefully examining the way in which the incompatibility of habitus and field in certain situations increases the possibility of social transformation (Bourdieu, 1999). A second major criticism is that Bourdieu's analysis has focused excessively on social class and neglects the other important lines along which society is divided, notably gender and race (Cicourel, 1993; Sayer, 2005). Although he once again tried to respond to this criticism in later work, it was too little, too late to rebut the critique of many feminist and postcolonial writers. However, other writers while acknowledging Bourdieu's relative neglect of race and gender – as well as other areas of possible discrimination such as sexual orientation, religion, age or disability – argue that habitus remains a powerful analytical concept that can be used to throw light on discrimination and the uneven distribution of power and resources within society (Cicourel, 1993; McClelland, 1990; Reay, 1995, 2004b). Bourdieu's concepts have also been criticised for vagueness and indeterminacy: they are used to convey theoretical weight to discussion which is often at an abstract level but are less effective at explaining exactly how things happen in the real world (Reay, 1995). Basil Bernstein argues that:

Habitus is described in terms of what it gives rise to, and brings, or does not bring about. It is described in terms of the external underlying analogies it regulates. But it is not described with reference to the particular ordering principles or strategies, which give rise to the formation of a particular habitus. The formation of the internal structure of the particular habitus, the mode of its specific acquisition, which gives it its specificity, is not described. How it comes to be is not part of the description, only what it does. There is no description of its particular formation (Bernstein, 2000, p. 133).

Bernstein's work on language codes is broadly compatible with the concept of habitus, but it represents a deeper level of analysis of how habitus is created and shaped. Bernstein's early theorisation of language codes was based on his experience of teaching young male apprentices in the East End of London. He found that there were different levels of performance on written tasks amongst the apprentices which seemed to be related to their backgrounds. In general, apprentices who performed better had access to 'elaborated' language codes while those who struggled were more likely to display the characteristics of a 'restricted' code (Bernstein, 1971). A restricted code operates in a context where there are shared assumptions about that context, while an elaborated code is needed in a context where shared assumptions about the context are less prevalent, the significance of context is recognised, and language is used to mediate between differing perspectives. A typical working-class linguistic code may have an incredible richness and efficacy within working-class communities but might be less effective as a mode of communication in a different social environment. Bernstein argues that 'one code is not better than another; each possesses its own aesthetic, its own possibilities. Society, however, may place different values on the orders of experience elicited, maintained and progressively strengthened through the different coding systems' (*ibid.*, p. 135). Language codes are initially acquired through the early influence of family, often tacitly, and for Bernstein the school is the crucial arena in which these codes can then be reinforced or modified (Bernstein, 1977). Clearly, elaborated codes offer a higher degree of social flexibility and a heightened potential for movement into new forms of habitus. Thus the work of Bernstein and others who have applied his concept of language codes to educational research complements certain elements of Bourdieu's theory. Morais et al. (1993) and Daniels (1995) carried out careful empirical work that highlighted the significant effect of unconsciously acquired dispositions on academic performance. Bernstein

suggests that his concept of 'code may be regarded as an attempt to write what might perhaps be called pedagogic grammars of specialized habituses and the forms of their transmission which attempt to regulate their acquisition' (Bernstein, 1990, p. 3). His use of the term 'regulate their acquisition' here is interesting: it suggests that built into language codes are certain barriers which prevent their easy or superficial mastery. This is broadly compatible with the idea that language is one of the more powerful and (for outsiders) impenetrable aspects of habitus. Like Bourdieu, Bernstein's work has attracted criticism for its emphasis on social reproduction rather than transformation. Bernstein's answer to this charge is that mastery of a given code has the potential to produce oppositional arguments which challenge the status quo (Bernstein, 1990). However, he qualifies this proposition with the caveat that an initial desire to subvert the code may well be diluted or lost in the often long process of acquiring full access to it.

The aim of this part of the literature review was to move from the first section's discussion of the background to the growth in adult participation in higher education and examination of some of the early literature dealing with their experience therein towards a more focused engagement with relevant theory: theory which has underpinned a substantial volume of subsequent research. First, it considered Tinto's theoretical framework which has been applied and continues to be applied – in modified forms – to analyses of student integration. The issue of integration is significant for students of all ages: the actual lived experience of participation will be different for members of increasingly diverse student cohorts, but an adequate level of social and academic integration is one of the most essential corollaries of effective transition to higher education. Second, it examined Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of cultural capital and habitus which have been employed by numerous researchers to examine the ways in which adult students adapt to higher education (Thomas, 2002; Reay, 2002; Tett, 2004). Criticisms of Bourdieu were considered but the case was made that these do not undermine the utility of his theoretical concepts as a framework for further research. Indeed Reay argues that from a research perspective the 'conceptual looseness' of habitus is one of its strengths: its fluidity means that it can be viewed as theory that informs research, or as a research method, or as a combination of both (Reay, 1995, p. 357). Finally the work of Basil Bernstein was discussed, and it was suggested that his theory of linguistic codes complements our

understanding of habitus and presents a clear and convincing analysis of the processes involved in its formation. The review of the literature now moves on to consideration of more recent work on retention and the first-year experience in higher education some of which builds – occasionally implicitly – on this theoretical foundation.

In the mid-1990s, as the British higher education continued its steady transformation from an elite to a mass system – and student non-completion became a growing area of concern for policy makers – Yorke (1999) conducted a major study of student retention and withdrawal. Unprecedented in its scale, its conclusions were based on an analysis of the experiences in higher education of 2151 respondents from across the English higher education sector. Yorke's work identified the most significant reasons for student withdrawal and, based on this and subsequent findings (Yorke and Longden, 2008), these can be subdivided into four broad categories. First, a student may find that they are incompatible with the institution or with their particular course. This may be particularly salient for students who have gained places through clearing: for instance, if a student applies to study ancient history at a redbrick university, is unsuccessful in that application, and is then offered a clearing place on a more generic history degree course at a post-1992 institution then the risk of incompatibility is clearly increased. Research suggests that in relation to this factor, the quality and accuracy of the pre-entry information and guidance provided to students is crucial: students are more likely to withdraw from courses which differ substantively from their pre-entry description or simply fail to meet their expectations (Quinn et al., 2005; Yorke and Longden, 2005). Similarly, inaccurate or overblown representations of institutional facilities may contribute to student dissatisfaction.

Second, student withdrawal may be the result of inadequate readiness for the overall experience of higher education. Quinn et al. (2005) in their study of working-class drop-out from higher education discuss the culture shock that their respondents experienced in the transition from school or college to university. This culture shock is clearly related to dissonance between working-class forms of habitus and the field of university life which is – in general – more closely attuned to middle class norms and values: its identification supports the contention of Reay (2002, 2004), Thomas (2002) and Tett (2003) that social class is a significant determinant of integration into or alienation from higher education. In addition to dispositional factors, students may

find that they are inadequately prepared to make the transition from school or college learning and teaching practices to those of higher education, and then – in the face of problems arising from this – may struggle to access appropriate, timely support (Yorke and Longden, 2008). Laing and Robinson (2003) argue that exposure to unfamiliar learning and teaching practices has a significant negative impact on student retention. Research into the learning experience of previously under-represented groups in higher education suggests that in order to enhance integration universities should take more account of the diversity of students' pathways to higher education and, accordingly, widen their focus from access to the accessibility of their educational provision (Bamber and Tett, 2001). Parker et al. (2005) argue that institutions which have been most active in widening participation – frequently post-1992 universities – have also been at the forefront of innovative developments in learning and teaching that have the flexibility to meet the needs of increasingly diverse student cohorts. One example of a potentially significant innovation in learning and teaching practice is Meyer and Land's (2005) work on threshold concepts. They argue that within and across academic disciplines there are certain key concepts whose full comprehension has the potential to transform an individual's understanding of a subject, or part of a subject. For instance, the precise meaning of Hegelian idealism is – arguably – a fairly difficult concept to grasp, but it is central to a comprehensive understanding of Hegel's philosophy which, in turn, is central to dialectical materialism – a threshold concept in Marxism. Meyer and Land posit that one response to such threshold concepts is a form of mimicry through which students are able to create the impression that they fully understand difficult concepts even when this is not the case. It seems reasonable to suggest here that the ability to perform such mimicry is in some way linked to previous educational experience and the possession (or lack) of certain forms of cultural capital, particularly – in Bernstein's terms – an elaborated linguistic code: a student with an extended and ostensibly more sophisticated vocabulary may be more adept at creating an *impression* of comprehension. While acknowledging that for some students such mimicry may be a coping strategy rather than deliberate deceit, and that it may – for them – lead to a successful learning outcome Meyer and Land propose that:

... the theoretical significance of this proposed conceptual framework lies in its explanatory potential to locate troublesome aspects of disciplinary knowledge within transitions across conceptual thresholds and hence to assist teachers in identifying

appropriate ways of modifying or redesigning curricula to enable their students to negotiate such epistemological transitions, and ontological transformations, in a more satisfying fashion for all concerned (2005, p. 386).

Here, Meyer and Land are advocating curricular changes intended to enhance and more effectively test deep learning: changes which may also accentuate the transformative potential of higher education rather than its long-standing role as an agent of social reproduction.

Third, social integration has the potential to enhance students' commitment to courses and institutions. Where failure carries the threat of separation, a sense of belonging may contribute to student perseverance (Harvey, Drew and Smith, 2006) while, as Mann (2001) argues, a sense of alienation – although it may actually be employed as a coping strategy – can lead to a gradual disengagement from university life, and, ultimately, to withdrawal. Unsurprisingly, Quinn et al. (2005) found that students living at home were generally less socially integrated than those living in university, on-campus accommodation. Thomas (2002) argues that friendships within higher education are especially important at times of difficulty and that the absence of such supportive relationships heightens the risk of withdrawal. Yorke and Longden (2008) suggest that the occasional anonymity of higher education – the experience of being just another face in a large, impersonal lecture hall – can weaken social integration.

Fourth, it is also evident that financial difficulties contribute significantly to student withdrawal (Ozga and Sukhnandan, 1997; Yorke, 1999). Thomas (2002) found that the risk of student withdrawal amongst working-class students was linked to their relative income: where they had been significantly better off before entering higher education, or were far less affluent than close friends or family while in education, this was more likely to have a negative effect on their commitment to it. Yorke and Longden (2008) found that financial problems and employment issues were more likely to lead to withdrawal amongst: older students; male students; non-white students; students in post-1992 institutions; students with some prior experience of higher education; students with dependants; and students with little prior knowledge of their institutions or courses. They also found that students who had been working six or fewer hours per week cited financial reasons for their withdrawal far less

frequently than students working fifteen hours or more (Yorke and Longden, 2008, p. 24).

Moving on from issues of retention and withdrawal, this review now considers students' experience of the first year in higher education. Complementing the discussion in the document review (Chapter 4) of issues of engagement and empowerment, this section focuses on the current emphasis in higher education on the development of generic graduate attributes. Developing these attributes in students is increasingly viewed as a way of enhancing their individual experiences in, and learning outcomes of, higher education and – equally importantly – of preparing them for life beyond the academy. Addressing the latter objective, the Global University Network for Innovation (GUNI) asserts that:

The central educative purpose of HEIs ought to be the explicit facilitation of progressive, reflexive, critical, transformative learning that leads to much improved understanding of the need for, and expression of, responsible paradigms for living and for 'being' and 'becoming' both as individuals alone and collectively as communities (GUNI, 2009, p. 11).

This is an attractive ideal and certainly moves the emphasis in higher education from social reproduction to transformation. However, as Moir (2010, p. 3) argues, '[t]his notion of higher education as educating citizens with a sense of civic awareness may again seem far removed from the everyday concerns of teachers in higher education'. It is also clearly in alignment with the increasingly pervasive mantra that one of the principal roles of higher education should be the preparation of its graduates for effective and adaptable participation in new, knowledge economies. In addition, the Scottish Government's new Curriculum for Excellence focuses on the development of four capacities (with associated attributes) in young people: successful learners, confident individuals, effective contributors, and responsible citizens (www.scotland.gov.uk). As a result, a national higher education system which may currently be grappling with an innovative approach to learning and teaching that is relatively unfamiliar to both students and academic staff will – within a few years time – be welcoming new, large cohorts of young students well-versed (at least in principle) in framing their participation in education within such terms. It is clear, therefore, that Scottish universities will find it necessary to adapt their first-year

curricula to accommodate this changed educational paradigm and that – to a certain extent – these changes will affect all new students.

Much of the current emphasis in British higher education on the promise of developing graduate attributes to counter the uncertainties of late modernity has been influenced by Barnett's (2006) analysis of their significance (Moir, 2010). However, his critique of the nature and purposes of higher education has become increasingly withering and he laments the late-twentieth century rise of a new type of student:

... [who] has been constructed as an acting rather than a cognitive being. Arguably, this has paid off for we have seen over the last 30 years or so – in the UK at least – the emergence of what might be termed 'the performative student' ... This student is replete with 'transferable skills', contemplates with equanimity the prospect of multiple careers in the lifespan, is entrepreneurial and has an eye to the main chance, and possesses a breezy self-confidence in facing the unpredictability that characterizes contemporary life. Such a shift heralds a transformation not only in what we take a student (and a graduate) to be but also in what students have actually become ... From knowing to doing; this move lies at the centre of this new sense of the being of the student. In the process, knowledge has receded from the frontline of what is to count as 'higher education'. In an Internet Age, even where it retains a presence, knowledge as such dwindles: now what is at issue is a student's ability to gain information from the databases and much less the student's own mastery of a knowledge field (Barnett, 2009, p. 430).

It is hard to gauge the extent to which Barnett is being deliberately controversial in this sweeping ontological critique of the contemporary 'performative student' whom he, in essence, relegates to the role of little more than an information processor. And it is equally difficult to imagine the extent to which he believes his rather dystopian stereotype reflects the true diversity of the student population. There is, however, an element of truth in his indictment of the increasing instrumentality of participation in higher education: there has been an insidious commercialisation of the relationship between students and their institutions and many students – quite understandably – focus intently on the impact of higher education on their life chances in an uncertain and competitive world (Gibb, 2001; Bok, 2003; Reisz, 2010). Barnett moves on to less provocative ground when he begins to synthesize his thesis in an examination of 'epistemic virtues' – dispositions to learn, to engage, to be prepared to listen, to be prepared to explore, to keep going forward (Barnett, 2009, p. 433), and qualities 'that

may especially be engendered through one's efforts to come seriously to know the world: courage, resilience, carefulness, integrity, self-discipline, restraint, respect for others, openness, generosity, authenticity' (ibid., p. 434). He then theorises the curricular and pedagogic implications of promoting these epistemic virtues. These cannot be considered in their entirety here but, for instance, he suggests that the curriculum should 'offer *contrasting insights and perspectives*, such that 'openness' may develop' and that pedagogy should 'require students to put forward their *own profferings* in order that the 'courage' to take up a position and stake a claim might be developed' (ibid., p. 438). Moir (2010, p. 5) argues that Barnett's 'call to educators' to create the curricula and pedagogies that will develop qualities of persistence and adaptability is highly relevant to the idea of engagement in the first year and – in particular – to the propagation of 'the will to learn' – a central aspect of effective transition to higher education. A survey of university websites shows that most universities in Scotland have created a set of guidelines on graduate attributes. These vary in nature and complexity but, for example, Strathclyde University's targeted graduate attributes are: Capable, applying leading edge knowledge; Global in outlook, thinking internationally; Enquiring, pursuing critical questions; Ethical, identifying risks and taking responsibility; Creative, contributing to solutions; and Enterprising, creating opportunities (www.strath.ac.uk). Although this type of approach to undergraduate learning and teaching is becoming increasingly widespread, it has not escaped criticism and, for some, is seen as little more than a further legitimisation of the audit-driven culture in higher education so decried by Evans (2005). It is certainly the case that universities' descriptions of graduate attributes – some subtly and some more overtly – include transferable skills and employability, and it remains to be seen to what extent they will realise Barnett's vision of a higher education system acting as a fount of civically and epistemologically enlightened graduates. However, there can be little doubt that there are clear signs of movement in relation to the flexibility of first-year provision in higher education: the potential implications of this increased flexibility for adult students in transition will be carefully considered in the extended analysis of this research project's findings (Chapter 7).

3. The focus on transition

In recent decades the concept of transition has been increasingly applied to social science research examining the experience of change and the often profound discontinuities we encounter in life. Some of these discontinuities have been facets of experience throughout human history, while others have become more commonplace as a result of the increasing economic, social and cultural instability of late modernity. Thus, while the experience of leaving the parental home is a longstanding (though constantly changing) example of transition, the negotiation of unemployment and the need to re-skill in middle age is a more recent form of transition, and arguably a direct consequence of the accelerating pace of technological change and globalisation. However, whilst transition is widely used as a conceptual framework to examine challenging discontinuities in the lifecourse – including those involving movement into and between educational contexts – this often takes place without sufficiently critical examination of what transition entails; indeed, as Ecclestone, Biesta and Hughes argue, ‘there is no agreed-upon definition of what constitutes a transition’ (2010, p. 5). The straightforward linear conceptualisation of transition, whereby it is seen as movement between contexts A and B – for example, primary to secondary school or college to university – is losing much of its currency in social science research. Nonetheless, as Gale and Parker (2014, p. 737) suggest, there is often an overreliance on ‘taken-for-granted notions of transition’, and Worth (2009) argues that there is frequently a lack of development of the concept in contemporary research:

Many researchers have discussed how transitions have changed – how they no longer follow a traditional linear path – but much of this research on youth transitions does not really provide an alternative to the linear model that is fundamentally different. Instead research often provides supporting case studies that suggest how transitions are now radically different, without taking the opportunity to add to transition theory (Worth, 2009, p. 1051).

More recently a concerted effort to address this lacuna in the theorisation of transition has been evident in the literature. In addition to the work of Ecclestone (2009) and Ecclestone, Biesta and Hughes (2010), the recent work of Crafter and Maunder (2012) and Gale and Parker (2014) has provided two useful frameworks that have the potential to significantly enhance our understanding of transition: the first considers

transition as a sociocultural phenomenon; the second specifically examines the application of the concept to studies of student transition to higher education.

Citing Hviid and Zittoun (2008), Crafter and Maunder (2012) differentiate between two broad approaches academic studies of transition have adopted. The first of these has tended to foreground the *outcome* of the process of transition (for instance, the level of adaptation and contentment of children moving from nursery to primary school). Often these studies are predicated on the idea of successful, problematic or failed transition, and many of them exhibit an alignment with the linear model alluded to above. The second approach is more concerned with the actual *process* of transition and focuses on its role as a ‘catalyst for change or rupture’ (ibid., p. 11). This approach foregrounds the actual experience of transition as a multi-dimensional interaction between the individual and her/his existing, changing and new social contexts. Acknowledging that significantly more studies have looked at the outcome rather than the process of transition, Crafter and Maunder (2012) outline a theoretical framework which incorporates three useful conceptualisations of transition.

The first of these examines the concept of ‘consequential transition’ (Beach, 1999) which seeks to explain how knowledge is transferred from one context to another, or adapted from one situation to another. For instance, how is arithmetical knowledge acquired in school applied in the home? Or how do the language and customs learned in school by the children of first-generations immigrants affect the interaction of the children with their parents? Beach (1999) was particularly interested in how transition alters both the individual and the social activities they participate in; or, in his terms, the *consequential* dimension of transition. A consequential transition ‘is the conscious reflective struggle to reconstruct knowledge, skills and identity in ways that are consequential to the individual becoming someone or something new’ (Beach, 1999, p. 30). Developing the concept further, Beach outlines a typology of four different forms of consequential transition: lateral, collateral, encompassing and mediational. Lateral transition occurs when individuals move between two developmentally related contexts: from primary to secondary school; from school to university or from school to the workplace. Here participation in one context is normally replaced by participation in the new context. Collateral transition involves simultaneous participation in two or more historically coexistent contexts such as

university and home life, or in different academic disciplines within higher education. Encompassing transition entails individuals encountering changing circumstances within an existing social context: for instance, schoolteachers implementing curricular reform, or employees adapting to the introduction of new technologies in the workplace. Mediational transitions normally occur within educational contexts where involvement in a future activity in the workplace or education is simulated: for instance, where opportunities are created for secondary school students to experience some aspects of higher education or to undertake simulated business start-ups or media projects. All these forms of transition may lead to some change in the individual as a result of the need to accommodate and make sense of what is taking place. Such ‘change may be in the form of knowledge construction; the adaptation of old skills or the incorporation of new ones; change in identities; and/or change in social position’ (Crafter and Maunder, 2012, p. 12). Educational research literature provides numerous examples of transition which mirror the categories in Beach’s (1999) typology. For instance, Evangelou et al.’s (2008) report on transition from primary to secondary school highlights the potential value of ‘move up days’ through which children are able to gain some experience of secondary school life: an example of mediational transition. There is abundant literature on the lateral transition from school to university and much of this focuses on students’ experience of the first year (Kift and Nelson, 2005; Krause and Coates, 2008; Scanlon, Rowling and Weber, 2007; Leese, 2010). Their conclusions are too extensive to consider here but Leese (2010), for example, found that new students’ expectations of higher education were significantly shaped by their previous educational experience, and that when there was a mismatch between such expectations and reality the impact on the overall experience of transition could be significant. Crafter and Abreu (2010) examined the social tension resulting from the clash of ‘everyday’ mathematics used and taught at home and formal mathematics taught at school: an example of collateral transition. Of the forms of transition delineated in Beach’s (1999) typology, collateral transition – which takes clear account of multiple social contexts – has the most explanatory potential in relation to the transition experiences of adult students whose diverse lives are arguably less compatible with linear or lateral models.

The second conceptualisation of transition Crafter and Maunder (2012) examine posits that transition is normally the source of identity change or even rupture (change

which causes intense feelings of uncertainty or disquiet). That transition often leads to subtle – and occasionally profound – changes in identity is relatively well established. Evangelou et al. (2008) found that unproblematic transition from primary to secondary school was often accompanied by a discernible improvement in children's confidence and self-esteem. Similarly, researchers examining transition to higher education have identified an element of personal transformation many students experience as a result of negotiating the personal and academic challenges of university life (see Hussey and Smith, 2010; Maunder, Gingham and Rogers, 2010; Warin and Dempster, 2007). Zittoun (2006) explores three sources of rupture which have the potential to precipitate particularly challenging transitions, and/or have an impact on transitions not overtly related. These are: changes in cultural context, resulting from traumatic events like war or natural disaster; changes in our 'realm of experience' such as changing school, the place we live or emigrating to another country, all of which alter our immediate environment; and changes in our relationships and interaction with others – with friends and teachers in educational settings, for instance. Not all transition is a direct result of some of the profound changes Zittoun considers, but transition never takes place in a vacuum and her conceptualisation of rupture is particularly useful in that it encourages us to consider the possible 'domino effect' of transitions: each experience of transition may be significantly affected by previous experiences. Young students may well have faced challenging transitions, but the sheer diversity of adult students' lives suggests that, where possible, account should be taken of the impact of other transitions that preceded their entry into higher education. From a critical realist perspective, an awareness of the possible impact of such experiences has the potential to help us look beneath the surface for less visible generative mechanisms at play in adult students' negotiation of transition.

The third conceptualisation of transition Crafter and Maunder (2012) consider is transition within communities of practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998). The theoretical concept of communities of practice is examined in some depth in the next section of this chapter, but it is worth briefly considering Crafter and Maunder's comparison with the two frameworks considered above. They argue that communities of practice theory facilitates a more developed explanation of the dynamic interaction between individuals and the context in which transition takes place:

Whilst Zittoun's and Beach's conceptualisations of transition both emphasise the role of identity shifts, with the individual changing or becoming a different self, they put less prominence on the adjustments occurring in others as a result of this. In 'Communities of Practice', transition not only happens to the individual through acquiring new skills, knowledge, meanings and identities, but also in the community itself by the inclusion of new members, [and] refinement of practices ... In this way transition is seen as a two-way process (Crafter and Maunder, 2012, p. 14).

They conclude that the application of sociocultural theory – which firmly locates the individual within the wider social and cultural context – significantly enhances our understanding of transition. The three conceptualisations of transition considered here all foreground the importance of context and, though different aspects of transition are highlighted in each, together they clearly illuminate the fact that transitions are 'complex and multifaceted' (ibid., p. 14), and they add to an expanding heuristic repertoire which may be utilised to explore the process and experience of transition.

Based on an extensive review of the expanding literature on transition to higher education, Gale and Parker (2014) introduce a particularly insightful and useful typology that identifies three categories of transition which are evident – sometimes only implicitly – in the research literature: transition as induction (T1); transition as development (T2); and transition as becoming (T3). They are keen to emphasise, however, that these categories are 'not rigid or inflexible, but relatively permeable and fluid, reflecting the diversity of thought. One view of transition may not fit neatly into any one of the three categories, but may demonstrate some characteristics of either of the other two' (Gale and Parker, 2014, p. 735). They also acknowledge that there are considerably more studies in the literature clustered around T1 and T2 paradigms of transition. At the same time they identify important limitations in both of these and point to the significant explanatory potential – yet to be extensively utilised in the research – of a T3 (transition as becoming) approach which, rather than seeing transition as an 'event' that occurs in various stages or periods of life, depicts it as 'a perpetual series of fragmented movements involving whole-of-life fluctuations in lived reality or subjective experience, from birth to death' (ibid., p. 737).

In recent research into transition to higher education, T1 (transition as induction) researchers have focused increasingly on the idea of 'smooth transition' which entails

institutions anticipating and proactively preparing resources to ameliorate the wide range of problems and challenges students in transition face (Gill et al., 2011, p. 63). Unsurprisingly, given the statistical evidence on student withdrawal during or after the first year, much of the emphasis has been on the first-year experience (Kift and Nelson, 2005; Krause and Coates, 2008; Scanlon, Rowling and Weber, 2007). From this perspective, induction is generally viewed as a crucial opportunity to assist students in making the adjustments required for effective participation in higher education. Gale and Parker (2014) distinguish between earlier, first-generation co-curricular activities which help students navigate the organisational requirements of university life (including advice on course selection, funding and accommodation, and orientation activities), and second-generation curricular activities which focus on academic requirements (understanding the curriculum, developing learning skills and fulfilling assessment tasks). Most recent scholarly work on induction has advocated a more holistic approach that combines co-curricular and curricular approaches in ‘whole-of-institution’ or ‘joined-up’ institutional strategies to develop and manage the induction process, arguing persuasively that smooth transition is dependent on social integration as well as academic performance (Hillman, 2005; Kift, Nelson and Clarke, 2010). In a significant development of this approach, Kift et al. have created a model of a ‘transition pedagogy’ which stresses the importance of strategic integration and coordination of transition policies across higher education institutions, and requires far more openness towards students regarding what and how they are being taught, and how it is assessed (Kift, Nelson and Clarke, 2010). However, these worthwhile developments in the field – arguably underpinned by a T1 conceptualisation of transition – have been the subject of sustained criticism which alleges that they contribute to the part universities play in the social reproduction of dominant norms and certain forms of social and cultural capital. Quinn (2010) points out that ‘the terms of transition are set by others’ (p. 119), and although T1 researchers pursue the unquestionably laudable goal of providing the widest and most appropriate support to students in transition, there is rarely explicit acknowledgement that this primarily involves assisting ‘students to navigate existing institutional pathways or systems’ (Gale and Parker, 2014, p. 741; Ecclestone, Biesta and Hughes, 2010). Although strategies developed from this approach endeavour to take full account of the diverse backgrounds of students transitioning to university, as well as the different requirements of individual academic disciplines, the important point is

that induction is *managed* by institutions (Kift and Nelson, 2005; Krause and Coates, 2008). The agency of students is certainly tested within the process of induction, but what is being tested is their individual motivation, engagement with learning, and interaction with staff and other students; in other words, their willingness or capacity to participate within institutionally shaped bounds of conformity (Gale and Parker, 2014). The focus on transition as induction arguably serves to maintain a hidden curriculum that privileges certain forms of knowledge over others: through induction, spaces are created for different types of student but less so for alternative ways of knowing (Bernstein 2000, Gale and Parker, 2014).

The second (T2) approach to transition in Gale and Parker's typology foregrounds the development of identity, and the shift – in transition – from 'one identity to another' (Ecclestone, Biesta and Hughes, 2010, p. 6). Grounded in the literature that examines the phases and stages of development across the lifecourse (Erikson, 1959; Havighurst, 1972; Baron, Riddell and Wilson, 1999), this approach depicts transition as a stage of life in which individuals develop their new identity as university students. Although the T2 approach shares some of the linear characteristics of T1 transition, in that they both aspire to facilitate movement towards a desired objective, subtle differences between the two approaches are evident in the metaphors used: induction is seen as navigation along a 'pathway' while identity development is achieved through the realisation of a 'trajectory' (Gale and Parker, 2014). This distinction arguably creates more conceptual space for consideration of the individuality of those in transition: 'pathways are well-travelled sequences of transitions that are shaped by cultural and social forces ... A trajectory is an attribute of an individual, whereas a pathway is an attribute of a social system' (Pallas, 2003, p. 168). While T1 researchers highlight structural and situational challenges transitioning students face, T2 researchers place more emphasis on individual, internal challenges:

One of the reasons students find transition to university so tumultuous is that it often challenges views of self and one's place in the world ... Transition is a time of identity re-shaping and coming to terms with whether expectations about university life have been met, or need to be revised, or, in fact, if the mismatch between expectation and reality is too great to warrant persistence (Krause and Coates, 2008, p. 500).

In terms of the implications of T2 theorisations, emphasis is placed – during transition – on the aim of developing students’ capacities, attributes, and attitudes towards learning. The first year in higher education is viewed as ‘a valuable time for promoting changes in thinking, particularly in relation to beliefs about learning and knowing’ (Brownlee et al., 2009, p. 600). However, like T1 theorisations, this approach to transition is arguably undermined by an occasionally blinkered interpretation of reality in the higher education system: a system in which beliefs about learning and knowing are often socially exclusive and require identity shifts which have been and remain hugely challenging for students from non-traditional backgrounds. Contemporary students are being given unprecedented levels of support and encouragement to develop new identities and follow ‘appropriate’ trajectories, but there can be a substantial mismatch between the nature of these identities and trajectories and what actually serves the best interests of some students in transition: ‘If a student feels that they do not fit in, that their social and cultural practices are inappropriate and that their tacit knowledge is undervalued, they may be more inclined to withdraw early’ (Thomas, 2002, p. 431).

The third model of transition in Gale and Parker’s typology – transition as becoming (T3) – is, they suggest, ‘a rejection of transition as a useful concept, at least in how the term is often understood within HE’ (2014, p. 743). T1 and T2 approaches are generally predicated on the assumption of a tangible beginning and end of the process of transition, whereas the proponents of the T3 model suggests that transition takes place across the lifecourse, not in finite or easily categorised phases of development: ‘we need to change the terms of the discussion and recognise that the concept of transition itself does not fully capture the fluidity of our learning or our lives’ (Quinn, 2010, p. 127). This more radical conceptualisation of transition emerges from the growing emphasis in social science research on life transition as an increasingly prevalent characteristic of late or liquid modernity (Gale and Parker, 2014). Drawing on conceptual frameworks from critical sociology and critical cultural studies, T3 researchers highlight the continuous two-way interaction of ‘public issues’ and ‘private problems’ and the way that social change may impact individual lives in a wide range of different ways (Field, 2010). They question T1 and T2 theoretical approaches to transition to higher education that depict it as ‘i’ a *particular* time of crisis, (ii) part of a *linear* progression, and as (iii) universally experienced and

normalised' (Gale and Parker, 2014, p. 744). In relation to transition to higher education being a time of crisis, the T3 approach adopts a different, more flexible perspective: it may well be a time of risk and anxiety for many students who are adapting to the requirements of university life but, it suggests, this is not *necessarily* problematic for all students, and the negotiation of risk and anxiety may have a transformative element and – in terms of identity formation – an advantageous outcome (Ecclestone, Biesta and Hughes, 2010). In addition to rejecting the premise that transitions are usually periods of crisis, the T3 perspective questions the parallel implication that periods of transition are always interspersed with periods of stability and equilibrium. For instance the transition between student and mother or carer, or student and worker, and the attendant identity shift, is something which for many students takes place on daily basis (Hughes et al. 2010).

In presenting the case for a wider application of the T3 model of transition to higher education Gale and Parker (2014) persuasively argue that much of the existing literature on student transition has taken, and continues to take, insufficient account of the diversity of student experience or understandings of what constitutes 'valid' knowledge, and, because of this, is inclined towards interpretations which frame departure from the norm as deviant or inadequate and, too often, within the restrictive, binary terms of success and failure. This ubiquitous narrative undermines student transition since it focuses attention 'on different students, on their difference, rather than on the changes to be made by institutions and systems in order to accommodate difference' (Gale and Parker, 2014, p. 745). A T3 perspective challenges the limiting effect of this narrative and suggests that it is no more appropriate to speak of a singular *transition* to higher education than a singular student *identity*: 'there is no such thing as *an* identity or *a* discrete moment of transition' (Quinn, 2010, p. 127). Because of the multiplicity and complexity of change in our lives, transition to higher education should not be viewed as movement from one context to another or from one identity to another but as an ongoing *process of becoming* that entails 'a series of flows, energies, movements and capacities, a series of fragments or segments capable of being linked together in ways other than those that congeal it into an identity' (Grosz, 1993, pp. 197-98).

Paying too little attention to the sheer diversity of students' lives and experience, to their individual histories, views, interests and perspectives, has led to a predominately structural emphasis on flexibility which – to a certain extent – enables systems and practice to be adjusted to meet the requirements of increasingly diverse cohorts of students. At the same time, however, this has also served to partially obscure the need for researchers (and higher education institutions) to – at least – examine the epistemological premises central to higher education, and the impact these have on student transition. A T3 perspective points to the need to challenge the hegemonic assumptions of higher education, that prioritises some ways of knowing and some forms of language over others, and highlights the value of structuring 'the student learning experience in ways that open it up and make it possible for students to contribute from who they are and what they know' (Gale, 2012, p. 251).

In conclusion, the 'transition as becoming' conceptualisation considered above arguably illuminates the most significant gap in the academic literature on the transition of adult students to higher education. The foregoing review of the literature has shown that there is a large volume of literature which has examined the specific barriers to participation in higher education that adults face, and the wide range of issues that impact both access to university and student retention. This part of the discussion has examined the trend in contemporary research that highlights the significance of transition to higher education, research that is underpinned by the concomitant assumption that enhancing transition will improve student retention and higher education outcomes. Only a limited number of studies concerned with transition were considered here, but there is a substantial body of work which has examined it from the perspectives of induction and development. Several of these have led to important innovations in higher education practice, and a widespread acceptance that university systems, processes and curricula need to become more flexible and receptive to the needs of increasingly diverse student bodies. However, a more radical theoretical approach – transition as becoming – arguably highlights the need to explore the significance of students' individual histories and experience, and to move beyond the rather limited, linear conception of transition as a discrete process ending in success or failure. This, therefore, is the most significant gap in the literature: as no student identities are the same, no two student transitions are the same, but many policies relating to student integration appear to be based on the

assumption that there are distinct categories of student and that distinct categories of academic and pastoral support are sufficient to facilitate ‘smooth transition’. What needs to be explored in far more depth is the real, lived experience of adult students as they enter higher education, taking account of their individual histories and the transitions they experience on an almost daily basis within and outwith university.

4. Conceptual frameworks: communities of practice and ecological (or bioecological) systems theory

Both communities of practice theory and bioecological systems theory are socio-cultural theories of learning which seek to move our understanding of human learning beyond the conceptualisation of it as a largely individual, cognitive process of internalising knowledge. Both theories posit that to understand learning fully account must be taken of its social context: even the learning of an individual reading alone in a silent room is – in significant ways – shaped by her or his social interactions outwith and before and after this solitary experience. In the 1970s, reacting to the prevailing emphasis on a cognitive approach to exploring learning, Bronfenbrenner observed that a significant body of research into human development involved: ‘the study of the strange behavior of children in strange situations for the briefest period of time’ (Bronfenbrenner, 1974 cited in Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006, p. 794). His early work on the ecology of human development sought therefore to investigate how learning takes place within more realistic, natural contexts, and adopted a theoretical approach which focused closely on how aspects of the social environment influence learning (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). His later work complemented this environmental or ecological approach with an increased emphasis on the actual processes of learning and on specifically how, over time, environmental factors help to shape learning and development (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006). Communities of practice theory (Lave and Wenger, 1991) has from its earliest formulation taken clear account of the interactive processes involved in learning as well as the environment in which it occurs. Thus, both theories situate learning firmly within its social context: this is not simply the immediate context – the lecture hall or seminar room in higher education – it is both immediate and historical; it is proximal and distal; and it is influenced by complex networks of human interaction. An adequate understanding of the impact of the social context must then take account of the diversity of social factors that

coalesce in situations where learning is expected to take place. Given that adult, non-traditional students – in general – exhibit a high level of social diversity (especially in relation to their backgrounds and life experience) both theories are particularly relevant to close analysis of their negotiation of transition to higher education. As will become apparent, there are several areas of complementarity between these theoretical approaches to learning: these will be considered briefly at the end of this chapter and more extensively in the extended discussion of the research findings (Chapter 7).

Communities of practice theory

The theoretical origins of Lave and Wenger's (1991) work on situated learning and communities of practice lie in Scribner and Cole's (1981) detailed examination of the process of acquisition of a distinctive form of literacy amongst the Vai people of Liberia which found a purely cognitive model of learning insufficient to explain how such literacy was acquired, and posited that traditional social practice played an essential role in its mastery (Barton and Tusting, 2005). Scribner (1983/1997) in a study of the development of functional expertise amongst dairy workers argues that such expertise is context-dependent. She suggests that this expertise is a form of 'practical thinking', proficiency in which is acquired through continuous engagement with the demands of practice. Lave and Rogoff's (1984) edited work on *Everyday Cognition* retains a theoretical grounding in cognitive psychology but, in its acknowledgement of the importance of context in thinking and learning, moves towards a significant emphasis on the situated nature of learning (Barton and Tusting, 2005). This movement continues in Lave's (1988) work on *Cognition in Practice* in which:

... cognition is viewed as being distributed across people. Practice has become more central as a concept, and there is a definite shift from a cognitive psychological framing to one which is more in line with social anthropology (Barton and Tusting, 2005, p. 4).

Lave and Wenger (1991) further elaborate and emphasise the role of social practice in learning, and – through their careful analysis of ethnographic studies of the intricacies of learning to become Yucatec midwives, Vai tailors, naval quartermasters, supermarket butchers and recovering alcoholics – suggest that a major part of such learning takes place through participation in communities of practice. In their

theorisation of learning in these communities, they suggest that new members become *legitimate peripheral participants* in the community and through progressive interaction with those more conversant with its practices may move towards full participation (Lave and Wenger, 1991). To some extent, this model of the process of learning mirrors the classic – though far less common in contemporary society – apprentice/ master tradesman relationship in which the apprentice is initially required to undertake ancillary or peripheral tasks before being introduced gradually to the more advanced skills of the trade (Lave and Wenger, 1991). In Lave and Wenger's theory of situated learning, a community of practice has three distinct characteristics. First, it has *mutual engagement*: this means that its members come together on regular occasions and interact with one another in a number of ways – such communities can range from groups of work colleagues to less formal groups which share interests or activities. Second, its members share common goals or aims, defined in communities of practice theory as *joint enterprise*: a group of office or factory workers will have the joint enterprise (perhaps one of several) of meeting output targets (and ultimately safeguarding their employment) while a rugby team will have the joint enterprise of winning its games. Third, a community of practice has a *shared repertoire* of language, styles, norms, routines and artefacts¹ through which participants develop and express their identities as members of the community. Some of these are explicit; many are implicit and are only accessed through extended participation in the community's practices. Wenger (1998), argues that the process of ascribing meaning to artefacts in communities of practice contributes significantly to learning and concomitant identity shifts. The example he focuses on relates to the process, routinely experienced by the claims assessors in his study, of ascribing meaning to a fairly complex insurance claims form. He argues that this process of ascribing meaning through participation is a central aspect of their development as claims assessors and often gives rise to a significant identity shift or 'process of becoming' (Wenger, 1998, p. 215). Not all artefacts are textual, but the reification of textual artefacts and the associated learning and development of identity clearly has particular relevance to higher education where – arguably – many of the most significant artefacts and practices students encounter in transition are textual. The

¹ In this context, an artefact is a 'thing' which somehow represents or reifies a concept or belief, and thus has cultural significance to the members of a group, organisation or society. One obvious example from Western culture is the cross which, for many, encapsulates and symbolises the Christian faith. At a more prosaic level, a full driving licence reifies the concept of driving competence.

evidence relating to the reification of textual artefacts will be examined in some detail in Chapter 6 which considers the formation of academic identity.

In a further development of communities of practice theory, Lave (1993) argues that learning within any community may also be shaped by external factors, and participants' interaction with a given community may significantly be influenced by the nature of their participation in other communities of practice involving friends, family, educational institutions and other socio-cultural groupings. The negotiation of this multi-membership of communities has the potential to place increased pressure on students in transition to higher education. On the other hand, if students' external communities are – in certain ways – aligned with the practices of higher education then such membership has the potential to enhance the process of transition: if, for instance, a student has access to a group of friends with successful experience of university study. Lave (1993) suggests that this wide range of practices (across multiple communities) gives rise to a 'learning curriculum' which may or may not be aligned with the institutional 'teaching curriculum'. Wider recognition of this important aspect of student diversity would help universities to avoid careless assumptions about adult students who may less unquestioningly accept the same ascribed position – as malleable peripheral participants in higher education communities of practice – that traditional students are often expected to occupy.

Communities of practice and situated learning theories have provided the theoretical framework to a wide range of studies of learning and transition. These have ranged from studies of less formal learning in a community of white witches (Merriam, Courtney and Baumgartner, 2003); to studies of primary schoolchildren's transition to secondary education (Tobell, 2003); to studies of transition to various levels of higher education (O'Donnell and Tobell, 2007; O'Donnell, Tobell, Lawthom and Zammit, 2009; Tobell, O'Donnell and Zammit, 2010); to studies of new lecturers' experiences of professional practice in higher education (Warhurst, 2008). Gourlay, however, questions the applicability of communities of practice theory to transitions to and within higher education (Gourlay, 2009, 2011). She is particularly dismissive of the idea that new academics acquire expertise through participation in communities of practice and posits that her own research indicates that new lecturers' experience of participation in higher education is characterised by 'confusion, inauthenticity and

isolation' (Gourlay, 2011, p. 75). However, she does point out that the *five* interviewees in her study had entered academia from professional rather than more traditional academic backgrounds. Having identified this significant caveat, she argues that there is little evidence that effective communities of practice exist within higher education and are – in essence – a myth. Based on the limited evidence she presents, this seems a rather unsound generalisation: communities of practice may or may not exist at various levels within the academic profession, but a more effective rebuttal of their significance would depend on far wider research than this. Drawing on Lea (2005), Gourlay (2009) also argues that research into transition to higher education employing a communities of practice theoretical framework has neglected the significance of academic writing, and that the gatekeeping aspect of academic practice actually positions undergraduate students as 'permanent novices' (Lea, 2005, p.193). However, this arguably distorts Lea's overall interpretation of the utility of communities of practice theory. While highlighting the limitations of some aspects of Wenger's (1998) theorisation of learning, she recognizes the heuristic potential of communities of practice theory, particularly when it is underpinned by concepts drawn from academic literacy studies:

Bringing work on language, learning and literacies more clearly into the frame might help us to examine how far students and tutors really do belong to the same communities of practice in higher education . . . Reinventing communities of practice as a heuristic is an important part of exploring and understanding learning contexts and their contrasting and often conflicting practices within the broad arena of today's higher education (Lea, 2005, pp. 193-4, 195).

Bioecological systems theory

Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory was in a continuous state of development and revision from the 1970s until his death in 2005 – 'I have been pursuing a hidden agenda: that of re-assessing, revising, and extending – as well as regretting and even renouncing – some of the conceptions set forth in my 1979 monograph' (Bronfenbrenner, 1989, p.187). His earliest theory prioritised the context in which learning and development take place and introduced the concept of four interacting social contexts which exert a significant influence on development: the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem and macrosystem. For a student, the microsystem – at the centre of the four concentric ecological 'layers' – would be the context which

includes family, friends, and regular contacts at university, all of whom help to shape the day-to-day experience of life. People usually spend time in more than one microsystem and the interaction between these immediate contexts forms the mesosystem: mature students may have one microsystem that encompasses their new university-centred lives and one that involves previous social relationships (for instance, earlier employment continued on a part-time basis for financial reasons). The exosystem includes significant social contexts in which the individual is not directly involved but which, nonetheless, influence their experience. For instance, an individual working extra hours to support their partner's participation in higher education might suffer from stress or ill-health and this, in turn, could affect their relationship and shared commitment to higher education. Finally, the macrosystem is the context which encompasses any 'culture, subculture or extended social structure' (Bronfenbrenner, 1993, p. 25) whose members share values and beliefs. One clear example of a central aspect of the macrosystem would be that of social class: an important and continuously problematic issue in higher education.

The most significant development in Bronfenbrenner's later writing was an increased emphasis on the role of processes in human development; this, in time, led to the development of the Process-Person-Context-Time (PPCT) model which is central to the current paradigm of bioecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006). In this model the concept of process takes centre stage. The concept is elucidated in two lengthy but particularly clear central propositions which merit reproduction here. The first states that:

... human development takes place through processes of progressively more complex reciprocal interaction between an active, evolving biopsychological human organism and the persons, objects, and symbols in its immediate external environment. To be effective, the interaction must occur on a fairly regular basis over extended periods of *time*. Such enduring forms of interaction in the immediate environment are referred to as *proximal processes* (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 1998, p. 996, original italics).

Arguably, there are parallels in this proposition with certain aspects of communities of practice theory: first, 'reciprocal interaction' suggests that learning and development takes place primarily as a result of social interaction; second, such interaction is not solely with other individuals but also with objects and symbols (or artefacts): and, third, the interaction should take place regularly over an extended

period of time - this is broadly compatible with the concept of learning through extended participation in practice. In relation to proximal processes, Bronfenbrenner argues that the nature of these processes varies in relation to characteristics of the individual and the context (spatial and temporal):

The form, power, content, and direction of the proximal processes effecting development vary systematically as a joint function of the characteristics of the *developing person*; of the *environment* – both immediate and more remote – in which the processes are taking place; the nature of the *developmental outcomes* under consideration; and the social continuities and changes occurring over *time* through the life course and the historical period during which the person has lived (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 1998, p. 996, original italics).

Thus the proximal processes involved in infant development would differ significantly for a one-year-old infant and an adult student: for the former these would generally involve close, largely physical contact; for the latter an impression of genuine mutual interest and an element of dispositional closeness in a tutorial situation might have a similarly positive effect. This is also compatible with learning through guided participation – enhanced by a degree of mutual respect – in communities of practice. The consideration of social continuities and change over the lifecourse adds some flexibility to this theoretical paradigm and adds to its applicability to our understanding of adult learning and development.

In relation to the person, the second element of the PPCT model, Bronfenbrenner focuses on the personal characteristics individuals take with them into given social situations. He describes three types of characteristic: *demand*, *resource*, and *force*. Demand characteristics relate to our appearance – skin or hair colour, age, build or height – and act as a stimulus which may illicit an immediate response that, in turn, influences the nature of the interaction. Resource characteristics are not always immediately apparent and relate to experiences, skills and intelligence, and access to material and social resources (arguably equivalent to social capital). Force characteristics relate to differences in temperament, perseverance and general disposition (Bronfenbrenner, 1995). Bronfenbrenner posits that individuals have the ability to change their context through these characteristics: this may occur passively through their demand characteristics (where, for instance, the mere presence of a

different gender changes the context) or more actively in ways related to their resource and force characteristics (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006). Again, this is broadly compatible with Wenger's argument that new participants in communities of practice have the potential to adapt and change the practices of that community (Wenger, 1998).

Context, the third element of the model was examined above; the fourth is time. Bronfenbrenner and Morris (1998) place time, as it plays out its role in development, in three categories: micro-time, meso-time and macro-time (earlier described as the chronosystem). Micro-time relates to what is occurring during a given activity or interaction; meso-time relates to the consistency and frequency with which such activities and interactions occur; and macro-time considers the significance of historical events that occur at different chronological stages of the individual's development. The most powerful example of research which seeks to explain the links between historical events and development is Elder's work which demonstrates the differentiated effects of the Great Depression in the USA on cohorts affected by it at different stages (separated by ten years) of their lifecourse (Elder, 1974, 1996). More broadly, macro-time or the chronosystem focuses on the impact on development of major changes that affect individuals over the life course and – in that sense – is compatible with Giddens' emphasis on the growing significance of reflexively ordered life-planning (Giddens, 1991).

Complex as bioecological systems theory is, therein arguably lies its beauty. Identity change and the associated learning are rarely straightforward processes, and any theory applied to investigating these must take full account of the wide range of influences which operate at a number of levels: again arguably, bioecological theory has the flexibility and breadth necessary to interpret the complexity and nuances of these processes. As such, it is being increasingly employed as a theoretical framework to examine educational transitions (Tobell, 2003; Seung-Lam and Pollard, 2006; Sanagavarapu, 2010; Durden and Witt, 2010). Bronfenbrenner's overarching thesis is that the process of learning is firmly situated within its social context and that meaningful learning and the attendant identity shifts take place most effectively through repeated interactive engagement with increasingly complex tasks over an appropriate period of time. In several respects – for instance, the interaction of

different microsystems and membership of multiple communities of practice – there are significant parallels with communities of practice theory. Finally, from a critical realist perspective, bioecological theory allows a level of analysis less easily informed by communities of practice theory alone. Some of the limitations of communities of practice theory – such as its limited consideration of the significance of literacy – were examined above, but another potential weakness in its heuristic utility is that it takes insufficient account of influences and factors that are not within or close to the community of practice. Bioecological systems theory, on the other hand, provides a theoretical framework which enables consideration of factors which are not only beyond learners' control, but also unknown to them: the hidden generative mechanisms of critical realism. Taken together, these two theoretical approaches to learning and development provide a particularly rich repertoire of sensitizing concepts which has the potential to illuminate many of the diverse factors that shape adult students' experience of transition to higher education.

Chapter 3

Research methodology

Planning the empirical phase of a research project involves, in essence, a four-stage process: establishing an ontological position; identifying a relevant epistemology; outlining an appropriate methodology and, finally, making practical decisions about the methods employed to collect data. The establishment of an ontological position is arguably the most personal phase of the research design since it addresses largely philosophical questions and involves an examination of one's own beliefs about what constitutes reality. That said, it is an important first stage of research design: it helps us to reach decisions on what we can and cannot hope to find in our research and imparts structure to and consistency in the succeeding phases of research planning. The ontological question, which has exercised the minds of philosophers for millennia, relates to the extent to which the world – and all its physical and social characteristics – is real and objective *or* is socially constructed through the actions, relationships and interpretations of its human subjects. In contemporary society, few people would dispute the existence of a real, physical world; where opinions diverge it is generally on how the physical and social characteristics of existence dovetail with one another, and on how we interpret and make sense of the world they shape. These divergent ontological stances exist on a continuum between two 'polar' positions at either end which, respectively, foreground physical, objective characteristics and human, subjective characteristics. In relation to the social sciences, della Porta and Keating (2008) provide a useful delineation of four distinctive positions on this continuum: positivistic, post-positivistic, interpretivist and humanistic. Positivism rose to prominence in the nineteenth century, largely through the work of Comte, Spencer and Durkheim who advocated the application of the principles of scientific research to the study of society. In his *Rules of Sociological Method* (1982, p. 159), Durkheim argues that: 'Since the law of causality has been verified in the other domains of nature and has progressively extended its authority from the physical and chemical world to the biological world, and from the latter to the psychological world, one may justifiably grant that it is likewise true of the social world'. In a *pure* positivist ontology, the world has an objective reality, exists outside the mind of its observer, and – through the application of rigorous principles of scientific

investigation – ‘is knowable in its entirety’ (della Porta and Keating, 2008, p. 23). What is central to this scientific rigour is the separation of the researcher from the object of their research so that they are, in effect, neutral observers of reality. In practice, this entails trying to take account of all the factors that may influence the phenomenon under investigation and attempting to eliminate potential sources of bias in its interpretation; this is exemplified by the hypothetico-deductive method where, in the search for causal relationships, a hypothesis is tested under highly controlled experimental conditions that are intended to represent a ‘closed system’. Even in physical science, however, the prevalence of truly closed systems where every variable can be taken into account has been the subject of some controversy, and, as Gorski (2013) argues, the only scientific discipline which can reasonably claim to investigate a wholly closed system (the universe) is astronomy. Nonetheless, positivism continues to exert a significant influence on social science. One particular reason for this may be that it is closely associated with a quantitative methodology whose research outputs normally include the ‘hard’ facts and sets of statistical data – such as educational achievement by race, gender, or social class – that so many of the bodies responsible for funding research value and prioritise.

In a post-positivist ontological position the idea that an objective reality exists outwith the human mind maintains its centrality, but the contention that it is ‘entirely knowable’ is relaxed. Generally, the emphasis in this ontology shifts from the existence of causal laws to the prevalence of probabilistic laws; this reflects the trend towards the growing acceptance of a degree of uncertainty in contemporary science alluded to above (della Porta and Keating, 2008). In contrast, an interpretivist or constructivist ontology is based on the premise that the social world is shaped more by the actions of meaningful actors than by objective laws external to them: objects and processes external to the human mind certainly exist but their role in the social world is constructed by the meanings attributed to them – individually and collectively – by social actors, and that world can best be understood by interpreting the subjective meanings that motivate their actions. The fourth, humanistic, ontological position represents the polar opposite of positivism and moves the emphasis towards an even greater focus on the subjective: here human behaviour is always ‘filtered through’ the subjective understandings of external reality of those being studied *and* those conducting the research (ibid. p 25). In the most radical

manifestations of this position, it is posited that reality does not exist beyond the meanings social actors attribute to it and all that social scientists can hope to achieve is an empathetic understanding of such meanings.

The development of a clear ontological position which both reflects my own views and seems appropriate to this research project was a rather protracted process. My initial position was shaped by a personal aversion to positivism, to the idea – as I saw it – that human behaviour and the social world could be explained entirely by the principles of scientific research. This was underpinned by a belief that positivist social science leads to a process of reductionism that seeks to represent humanity through objective, causal laws exemplified – for instance – by behaviourism which, in its crudest form, suggests that human beings like other animals can be conditioned or trained to behave in certain ways. Initially, this view led to the adoption of a constructivist or interpretivist ontology which, through its clear focus on subjectivity, agency and the ways in which people construct their social worlds, seems particularly appropriate to understanding the real-life experience of adult students in transition to higher education. At first, this adoption of both an interpretivist ontology and epistemology which focused on investigating the meanings that individuals attribute to their experience seemed straightforward and promising; but then, in the early stages of planning the research, some troubling questions began to arise. For instance, are there factors and processes at work in the social world which impact the experience and actions of social actors and, yet, are unknown to them? Students new to higher education may be aware of issues of social class but how many would be fully aware of the manifold and sometimes hidden ways in which such issues permeate the higher education system? Another troubling question relates to the extent to which an interpretivist approach is able to take clear account of structural factors. In bioecological theory, for instance, the macrosystem is seen as the source of major changes that affect individual lives but are largely beyond their control or influence, and may also be unknown to them: how then can interpretivism *alone* explain what they experience? Reflection on these questions led to the adoption of a more flexible ontological position, *critical realism*, which recognises the importance of subjectivity but acknowledges the existence and significance of an objective reality, thus enabling a more nuanced analysis of the interplay of structure and agency.

Since the 1970s critical realism has offered a flexible and increasingly influential alternative to the positivist and interpretivist paradigms employed in social science, although, in certain respects, it draws on both. It first gained prominence through the work of the British philosopher, Roy Bhaskar (1978), and has since been developed significantly by Margaret Anderson (1995), Andrew Sayer (1995, 2000), Bhaskar himself (1998), and a growing school of critical realist thought. Central to critical realism is its conceptualisation of the interaction of social structure and human agency which eschews both the voluntarism of the constructivist/interpretivist paradigm, which posits that society is primarily a construction of autonomous actors, and the determinism of the positivist paradigm which depicts those actors as little more than marionettes of dominant social structures. Through the critical realist lens, social structure and agency are seen to be recursively related in that one brings the other into play: 'Each is both a condition for and a consequence of the other. Actors constantly draw on social structures in order to act and in acting they either reproduce or transform those structures' (Lewis, 2002 pp. 18-19). Whilst acknowledging the potential for change inherent in this process, critical realists foreground the importance of pre-existing social structures which provide the context for activity: at any time actors may confront social structures which are pre-formed – sometimes in unintended or unanticipated ways – by actions taken in the past (Archer, 1995). From infancy onwards, the languages we learn, the social, cultural and economic structures we interact with are bequeathed to us 'ready-made', and a clear ontological distinction must be made between pre-formed social structures (from the past) and current social activity (Bhaskar 1998, Archer 1995). Thus, these antecedent social structures are ontologically irreducible to *current* human agency and are relatively autonomous from it (Archer, 1995). Critical realism describes a constant process of interaction between social actors and these pre-existing structures (which may or may not be fully understood) and argues that the existence of the latter is a necessary condition for the exercise of intentional human agency (ibid.). Whilst the existing social structure may act as the spur to agentic action, it may also constrain it, as, for instance, when legal systems serve to control the effects of many of humanity's more self-centred instincts. Social structure can, therefore, be seen to influence the way in which actors behave in that certain social structures are more conducive to some forms of action than others and, in that sense, critical realists suggest, structure has the potential to exert a causal effect (Anderson, 1995; Bhaskar, 1998). However, the

extent of any causal efficacy linked to social structure may be highly dependent on the vested interests and resources embedded in that structure. Thus, the nature of the effect social structure has on the individual actor will be linked to the extent to which her/his existing social relations have orientated them towards such interests and equipped them with a range of appropriate resources.

In relation to causation in the social world critical realists distinguish between an *efficient* cause and a *material* cause. Drawing on an Aristotelian framework, Bhaskar (1998) cites the example of the sculptress who is the efficient cause of her work. The medium in which she works does not initiate the creation of the sculpture but, nonetheless, has an effect on its final form: the type of material used – wood, marble or bronze, for instance – will be more suited to different styles and techniques (using different tools) of sculpture. In this sense, the chosen material exerts a causal influence over the outcome of the sculptor's work and can thus be seen as *material* cause of that outcome. For critical realists, social action is in many ways analogous to the work of the sculptress: as the raw materials and tools available affect her work, social actors produce their actions from and through the influence of existing social structures. Social structures, per se, cannot initiate action since social actors are the only *efficient* causes of action, but the social structure or *material* cause can play a part in determining which actions individuals choose and/or are able to undertake (Marsh and Smith, 2000).

To explain the complex, never static interplay of agency and structure in the social world, critical realists adopt a layered ontology. They distinguish between three different domains or modes of reality: the empirical, the actual and the real. The empirical is that which can be experienced, either directly or indirectly; the actual refers to those aspects of reality that occur but may not actually be experienced; and the real is the domain of the enduring properties and mechanisms that have the potential to generate phenomena (Sayer, 1998). These deep structures and generative mechanisms are often not directly observable but their existence can be inferred through a process described as 'retroduction'. This involves moving backwards from observation and investigation of experience to explicit consideration of causation employing a 'mode of inference in which events are explained by postulating (and indentifying) mechanisms which are capable of producing them. In many cases the

mechanism so retroduced will already be familiar from other situations and some will actually be observable. In others, hitherto unidentified mechanisms may be hypothesized' (Sayer, 1992 p. 107). Sayer also makes the important point that whether or not 'a causal power or liability' is actually activated 'depends on conditions whose presence and configuration are contingent': gunpowder will only explode in certain environmental conditions and after the introduction of a spark (ibid., p.107). Further, the effects of given material causes will often be actualised in the presence of other material causes which 'may be only contingently related to one another' (ibid., p. 208). Xenophobia, for instance, can exist for a variety of social and cultural reasons, and economic recession may occur for reasons entirely independent of these, but a rise in levels of xenophobia – notably but not exclusively in contemporary Greece – has occurred at the same time as the recent recession in Europe and is arguably linked to these adverse economic conditions. Further, the operation of the same generative mechanism can – in different circumstances – produce quite different results and, conversely, different generative mechanisms can produce the same result. As an instance of the latter, Sayer (1992) gives the example of a company which has reduced the size of its workforce: new technology might have made workers' skills redundant or – on the other hand – the failure to introduce new technology could have blunted the firm's competitive edge, reduced its market share and lowered production levels, resulting in exactly the same employment outcome. Overall, however, the complexity of adopting a layered or depth ontology is significantly outweighed by its flexibility and significant explanatory potential. In summary, critical realists argue that the real world operates as a multi-dimensional open system in which effects arise through the interaction of social structures, sometimes invisible causal mechanisms and human agency (Lawson, 1997). Generative mechanisms have the potential to bring about an effect, but the impact of the mechanism is dependent on the variable conditions in which it operates; so it is more appropriate to think of *tendencies* that are produced by these mechanisms than to seek empirical generalisations about the ways in which they shape social reality. The depth ontology underpinning critical realism is, therefore, 'able to produce a much richer layer of explanatory variables and generative mechanisms than rival positivist explanations' (Kerr, 2003, pp. 122-3). What further distances the critical realist research paradigm from positivist approaches is its foregrounding of human agency:

... the incorporation of agency into the explanatory schema means that the analyst must take an even bolder step beyond positivism. Given that agents are themselves active in interpreting their own structural context and that the meanings which they attach to any given situation are likely to differ, part of the quest for explanation must be incorporation of the notion of hermeneutics; i.e. an understanding of the differential meanings which agents infer upon their actions (Kerr, 2003, p. 3).

Having, thus far, considered the justification for the adoption of a critical realist ontological position in this research, the preceding mention of hermeneutics represents an appropriate point at which to move the discussion of methodology on to the second stage of research planning: the question of epistemology.

In straightforward terms, ontological questions address *what* constitutes the real world and what we may therefore know about it, and epistemological questions are concerned with *how* we may come to know these things, how we acquire knowledge of them. Epistemological questions examine 'the possible ways of gaining knowledge of social reality, whatever it is understood to be. In short, claims about how what is assumed to exist can be known' (Blaikie, 2000, p. 8). As is the case for the ontological positions underpinning various research paradigms, there are a number of differing epistemological approaches to research. These are logically related to ontological positions (in that they reflect the view of reality on which such positions are predicated). It is hardly surprising that the most striking contrast is between the epistemological positions adopted in positivist and interpretivist/constructivist research paradigms. Positivism is generally associated with 'an ontological position that advocates the application of the methods of the natural sciences to the study of social reality and beyond' while interpretivism calls for an epistemological position which is 'predicated upon the view that a strategy is required that respects the differences between people and the objects of the natural sciences and therefore requires the social scientist to grasp the subjective meaning of social action' (Bryman, 2001, pp. 12-13). Often, however, in the real world of social science (and to some extent physical science) there is significant blurring of the binary divide between positivist and constructivist epistemologies, and this is certainly the case in the critical realist approach to research.

Although, it shares the *basic* positivist epistemological position that reality is there to be revealed or unlocked, critical realism departs theoretically from positivism in some of its most significant premises and implications. Most important of these is that critical realists reject the interpretation of theoretical concepts, advanced by positivists, which maintains that they are little more than logical constructions based on empirical observation: in other words, they are ‘fictions’ which may help us to make predictions but have no reality. This view, known as ‘instrumentalism’, is refuted by critical realists who posit that theoretical concepts and terms refer to ‘actual features and properties of a real world’ (Maxwell, 2012, p. 8). A second important departure from positivism relates to the concept of causality: while many positivists argue that causality is a metaphysical concern which should have no place in science and others simply ‘operationalise’ it to the observed association between variables, realists see causality as a real phenomenon worthy of investigation (*ibid.*). Rather than concerning themselves with the process of prediction closely associated with the positivist ‘regularity’ theory of causality, critical realists seek to identify and understand the deep generative mechanisms that positivist epistemologies essentially disregard. At the same time, critical realists dispute the concept of ‘multiple realities’ posited by some radical interpretivists which suggests that there are a (theoretically infinite) number of independent and incommensurable social worlds constructed by the individuals and societies that inhabit them. Critical realists do not recognise the existence of multiple realities but argue instead that there are multiple valid perspectives of reality: these perspectives and concepts help to structure the social world and are therefore an integral part of it. Since these perspectives and concepts are normally expressed in language, it follows that an epistemological approach that seeks to *interpret* the subjective meanings underpinning them – an interpretivist approach – seems particularly suited to their investigation (Grix, 2002). Similarly, interpretivism is epistemologically compatible with the process of retroduction discussed above: identification of patterns of experience or shared interpretations has the potential to uncover or at least guide us towards the previously hidden generative mechanisms that play a role in their causation.

The preceding discussion points to an effective ‘pairing’ of a critical realist ontology with an interpretivist epistemology. This approach has been criticised by Smith and Deemer (2000) and Denzin and Lincoln (2000) who point out that the epistemology

of critical realism is relativist and it is logically contradictory to combine a realist ontology with a relativist epistemology. However critical realists argue that this criticism represents an example of the 'ontological/epistemological collapse' where ontology and epistemology are simply – and wrongly – regarded as reflections of one another, an interpretation Bhaskar (1998) describes as an 'epistemic fallacy': the inevitable outcome of attempting to conflate the intransitive world of being (the ontological realm) and the transitive world of knowing (the epistemological realm). Maxwell and Mittapalli (2010) argue that rather than seeing ontological and epistemological perspectives as foundational premises that determine the actual nature of research we should regard them as *resources* which help us to design and carry out qualitative research, and that ontological realism and epistemological constructivism are therefore wholly compatible.

Theoretical considerations thus far have focused on the broad, philosophical approaches which underpin the research strategy. In relation to methodological issues, the question of how theory directly relevant to the subject under investigation affects the design of the research is now considered. Self-evidently, enough knowledge of the subject is required initially to identify the gaps in knowledge the research will address, but theory assumes an even greater significance when methodological questions are addressed. Theory helps us to make decisions about what we want to know and how we may come to know these things: 'Without theory, experience has no meaning ... one has no questions to ask. Hence, without theory, there is no learning' (Deming, 1993, p 105). Theory, as Mills (1959) argues in his classic work, *The Sociological Imagination*, can carry us beyond the 'abstracted empiricism' rooted in a single context that highlights correlations but offers little in terms of explanation; he demonstrates how theory can both move the level of analysis and synthesise different levels of analysis, as he does in his groundbreaking examination of how social structures shape everyday life. Carefully and critically employed, theory has the potential to ignite and fuel our imagination and negotiate what Fine (2009) describes as 'epistemological reversals' through which we may question what often appears to be self-evident. This utilisation of theory to interrogate straightforward explanations is compatible with critical realism's notion of retrodution which entails going beneath the surface of what is being investigated to search for other, perhaps hidden generative mechanisms at play.

There are, however, some significant pitfalls in the relationship between theory and research. Trower (2012) argues that there are numerous examples in educational research of the misuse of theory, where it is used to add weight or credibility to a study more through undeveloped reference to the work of eminent thinkers than clear, critical application of their theoretical frameworks; this is described by Ball (1995) as the ‘mantric’ use of theory. On the other hand, being too closely aligned and engaged with *one* theoretical perspective to the exclusion of others has the potential to lead to a form of research myopia and – in certain cases – the (often unintentional) filtering of data to fit the researcher’s theoretical standpoint. Another potential problem with the use of theory is a lack of clarity about its role in the research. Sibeon (2007) distinguishes between sensitizing and substantive theory: while substantive theory is particularly suited to rigorous testing, sensitizing theory lends itself to the development of new perspectives on existing questions and new ways of conceptualising what we are investigating. Explicit identification of the role theory is intended to play in the research is necessary for consistency in its application to all stages of the process, from research design to data analysis.

What role then does theory play in this research? An extensive review of the literature shows that the experience of adult students is subject to the influence of so many diverse factors – individual and collective, agentic and structural, explicit and hidden – that no single theory could easily be applied to or tested in this research. This led to the adoption of a pluralistic approach, what Clegg (2012) describes as a form of ‘intellectual promiscuity’ through which there is no distinct adherence to a single theoretical framework but pragmatic utilisation of different – though not incompatible – frameworks as and when they seem appropriate and illuminating. In this way theory performs a sensitizing function and provides different perspectives on the characteristics of student transition the research seeks to investigate. The set of theoretical frameworks used may be compared to a set of heuristic prisms each of which reveals a different image of the factors that shape the experience of transition. Using theory to provide sensitizing concepts enables researchers to consider what types of questions about social phenomena need to be asked, and how data concerning these questions can most effectively be collected. Though not excluding the possibility of quantitative research, most of the theoretical frameworks considered in the literature review point directly to the adoption of a qualitative research

methodology. This research deals with how adult students' understanding and negotiation of communities, practice and participation shape their experience of transition: this area of study does include measurable variables (for instance, time spent on campus outwith class) but focusing on such analyses would arguably ignore the multifarious, nuanced aspects of student experience which a qualitative methodology has the potential to foreground. Similarly, from a critical realist epistemological perspective, examining these issues may entail the necessary unpicking of structural factors which are sometimes barely visible, let alone measurable. Having discussed the reasons for the adoption of a qualitative research methodology, the next phase of the research design deals with the selection of research methods and issues around what and how data are collected and analysed. Before this detailed discussion of the practicalities of the research, it is necessary to consider the three research questions which underpin it and – because they arose from a study of existing knowledge and the appropriate theoretical frameworks – serve to act as a bridge between methodology and methods. Like the delineation of a clear ontological position, the identification of valid research questions was a protracted process, and the nature of these questions changed several times during the initial literature review. Ultimately, three clear questions emerged: these are directly concerned with aspects of student experience which have been less comprehensively and extensively examined in the existing literature. In particular, they seek to move the focus away from the recurring emphasis on specific problems that adult students face in higher education towards a more general examination of their experience of transition and how characteristics of their adult status impact it, positively or negatively. They are:

1. What is it to be an effective student?

Since transition arguably involves a shift from one learner identity to another, this question addresses the issues of what it is that students are in transition to. It also seeks to illuminate some of the actual processes which facilitate or – in certain cases – hinder transition.

2. What impact do adult students' networks of social relationships have on their experience of transition to higher education?

This question moves beyond the first question's focus on the individual in transition and seeks to determine the impact – positive or negative – the social relationships of those in transition have on their experience of it.

3. What are the effects of structural factors on adult students' experience of transition?

This question examines the extent to which student agency is constrained in the highly structured world of higher education.

The selection of appropriate methods was determined by consideration of the type of data the research sought to gather and by the practical restrictions of what could feasibly be undertaken by a single researcher. The methods of data collection which can be used in qualitative research include (amongst others): participant observation, diaries or journals, semi-structured interviews and focus groups. In an ideal world, qualitative research examining higher education experience might involve utilisation of several of these methods, thus enabling comparison of different perspectives. Although considered, both participant observation and student diaries were judged to be impractical: the former because of issues of consent and confidentiality, the latter because of the logistics of organising student participation over an extended period of time. Consequently, the methods selected for this research were semi-structured interviews and focus groups. In addition, and in line with a critical realist perspective, because wider structural issues have a significant impact on the student experience, the research also involved an extensive review of the policies of several bodies – from government to individual institutions – involved in shaping higher education in Scotland.

Though very widely used in social science and educational research and valued for its flexibility the semi-structured interview has been the subject of some criticism (Clegg and Stevenson, 2013). Among these criticisms is the suggestion that insufficient consideration is given to context of the interview, the relationship between the participant and the researcher, or the possibility of overlooking non-verbal data in the transcription and analysis of the data. Even when the research is conducted by a PhD student with no formal relationship to the interviewee, it is entirely feasible that she/he may ascribe 'insider status' to the researcher and this may

have an effect on their willingness to discuss their experience fully and frankly. Similarly, a smile, raised eyebrow or any other non-verbal signal which contributes significantly to the meaning of a remark may easily be lost or overlooked in transcription of the conversation. Clegg and Stevenson (2013) argue that the interview – particularly in higher education research – represents a form of ‘tacit ethnography’ where the researcher’s insider status and subjectivity may have a direct effect on the nature of the data, as well as their interpretation. They do not, however, suggest abandoning the research interview; instead they argue that researchers need to think more carefully and be more explicit about their epistemological position and should engage in a careful, deliberate process of reflexivity when using the interview method. What this may involve in practice is continuously reflecting on how a question is asked and on how it was answered: what might this tell us about our own position and potential biases, in addition to the participant’s reflections on her/his experience? For instance, in framing our question in a certain way are we tacitly, or perhaps even unconsciously, suggesting a response? Similarly, does a respondent’s difficulty in answering a question or show of discomfort in doing so suggest that it is an inappropriate question? One instance of this in the research was when respondents were asked in early interviews if any of their longstanding social relationships had been affected by their involvement in higher education. Several of the interviewees had some difficulty answering this question, but when it was addressed from a different angle – asking if the subject of university came up in social interaction with older friends and work colleagues – evidence of change and an element of tension in some of these relationships began to emerge. A particular strength of semi-structured interviews is that the flexibility involved frequently provides scope for any such changes that interviewer reflexivity highlights the need for. As a research method, focus groups have the potential to facilitate the emergence of collective perspectives on students’ experience of higher education. Whilst they certainly have the flexibility of semi-structured interviewees there is also an increased element of serendipity in the direction the discussion takes: researchers may direct the conversation to a certain extent, but too much intervention has the potential to limit the spontaneity and independent contribution of the participants. Nonetheless, effectively conducted, with committed participants, focus groups may complement and enhance data gathered from single face-to-face interviews. The types of question addressed in the interviews and focus group are considered below.

Some qualitative research seeks the collection of data from a representative sample of the population being studied. In practice, however, no such sample – however large and carefully selected – can ever be wholly representative of the wider population and all that may realistically be expected is the collection of data which has, at least, an element of *representativeness*. In small-scale research, the likelihood of this may be enhanced by the selection of a purposive sample which includes participants who represent a cross-section (equal or roughly equal numbers) of all the participant variables which might impact student experience of transition. The most obvious of these is gender; significant others are: type of institution (ancient, post-Robbins or post-1992: in this research, respectively, Glasgow, Strathclyde and Glasgow Caledonian Universities); access route (college access, university access or articulation); and academic discipline. My initial aim was the selection of a sample of participants which – in relation to these variables – was as representative as possible. A further important parameter of the sample was the age of those asked to participate in research interviews. The demarcation line between ‘traditional’ and ‘mature’ students is fairly contentious, but a considered decision was taken that only full-time students of twenty-five and over at the time of entry to higher education would be asked to take part. This was based on the fact that – although the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) classifies mature students as those who are 21 or over at entry – most mature student bursaries, which acknowledge the additional commitments of adult life, are targeted at students who are 25 or over. It was also designed to exclude students who may have taken a comparatively short gap after secondary school or college and arguably have more in common – in relation to life experience and extended commitments – with traditional students.

The research also sought to collect data on the perspectives of academic staff involved in facilitating access to university, and undergraduate teaching. This specifically sought to identify how they view the characteristics and challenges of adult student transition to higher education, and to establish whether or not they identify issues similar to those highlighted by students. In addition, from a critical realist perspective, insights on student transition provided by academic staff have the potential to open up a different level of ‘reality’. Their greater awareness of a wider range of factors that impact adult students’ experience of transition may serve to illuminate significant causal factors which are only partially known or unknown to

those students. To gain a reasonably wide range of insights, I planned to interview two members of academic staff who taught on college access and Higher National courses; two who taught on university access courses; and two who were primarily involved in undergraduate teaching. To enable some consideration of any themes that might emerge from the student interviews and focus groups, it was planned to conduct staff interviews after these had been concluded. Four of the staff who agreed to take part were contacts I had already established; the remaining two were recruited by direct approaches suggested to me.

In relation to student interviews, the next stage of research planning involved careful consideration of research ethics. Glasgow University's ethics policy required that prospective interviewees should be contacted directly through strictly approved channels, and indirectly through public appeals for assistance (generic emails, posters etc.); and that they would be provided with plain language statements (Appendices 3 and 4) giving clear details of the research, the reason they were being approached and of their right to end their participation at any time. They should also be informed that interviews and focus group meetings would be recorded and transcribed and, to protect participant identities, all names would be anonymised. I submitted these fully documented proposals to the Faculty of Education's ethics committee and was granted full ethical approval for my research (Appendices 1 and 2). I then began the process of recruiting prospective interviewees and very quickly realised that this was not going to be the straightforward process I – perhaps rather naively – had anticipated. It serves no particular purpose to labour this point but one example illustrates the difficulty this process entailed particularly well: eighty-five letters (Appendix 5) were sent to former University of Glasgow Access students (from the previous year) on headed university notepaper and only five students responded and agreed to participate in the research. I can only speculate that many of the students who were approached lacked the confidence or time to take part in the research. One unavoidable consequence of this was that I was forced to relax some of the initial sample parameters: the search was widened to include students from the University of Stirling (a second post-Robbins university) and – as it became necessary to accept the participation in the research of any student aged 25 or over who had gained entry to higher education through one of the three routes described above – the initial aim of deliberately shaping the sample to represent a carefully balanced cross-section of

adult students in higher education became increasingly unrealistic. The process of data collection which was expected to last no more than one year actually lasted for almost eighteen months. By its conclusion, interviews had been conducted with 35 students and 6 members of academic staff, and one focus group involving 6 second-year students had been conducted. 15 of the interviewees were students at Glasgow (GU), 7 at Strathclyde (SU), 7 at Stirling (US), 6 at Glasgow Caledonian University (GCU); all the focus group participants were students at Glasgow University. In the total group of 41 students, 17 were in the 25-30 age bracket; 21 were aged 31-40; 3 were over the age of 40; 22 were women and 19 were men. Appendix 10 provides further information on individual participants.

Details of the semi-structured interviews and focus group are provided in Appendices 7, 8 and 9. It is, however, worth briefly considering here what some of the questions were, and why they were asked. One of the first issues addressed in each interview was the student's educational background: what this sought to reveal was their early experience of education and how it had affected their life choices. It also gave students an opportunity to reflect on their early attitude to university; and another question asked them to discuss the attitude to higher education of their family and friends which, in several cases, gave insights into their social background. Adult students in higher education are an incredibly diverse group, and what these questions provide is an indication of the wide range of starting points from which students re-enter education. Another area of discussion required students to reflect on the level of preparation for higher education they had gained from the various forms of access course taken: this sought to identify any variation in how effectively these courses were preparing students for transition. A particularly important issue addressed in the interviews was students' experience of both academic and pastoral support in the early stages of higher education: this question is central to our understanding of what facilitates – and what sometimes militates against – effective transition. Similarly, students were asked about the significance of their existing and new social networks: this enables consideration of the impact of social relationships – internal and external to the institution – on transition. Those participating in the focus group were asked to discuss their experience of transition from the perspective of students who had successfully moved on to their second year of studies. Members of staff interviewed were asked to comment on any differences they perceived between adult and

traditional-age students, and they were also encouraged to reflect on some of the issues which had emerged from the student interviews.

The final aspect of data collection considered here relates to the types of document considered in Chapter 4 of the thesis. The overarching aim of this thesis is to highlight aspects of adult students' transition to higher education which are problematic *as well as* those which serve to enhance the experience. Since most of the research data relate to the actual lived experience of students, it is important to establish the extent to which this mirrors what is 'required' by government, national bodies involved in administering and overseeing higher education policy, and individual institutions. Manifestly, this has the potential to identify any changes in higher education practice which have been signposted but not yet comprehensively implemented. To enable such a comparison, the documents considered relate to Scottish government policy on higher education, Scottish Funding Council policies on university funding, Quality Assurance Agency documents on improving practice in higher education and similar documents on teaching and learning practice published by individual universities. Finally, from a critical realist perspective, close consideration of these policy documents which – in effect – determine the nature and impact of many of the structural factors operating in higher education, is necessary to understand how such factors, of which adult students may hardly be aware, or completely unaware, affect their overall experience of higher education.

Analysis of the data was carried out on an ongoing basis as the research interviews were conducted. All the interviews were fully recorded but, with the aim of making the atmosphere as relaxed and informal as possible, no notes taken. Because of this it was very important that the interviews were transcribed as soon as possible after the interviews. The data were analysed inductively on an ongoing basis which involved coding and continuous cross-checking of the transcripts as recurrent themes began to emerge from the data. This method of analysis also follows Anderson and Arsenault's (2002) 'focused problem' approach as it was informed by sensitizing concepts drawn from theoretical perspectives on learning and transition considered in the literature review. For instance, as some clear evidence of academic support external to the universities began to emerge, Lave's (1993) concept of the learning curriculum helped to add shape to this emergent theme. This method of data analysis is also

conducive to the process of researcher reflexivity: if a specific theme appears over and over again and is discussed in very similar terms by those being interviewed it follows that – in order to ensure the reliability of the data – it is necessary to reflect very carefully on the conduct of the interview and ensure that there is no evidence of researcher bias or undue influence. The process of data analysis entailed a continuous process of checking and re-checking identified themes as the transcripts were analysed – as a result not only did clear themes emerge, but possible themes identified early in the research were discounted in the light of new data. Analysis of the data in this way is a time-consuming but highly flexible process which, because of the continuous dialectic between new and already interpreted data, is particularly suited to qualitative research conducted by a single researcher. Another factor which has to be taken into account is the variability of the data. The interviews ranged in length from 40 minutes to almost two hours and there were considerable differences in the extent and depth of students' reflections on their experience of transition. The most useful interviews were a rich source of data on the student experience, and several of them enabled retroductive inference of some of the structural factors at play in transition. At the forefront of my agenda in the process of data analysis was the ambition to identify evidence from which we may generalise – even tentatively – to the wider population. However, generalisability is a notoriously contentious issue in social science and whilst the data analysis did reveal a number of themes related to transition to higher education, no reasonable claim can be made that themes emerging for a small-scale study such as this are highly generalisable: the most that can be said is that they illuminate particular areas of interest which are worthy of consideration and further investigation.

Chapter 4

Document review

Introduction

The primary means of data collection employed in this research suggests that it closely fits Trowler's (2012) classification of 'close-up research': it is interview-based research examining certain aspects of higher education, conducted by a researcher who is both a student and a teacher within that field. Trowler points out that it is essential for close-up researchers to be able to step back from the subject of their study and view it in its wider context: 'human behaviour viewed through the microscope tends to bring to attention impalpable drivers far more than when it is seen through a telescope and by their nature these are difficult to apprehend through data collection alone' (2012, p. 276). Thus trends and themes identified in raw empirical data may initially be difficult to interpret or explain until they are considered within their wider context which – potentially – highlights the impact of a multiplicity of other factors at play. This points strongly to the need to 'span' and integrate the different possible levels of analysis:

... public policy literature on the whole operates on the levels of whole organizations, professions and middle-range theory, while close-up research ... operates at the micro level. The danger of the latter is that close-up researchers miss structural conditioning of behaviour (Webb, 1991). The danger of the former is that research misses the significant social processes operating on the ground in different contexts (Trowler, 2012, P.281).

Whilst Trowler generally focuses on the need to integrate 'micro' and 'meso' levels of analysis, the same argument can be used to justify integration of an even wider range of factors that impact the experience of higher education. Bronfenbrenner's (1999) bioecological theory seems particularly appropriate to such an analysis: beyond the microsystem of the individual and the mesosystem of their more immediate social relationships, lie the exosystem and macrosystem – in which factors often beyond their control and sometimes unknown to them operate – and the chronosystem in which significant change takes place over time. From a critical realist perspective, this extended level of analysis is also compatible with its depth ontology which highlights the complex interaction of factors that are experienced,

actual and real. The clear need for this breadth of analysis provides the justification for this chapter: acknowledging that adult students' experience of transition takes place within a wider higher education context – subject to a range of powerful political, economic, social and cultural influences – it seeks to explore the nature of that context and the role played by various agencies in shaping the structures and practices in which transition is located.

The chapter examines some of the documented policies of the wide range of bodies, organisations and individual institutions involved in the governance and provision of higher education in Scotland. Broadly speaking, these generators of higher education policy and practice operate at three different – albeit closely interconnected – levels. At the first, macro level of policy, the Scottish Government – the single largest funder of higher education – seeks to determine the shape and long-term strategic aims of higher education provision and, in particular, to align such provision with its vision of the nation's economic, social and cultural future. At the second level, a number of organisations essentially mediate between the government and the institutions delivering higher education: these range from the Scottish Higher and Further Education Funding Council (SFC) which allocates national funding for research and teaching to individual institutions; to intra-university bodies such as Universities Scotland; to independent advisory bodies such as the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA); to specialised agencies like the Scottish Wider Access Programme (SWAP) which organises the provision of courses for adults seeking entry to higher education. At the third level, in essence the coalface of higher education, Scotland's universities and colleges translate and shape policy and guidance on best practice to fit their individual aims and objectives. As autonomous bodies operating in an increasingly competitive (both nationally and internationally) higher education 'market', universities strive to emphasise their unique characteristics, high standards, and, by implication, superiority over other institutions. In reality, however, much of the substantive differentiation of the perceived status of universities relates to their research output and success in attracting vital research funding. In relation to teaching and learning – the aspects of higher education with which this research is primarily concerned – university practices are arguably becoming much more homogeneous: this is demonstrated by the ubiquitousness of terms like 'graduate attributes' and 'assessment for learning' in institutional teaching

and learning strategy documents. These then are the types of body whose documents will be examined in this chapter. Before doing so, it will be instructive to examine briefly the background and role of these bodies: this will provide necessary context to the analysis of their documents.

The Scottish Government regards Scotland's higher education system as one of the nation's most important and valuable assets (Scottish Government, 2008a). This is nothing new: Scotland has a long tradition of highlighting the importance of its universities which looks back to the early modern period when Scotland had four universities, compared to England's two, and to the eighteenth century when Glasgow and Edinburgh Universities were at the very heart of Enlightenment thought (Anderson, 2000). Nonetheless, given the size of Scotland's population, its universities maintain a consistently favourable international reputation, evidenced by the numbers of overseas students who undertake first-degree and postgraduate studies here (Scottish Government, 2008a). Over time, they have lost some of their distinctive national characteristics (Anderson, 2000) but retain one important feature which distinguishes them from universities in all other parts of the United Kingdom: the four-year standard honours degree. Clearly, this has significant implications for the cost of funding undergraduate studies, as does the current Scottish Government's commitment to the provision of free higher education to Scottish (and EU) students. The first devolved Scottish administration replaced annual tuition fees – introduced across the United Kingdom in 1998 – with a one-off graduate endowment (£2, 289 by 2007) paid by qualified students until its abolition by the current government in 2008 (Scottish Government, 2008b). This reinstatement of free higher education has taken place against the backdrop of the significant increase of annual tuition fees – to a current maximum of £9000 – in England and Wales and signals the Scottish Government's clear prioritisation of higher education. The long-term consequences of this decision and the extent and implications of any higher education funding gap are beyond the scope of this discussion, but it is arguably the case that the higher *relative* commitment of the government to funding universities will have a discernible *quid pro quo*: the loss of some of the universities' autonomy in shaping the future of the Scottish higher education sector.

One of the earlier manifestations of this changing relationship was the establishment, in 2007, of a Joint Future Thinking Taskforce on Universities which was charged with assessing and suggesting responses to the challenges higher education would face in the ensuing twenty years. The Taskforce was jointly chaired by Fiona Hyslop, then Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning, and Muir Russell, then Principal of the University of Glasgow and Convenor of Universities Scotland, and its other members were all senior office holders in the Scottish higher education sector. Its report, *New Horizons: Responding to the Challenges of the 21st Century*, was published in 2008. The content and continuing significance of this report will be examined in more detail below but some of its overarching, defining principles are very clearly signposted in three challenges from the Scottish Government:

Challenge 1 – Scottish universities must demonstrate that they use the funds they receive from the Scottish Government to support activities which are well aligned with the Scottish Government’s purpose, its economic and skills strategies and its other policy frameworks.

Challenge 2 – learning provision in universities must become more flexible (if it is to respond to the changing needs of students) and more capable of being delivered by closer and differing institutional collaborations and structures.

Challenge 3 – universities contributing more directly to Scotland having a world-class knowledge economy by embedding a culture of engagement between themselves and the Scottish micro, small and medium sized business base (Scottish Government, 2008a p.3).

The first challenge arguably hints at the existence of the reciprocity alluded to above: the government will – through the SFC – provide funding at a proportionately higher level than that provided by central government to universities in England, but will expect to exert a continuing, and perhaps increasing, influence upon the ‘activities’ of universities. The second challenge addresses the laudable and welcome goal of providing more flexible learning opportunities to meet the changing needs of students, but one potential ‘sting in the tail’ which may also be inferred from this challenge is that this will have to be achieved within a cost-cutting framework that involves both the exploitation of inter-institutional synergies and the concomitant streamlining of individual institutional structures. The third challenge is typical of the increasingly pervasive alignment of the core functions of higher education with the needs of a post-industrial economy: where the overall contribution of the manufacturing sector

to economic output has declined – as it certainly has in contemporary Scotland – new high-level skills and enhanced human capital are promoted to enable effective and competitive participation in new, knowledge economies (Field, 2006).

The SFC is a non-departmental public body of the Scottish Government which allocates funding for ‘teaching and learning provision, research and other activities’ in Scotland’s colleges and higher education institutions’ (www.sfc.ac.uk). In addition to providing the government with specialised advice on further and higher education, it is charged with developing and implementing ‘policies and strategies which support Scottish Government priorities’ (ibid.). Since it is the leading agency through which the government channels its policy objectives, the SFC exerts a commanding influence on higher education in Scotland. This is illustrated by the scope of one of its recent reports which examined long-term options for reducing the financial cost of the four-year honours degree. These included: the extension of articulation agreements between universities and colleges; more advanced entry to undergraduate courses (based on the appropriate achievement of Advanced Highers); and the truncation of the – previously sacrosanct – four-year honours degree course through accelerated study (SFC, 2012). Under the Further and Higher Education (Scotland) Act of 2005, the SFC has a statutory duty ‘to maintain and enhance the quality of the provision of education that it funds’ (Scottish Parliament, 2010). In practice, much of the responsibility for detailed quality assurance in higher education is delegated to the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) which conducts reviews of institutional performance, recognises and highlights good academic practice, and recommends necessary improvements. The QAA is an independent UK-wide body to which publicly funded higher education institutions in Scotland are required to subscribe. Its Scottish arm (QAA Scotland) operates in close cooperation with the SFC, and in 2003 these two bodies, along with a number of other higher education stakeholders, developed the Quality Enhancement Framework (QEF) for Scotland (Scottish Parliament, 2010). The QEF is coordinated by the Scottish Higher Education Enhancement Committee (SHEEC) whose membership is drawn from the SFC, Universities Scotland, QAA Scotland, the National Union of Students, and Student Participation in Quality Scotland (sparqs), and thus arguably enables representation of all the major stakeholders in Scottish higher education. In relation to the issue of transition to higher education, one of the most significant strands of the

QEF was the development of a number of Enhancement Themes whose broad aim is to improve the student learning experience in higher education and ‘encourage staff and students to share current good practice and collectively generate ideas and models for innovation in learning and teaching’ (www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk). To date, work has been completed on eight enhancement themes: *Assessment* (2003-04); *Responding to Student Needs* (2003-04); *Employability* (2004-06); *Flexible Delivery* (2004-06); *Integrative Assessment* (2005-06); *The First Year: Engagement and Empowerment* (2005-08); *Research-Teaching Linkages* (2006-08); and *Graduates for the 21st Century: Integrating the Enhancement Themes* (2008-11) (ibid.). To varying degrees, all of these enhancement themes address aspects of higher education which significantly impact students’ experience of transition and some of their implications will be considered in more detail later in this chapter.

Widening access to higher education remains one of the Scottish Government’s most important and heralded priorities. However, there has in recent years been a subtle but important change of emphasis in the targeting of resources aimed at achieving this. In the government’s 2010 consultation paper, *Building a Smarter Future*, it was observed that ‘There was considerable support for access activity to be focussed *more* [my italics] on early years of education’ (Scottish Government, 2010, p. 14). The outcome of this change of emphasis has meant an increased focus on targeting access activities at schools with low rates of progression to higher education, and a concomitant diminution of activities targeted specifically at adult learners. This is clearly evidenced by the winding up of the West of Scotland Wider Access Forum (West Forum) and its effective replacement by another body, Focus West. While the former targeted its activities at improving recruitment to, and progression and retention in, further and higher education from areas and *groups* (including adult students) where there is low participation (Lederle, 2009), the latter targets widening participation activities primarily at secondary schools (www.focuswest.org.uk). West Forum was also involved in outreach work with adult learners and communities through Community Access to Lifelong Learning (CALL) and ran the On Track Programme (until its funding was withdrawn in July 2011) which aimed to enhance the experience of transition for students moving from further to higher education. It was not aimed exclusively at adult students, but West Forum’s evaluation of the 2007-08 cohort of the On Track Programme shows that 53.4% of its respondents were

over the age of 30 and 67.1% were 23 and over (Lederle, 2009, p. 17): this suggests that its services were particularly attractive and/or relevant to the needs of mature students. Despite the demise of West Forum, one of its associate members, SWAP West, continues to organise and administer access courses for adult students with its partner further education colleges (ibid., p. 7). Nationally, since it was established in 1988, SWAP has helped around 30,000 mature students gain entry to higher education (www.scottishwideraccess.org). Although it is not directly involved in formulating research-led policy, or guidance on best practice, SWAP provides access to a range of documents that offer advice to adult students on transition to higher education.

The final group of policy documents examined in this chapter are those created by individual universities. Each of the four universities whose students were interviewed in this research project has its own service or department concerned with learning and teaching: at the University of Glasgow this is the Learning and Teaching Centre which ‘helps implement and develop the University’s Learning and Teaching Strategy, and identifies, assesses and disseminates new developments and good practice to enhance the student learning experience’ (www.gla.ac.uk/services/learningteaching). The particular logistics and names of the bodies responsible for quality assurance and institutional learning and teaching strategies differ from institution to institution but, as will become apparent in the overview in this chapter of some of their policy documents, they share a clear common commitment to QAA guidelines and, in particular, to the comprehensive implementation of good practice identified in Enhancement Themes documents.

The Scottish Government

In *New Horizons* (2008a) the government’s taskforce voices its clear belief in the quality of Scottish higher education and the potential value of its contribution to the nation’s future. On the quality of higher education the report comments that:

The evidence on the quality of Scotland’s universities is strong. For example there are three Scottish universities in the world’s top 100 research universities and three universities ranked in the top 10 new universities in the UK. Scotland has world class schools of art and design and an internationally renowned academy of music and drama. Scottish universities are leading the world in having developed one of the

most advanced approaches to academic quality, which is based on enhancement and continual improvement (Scottish Government, 2008a, p. 4).

On the effectiveness of Scottish higher education, the report is similarly effusive:

According to recent data, only 14.3% of Scottish students fail to leave university without a successful outcome (degree, other award or transfer to another educational programme). Scottish research is cited relatively more often than that carried out in the USA, Germany and China, placing Scotland second in the world for the impact of its research. It is first in the world in terms of the rate research papers are cited, relative to GDP. With less than 0.1% of world population, Scotland's share of global research people and publication outputs are both around 0.8% and we are particularly strong in science, engineering and medicine. In 2005, Scotland's higher education expenditure on research and development ranked top out of all the UK regions and in the first quartile of OECD countries (ibid.).

What is arguably striking about these two extracts is the extent to which they highlight the role of universities as internationally competitive enterprises, competing for recognition in world higher education rankings, in the quality of research outputs, and – implicitly – in their ability to attract valuable research funding and potential investment in local manufacturing capacity. The quality of learning and teaching and the student retention rate are touched on - albeit briefly - and this suggests that, although the government does prioritise improvement in the overall student experience in higher education, its *highest* priority is enhancing the international standing of Scotland's universities in the interest of long-term economic benefits. The economic emphasis of the report is further reinforced by its contention that one of the most significant challenges universities face is: 'Responding to the changes in the skills needs of Scotland. Universities are a key player in helping to ensure the skills profile of the modern Scottish workforce is at the optimum level for our country to be able to compete in today's global economy' (ibid., p. 8).

A further challenge identified relates to Scotland's changing demographics in which current trends are forecast to lead to a decreasing proportion of younger people and an increasing proportion of older people in the working population. This may lead to a skills imbalance where the economic contribution of the younger section of the workforce is counterbalanced by that of a growing section of older workers some of whose skills – in a time of rapid technological and economic change – have less currency. The report suggests that possible solutions to this demographic challenge

include increasing the higher education participation rate of Scottish school-leavers and attracting highly skilled young immigrants to Scotland (some of whom will have received their higher education in her universities), but it also identifies the significant implications of this challenge for the provision of lifelong learning:

Skills for Scotland, the Scottish Government's skills strategy, highlights the importance of lifelong learning and the need for people to progress seamlessly from one learning opportunity to another developing their skills and knowledge as they do so in one education system. The demographic changes affecting Scotland in the future will make it more challenging for colleges and universities to attract students, staff and researchers . . . New tertiary education partnerships and collaborations will therefore be increasingly attractive to potential students, particularly those from a background who have traditionally not accessed higher education (Scottish Government, 2008a, p. 19).

The allusion to the importance of 'lifelong learning' here is interesting but arguably typical of the pervasive use of the term as an inviolable concept whose social value few would question, but which means so many different things to different audiences. The notion of moving 'seamlessly' between learning opportunities is similarly laudable but seems to encapsulate a vision rather than a clear statement of intent. A further glimpse of this vision is offered by the report's forecast of long-term changes in the higher education student profile and needs:

Overall, the student body moving towards 2028 will be increasingly diverse, internationalised and discerning. There will be no "typical" student – changing birth rates, an ageing population and more varied working practices will result in a move away from the necessity of full-time, traditionally taught courses into a need for more part-time, flexible provision delivered through a variety of means (ibid., p. 15).

How is this flexibility of provision to be achieved? The report makes concrete suggestions in two areas: developing close partnerships between colleges and universities, and expanding opportunities for a range of exit and re-entry points in higher education. The first suggestion involves a formalisation of articulation arrangements between universities and their local further education colleges in the provision of 'Degree Link' courses. The example cited in the report is the formal alliance between Aberdeen College and Robert Gordon University through which Aberdeen College became an associate college of the university and delivers the first two years (to HND) of a '2+2' course: successful associate students can then move on to the university for the second two years, and completion of a degree. The advantage

for students of this close institutional co-operation is the opportunity it provides for a potential coalescence of teaching and learning practices which *may* facilitate a smoother transition from college to university: the broad aim the On Track Programme sought to achieve at a more generic level. The second suggestion calls for an extension of opportunities for students to leave university with Certificates and Diplomas of Higher Education (at levels 7 and 8 of the SCQF, respectively) and for them subsequently to re-enter higher education, at an appropriate stage, in a university or college, or on a comparable workplace programme (Scottish Government, 2008a, p. 20). Undoubtedly, a wider promotion and acceptance of these options would add significant flexibility to the Scottish higher education system. From the perspective of adult students considering university, the knowledge that a wider range of potential outcomes and pathways exists may lessen the perceived risks of participation in higher education. Beyond these largely structural proposals, the taskforce report is conspicuously silent on the development of greater flexibility in academic practice. However, it does suggest that the exploitation of synergies through pooling of resources – which has taken place in research collaborations like the Scottish Universities Physics Alliance – may be applied to learning and teaching. While acknowledging some of the practical limitations of this approach, it observes that: ‘if we are to maintain delivery of a wide range of subjects across institutions, especially in remoter areas, the extension of the pooling approach beyond research into teaching is an option for future development’ (ibid., p. 20). What exactly is meant here by ‘remoter areas’ is rather ambiguous: the one Scottish higher education institution whose constituent colleges are truly remote – the University of the Highlands and Islands – already employs very flexible mediums of course delivery such as video conferencing (www.uhi.ac.uk). It may be the case that over time universities will be encouraged to pool teaching resources for reasons of cost rather than physical remoteness *per se*. One obvious way in which this might be achieved is through the extended use of ICT and technology enhanced learning.

It is perhaps not particularly surprising that this document lacks detail on the precise nature of the changes in academic practice its call for greater flexibility will necessarily entail: it is, in essence, an overarching, largely political vision of the future of higher education in Scotland. It is nonetheless an important document which clearly signals the current government’s plans for and expectations of

Scotland's universities. The reality of those expectations is encapsulated unequivocally in *New Horizons*' description of the ongoing relationship between government and higher education:

This is the crux of the 'something for something' deal between the Scottish Government and our universities. The Scottish Government's funding is targeted at activity which will deliver against the National Outcomes, thereby aligning publicly funded activity against the Scottish Government's Purpose and Strategic Objectives – that is its 'something'. The universities, by demonstrating that they are delivering relevant to this agenda, strengthen their case for increasing levels of public investment – that increase in public investment is their 'something' (Scottish Government, 2008a. p. 27).

The bodies which administer the allocation of government funding to higher education and monitor the quality and effectiveness of its provision, in effect translating government policy into precise requirements and guidelines, are the Scottish Funding Council and QAA Scotland. In a number of ways, their decisions and activities have a significant impact on students' experience of transition to higher education: some of their documentation is examined in the next section of this chapter.

The Scottish Funding Council and QAA Scotland

In keeping with its responsibility for the allocation of a significant portion of the public sector budget in Scotland, the SFC publishes a substantial array of documents, many of which deal with highly technical aspects of finance and performance measurement. Few of these have a clearly discernible link to adult students' experience of transition to higher education, though its Corporate Plan for 2009-12 sets out priorities which have clear implications for universities as key players in Scotland's lifelong learning agenda. Its vision for tertiary education's future requires: 'colleges and universities that are part of a coherent system of lifelong learning in Scotland with improved access for students to, and progression through, further and higher education based upon ability to learn' (SFC, 2009, p.11). However, arguably reflecting the Scottish Government's position on widening access to higher education, the plan places considerable emphasis on improving access for school leavers and young adults. In particular, it highlights close links between its strategic plan and the

development of *Curriculum for Excellence*, the government's new strategy for improving the learning experience and outcomes of primary and secondary education:

We promote and invest in further and higher education that sits within a lifelong learning environment – taking full account of the Scottish Government's *Curriculum for Excellence* agenda – that includes schools, community learning, private training providers and the workplace (ibid., p. 4).

Its actions on Outcome 2 of the plan (Access, inclusion and progression) include: supporting the government's *More Choices, More Chances* strategy focused on encouraging young adults into education, training or work; using its Horizon Fund to further expand articulation provision; continuing support for the Scottish Wider Access Forums (though not all aspects of their work did actually continue to receive support); and supporting initiatives in colleges and universities aimed at improving retention and progression (SFC, 2009, p. 26). The final action point relates to the challenge of increasing the retention of students in Scotland's universities which continues to be a major concern. For 2010-11, Scotland's higher education sector had the highest level (8.9%) of non-continuation among full-time first degree entrants in the UK (overall average: 7.4%). For mature students (twenty-one and over), the figures were 13.0% and 11.6% respectively. Even more telling is a comparison with Northern Ireland where the non-continuation figures were 6.0% for all students and a comparatively low figure of 7.4% for mature students (HESA, 2013). It is perhaps surprising therefore that the SFC's corporate plan does not place more emphasis on this pressing issue: particularly in the light of its overall vision – reflecting that of the Scottish Government – of placing Scottish higher education at the forefront of international developments in the sector. The fact that the SFC has direct accountability for the efficient use of funds it allocates, adds to this question of why it does not address this problem – so wasteful of valuable resources, as well as the aspirations and potential of individual students – more directly in its corporate plan. One possible interpretation may point to the important distinction between the issues of access and accessibility: the former relates directly to social justice and the provision of fair and equal access to higher education *for all* based on their ability to learn; the latter relates to the flexibility of what they achieve entry to and addresses the question of how effectively the practices of higher education meet the needs of an increasingly diverse student body. Accessibility is certainly a more technical issue – linked closely to issues of academic practice – than much of what is addressed in the

SFC's corporate plan and, as such, falls within the broad remit of quality assurance in higher education.

All major stakeholders in higher education have some responsibility for monitoring and ensuring its quality across a wide range of parameters – in relation to learning and teaching these include: academic standards, retention, progression, learning outcomes and student satisfaction. Across the UK, much of this responsibility for quality assurance is centralised in and managed by the QAA which develops and maintains 'key documents that are used by higher education providers to help them meet UK expectations about standards and quality' (www.qaa.ac.uk). In 2003, QAA Scotland in close collaboration with the SFC and other major higher education stakeholders developed a Quality Enhancement Framework one of whose five strands – the investigation and development of a number of important Enhancement Themes – sought to shift the emphasis of quality in higher education from assurance to enhancement; from adherence to preset, often minimum, standards to a continuous process of seeking, developing and disseminating ways to enhance academic practice, student learning experiences and the wider outcomes of their participation in higher education. QAA Scotland also conducts cyclical Enhancement-Led Institutional Reviews which inform Enhancement Themes publications (www.qaa.ac.uk/Scotland). Planned and directed by the Scottish Higher Education Enhancement Committee (SHEEC), the Enhancement Themes programme has, to date, completed eight themes. To varying extents, all of these themes have some relevance to adult students' experience of transition to higher education: the relevant aspects of the themes are considered below.

The first two themes developed under the Enhancement Themes programme were *Assessment*, and *Responding to Student Needs*. The *Assessment* theme focuses on developing practice to facilitate 'efficient assessment that does not take up an overly burdensome amount of time for students or staff' and 'effective assessment that produces a result that is informative, valid, just and robust' (www.enhancement-themes.ac.uk). In relation to this, it identifies five key issues. First, it stresses the need to reduce the 'assessment load'; inter alia it suggests: more formative and less summative assessments; the use of 'long thin modules' that have examinations at the end of the academic session rather than at the end of the first semester; and 'synoptic'

end-of-year tests which draw together the main themes of each course and take learning beyond a process of assimilating bite-size chunks of information (Enhancement Themes, 2005a, p. 4). All of these suggestions arguably have the potential to enhance the experience of transition for adult students. More use of formative assessment may help them to learn through practice and to express their imagination and creativity (important aspects of developing an academic identity), secure in the knowledge that there is – at least initially – little risk in this. Long, thin modules may mean that adult students in the early stages of transition to the unfamiliar milieu of higher education would not face the dramatic prospect of a final examination after less than three months. Finally, much of the research on adult learning (Merriam, Caffarella and Baumgartner, 2007; Tennant, 2006) suggests that adults seek to contextualise their learning and, often, to relate it to their own experience: this is clearly more compatible with a synoptic model of learning and assessment.

The second key issue, expanding on the benefits of formative assessment, highlights ‘the need to redress the balance between formative and summative tasks with the former to be increased at the expense of the latter’ (Enhancement Themes, 2005a, p. 4). To this end, it suggests: the progressive weighting of assignments so that the summative aspect of assessment only becomes proportionally more important towards the end of the course; more use of computer-aided formative and personal and peer assessment; and the wider adoption of personal development planning to enable students to view their higher education as an ongoing process with distinct goals. These all have the potential to enhance the experience of transition for new students in higher education but two could have particular relevance for adult students. First, it may be the case that adults with more life experience (of job interviews and employment performance appraisals, for instance) will feel more familiar with and confident about the process of self and peer assessment than their younger counterparts. Second, given that many adult students are, in Giddens’ (1991) terms, entering higher education as part of a process of reflexively ordered life-planning, personal development planning has the potential to locate the place of their participation in higher education within that wider, life-planning context.

The third issue focuses on providing effective feedback to students and developing imaginative means of improving its overall quality. Here the question concerns the extent to which conventional assessment – even formative assessment – enhances learning. Feedback on assessments is obviously important and conventional wisdom suggests that the speed with which students receive that feedback is a major determinant of its effectiveness. Counter-intuitively, however, there is also evidence that many students pay little actual attention to the content of feedback and focus primarily on the grade awarded for their work (Enhancement Themes, 2005a). Suggestions for innovative ways of improving the effectiveness of feedback – some of which overlap with suggestions on the second issue – include: extended use of computer-aided assessment (CAA) which could provide instant feedback on incorrect answers (explaining clearly why the answer was wrong); the use of personal response systems through which lecturers can receive instant feedback on students' understanding of what they are teaching; and classroom-based assessments such as joint presentations (ibid.). The actual design of CAA tests is crucial: it is clearly important that – particularly in non-science subjects – they are set to test thematic and conceptual understanding rather than the retention of decontextualised chunks of information. All these methods have the potential to transform the nature of assessment from a series of discrete, often arduous, events which occur at various points in the academic session, to an ongoing, familiar process embedded in the learning experience of students. If their use increases the efficacy (in speed and quality) of feedback, this may improve the experience of transition for all students and may be particularly beneficial to adult students many of whom suffer from early confidence crises because, for them, entry to higher education is not a natural, seamless progression from secondary education, but a major life-changing decision, often accompanied by considerable uncertainty and doubt.

The fourth key issue is the need to ensure a better match between teaching, assessment and learning outcomes. Research has shown that constructive alignment in the curriculum of teaching, assessment and learning outcomes has the potential to transform surface, transient learning into deep, more entrenched learning (Enhancement Themes, 2005a). However, although *constructive alignment* is a ubiquitous watchword in higher education, the Enhancement Theme paper suggests that, in this regard, practice does not always mirror theory and – because of time and

various other constraints – ‘there is sometimes a tendency to assess that which is easy to assess’ rather than the clear achievement of specific learning outcomes (ibid., p. 12). To address this issue, the paper suggests the use of a more diverse range of assessment techniques, specifically methods of assessment that test competence, capability and, ideally, deep learning. This might include the use of more assessed group work and group or individual presentations all of which have the potential to develop students’ communication skills and concomitantly – because it is usually necessary to grasp an idea fully to communicate it clearly – their deep learning. Again this mode of assessment may be more comfortable for those adult students who have experience of teamwork and making presentations in work and other settings. The second suggestion is rather more contentious: it involves a greater involvement of students in the design and application of assessment:

This is a practice that is not commonplace, and yet the importance of assessment to both parties surely demands some kind of dialogue. Although the explicit declaration of learning outcomes in a module or programme is likely to better define the most appropriate assessment task to determine whether students have acquired new knowledge or understanding or developed a particular skill or set of skills, there is the potential danger of being over-prescriptive and thus restricting the range of learning with which students might engage (Enhancement Themes, 2005a, pp. 12-13).

The implication that the rigorous alignment of assessment schemes with intended learning outcomes has the potential to restrict the range of learning students engage with is interesting: it certainly represents a welcome departure from more instrumental interpretations of the value of higher education. However, acknowledging the considerable practical difficulties of implementing student involvement in planning assessment, the paper’s only suggestion is the extension of student inputs on assessment in individual portfolios and PDPs. Presumably this would entail students setting personal outcomes (for instance, on the development of metacognition) from higher education which are additional to formal learning outcomes, and later outlining how and to what extent these had been achieved. Again, the extension of opportunities for students to influence what they experience in higher education may be attractive to adult students some of whom (a theme identified in this research project) exhibit a degree of frustration with their perceived voicelessness. However, the specific issue of setting individual learning outcomes was not addressed

in the research interviews and it is therefore impossible to comment on whether or not adult students would welcome this particular development.

The fifth and final key issue identified in the *Assessment* Enhancement Theme draws together several of the issues identified earlier and is, in effect, a clarion call to higher education practitioners to continuously innovate in the practice of assessment:

Innovative techniques can be used to reduce the assessment load or switch from summative to formative tasks; they can offer better and quicker feedback and they can provide a better match between teaching, assessment and learning outcomes. It is therefore self-evident that innovative assessment techniques offer both staff and students new possibilities to better judge both teaching and learning. However, the introduction of innovative assessment methods is not simply about choosing a different way of doing things or saving staff time, instead the driver must be because the particular innovation is best suited to what students are being asked to learn (Enhancement Themes, 2005a, p. 13).

The paper also highlights the value of cooperation between academic disciplines, departments and institutions in the development and dissemination of best practice. While acknowledging that there is some resistance to the introduction of new assessment models across the higher education sector, and that the need to innovate places further demands on academics often struggling to balance the requirements of research and teaching, it challenges practitioners to be bold and to view innovation as an ‘investment that will repay the extra effort’ (ibid., p. 14). That assessment is a central component of higher education is clearly a truism, but in the past there has been a marked tendency to view the essential process of assessment as an immutable series of unavoidable hurdles that students must negotiate to reach the successful conclusion of their higher education. From that perspective, one characteristic of ‘unsuccessful’ transition is failure to negotiate some of the earliest hurdles: any developments in higher education that alter the nature of these hurdles and facilitate and stabilise student trajectories through higher education are therefore to be welcomed.

The second Enhancement Theme, *Responding to Student Needs*, focused on two issues: student needs in the first year of study, and student evaluation of and feedback

on their learning experience, and commissioned two developmental projects on these issues. One of the key outcomes of this work was its clear recognition of:

. . . the importance of preparing students for entry to higher education, engaging them quickly and effectively into the learning community of the institution, smoothing the transition and process of acculturation, and providing timely and relevant academic, pastoral and professional support (Enhancement Themes, 2005b, p. 3).

The first developmental project on the needs of first-year students identified four relevant strands: induction, personal tutor systems and their alternatives, approaches to integrating student support, and the first-year learning experience. In relation to induction, the paper outlines 15 characteristics of good practice: those of particular relevance to adult students in transition are briefly considered here. First, it highlights the need for the induction programme to ‘address academic, social and cultural adjustments that students may face’ (Enhancement Themes, 2005b, p. 8) which is a clear call for universities to acknowledge and address the diversity of new students and to move even further away from the implicit assumption that those entering higher education have followed traditional pathways. Second, it suggests that induction should recognise existing skills and experience: this has the potential to reassure adult students that although their pathway to higher education may have been different from that of traditional school-leavers the institution acknowledges and values their life experience. Third, it should ‘involve teaching staff at a personal level’ (ibid., p. 9): this may provide something of a bridge between the less formal world of adult education – where there is a strong crossover between teaching and pastoral roles – and the more formal, sometimes anonymous, world of higher education. Fourth, induction should take account of different entry points to higher education. Induction does tend to focus primarily on year one of higher education, but students articulating to year two or three – a significant proportion of whom are mature entrants – are very often moving into a challenging new milieu and may require as much guidance, support and reassurance as first-year students. Fifth, induction should endeavour to be inclusive of students’ families: this may be particularly relevant to adult students who are concerned that their participation in higher education may have a detrimental effect on their family lives.

The report’s guidance points on personal tutor systems and integrating student support are arguably more generic and applicable across the broad spectrum of

entrants to higher education. In relation to adult students, three merit closer consideration. First, the report suggests that an effective personal tutor system should: 'Provide training and guidelines to assist academic staff in providing general support and in identifying a critical incident and knowing how to respond' (ibid., p. 10). The range of potential critical incidents has to take account, or at least have the flexibility to take account, of the wide range of barriers to continued participation that potentially impact adult students. This is not to suggest that the critical incidents younger students face are any less pressing, but simply that such support has to be able to respond as effectively to the diversity and extended responsibilities of adult life. Second, in relation to integrating student support, the report advocates the promotion of greater student-peer and student-staff interaction (especially outside the classroom): this has the potential to reduce feelings of alienation experienced by adult students in institutions where they are, to varying degrees, in a minority. The use of mature students – further along the higher education trajectory – as peer mentors may be particularly effective in this regard. Third, 'increasing students' involvement and engagement with the institution' (Enhancement Themes, 2005b, p. 11) may appeal particularly to some adult students who have had more experience of involvement in formal decision-making processes than their younger peers, and add weight to the perception that they are stakeholders in, rather than relatively passive recipients of, higher education. The final strand of *Responding to Student Needs* looks at the first-year learning experience. This is the subject of a subsequent major enhancement theme and is examined below.

The second key issue of this Enhancement Theme is student evaluation of and feedback on their learning experience: this short section of the paper addresses the need for more development and uniformity in this area of academic practice. In relation to students' evaluation of their learning experience for *assurance* purposes, it points out that systems are well embedded across the sector, but that for *enhancement* purposes (taking account of students' ideas for improvement) the employment of evaluation systems is less widely established. It suggests that improvements could be made to: 'speed up processes of collection, analysis and response; enable the institution to respond more effectively to issues and needs; [and] facilitate real-time evaluation during the delivery of a module or class' (ibid., p. 13). Like so much of this enhancement theme, this issue seeks to enhance students' engagement with their

institutions: if it can help them to feel that they have a definite stake in higher education and some power to influence the nature of its practices, this can only serve to increase their sense of legitimate membership of the academic community.

Particularly apposite to this research project is the major enhancement theme that, acknowledging the central importance of the first year at university, sought to identify and disseminate a range of approaches aimed at enhancing the student experience of this first and – for many students – most challenging phase of transition to higher education. Perhaps one of the most striking characteristics of this theme is an important change of emphasis which moves concerns about the first year beyond a straightforward rather utilitarian focus on retention and progression to one which also seeks to enhance students' autonomy and motivation and maximise the transformative potential of their participation in higher education:

The committee was clear from the start ... that this Enhancement Theme should not be solely based on the concern that has long dominated our debate about the first year, namely retention and progression. Rather, the goal would be to encourage the sector to consider whether it is offering all students, whatever their initial ability and attitude, and in whatever way they are studying, the encouragement and attention that would make the experience of HE genuinely transforming from the start. If this can be offered, then able and well-equipped students would still be fully stretched throughout the first year in Scottish HE, and those that enter with less well developed personal resources would be given all the help they need to flourish (Enhancement Themes, 2009, p. 3).

The twin pillars of this strategy for enhancing the first year experience are student engagement and empowerment where, broadly speaking, engagement relates 'to a student's motivation and commitment to study' and empowerment entails 'equipping the first-year student with the competency to learn effectively' (ibid., p. 4). Building on this, one of the theme's major strands - which specifically addresses the issue of transition to and during the first year – argues that engagement and empowerment are essential components of effective transition:

Effective approaches to transition support may require more major cultural, philosophical and pedagogical shifts regarding the nature and purpose of the first year. If the goal of the first year of university is to facilitate the engagement and empowerment of all students and equip them with the skills needed to successfully undertake subsequent stages of their programme, a radical reshaping of the first year

may also be required. This may entail a rethinking of curricular structures, curricular content and learning and teaching strategies (Enhancement Themes, 2008a, p. 4).

One of the principal justifications for the need for this radical approach to transition is the increasing diversity of higher education: the fact that – across the higher education sector – the student body is becoming more heterogeneous means that approaches to facilitating transition will increasingly have to take account of the expanding range of personal and work circumstances, prior educational experiences, motivation and attitudes to learning that students bring with them to university (ibid.). In foregrounding an approach built around engagement and empowerment, the report also signals an important shift away from a deficit model of student support and guidance which has primarily been used to ‘rescue’ individuals who are somehow struggling to meet the demands of higher education rather than as a means of enhancing the learning experience of all students. Further, single solutions targeted at different types or categories of student will no longer be enough. The heterogeneity that increasingly characterises higher education is also becoming more apparent *within* various ‘non-traditional’ groups of students. In fact, that diversity was probably always there, but greater account is being taken of it as the numbers of non-traditional students in higher education rise: the report argues that support predicated on narrow, stereotypical interpretations of the specific needs of students based on gender, age, disability, ethnicity or educational background needs to be replaced by new approaches flexible enough to negotiate the true diversity of the student body (Enhancement Themes, 2008a).

The report pinpoints four defining features of effective support for transition in the first year. First, all students should be supported in transition, not simply those who are perceived to be at risk: ‘if the concept of successful transition is measured in terms of the engagement and empowerment of all students, a shift to a model based on ‘enhancement’ – which values and builds on existing strengths, skills and knowledge *regardless of learner profile* [my italics] – is necessary (ibid., p. 26). This proposal is underpinned by the observation that if the efficacy of transition support is judged purely by the criterion of student retention this may conceal the important truth that some students have – because of restricted engagement with academic or social life in higher education – failed to realise their academic potential or fulfil their aspirations. Second, support should be visible and available at the appropriate stages

of transition; it should be depicted as a normal aspect of the student experience and not something that should only be resorted to in times of crisis. This normalisation of seeking support has the potential to encourage students to see it less as a symptom of failure than as one aspect of the developing relationship with their institution: this may be of particular value to adult students experiencing ‘impostor syndrome’ (Reay, 2002), a feeling that – for various reasons including their social class or educational background – they do not deserve to be in higher education. Third, the experience of transition may be enhanced by the promotion of academic and social networks. This part of the report points to the potential role that virtual learning environments and other electronic media may play in facilitating networks that connect students with their peers and academic staff. Fourth, transition support should be incorporated into ‘curriculum design and programme delivery’ (Enhancement Themes, 2008a, p. 27). This may be achieved through a more longitudinal approach to induction that enables students to practise the specific skills of enquiry and group work and develop their learning strategy as they progressively engage with the curriculum during the first year. Group activity and/or peer support focused on the first essay is cited as an example of one method of extending and, essentially, situating the induction process. The longitudinal approach to induction described here not only stretches forward into students’ engagement with the curriculum but also extends backwards into the pre-entry stage of transition. By developing links with schools and colleges, universities will be able to assist in raising aspirations and help students to develop a realistic understanding of the demands of higher education as well as an awareness of the adjustments to their learning styles and strategies that may be necessary. By moving induction out of its traditional temporal location in the first week or two of higher education into a longitudinal role, this approach arguably removes some of the element of chance from the process: if some students – for whatever reason – fail to engage sufficiently with the valued practices of higher education at an early stage, the fact that induction is an ongoing process provides additional opportunities for this to take place. In addition, the report highlights the need to avoid information overload in the first weeks at university: students should be given or directed to sources of information in various media only as and when it is necessary. This will avoid the counterproductive situation in which students overwhelmed by the sheer volume of new information actually assimilate very little of it.

The final strand of this enhancement theme – which has particular relevance to transition – focuses on enhancing scholarship skills in the area of academic writing. Here ‘writing’ also refers to the range of practices which are complementary to the creation of text, namely: seeking information, reading and taking notes. Skill in academic writing retains its absolute centrality in assessment in higher education and the acquisition and demonstration of an acceptable level of competence remains a *sine qua non* of academic success. Whilst acknowledging this, the report highlights the need to again take account of student diversity and provides clear guidelines on good practice in three generic areas of academic literacy. First, it suggests that assessment strategies should be made as transparent as possible so that students are – ideally – well aware of what standard of writing is expected of them. Ways of achieving this include: providing clear guidance on marking criteria and the use and citation of sources, and the utilisation of anonymised or invented assignments (or extracts) for students to analyse and assess (Enhancement Themes, 2008b). Second, students should be encouraged to identify terminologies and writing and citation styles that are particular to the discipline they are studying, and given the opportunity to consider assessment criteria with their peers and apply these criteria to each other’s assignment drafts. Both of these suggestions have the potential to enhance student comprehension of what constitutes good writing within their discipline (ibid., p. 22). Third, short writing tasks should be used to ‘enhance students’ sense of taking responsibility for their learning’ (ibid.). These short learning tasks could focus on briefly explaining a discrete theme or concept which is one element of a wider theme. For instance, students could be asked before a class on nineteenth-century poor relief to prepare a short outline of Jeremy Bentham’s utilitarianism. Students could then briefly compare and analyse each other’s work, without the need for the tutor to provide any written assessment. Students could be asked to summarise points from the last class; or could prepare short written answers to questions the lecturer asks in class; or be asked to paraphrase a short extract from a written source; or, finally, students could undertake short exercises in collaborative writing where they are required to provide comments on one another’s work and, if they agree with the comments, amend their work accordingly. The authors of this assessment theme report are realistic about the pervasiveness of opposition to these types of innovation in a higher education sector peppered - across departments and institutions – with a degree of conservatism, but assert that:

Ultimately, the key to this kind of development perhaps lies in engendering a gradual cultural and conceptual shift in how staff and – consequently – students view writing. If writing can be seen as an intrinsic part of learning, then both may find it easier to confidently focus on and develop academic literacy, thus enhancing student scholarship, confidence and achievement in the crucial first year (ibid., p. 23).

The point was made above that adult students share the heterogeneity of other ‘groups’ of learners and it would therefore be wholly inaccurate to assert that academic literacy is more problematic for adult learners than it is for any other group of non-traditional students. But it is certainly true that academic literacy is a significant stumbling block for *some* mature participants in higher education, and the case can be made that for such adults the enhancements of practice examined above provide alternative, and arguably promising, techniques for negotiating this core aspect of transition.

The final body considered here which, in effect, mediates, between the Scottish government and higher education institutions is the Scottish Wider Access Programme (SWAP). Unlike the organisations whose policies documents were examined above, SWAP has little direct input to the generation of policy and in essence operates as an agency which offers advice to, and administers access programmes for, adults seeking entry to higher education. While internal university access courses generally involve no more than four contact hours each week, SWAP courses require full-time attendance and entail study of a wider range of subjects (at least eight) at SCQF level 5 or 6. SWAP organises courses across Scotland with its partner further education colleges and provides detailed advice to students on their applications for admission and funding (www.scottishwideraccess.org). In addition to this, SWAP does provide a number of on-line documents aimed at enhancing student engagement with learning on their college courses and beyond. Under the umbrella title of, *Preparation for Higher Education*, many, indeed most, of the documents relate to the intricacies of applying for university admission through UCAS (writing personal statements, meeting deadlines etc.). There are links to several documents on study skills which address: ‘How do you study?’, ‘Reading skills’, ‘Listening skills’ and ‘Preparing for lectures’; ‘Memory improvement techniques’; and ‘Critical thinking skills’. Much of the guidance in this section – though it may be of some use to students – seems rather dated and appears to take very little account of recent

developments in educational research. For example, the document on ‘How do you study?’ appears to embrace the deficit approach to support mentioned above: it primarily consists of a series of questionnaires through which students are able to position themselves on continua relating to: perfectionism, procrastination, confusion about tasks, and loss of focus and/or difficulties prioritising their work (SWAP, 2010). It briefly describes certain ways of addressing these problems or deficits, but makes no allusion to more recent models of practice designed to enhance the student experience of higher education. Similarly, the document on reading skills adopts something like a ‘toolbox’ approach to reading and literacy: it explains reading terminologies and citation requirements; it shows how to ‘deconstruct’ the subject, focus and command words of academic questions, and it provides a number of exercises in comprehension and interpretation (ibid.). The final section does provide some good advice on the development of critical thinking and some clear, practical examples and useful exercises. Even here, however, the guidance seems somewhat dated; there is little suggestion that it is informed by any recent developments in research-led practice. It is perhaps unfair to draw attention to the limited contribution made by SWAP to innovations in the enhancement of students’ experience of transition: this is undoubtedly a funding issue rather than any dereliction of responsibility. It is however disappointing that one of the few remaining agencies directly charged with promoting adult access to higher education is unable to make more use of its extensive involvement with students to conduct research into the specificities of SWAP students’ transition to higher education.

The final policy documents considered in this chapter are those produced by Scotland’s universities. Specifically, the review examined the teaching and learning strategies of the four universities in the west of Scotland where individuals interviewed in this research are or were studying. What was immediately apparent in the process of reviewing these documents was their striking similarity and, in particular, their clearly stated alignment with the aims and objectives of the Enhancements Themes programme. Each of the four strategies makes an almost identical commitment to the University of Stirling’s which states that: ‘the University will continue to focus and develop quality enhancement in-line with guidance from SFC and QAA’ (University of Stirling, 2010). The clarity of this commitment is underlined in several of the University’s strategic objectives which include:

To promote a student-centred and research-led approach to learning, teaching and scholarship;

To provide a curriculum that is stimulating, innovative and intellectually rigorous;

To facilitate and support transition, flexibility, progression and retention through a well designed and supported curriculum;

To maintain and develop a high quality innovative learning environment and curriculum that is relevant, distinctive, affordable, inclusive and engages with the environment outside academia;

To value, respect and respond to diversity amongst the student population, to ensure that the University's curricula and arrangements for learning, teaching and assessment actively promote equality, diversity and inclusion, and to ensure that all students have the opportunity to participate fully in the learning experience at Stirling;

To facilitate excellence in learning and teaching through development, enhancement, and research;

To continue to stimulate a culture of continuous improvement and enhancement through the critical scrutiny of effective practice, procedures and methods of learning;

To ensure effective and efficient use of resources and delivery of learning, teaching and assessment, including innovative approaches and making full use of new technologies (University of Stirling, 2010).

It would be pointless to compare individual points of each strategy across the four sets of documents, but the themes they address are remarkably similar and demonstrate an explicit and very direct connection to many of the Enhancement Themes programme's recommendations on best practice. Equally common in university assessment policies, is the introduction of personal development plans which the Enhancement Theme on assessment suggests has the potential to enhance student engagement in the process of self-assessment. As noted in the introduction, another recurrent strand in teaching and learning strategies is the idea of *assessment for learning* through which assessment, rather than simply measuring outcomes, contributes to the actual learning process. Overall, arguably, there is something of an irony here: as universities have embraced the Enhancement Themes that challenge them to recognise and embrace student heterogeneity, the higher education sector they operate in has become increasingly homogeneous, particularly in relation to learning and teaching. Universities continue to protest their individuality (and often

superiority) and do have diverse research profiles, but there can be little doubt that across the sector as a whole the experience of many students is becoming increasingly shaped by the growing volume of sector-wide guidelines on best practice.

Conclusion

The primary aim of this chapter was to provide a detailed examination of the wider higher education context in which transition takes place. It lays the foundation for the analysis of the interview data and – by highlighting many of the most relevant *articulated* policies on academic practice – enables some comparison to be made between the aims of such policy and the actual lived experience of adult students. To what extent, for instance, do the data support the idea that universities actively promote student ‘engagement’ and ‘empowerment’? On the other hand, since many of the practice recommendations discussed in this chapter represent ongoing innovations in academic practice, to what extent do the data explicitly point to the need for any of these changes? Extending the level of analysis outwards – to the macrosystem in particular – enables consideration to be made of wider economic and social factors that impact transition. Adult transition to higher education takes place against a background of continuous economic and social change which arguably contributes to the level of risk and anxiety the decision to participate in higher education – for many – entails. Finally, the thesis concludes with some comments on the potential implications of the research: the foregoing discussion also serves to contextualise such comments within ongoing developments in the higher education sector.

Chapter 5

Negotiating the demands of academic practice

Introduction

Through the lens of communities of practice theory, transition to higher education can be seen as a process of familiarisation with and increasing participation in the valued practices of the academic community. In Lave and Wenger's (1991) paradigm, such participation results in or facilitates learning, although the actual nature of that learning may be unpredictable and – in institutional contexts – may differ from the explicit, intended learning outcomes of the curriculum. Thus, Lave (1993) distinguishes between a 'teaching curriculum' and a 'learning curriculum': the former is shaped by what institutions expect or intend students to learn through engagement with the required academic practices, and the latter describes what students actually learn mediated by their own experiences, expectations and social networks, within and outwith the institution. When learning results from participation in practice, there are concomitant shifts in learner identities which Wenger (1998 p. 215) describes as a *process of becoming*. Each community of practice has distinct, and often unique, characteristics and within each community there is a range of possible trajectories which both shape and are shaped by the engagement of its participants. Thus some participants are on a clear inbound trajectory; some outbound (for example graduating students); and some by choice, or because of factors which restrict their participation, remain on a peripheral trajectory throughout their engagement with the community. In the context of this research, successful transition to higher education is arguably most closely associated with an identifiable inbound trajectory which involves a *process of becoming* an effective participant in the community of higher education practice, and acquiring a degree of mastery of the skills, conventions, dispositions and discipline(s) embedded in that practice.

This chapter explores the demands of academic practice which adult students encounter and negotiate in the process of transition to higher education. In part one, the data relating to what – for many students and some staff – are problematic aspects of academic practice are examined. Analysis of the data reveals a number of recurrent themes relating to the nature of such practice and, in turn, points clearly to the

overarching significance of the process of constructing meaning in explaining both the initial problems of practice and how students overcome them. In other words, some demands of academic practice are problematic for students simply because they require engagement with concepts, language or conventions which – for various reasons – are unfamiliar to them and have limited meaning; and mastery of practice is, therefore, contingent on the negotiation of appropriate meaning (Lea and Street, 1998). Following the analysis of the intractability of certain aspects of practice in part one of this chapter, part two moves on to a discussion of the central role of the related themes of participant interaction and the process of negotiating meaning in effective participation in the practices of higher education. Permeating all the valued practices of higher education that students must negotiate and learn is the insidious influence of risk, and the anxiety this often creates. Part three considers how this particularly affects adult students and considers the extent to which this is one of the defining characteristics of their experience of transition.

1. Problematic aspects of practice in transition to higher education

In this section of the chapter, three fairly broad recurrent themes which emerge from the data are examined: Information Overload; Silences: The Experience of HE Teaching; and The Exclusionary Power of Academic Language.

Information overload

Acknowledging that for most students entry to higher education represents the beginning of a significant and potentially life-transforming phase of their lives, universities are increasingly focusing their efforts on the process of induction (Yorke and Thomas, 2003). The first week or few weeks at university represent a window of opportunity for institutions to cultivate the social integration that may help students to adapt to new and often unfamiliar surroundings and experiences. For traditional students this involves the well-known rituals of freshers' week; for non-traditional students an introduction to a generally narrower range of targeted social facilities; and for all students the opportunity to sign-up to a plethora of clubs and associations. In terms of academic integration, induction is also seen as an important early opportunity to familiarise new students with the 'essentials' of academic practice. Universities – with an eye to retention rates – make careful and concerted efforts to

ensure that all new students are introduced to the basic requirements of academic practice including: use of the library, information technology, effective learning, and the avoidance of plagiarism. Lewis (1984) found that new students were, in effect, ‘assaulted’ by a battery of information on social and academic aspects of university life and this research suggests that little has changed in recent years. Many of the interviewees recognised that most of the social aspects of induction were not targeted at them and there was a degree of recognition – often bordering on amusement – that they would not experience the stereotypical student social life: for most, family responsibilities and existing social networks meant that they had, in fact, little interest in doing so. In terms of the academic dimension of induction, however, the data reveal a significant level of dissatisfaction with this aspect of their introduction to higher education:

I was a bit nervous the first week, but excited as well. There were tours of the university and the library and talks about all sorts of things. Some of the talks were better than others and told you things that you needed to do to get by here. They were about things like sources of advice . . . personal tutors, the SRC, effective learning and so on and I remember thinking there seems to be plenty of support if you need it. But a couple of them were a bit high-brow – talking about educational journeys and personal transformation, and making a contribution to society [laughs]. A couple of times, I thought what’s this guy on about? . . . but I was with a couple of friends I’d done the access course with and we just smiled at each other, just kind of laughed it off. But they kept giving you these printed guides, or introductions, to things you needed to know . . . and by the end of the induction week there was loads of them. To be honest I didn’t really look at them properly until the weekend . . . When I started reading them I got a bit bamboozled and I had to get out the brand new dictionary my kids, my wife really [laughs], had got me for uni. But there was just so much of it and I started to feel worried about taking it all in, you know, picking it up. That was the first time I felt a bit flat and worried about whether I was doing the right thing (Dan, GU).

Similarly, Una reflected on feeling rather overwhelmed and confused by the amount of printed material she was given at the start of her course:

They gave us screeds of printed stuff – so much for saving the trees, I thought. When I found time to start reading it, I thought what the hell’s all this . . . critical analysis, correct referencing, inverted commas, italics, plagiarism and all that. I remember showing some of it to my dad, who’s a retired teacher, and he kind of grumbled his way through it quickly and went on about how they didn’t have all this in his day (Una, US).

In the same vein, Emma felt that the sheer volume of printed information provided was actually counter-productive:

The information you get can be quite overwhelming because you’re getting a whole lot from different courses, the tendency is to stick it all in a file and then put it into a folder and then at some point think you have to go back and look at that again, or for the first time (Emma, GU).

Focus group data (involving students in their second year of study) also suggest that there is significant duplication of information in the printed material distributed during induction, and subsequently:

I suppose they do give you too much stuff to read . . . and a lot of it’s saying the same stuff over and over again about plagiarism, bibliographies, em style, extensions and things like that ... of course there’s other things like reading lists and class schedules that are different for each course but surely they could give you one big handbook that applied to all the more general rules, couldn’t they? It’s the same in second year I’m afraid but at least we know which bits to skip through (Marie, GU).

Yes, there’s too much it, puts you off reading it really . . . I remember somebody talking about intended learning outcomes this [second] year and I remember thinking what the hell are they? (Arthur, GU).

The interviewees’ reflections on the actual value of the written information on academic practice they were given at the start of their respective courses raised a number of recurrent concerns. They related a significant level of confusion over the academic terminology used: for instance several of them found the concept of critical analysis particularly problematic (the specific issue of academic language is examined in part two of this chapter). In terms of some of the more instrumental demands of

practice, warnings about plagiarism, the protocols of academic referencing, and, for them, ominously long reading lists were highlighted by a number of students.

I might have heard the word plagiarism when I was at [FE college] but I didn't really know what it was . . . I suppose I knew it was cheating, kind of copying. But when I started reading all the stuff about it in the course introduction I got really mixed up . . . it was all about how to avoid it and I thought, God I've never really done any of this before, it worried me quite a bit (Neil, GCU).

A lot of the course material was about plagiarism and proper referencing; it all seemed very technical and I was a bit concerned about picking it up (Fiona, US).

I found all the stuff about plagiarism and how to reference boring and pretty confusing, really. The way they went on about plagiarism, it was like it was some kind of terrible crime . . . and referencing the right way seemed really complicated. We'd done some referencing on my SWAP course but it was really only a list of the books you'd used, at the very end of the essay. I suppose I saw the point of references in the actual essay but all the nitpicky rules, and when it was printed and where, what's that all about? Surely the lecturer knows what book it is – they told us what books to use. I'm getting to grips with it now but it's still a bit of pain (Ian, GCU).

During the focus group discussion the general consensus seemed to be that by the students' second year of study referencing and the avoidance of plagiarism had - largely through practice - become less problematic but, in the context of students being overburdened by the sheer volume of information, a slightly different but important point emerged:

On my access course we did Harvard referencing and I pretty much got the hang of it – a nuisance but I knew it had to be done. One of the subjects I'm doing is history and when I did my first essay last year I used Harvard referencing. When I got it back, the mark was OK, I suppose, maybe not as good as I thought but there was some really snotty comment like I was supposed to use footnote referencing. I asked my tutor about it and she said it tells you in the handbook Fair enough, but why do different courses have to use different styles of referencing? I still think it makes writing essays a bit harder when you've got to keep changing styles (Kevin, GU).

Yes, you're right – I hadn't really thought about that, I have to do footnote referencing in one of my courses and it does take a lot more time: Harvard referencing is much more straightforward (Marie, GU).

These comments raise the question of why relatively cognate disciplines – for one of the focus-group students, economic and social history and sociology – require the use of different citation systems so that, in one example, reference to a specific contention of Marx in an essay for the former would require a footnote and, in an essay for the latter, a Harvard-style reference. Students are justifiably perplexed by this disparity in academic writing conventions and are, in the main, unaware of any of the reasons for it. Becher and Trowler (2001) describe how the 'academic tribes' of higher education strive to maintain their disciplinary boundaries and jealously resist infringement of their academic territories and protocols. From a communities of practice perspective, this may be seen as counterproductive: students in transition to higher education are generally seeking to acquire competence in its valued practices, and this process may be undermined if any of those practices are obscured by a lack of transparency or by any apparent contradiction in their characteristics. As 'interdisciplinarity' and 'knowledge transfer' become increasingly ubiquitous *leitmotifs* in university mission statements, disciplinary boundaries may progressively become more flexible, particularly in relation to research. It may, however, take longer for interdisciplinarity to have an impact upon the early years of undergraduate study.

Another aspect of the theme of information overload which emerges clearly from the data is that students were initially concerned about the length of course reading lists and unsure of how much reading they would realistically be required or expected to undertake:

When I opened my first course handbook my heart sank a bit, I couldn't believe how long the reading list for the course was. I'd bought a couple of textbooks for that course but there were at least another five or six books on the reading list. I'd bought the books so I wouldn't have to compete with other students for them in the library . . . I didn't want to waste time I could be spending with my kids traipsing back and forth to the library. For different bits of the course, there was recommended reading and additional reading but what did that mean? Was recommended reading what you needed to do just to pass and additional reading what you needed to do to get a good

mark? I didn't know and I really started to panic a bit? How could I find out how much you really needed to read? (Norma, SU).

I looked through the course handbook – lots of details about the course but the only bits that really grabbed my attention were the dates for essays and exams and that kind of thing . . . oh yes, and the reading lists – I remember thinking there's no way I'll be able to read all that (Mark, GCU).

Other interviewees expressed a similar level of uncertainty but also alluded to the potential usefulness of interaction with other students in overcoming this hurdle. Kate reflected on such interaction on her access course but was concerned that this might no longer be possible for her:

When I looked at the reading lists I wondered how much I would actually have to read to do well on the course . . . When we got assignments on the access course, the first thing we did was talk about what books we were going to use for them, so we were all doing much the same reading and we all got pretty good grades. But none of my access friends from [FE college] are even at this university so I can't really talk to them about it (Kate, GU).

In a similar vein, Dan appeared to concur with his wife's suggestion that discussing the level of reading required with other students on his courses would make things clearer:

When I spoke to my wife about how many books were on each of the reading lists, she said 'don't worry you'll be able to talk to other students about what they're doing' (Dan, GU).

In Lave and Wenger's terms, the documents students receive at the beginning of, and throughout, their university careers can be viewed as reified artefacts of the academic community of practice: a 'library guide', for instance, reifies the utility of library facilities to students. The data above suggest that, in addition to being overwhelmed by their sheer volume, a number of students found it difficult to ascribe clear, tangible meaning to certain aspects of these textual artefacts. Similarly, in Wenger's (1998) vignette, Ariel and her claims-processing colleagues have some difficulty making

sense of a new form (a Co-ordination of Benefits worksheet) they are required to use. Through interaction with one another, they begin to understand the purpose of the form and how it should be used – in other words, they ascribe meaning to it. In his analysis of how this happens, Wenger (1998) foregrounds the process of reification, of giving concrete meaning to abstract or intangible concepts – thus, in this instance, the form has the *potential* to act as a conduit through which the aims and methods of this particular process may be understood. But for Wenger (1998) reification is only one part of the process of negotiating meaning – reified beliefs, concepts or procedures (in whatever form the reification takes) only gain meaning through participation. Thus the Co-ordination of Benefits form only acquires meaning as the claims processors begin to utilise it and puzzle over some of the questions it raises. In the same way, it could be argued that for students the point of academic referencing – reified in their course handbooks and study guides – only starts to become clear as they begin to practise it. Wenger's (1998) analysis of the interplay between reification and participation is useful in understanding how learning takes place within communities of practice but arguably underplays the significance of language. He convincingly argues that not all reifications are primarily textually mediated, but many of the elements of joint repertoires he lists, such as routines, stories, genres, symbols, ways of doing things, or concepts, may be predominately or wholly language-based. Undoubtedly, however, the vast majority of examples of reification in higher education and the joint repertoires of its communities of practice are mediated by language. In the second part of this chapter - which examines students' actual negotiation of the demands of academic practice - analysis, largely informed by communities of practice theory is complemented by discussion of some significant insights offered by the new literacy studies (Barton, Hamilton and Ivanič, 2000; Bartlett and Holland, 2002; Hamilton, 2001).

Silences: the experience of higher education teaching

A second recurrent theme in the data is student recognition of some distinct differences between the pedagogic practices of adult and higher education. Adult education theory frequently highlights how the learning styles and needs of 'typical' adults differ from those of younger learners: differences elucidated most explicitly in Knowles' (1984) conceptualisation of *andragogy*, a term which describes the

‘particularities of adult education practice’ (Brookfield, 2005, p. 284). Knowles’ characterisation of most adult learners as self-actualising and self-directed has less currency in contemporary adult education, but his more general emphasis on valuing and foregrounding the life experiences of adult students and using them, where appropriate, as an educational resource continues to exert a significant influence on practice (Brookfield, 1995). Access courses are generally delivered by adult education or lifelong learning departments (or what remains of them) in universities, or by further education tutors often schooled in the values and practices of adult education. Where this is most clearly the case, interactive teaching is prioritised, student experience and reflection on that experience is valued, and students are encouraged to participate in the construction of meaning (Brookfield, 1995; O’Hara, 2005). Teaching in higher education – largely because of the sheer numbers of students involved and the continuing centrality of lectures – is, in many respects, more depersonalised: although recent research (Yorke and Longden, 2008) emphasises the potentially positive contribution of more interactive modes of teaching to the first-year student experience. The data considered here suggest that the process of transition from adult education to higher education pedagogic practices is initially challenging for some students: in particular, the early experience of first-year university lectures was problematic for a number of interviewees:

On my pre-entry [access] course, there was about twenty of us and we were free to ask questions any time we didn’t get something . . . in fact our tutor was always asking us questions and half the time three or four people might be speaking at the same time, but he didn’t mind really . . . I suppose it showed we were interested. Here we go to lectures in these huge rooms . . . there might be two or three hundred people there and once it gets going nobody really speaks apart from the lecturer. I think a couple of them did say at the start that it was OK to ask questions but nobody ever does, really. There have been quite a few times when I didn’t really understand something and I wanted to ask the lecturer a question but I just couldn’t risk sounding stupid in front of all these people (Norma, SU).

[name of tutor] did warn us that uni classes were very different and that we were in for a bit a shock. A bit of a shock alright – I asked a question halfway through one of the first ones I went to and it felt like you could have cut the atmosphere with a knife – like it wasn’t the done thing. I’ve not asked another question since, and I just sit

there bored stiff like the rest of them. In fact loads of the younger students don't even bother going to the lectures and I sometimes think, what's the point of them? (Ian, GCU).

Most of the time, I enjoy the lectures – some more than others – but they're very formal. I miss the friendliness, the chattiness of my access class . . . we worked things out together (Kate, GU).

The data also provide clear evidence of the impact of structural constraints on practice and show how the agency of participants in the higher education community of practice may be strictly curtailed by its structural inflexibility. For Wenger (1998), the transformative potential of learning within a community of practice is determined by the extent to which participants are able to effect change in the valued practices of the community: this may occur as they become full participants and are able to adapt practices to suit changing circumstances, or as they introduce practices from other communities of which they have been or are members. Using the example of Alinsu, Wenger (1998) also demonstrates very clearly how the dynamic potential of a community can be stifled by structural inflexibility. Ariel and her colleagues may have had some interesting ideas concerning changes in practice but, aside from largely tokenistic training events where their input was encouraged, there were no mechanisms within Alinsu for claims processors to effect any meaningful changes in practice. It could be argued that in a truly dynamic community of practice even legitimate peripheral participants would have the opportunity to influence the nature of practice to some extent as they move towards full participation. Although their purpose is not framed in those terms, universities' increasing emphasis on student feedback and satisfaction surveys would appear to suggest that even first-year students may be able to influence practice. However, the data do not suggest that this is a perspective students generally share. Laurie's frustration with some aspects of university teaching and her apparent resignation to the limited possibility of change typifies a recurring thread in the data:

I wish we could ask questions in lectures, I know we can ask questions in tutorials but these guys, the lecturers, are the real experts. I know it would take up more time but I wouldn't mind one-and-a-half or even two-hour lectures - there are so many gaps in

the day, and we're just hanging around drinking coffee. That's one thing I'd change about this place (Laurie, GU).

This picture of institutional inflexibility is also supported by data from the focus group:

I haven't actually taken part in a student satisfaction survey yet but there are plenty of course feedback, or is it evaluation, forms and there are class reps. If there's anything particularly wrong with the course . . . something glaring like lectures being cancelled the reps can bring that up but you don't get the feeling that there's much chance of changing anything important.

Interviewer: Can you give me some examples of things you would like to change?
Em, let me think . . . one of the things I would most like to change is the timing of classes – you can have three classes that keep you here for the whole day. I know we could easily go to the library in the gaps but it's usually really busy and I'm not always that great at motivating myself. I'd rather have a half day and then study at home. I suppose I would also like to see lecturers taking our tutorials more – the graduate students are OK but some of them don't always have a great grasp of what they're teaching (Ben, GU).

You don't get the feeling that the feedback forms really make much difference or will change anything we're not happy about ... I've even heard some students say that they don't want to say what they really think in case their handwriting gets recognised and they lose marks for the course – I know that sounds a bit paranoid (Marie, GU).

The fact that these second-year students have arguably demonstrated some movement on an inbound trajectory towards full participation in the higher education community of practice and yet seem to feel unable to exert any tangible, substantive influence on its practices would suggest that structural inflexibility continues to be a pervasive characteristic of that community. On the other hand, it could be argued that although they may be on an inbound trajectory they are not yet full participants in the notional higher education community of practice and this explains their limited power to effect any significant change in its practices. But who then are the full participants? It would

seem reasonable to suggest that a full-time member of the teaching staff is such a full participant, but the following comments suggest some ambivalence on this point:

When I began my career here as a lecturer, I tried to encourage first- and second-year students to ask questions in my lectures. I wanted to engage with them more directly and talking uninterrupted for an hour can be pretty tedious, but I didn't have much success. I still go through the motions and tell them that they're free to ask questions but it's quite unusual for anyone to do so . . . it may be a matter of convention and what happens in their other lectures but I think it has a lot to do with the size of the class – I've no problem getting students to speak up in the much smaller classes of junior and senior honours (Dr A, GU).

Here, Dr A. articulates an interest in changing established practice which has the effect of silencing students, and alludes to the insidious effects of class size; but it is also evident that he is, to a significant extent, excluded from the ultimate core of the community where the power to substantively modify practice resides and this, again, points to the continuing significance of structural inflexibility within higher education.

Amongst the students who had completed Higher National qualifications at further education colleges, there was no clear identification of differences between teaching styles in further and higher education. It is, however, important to bear in mind that articulation students enter the second or third year of their degree courses when class sizes, in general, are smaller and – as reflected in the experiences of this small sample of articulation students – interactive teaching is more commonplace.

A second form of silence which is a recurrent theme in the data is the silence occasionally surrounding the assessment of students' work. This silence has two dimensions: first, there is the silence of delayed feedback:

They were really slow at returning my first essays – I know they probably had hundreds to mark but that's their problem not mine. I really wanted to know how I was doing – this whole thing's a big gamble for me. They said we'd get them back in a couple of weeks but for one or two essays it was more than a month . . . it wasn't in

the same subject, but I was writing my second essay before I knew if I'd passed the first one (Ian, GCU).

On my access course the tutor was great – she returned our essays a week after we handed them. It's pretty different here – sometimes it's three weeks before you get them back – so you're nervous and grumpy with your family for three weeks after you finish them as well as for the three weeks when you're doing them [laughs]. But seriously, I think they should return them a bit quicker than that (Paula, GU).

It seemed to take them a long time to return our first coursework, I know we were all in the same boat but we started to get a bit paranoid, at least I did. I started to think it must be really bad – that's why it was taking so long. When I did eventually get my first essay back, I'd got a B and – you know – it was a huge weight off my mind. I did fairly well on my access course, well enough to get in here, but I was frightened this was going to be a big step-up, one I might not be able to make (Fiona, US).

Second, there is the *relative* silence of partial or unhelpful feedback: several of the students expressed confusion about intended learning outcomes and the particular intricacies of the criteria for awarding grades. In general, there were few complaints about the actual grades achieved but there was an element of dissatisfaction with some of the written feedback on assessed work:

I've got OK marks for my essays so far but when I went to see my tutor – for five minutes – to get the first one back he mentioned a few things but I didn't really take it in and there were only a few comments scribbled on the front cover. I really wanted to know what I'd done well and what I hadn't done so well so I could improve on it, but the comments didn't actually tell me very much at all (Mark, GCU).

When I was working on my first essay I kept looking at the grade descriptors, or whatever they're called, and tried to follow them. It wasn't easy – I didn't really know what some of them meant like what's theory and what's evidence? After I'd picked up my first couple of essays, I was none the wiser - the comments on the essay didn't really mention any of the grade descriptors. My tutor's a PhD student and he's quite good in the tutorials, a nice enough young guy, but I can't help thinking that when it comes to marking he doesn't really know what he's supposed to be doing (Dan, GU).

They don't really give you enough information about how to make your essays better, I mean when you get them back. They're pretty keen about telling you what you got wrong but don't say much about what you could have done different or better. I got a bit rattled when I was talking to my tutor about it the first time, then I suddenly thought, you better calm down there's no point in falling out with this guy – the next one might be even worse (Ewan, US).

I wish they'd give you more advice on the essays – it's kind of like it's some secret skill and it'll just rub off on you as you make your way through uni (Eilidh, US).

The availability of effective learning advisers or learning support was alluded to in several of the interviews, but students' reflections on this give no clear impression that it compensated for the weakness of course-specific feedback, where this was an issue. Once again, these recurrent themes in the data point to the structural inflexibilities of higher education and the limits of agency within its communities of practice. Arguably, the observed delays in providing feedback and its paucity are the result of systemic issues in higher education – increasing workloads mean that demands on the time of both qualified staff and graduate teaching assistants often have an impact on their ability to fulfil some of their teaching responsibilities expeditiously. The data relating to silences in academic practice considered above, suggest quite persuasively that many of the social structures within higher education are deeply conservative, and that the scope for significant change through the agency of participants is, therefore, rather limited.

The exclusionary power of academic language

The theme of the frequently problematic issue of the comprehension and mastery of academic language emerges particularly clearly from the data. There is a very rich seam of literature on the connected issues of social class and habitus in formal education (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990; Bernstein, 1996; Reay, 1998, 2002) and, in more recent years, a growing body of research has examined the significance of literacy in higher education (Lea, 1998; Ivanič, 1998; Hamilton, 2001; Bartlett and Holland, 2002). Through the lens of communities of practice theory, competence in academic literacy constitutes one of the most highly valued practices – if not *the* most highly valued practice - of the academic community, and progressive mastery of that

practice is arguably an essential element of an inbound trajectory from peripheral to central participation in the community of practice. Data from this research confirms that for a significant number of mature students anxiety about the use of language in higher education contexts is a pressing issue:

I don't sort of speak in academic terms yet, that's a big fear, a phobia I've got going on just now when writing essays and things . . . I think it's because you compare yourself, because you read other people's essays and maybe essays from years gone by and you read them and you think 'god that's not really what my essay sounds like' . . . I tend to kind of say things how it is, oh it's really hard to explain but sometimes I've often been on the verge of answering something in class and I haven't and someone else answers and it sounds so much better than what I had been going to say . . . I've never written at that sort of academic level so maybe I'm just finding my feet, hopefully I'm just finding my feet (Paula, GU).

You're frightened that what comes out of your mouth is complete rubbish . . . you come in with a perception of how others are going to view you, it's a self reflection (Emma, GU).

When I first started this course I was studying in the library – I'm not that much older than the normal students so I didn't feel out of place because of that. But I had to keep checking words in my dictionary when I was reading in there and I started looking around and noticed that the other students weren't looking up words every two minutes. It made me feel really stupid and I stopped going in there ... I mostly work in my flat now, I still use my dictionary a lot but nobody sees me (Tom, US).

Frustration with what seemed to be unnecessarily obscure or abstract language was also highlighted:

Some of the lecturers seem to love using really fancy words a lot of the time; it's like they're trying to show us how smart they are compared to us. It wasn't like that in my access class and if you didn't know the meaning of something you just asked. It's very different here but we have one younger lecturer – he doesn't seem to use any, or at least that many, of these posh words – and I really get a lot out of his classes (Dan, GU).

It's kind of quite technical, like politics for example, obviously I know a bit about politics but, you know, I don't know the university side of what's involved in politics. So they would be talking about concepts that you're not really familiar with, in a way you're not familiar with, it's really quite advanced for walking in on your second week. You're like 'this is completely new' . . . I think it could be taken down a notch, personally.

Interviewer: Can you give me an example of what you mean?

Talking about constitutions and kind of Latin words for things in constitutions and you're like 'I don't know what that is' . . . I like my politics tutor but I think 'just try and make it a bit more basic so that people can understand it better' . . . I think it's just because they're quite advanced, they're in their sixth or seventh year [graduate teaching assistants], they can't help it. If you got me talking about Shakespeare or Greek tragedy I'd start talking about hubris and all sorts of other things, you know, that people would be like 'what is that?' So I think it's just natural, but I think it's something maybe they should be aware of, especially for first years (John, SU).

Focus group data also suggest that there is a generational dimension to the use of more esoteric academic language and, in a similar vein to the issue of referencing style discussed above, some evidence of a connection between academic disciplines and the use of complex language:

I suppose some of the language seemed - at least in first year - to be a bit heavy. But it wasn't all the lecturers who used it - quite often it was older lecturers and professors but I suppose you'd expect them to be working on a higher level - doesn't do us much good though . . . There's also a difference between different subjects - economic history lecturers - even the older ones - seem to use language that's quite straightforward sometimes; I don't get the concepts but the words are OK [laughs]. But in sociology they were forever using words that we didn't get at first and sometimes we just looked at each other - and of course you didn't want to look stupid by asking, what does that mean? But I've had help from a social worker friend and it is getting better this year as I become more familiar with the language but there's still a bit of a difference [between subjects] (Kevin, GU).

I agree with that when I come to think about it - it does often seem to be some of the older, more established staff who use confusing words . . . In economics the equations and graphs can be a bit baffling, but the actual words are OK; politics is a

different story, quite often some of the terms used in lectures go over the top of my head. It's OK in the tutorials though - my tutor's just a young research student and uses pretty plain English (Jill, GU).

Amongst the common, general concerns about academic literacy articulated in the data, there are interesting concerns about two particular concepts: plagiarism and critical analysis. Plagiarism, which has the more prosaic connotation of cheating or simply copying the work of others, is the rather less elusive concept of the two although the protocols of avoiding it – discussed briefly above – remain a source of some confusion for many students. Critical analysis, on the other hand, is an altogether more abstract concept which initially baffled a number of the research interviewees:

They keep talking about critical analysis and I just can't get my head round it. When I got my first history essay back my tutor said there was 'too much description and not enough critical analysis' and I didn't have a clue what he was talking about. He said you have to compare the views of different historians and see which one seems to be making the strongest argument. Not much chance of that, I thought – I don't understand what they're talking about, half the time (Tom, US).

I still am quite confused by the idea of critical analysis. For me, before university, I'd always thought criticism was a – you know – a bad thing, a negative thing, so if you criticised someone you were sort of having a go at them. I struggle a bit with the idea that you can be critical about something that is good and that – in a way – being critical is how you show how it's good (Laurie, GU).

I don't actually know what critical analysis is, sometimes I can't even understand what's in some of the textbooks never mind what's good or bad about it. I think they need to give us more time to come to grips with learning before they start hitting us with this really difficult stuff (Mark, GCU).

The themes which were examined above suggest that adult students making the transition to higher education are novices in some central areas of academic practice. Their specific experience of whichever academic route facilitates their entry to higher education may mean that they arrive at university with a diverse range of academic

capabilities, but even those with higher levels of these capabilities are afforded the same status as novices – or legitimate peripheral participants – in notional higher education communities of practice. They are forced to re-situate their current knowledge within the new context of higher education (Lave and Wenger, 1991) and, in Wenger’s terms, become involved in the process of negotiating the ‘boundary’ between one set of practices and another (Wenger, 1998; Tobbell, O’Donnell and Zammit, 2010). In relation to the nature of the boundaries of the three routes of entry to higher education taken by the students interviewed in this research, some interesting differences emerge from the data. In terms of academic practice, the boundary between the practices of university access courses and higher education seemed to be the least difficult to negotiate: Amy’s observation that ‘*Access prepared me very well for what is expected of me in university*’ typifies the attitude of students who had undertaken these courses. The responses of students who had undertaken SWAP or Higher National courses were more ambivalent: some students felt well-prepared for higher education while others clearly identified some difficulties in negotiating the boundaries between their respective courses and higher education: Mark’s above comment that, ‘*I don’t actually know what critical analysis is*’ is indicative of the lack of comprehensive preparation identified by several of the interviewees. The process of participating in practice – particularly in relation to the problematic aspects of it examined above – is the subject of the next part of this chapter.

2. The negotiation of meaning – participation in practice

In Lave and Wenger’s (1991) classic theory of situated learning, learning is, in effect, an inevitable outcome of participation in the social practices of a community. Even if the outcome is ostensibly negative and results in a complete rejection of the practices or values of the community, that decision is still a learning outcome since it results from participation – however short-lived – in the community’s practices. Wenger (1998) cogently argues that the negotiation of meaning is the essential foundation of learning within a community of practice and results from the interplay of reification and participation – a book, for instance, only acquires meaning when someone reads it. How then do the reified concepts embedded in the voluminous documentation given to new students, but so often disregarded, become meaningful to them? Two

distinct but related themes emerge from the data: first, learning and social interaction and second, the negotiation of meaning.

Learning and social interaction

In situated learning theory, the learning outcome of an activity is contingent on its social context and, in Lave and Wenger's (1991) theorisation of learning it is through the process of co-participation amongst members of a community of practice that they are able to ascribe meaning to its valued practices: in simple terms, it is a process of learning by doing. The research data are particularly rich in relation to this aspect of practice and clearly point to the significant role played by social interaction in ameliorating some of the problems of academic practice examined above:

I learned about the requirements of the course by talking about them with other people on the course, and my tutor. We only looked at the handbook to check precise details of things, sometimes – someone always had a copy of it or you could look at it on Moodle . . . The first time I tried referencing it was a bit of disaster but when I got the essay back my tutor had scribbled big arrows and stars all over it in bold ink to show me what I should have done – I know that sounds pretty off-putting – like primary school – but it was really helpful and we all checked that we were doing it right after that (Emma, GU).

Referencing's not so bad really, once you've done it a couple of times . . . me and a couple of the girls on the course proof-read our essays for each other before we hand them so that's a good way of picking up silly mistakes (Fiona, US).

Just now we've got sociology essays to be done for a couple of weeks. The last one I did was on Islamophobia and I think [name of friend] did Islamophobia as well. [name of second friend] is going to do Islamophobia for his one that he's going to hand in a couple of weeks. We've given him our essays to have a look at and journal articles that I'd found – then he can go and find his own stuff as well and have a wee look through what we've done because we both took completely different takes on it and focused on different countries (Amy, GU).

In general, the focus group data concurs with this evidence and identifies even more explicitly the importance of learning through practice:

Things that were a bit mysterious at the very start of the course [in first year] are becoming much clearer now that I'm in second year . . . How did that happen? I suppose it was just a process of picking it all up gradually along the way, getting feedback and not being afraid to ask questions, and talking things over with other people on the course . . . There wasn't one moment where it all became clear it just happened bit by bit – kind of like putting a jigsaw puzzle together. I feel that I pretty much know what's happening now and I'm happy with the marks I'm getting, most of the time (Arthur, GU).

In these examples there are very clear links between reification and participation, and the fact that all the forms of reification involved are textually mediated is particularly evident. In the data concerning the negotiation of silence through practice, written reifications are far less significant, but there is abundant evidence of an appreciation of the implicit benefits of oral reification that takes place in the shared repertoires of students' academic practice:

I've come to terms with not asking questions but I really make up for it in the tutorials. I still go to all the lectures though ... I think these students who don't turn up are being really stupid – don't they realise that these people set the exam questions and maybe mark them so what they say in the lectures might be the difference between a good mark and a bad mark (Laurie, GU).

I participate too much . . . in the tutorials I feel I'm always the person who's asking the questions and saying things, and in a way I feel like they'll all be going 'who's that old woman at the front asking questions again?' But I think I'm here to get the most that I can out of it and if I've got to ask loads of questions then I'm going to ask them (May, GU).

Some of the tutorials are great, some not so great. When they're good you really get a chance to talk things through and maybe come to grips with something you've been struggling with or maybe aren't that sure about. Sometimes hearing an idea set out a bit differently or coming at it from different angle, you know, it can just click (Keith, GU).

There is less explicit evidence in the data about specifically how participation in practice negotiates meaning in relation to late or inadequate feedback but there are some indications of grudging acceptance and circumvention of these shortcomings:

I don't get so hung up about having to wait a long time for essays now – my first few marks were pretty good and I talk about what we're doing for them with my friends – so we're all kind of in the same boat and know – more or less – what mark we're going to get (Fiona, US).

The feedback's not got any better - a guy from access and me tend to do the same questions so we can share books and articles . . . we look at them when we get them back and we've got much the same marks unless there's something obviously different – it seems fair enough (Dan, GU).

This tacit compliance with a system which has some clear pedagogical weaknesses again highlights the inflexibility of university structures and hints at the insidious influence of hegemonic assumptions at the heart of higher education. For Brookfield (2000), drawing on Gramsci (1971), hegemonic assumptions are the taken-for-granted, 'common sense' ideas about the world which uphold and maintain the status quo and effectively disenfranchise 'outsiders'. Thus, the hegemonic assumptions of higher education serve to maintain the currency of forms of social and cultural capital – including language and modes of behaviour – closely associated with the middle classes who have traditionally provided and continue to provide the majority of entrants to higher education. In Bourdieu and Passeron's (1990) terms, British universities – to a significant but varying extent – continue to act as agents of social reproduction rather than transformation: *'I know that university is very middle class – I'm from a working-class background but you've just got to fit in and toe the line, if you want to get on'* (Rob, GU).

The negotiation of meaning

For several of the students interviewed, the negotiation of meaning appears to be a steady if very gradual process which – nonetheless – retains an element of uncertainty. There is also a tacit undercurrent in the data that, although they are negotiating a meaning which is personal to them, that meaning has to correspond

fairly closely to the consensual meaning of the academy. Interestingly, but perhaps unsurprisingly, the four students whose reflections are presented below are all from a working-class background:

I don't feel as stupid as I did at the start, I don't need my dictionary as much but I've still got it with me most of the time when I'm here (Tom, US).

I don't feel as frightened anymore but I'm still not comfortable speaking out in big classes – my essays are getting good enough marks though so I'm doing alright, but overall I worry, secretly almost, about sounding stupid compared to other people on the course (Paula, GU).

I just snigger at some of the posh professors now – to be honest, there's only a couple of them, old guys – I just take a note of their fancy words and look them up later but I'm having to do that less and less ... One of the tutors showed us a PowerPoint on critical reflection which was quite straightforward really – I wouldn't say I'm very clear on it yet but I'm getting the hang of it (Dan, GU).

I still feel a bit weird criticising the work of guys who're mostly professors but I am, at long last, starting to see some differences between what they're saying in their books (Mark, GCU).

The focus group data suggest that the process of negotiating meaning may gather pace in the second year of university study and that this is accompanied by a reduction in the level of uncertainty associated with this process for some students:

I was really quite nervous about following lectures and reading academic textbooks when I started at university and I remember thinking that I 'd never understand or be able to use all these big words. But as time's gone on I've done the reading and I've got more confident – on a couple of occasions I even spotted where [the books] one of the lecturers got his lecture notes and I remember thinking if he's just using the books that they recommend for us there's really no great secret to all of this – I can read the books and a dictionary as well as most people (Meg, GU).

I've been really lucky, one of my wife's best friends is a senior social worker and she's got a degree in sociology so she's been a real help with my sociology. Very early on she helped me to feel more confident about it. I remember her telling me that stuff [theoretical sociology] is all pie-in-the-sky; these people don't live in the real world . . . try applying the concept of anomie – I think it was anomie – to a heroin addict desperate for his next fix. She's really helped me with my essays – she's pointed me towards the right books and lent me some of them – and talking over the essay questions with her has helped me to relate them to the real world. I feel pretty confident about sociology and I've been getting really good marks. (Kevin, GU).

Kevin's reflection alludes to the potential pitfalls of negotiating meaning in academic practice but also points to the significance of Lave's (1993) concept of the learning curriculum whereby external social relationships have the potential to circumvent, or in Kevin's case significantly enhance, the learning outcome of the official teaching curriculum.

Much of the criticism which has been levelled at communities of practice theory acknowledges that it has clear applicability to narrower, task-orientated contexts such as workplaces – indeed, much of Wenger's most recent work has focused even more explicitly on workplace learning (see Wenger, McDermott and Snyder, 2002) – but argues that it loses its analytical validity when it is applied to more fluid contexts where communities are more widely dispersed and/or share less clearly defined purposes and goals (Barton and Hamilton, 2005). This particular criticism of communities of practice theory provides an important insight into its limited explanatory power in relation to the structural inflexibilities of higher education. Undergraduate students clearly have the goal of obtaining a university degree and institutions have the goal of teaching for and awarding degrees, but they also have the goal of attracting research income and encourage most of their academic staff to focus heavily on that goal, reducing the time allocated for teaching which, in turn, contributes to the continuation of very large lecture-based classes, strictly limited student contact time and – as this research suggests – some dissatisfaction amongst students. Acknowledging that the real social world is a very long way from the archetypal communities of practice paradigm, Barton and Hamilton (2005, p. 25)

argue that the real world ‘is characterised by multiple membership; it has unresolved boundaries, with many different fluid communities of practice which exist in a variety of relationships to one another, both supporting and competing’. Having rounded on communities of practice theory for its strictly constrained applicability to the real world and its neglect of issues of power in social relations, Barton and Hamilton (2005), nonetheless, highlight the value of the concept of reification, particularly when theoretical constructs from the world of literacy studies are used to complement its explanatory power. The construct of the ‘literacy event’, for instance, can be used to unpick or deconstruct the meaning of an event and, although this specific analytical technique was not applied directly to the data concerning university lectures examined above, carefully unpicking some of the interviewees’ reflections did enable illumination of their attitudes to the value and significance of lectures. To a significant extent, therefore, the preceding discussion of a number of themes that emerge from the data confirms the heuristic utility (Lea, 2005) of communities of practice theory, particularly when the analytical framework it underpins is enhanced by insights from other conceptualisations such as those that foreground the central importance of academic literacy. Its utility diminishes when the analysis is extended to take account of wider, more structural factors that impact the experience of transition. The final emergent theme considered in the concluding part of this chapter relates to adult students’ understanding and negotiation of risk immediately before and during their transition to higher education – a theme simultaneously linked to individual, proximal factors as well as far wider influences operating at a societal, national, and sometimes even international level.

3. The overarching significance of risk

It is axiomatic that participation in higher education involves an element of risk. The actual risks are numerous but include more obvious difficulties like choosing an unsuitable course or institution, financial problems, academic failure, and the non-realisation of expectations associated with successful participation (such as the acquisition of graduate employment or work in one’s chosen field). There are also more subtle risks involved: if participation in higher education involves identity shifts, is there a danger that these may lead to movement away from or tensions within existing relationships with friends or family members? These risks pervade the

wide and diverse spectrum of students in higher education, but a case can be made that they generally have a more significant impact on non-traditional students, and adult students in particular. Take, for instance, the risk of failure or ‘dropping-out’ of university. No suggestion can reasonably be made that academic failure or leaving university early may not have an adverse effect – either emotionally, or in terms of future life chances – on students in their late teens or early twenties. But for many of us – certainly in Western culture – making such mistakes in our youth is a widely acknowledged aspect of growing-up: they are rarely encouraged, but generally understood. For adult students, on the other hand, the implications of making such mistakes may be rather more serious, if not, in some cases, catastrophic: if for instance someone leaves stable employment to pursue – through higher education – a long-held career ambition which is not then fulfilled. In late modernity, adults decide to participate in higher education for a variety of reasons, but a particularly common thread running through the data is that one of the principal motivations is the creation or improvement of life opportunities:

I trained at the Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama ... I really, really love acting, it's all I've ever wanted to do. I enjoy it so much: I've had some roles in theatre, a couple at the Citz [Citizens' Theatre, Glasgow] and I had a part in [a BBC Scotland drama series] for a year or so. But to be honest I've not made much money out of it and I'm getting a bit fed up of having to sign on so regularly. I guess I've reached a time in life where I need to spread my options, to add some more strings to my bow. I know that getting a degree in politics won't guarantee me a job but it'll maybe give me more opportunities. I'll never give up on acting completely but it would be nice to have something else that's interesting, and pays the bills (John, SU).

When I was young I never really thought about a career or anything. I left school when I was sixteen with a few standard grades, and mainly just worked in shops until I got married and had the kids in my early twenties ... It was great when I could stay at home and be a housewife, like my mum, and look after the kids all day. But when they'd all started at primary school I just had too much time on my hands. I got some part-time jobs one in an office and some in shops but second-time round I didn't really enjoy them and started thinking 'is this it?' I looked at other jobs and applied for a couple but it was obvious I just didn't have enough qualifications ... So here I

am, studying for a degree, working as hard as I can, and hoping for the best (Norma, SU).

Broadly similar references to the need or desire to leave unrewarding or unfulfilling employment are particularly common in the data, suggesting quite emphatically that it is one of the most important motivations for adult participation in higher education. There is a similarly widespread recognition in the data of the element of risk this entails, and a frequently articulated recognition of the fact that such participation does not *guarantee* improved career opportunities.

The data also indicate that acknowledgement and negotiation of risk do not become less important or pervasive after the decision to enter higher education has been taken. The data suggest that the shadow of risk often exerts an insidious influence on the process of adaptation to the requirements of academic practice considered earlier in this chapter. Dan's reaction (cited above) to the volume of information he was presented with in the induction programme which made him question whether or not he was '*doing the right thing*' is typical of the expressions of anxiety that occur regularly in the data:

I worry about what I'm doing here all the time, should I have come here? Especially when I'm waiting for essays ... I want to do the best for my family ... this is very important to me, I don't want to let them down, I want to make them proud of me. I was at my sister's college graduation two years ago ... it would be so nice to see my family at mine in a few years (Paula, GU).

Other interviewees explicitly identified how risk, and the anxiety it caused, differentiated them from younger students:

I would prefer to get my essays back quicker, this is very important to me, I've taken a big gamble coming here and I need to know it's going alright. It's not like that for all these kids, they've probably got mum and dad to bail them out if things go wrong ... I've got too much depending it (Mark, GCU).

I always feel worried about how I'm getting on ... I get nervous when I'm getting assignments back, nervous when I go into tutorials and I thought I was going to be

sick before my first exam. I was standing among all the young students ... they were all laughing and chatting and I could feel my heart pounding, I was really terrified (Eilidh, US).

The data suggest that a sense of risk and the anxiety it generates permeate many central aspects of transition to higher education as it is experienced by adult students. Indeed an argument can be made that it is such an overarching and pervasive characteristic of that experience that it always or, at least, generally distinguishes it from the transition experience of traditional students. A younger student, for instance, may be concerned about the requirements of academic citation but perhaps somewhat less so than a mature student whose perception of the personal risks of participation in higher education is heightened. From this perspective, the impact of risk may be viewed as *a* – if not *the* – defining characteristic of adult students' transition experience.

Chapter 6

Transition and student identity

Introduction

In his seminal work, *The Presentation of the Self in Everyday Life* (1978), Goffman highlights the fluid nature of human identity: he argues that our identity is – to a major extent – context-dependent, and that in our social interactions we often *act* in ways which we believe will influence the impression we make on others. Thus, we foreground different aspects of our identity in the various relational domains of our social world which encompass family, workplace, educational and social relationships: a dutiful son visiting his mother will generally exhibit characteristics of identity quite different to those more evident in social interaction with his close male friends. Butler (1990) argues that even the most signally genetically determined aspect of identity – gender – is far from being fixed: it is performative, context-dependent and for many of us subject to continuous change and reinterpretation throughout the course our lives. In his examination of identity formation in an increasingly globalised world, Castells highlights the multiplicity and complexity of the influences that shape both individual and group identities:

. . . from a sociological perspective, all identities are constructed. The real issue is how, from what, by whom, and for what. The construction of identities uses building materials from history, from geography, from biology, from productive and reproductive institutions, from collective memory and from personal fantasies, from power apparatuses and religious revelations. But individuals, social groups, and societies process all these materials, and rearrange their meaning, according to social determinations and cultural projects that are rooted in their social structure, and in their space/time framework (2004, p. 7).

Giddens also foregrounds the impact of a rapidly changing and – in many respects – increasingly uncertain world on the construction of individual identities. He argues that in response to the breakdown of some traditional patterns of life in Western society many of us are increasingly compelled to reflect on the circumstances of our lives: ‘to be a human being is to know . . . both what one is doing and why one is doing it . . . In the context of post-traditional order, the self becomes a reflexive project’ (Giddens, 1991, cited in Castells, 2004, p. 10). In ‘late modernity’, as many of the former certainties of life – such as lifelong careers and relationships, and

religious beliefs – become less prevalent, we (more frequently than earlier generations) have to make major decisions on the course of our lives which have the potential to distance or separate us from existing sources of validation and reinforcement of values and beliefs, and move us towards new social relationships and influences. New projects, careers and relationships may thus have profound effects on our social networks and on our identity within and across these networks, so that what Giddens describes as ‘reflexively ordered life-planning’ (1991, p. 5), necessitated by the conditions of modern life, adds significantly to the fluidity of identity.

A focus on the fluid nature of identity is also central to Lave and Wenger’s (1991) theorisation of learning in communities of practice. They highlight that any learning results in some change or shift in identity – learning is thus a process of becoming someone with new knowledge, attitudes or competencies. Focusing explicitly on the relational nature of learning within communities of practice, they argue that identity change is an inevitable corollary of learning:

. . . systems of relations arise out of and are reproduced and developed within social communities, which are in part systems of relations among persons. The person is defined by as well as defines these relations. Learning thus implies becoming a different person with respect to the possibilities enabled by these systems of relations. To ignore this aspect of learning is to overlook the fact that learning involves the construction of identities . . . We conceive of identities as long-term, living relations between persons and their place and participation in communities of practice. Thus identity, knowing and social membership entail one another (Lave and Wenger, 1991, p. 53).

From this perspective, understanding the ways in which participation, learning and identity are interlinked is central to the analysis of how learning occurs within communities of practice. So, for instance, problems of participation in higher education for non-traditional students can be examined in the context of the nature and degree of identity shift required for even peripheral participation in the unfamiliar milieu which – for some – higher education’s communities of practice represent. Wenger’s (1998) ethnographic study of the nature and dynamics of communities of practice within a medical insurance claims processing office extends the level of analysis significantly beyond that presented in his earlier collaboration with Lave.

Although this (and his subsequent work) has been criticised for its focus on workplace learning and a resulting emphasis on reproductive rather than transformative learning (Fuller et al, 2005; Barton and Tusting, 2005), its potential as a powerful heuristic has also been recognised - but perhaps less widely (DePalma, 2005; Lea, 2005). Thus, for instance, through his careful, highly-detailed analysis of how Alinsu restricts the potential for transformative learning amongst its employees and limits the extent of change within the communities of practice in which they participate, Wenger points implicitly towards ways in which these processes may be enabled in organisations and institutions with less instrumental objectives. As Wenger argues, ‘A perspective is not a recipe; it does not tell you just what to do’ (1998, p. 9). The heuristic power of any theory – as a means of facilitating understanding – depends on its adaptability and applicability to different contexts. In that respect, Wenger’s theorisation of issues of identity within and across communities of practice has proved to be particularly applicable to this research, and consequently underpins the identification of the major themes relating to identity which have emerged from it. The discussion now turns to five broad emergent themes which are largely but not solely framed by Wenger’s theorisation of identity. These are: identity in practice – participation and non-participation; the reconciliation of multimembership; the power of imagination; economies of meaning; and identity congruence.

1. Identity in practice – participation and non-participation

In the interviews students were asked to reflect on the effect of participation in the practices of higher education on their identity. In general, the interviewees found this a difficult question to address. In the absence of major transformative experiences, and despite the knowledge that we may – in the sense of Goffman’s dramaturgical metaphor – *act* in certain ways in different contexts, many of us believe that our ‘core’ or ‘true’ self remains relatively constant over the course of our adult life. Dan’s comment that ‘*I’m not sure really . . . I’m pretty much the same guy I’ve always been*’ was a typical initial response to this part of the interview. It was only when the question was unpicked slightly and framed in more specific terms - relating to their participation in academic discourse, and interaction with family and friends, that clear themes began to emerge. One overarching theme which emerged is that growing and acknowledged competence in higher education’s practices contributes to an increased

level of confidence and – in particular – to a gradual diminution of the effects of what Reay (2002) describes as ‘impostor syndrome’ in which non-traditional entrants to higher education feel that their background, education and abilities are not truly suited to academic life, and that they will in due course be ‘found out’. This particular form of insecurity is arguably linked to the impact of risk on adult students’ experience of transition which was discussed in the preceding chapter. Further, the data considered there highlight that one of the areas of academic practice in which anxiety stemming from the awareness of risk is most frequently manifested relates to the use of language in written assignments and class discussion. In fact the most commonly reported incidences in the data of heightened anxiety – during which students expressed concern about the wisdom of their decision to enter higher education – were frequently related to writing their first assignments and waiting for their return. Norma’s reflection on this was fairly typical:

Do I remember my first essay here? I don’t think I’ll ever forget it. Access is one thing but this is, you know, something else, a lot more serious. I was like a nervous wreck and I kept starting it again and changing it. Every time I changed it I thought it was even more rubbishy. I just wasn’t sure what, really how to write it. I’m afraid I took it out on my husband, as usual, and the kids a bit. That wasn’t fair; they were just asking why I wasn’t watching the telly with them. But I was just so worried and scared that I’d made a big mistake coming here, you know that it might be too much for me ... I calmed down when I took it in, but I was pretty nervous until I got it back (Norma, SU).

The recurrence of this theme signals the significance of academic literacy in the changing identity of students in transition. In the following discussion, ideas from communities of practice theory, concerning how learning and development take place, are complemented by concepts drawn from literacy studies that focus on the ways in which certain forms and styles of discourse assume a dominant value or position in educational settings. Legitimacy within any community is, to a major extent, contingent on competence in its dominant discourses, verbal or written: thus the extent and nature of students’ interaction with the ‘academic discourse community’ (Lea and Street, 1996; Ivanič, 1998) is a crucial determinant of their engagement with or, indeed, alienation from higher education (Mann, 2001). The concept of a discourse

community is used by new literacy theorists to delineate and analyse ‘group norms and conventions in relation to written discourse’ (Ivanič, 1998, p. 80). So, in the notional higher education discourse community, certain modes of written and, to a lesser extent, verbal communication – formal, disciplined, objective and critical – are highly valued whilst everyday, common or vernacular forms of language are, in general, ascribed less value. Ivanič (1998) argues that for adults entering higher education – particularly those with working-class or minority backgrounds – enculturation into academic discourse is particularly challenging:

They will be encountering literacy practices which belong to people with identities different to theirs. In order to take on these new aspects to their identities, they need to engage in these practices; in order to engage in these practices they need to be people of this sort. It is a vicious circle, fraught with conflicts of identity. Most mature students are outsiders to the literacies they have to control in order to be successful in higher education (p. 68).

There is significantly more evidence in the data concerning students’ negotiation of written aspects of academic literacy (which is examined below) and, given the currency of written forms of assessment in higher education, this is hardly surprising. Nonetheless, there is some evidence of the often subtle effects of engagement in verbal academic literacies, and of the effect of the interplay between verbal and written literacies on student identity:

At first I worried about whether or not I really deserved to be here, at my age you know. I looked at all these wee girls just out of school and thought they look like real students . . . I worried about them being far better suited to this than I am. But then I started speaking up in tutorials while these smart-looking kids looked at the floor when the tutor asked a question, and after a few weeks one of the tutors seemed to realise that I had something to offer and I felt as if she was aiming the questions at me – I didn’t mind. Then I got marks for my first essays and they were good and I started to think I belong here as much as anyone else (Paula, GU).

I suppose at first I was a bit unsure of myself in the tutorials. It wasn’t that I felt stupid I just wanted to use the right types of words, you know what I mean? . . . I was kind of used to calling a spade a spade and that had been fine in the access class. But everything seems a lot more formal here, there’s more em respect, or seriousness - I suppose it’s because so many of the other students are eighteen or nineteen and more

used to school. But I quite quickly realised that the type of language you need to use is much the same as you use in your assignments . . . it was the way the tutors speak: 'it could be argued'; 'there is clear evidence' and stuff like that. I was pretty used to writing like that in my essays on access and so it wasn't really a problem, I'm fine with it now . . . but I don't talk like that out of here, at least I hope I don't (James, SU).

It is very important in our tutorials that we speak in very precise ways; we quickly get shot down if we don't. They make the point that there is no room for any waffle or imprecise language in legal documents or in court if that's where we end up working. When we have the tutorials we exchange pleasantries in informal, chatty language and then it's down to business . . . it's pretty much a form of imitation - we learn to talk the way our lecturers and tutors talk so that there's no ambiguity or possibility of misinterpretation – pretty difficult some of the time but it's very good training (Nazir, GU).

These data suggest that in terms of their learner identities these students are learning the 'rules of the game' (Bourdieu and Waquant, 1992) of the academic community, and that these 'rules' strongly relate to language and its appropriate usage. For James and Nazir, this has led to explicit recognition that certain aspects of participation in academic practice are context-dependent. Whilst these data relate to identity within the institutional setting, other data indicate that engagement with academic discourse may have wider-reaching effects, and can affect how we are perceived by the people we have relationships with:

I used to go to the pub with my friends and we'd have discussions about politics and football and more often than not they'd turn into slanging matches – good-natured but we'd basically just be shouting each other down. After a few months at uni I started to try and have more sensible conversations with them and would say things like 'but you've got to look at things from this angle'. At first they thought this was hysterical and would call me a jumped-up smart-arse and other things I won't mention but they came round to my way of thinking – we still slag each other off about football but we usually have grown-up conversations about most other things (Dan, GU).

My husband sees a change in me. He's got a degree and so have most of our friends – he says I seem far more relaxed and confident about taking part in heavy conversations and that I don't get angry and upset like I used to. My kids even seem to ask me to help them with their homework more often than before (June, GCU).

June's experience points to the exclusionary potential of discourse communities and her allusion to anger and frustration in what would appear to be an otherwise amenable context (social interaction with her husband and close friends) suggests that, even removed from their normal institutional locus, academic literacy and discourse have the power to exclude newcomers and affect their confidence and self-esteem. For adult students with established close family networks of spouses, partners and children, the exclusionary potential of academic language may lead to tension at home and a sense of being torn between 'two worlds'. For traditional school-leavers whose network of close friends develops from the community of students around them, the challenges of developing academic literacy are likely to be shared within that network.

The development of academic literacy brings with it increasing demands in relation to written academic discourse. This affects student identity in ways that are apparent in two distinct themes that emerge from the data. First, there is a clear suggestion that the necessary adoption of an impersonal, detached voice in written academic work is problematic for some adult students who have, in various social and workplace contexts outwith higher education, valued and been accustomed to expressing personal opinions. Adult students' experiences in multiple social and workplace contexts is likely to be greater than that of younger students, and so may present a greater challenge:

At first I couldn't understand why I couldn't use words like 'I' and 'my' in the essays. . . . In one of my first essays – I worked really hard on it and made sure it had a clear introduction, conclusion and structure – and I remember in the introduction I wrote something like 'in this essay I will discuss' and 'I would argue' in other bits of the essay, and I got it back with comments saying that I should stop saying 'I will discuss' or 'I would argue' and instead say 'this essay will discuss' or 'it could be

argued' . . . and I remember thinking that's really stupid I'm not claiming credit for anything I haven't done; all I'm saying really is that it's me who's writing the essay. But the really annoying thing is that in a lot of the textbooks the writers quite often use 'I' and 'me'. It's as if they're allowed to use more personal words because they're experts and their opinion counts and mine doesn't . . . It was pretty discouraging, but I suppose I've just come to accept that's just the way things are here (Una, US).

It's all a bit impersonal really. I thought universities were about training us to think but the minute you write 'I think' in an essay you get slapped down for it. What's wrong with saying 'what I think Shakespeare means here' instead of something like – I don't know – maybe 'what Shakespeare seems to mean here'? I'm reading Shakespeare's words in the same way as millions of other people have, and I've even performed some of them, and it is what I think he means – if it wasn't I wouldn't say it (John, SU).

In a similar vein, there is some evidence in the data that confusion over the need to use impersonal language in essays is compounded by the requirement to employ personal language in assessed reflective journals and portfolios. For students not yet fully academically literate, what seems necessary is some process of translation from their everyday language, to appropriate academic discourse. The realisation that 'appropriate' academic discourse may sometimes entail everyday language, presents a challenge. For example, Ann, a student teacher, commented on the arduous and confusing process of switching between linguistic protocols in different pieces of academic writing:

I had just got used to not using the first person in my essays and 'hey presto' we had our first teaching practice and had to start writing a reflective journal where it's all 'I felt' or 'for me'. It's kind of hard to switch back and forth between these styles and a bit confusing that I'm clearly allowed to say what my opinion is in one piece of work but not in the other – it's as if my opinion is only valid when I'm talking about myself but not when I'm talking about theoretical stuff, and that's a bit insulting really (Ann, GU).

Data from the focus group suggest that for these second-year students this perceived suppression or undervaluing of their individual voice within the academic discourse community was less of an issue, and it seems, once again, that it is through effective participation in the valued practices of the community that this particular challenge to students' identity and sense of legitimacy is countered. The development of academic literacy means that students become comfortable with the discourses of the community in their various forms, and the process of conscious translation to academic language is no longer so apparent:

Yes, I suppose it did annoy me, or not so much annoy me as confuse me, that I couldn't state clearly what my opinion was when I wrote my first essays last year. But as you get better at writing essays you develop a skill of making it very clear what you think without saying it explicitly. In fact the way that you marshal evidence from different writers and theorists is very individual and can feel very rewarding – especially when you get a good grade – and it feels very much like you're putting your own stamp on it. It seems like more of a fine art to be able to critically balance the opinions of experts rather than just stating your own opinion . . . it gives you a bit of a sense of power because you're judging and weighing up their work (Ben, GU).

I hadn't really thought of it quite like that but I do feel now that I am expressing my opinion quite clearly in my written work. I suppose in first year it was a bit like regurgitation – I pretty much gave them back in essays what I'd been given in the classes with a few references to the reading, and if I did feel 'voiceless' it was because I thought that was all I was required to do and I just went along with it. But now, like Ben, I'm putting my arguments forward in a way that is pretty unique to me, I think, and my opinions – supported by evidence – are there to be seen (Meg, GU).

The second theme concerning written academic discourse to emerge from the data relates to students' negotiation of the specific linguistic requirements of academic writing. The quality of academic writing is arguably enhanced by the application of what Bernstein (1971) describes as an elaborated linguistic code that sets clear standards for 'correct' styles of grammar and vocabulary which are transparent and transferable across contexts. Thus, such an elaborated code is a necessary prerequisite of central academic discourse practices like conceptualisation, abstraction and critical

analysis. Unsurprisingly, the data suggest that the level of mastery of these highly developed linguistic skills is variable across this sample of adult students – as it undoubtedly would be across a representative sample of traditional students in higher education. A number of the students interviewed in the research reflected on difficulties they had experienced in relation to adhering to the strict rules of grammar and vocabulary which apply to academic writing, and this generally concurs with evidence on the exclusionary potential of academic language discussed above. However, an interesting theme which emerges from the data relates to the synergetic interplay between reading academic texts and academic writing. It seems self-evident that through reading the work of more skilled writers, and immersing ourselves in the language of the academy they employ, we develop our academic literacy and emulate some of their practices in our own writing. However, some of the research data suggest that the actual practice of writing may enhance our comprehension and analysis of the literature we read:

I did find writing essays quite difficult at first but through trial and error – and good feedback when you get it – you get the hang of it. You start to become familiar with the rules and the way that evidence is presented to build up an argument and I think that actually helps with reading textbooks . . . what might have seemed like a great barrage of facts and theories starts to have more form and make more sense when you can see why it was written in a certain way (Eilidh, US).

I think reading helps you to think academically but so does writing. When you have to think about how you write in an academic style it trains you to think academically even when you're listening to a lecture, in a tutorial or reading a textbook (Amy, GU).

Writing in the correct way helps me to think like a lawyer and then when I read the textbooks and case records I'm pretty much in tune with the very specific ways things are outlined and described in them (Nazir, GU).

Focus group data also suggest that competencies in academic reading and written work complement one another:

I definitely think that being able to write well academically actually helps you take in information and study more effectively – they're both parts of the same set of academic skills. It might be a bit of a generalisation but if you can write clearly you seem to be able to understand things more easily (Arthur, GU).

If, as these data suggest, writing and reading are closely linked elements of a generic set of academic literacy practices, two theoretical explanations merit consideration. First, it may be the case that the parallel development of competence in academic writing and comprehension is a result of cognitive development: verbal or linguistic schemata or thought patterns develop through predominately individual learning activities and these, in turn, facilitate improvements in intellectual function. This may well be an important component of our capacity to learn, but evidence also suggests that social interaction plays a crucial role in learning, and this provides a second theoretical explanation for the interdependency of academic reading and writing. We can read texts in complete isolation but how do we validate our interpretation of their meaning? Similarly, we can write texts that no one reads but how do we then know that what we have written makes any sense at all? Evidence concerning the role of social interaction in learning was considered in the last chapter, and in answer to these two questions it suggests that we validate our interpretations of texts by comparing them with the interpretations of others, and we learn whether or not what we have written makes sense through feedback from teachers and peers who read it. Language has a primarily social function, and is central to participation in any community. Thus, through the lens of communities of practice theory (Wenger, 1998), it can be argued that our identity changes – subtly and gradually – as we negotiate meaning through the interaction of participation, and the reification of concepts and artefacts which, in higher education, are primarily textual. Although it lacks the focus – found in new literacy studies' theorisations – on the significance of power relationships on and within discourse communities, Wenger's identification of the link between participation in the valued practices of academia and learner identity dovetails productively with the insights provided by the former: 'Discourse communities are the 'social' element in the expression 'the social construction of identity': a person's identity is constructed by their membership of, their identification with, the values and practices of one or more communities' (Ivanič, 1998, p. 83).

In relation to non-participation, the data reveal two clear themes: the first of these concerns non-participation in wider, generally non-academic aspects of university life; the second relates to elective non-participation in certain aspects of academic practice. In general, adult students – particularly those with family responsibilities – acknowledge that the stereotypical student social life is not for them:

I don't have any interest in the typical student social life – a few of us went to the union the Friday of the first week - it was only six o'clock but I couldn't wait to get out of the place – I'm 31 and I felt ancient. For me coming to this place is like a nine-to-five job – I try to do most of my work here and save my home time for my family. We might have a drink at the end of the term but my normal social life has nothing to do with this place (Kathy, GU).

Younger students seem to spend all of their time either doing part-time work or drinking, no wonder half of them don't turn up for the lectures. Maybe I was like that when I was their age but giving up my job and coming here is too much of a gamble for me to risk screwing things up now. I still have a social life but not on 'school nights' and it's with the same friends I had before I came here (Ewan, US).

There are lots of clubs and societies – I joined the Mature Students' Association but nothing much seems to happen there. Some of them [the clubs and societies] sound quite interesting and relevant to what I'm studying but they always meet at night and I just don't have the time to go along – it's a pity really (Emma, GU).

Emma is suggesting here that there may be a downside to non-participation in some of the wider aspects of student life and this concern is articulated more explicitly by another interviewee:

I don't really want to take part in the social life of the younger students here but I can't help worrying that in the middle of all the boozing and carrying on some valuable information about what's happening in the course – like a book or an article perfect for an essay – is passed around. It would be a bit embarrassing hanging around with young students but I am aware that I might be missing out on something (Dan, GU).

Dan's remarks here allude to an awareness of the possible existence of alternative sources of learning or support for learning within or outwith the institution which may provide 'something' (he's not quite sure what) of importance to his learning career. This fits in with Lave's (1993) concept of the learning curriculum which may have quite different outcomes from the institutional teaching curriculum. An extreme example of this would be a student having access to someone who is prepared to complete their assignments for them, but there are a whole range of more subtle, nuanced ways in which various forms of social interaction have the potential to 'subvert' the intended learning outcomes of the teaching curriculum. The focus group data also suggest that second-year adult students are aware that their marginalised status in higher education may lead to them missing out on certain pieces of information, but they are generally quite relaxed about it and appear to have developed strategies for gathering relevant information:

We don't really socialise much with the younger students but we're friendly enough towards them in class situations. After all they've probably got their ears closer to the ground in this place. Last year they told us [something concerning a member of university staff] which was certainly worth knowing . . . I suppose it's a bit of a 'you scratch my back' relationship we give them advice about essays and journal articles and they keep us posted with snippets from the university grapevine (Kevin, GU).

The second theme linked to non-participation relates to the active decision taken by some students to eschew participation in some of the practices of the academic community:

We try to encourage students to engage with the totality of each course so that they gain a wider and more comprehensive level of understanding. But, in practice, our system of assessment counters this aim: students write one essay from a choice of four, complete a computing project and, in the final exam, answer two questions from a choice of twelve. So it is entirely possible for students to focus on a few parts of the course, to ignore their overall connection, and still obtain a high grade (Dr A, GU).

You can't read everything you're supposed to, it's just not possible. I'm really interested in what I'm studying I've wanted to study it for years but there just isn't time to read everything . . . maybe if I was a student in the good old days when they

got grants it would have been possible, but I've got to work about twenty hours a week. You just read what you need to for the essays and try to figure out what subjects will come up in the exams (Ewan, US).

Reading everything we're supposed to seems a bit pointless – we only get a chance to discuss a few of the lecture subjects and there's such a wide choice in the exam that studying three or four topics is a pretty safe bet. I know that sounds a bit cynical but I've got so little time and I just do enough to get me by (Fiona, US).

In these data, there is clear evidence that students often choose not to participate in all the valued practices of the higher education community. Although such decisions are taken for entirely practical reasons, there are also hints in the data of disillusionment with the implications of these decisions and nuanced reflections on their impact on student identity - an identity which here appears to be undermined by an emphasis on assessment rather than learning *per se*. This also suggests that some students are entering higher education with slightly unrealistic expectations, and this seems to be particularly true for students who gained entry through SWAP courses. One possible explanation may be that some SWAP tutors are not particularly recent graduates of higher education and thus present a rather nostalgic picture of a bygone 'golden age' of higher education. On the other hand, it may simply be the case that as they seek to enhance their students' confidence and raise their aspirations they present an idealised picture of university life. Whatever its causes, this sense of disillusionment is certainly the experience of some students: for them, transition to higher education entails a transition to reality.

The data also highlight non-participation, especially amongst mature students, in a less traditional type of practice which universities are increasingly employing – online learning and the use of virtual learning environments. The data suggest that for many mature students these have limited practical utility, and that, in this particular case, identity is influenced not by participation but by conscious non-participation:

We have this online thing called Moodle but to me it doesn't seem very useful. You can go on it to get notes if you miss lectures and there are these forums we're all supposed to use to discuss our course – but apart from the lecturers and the

admin. staff nobody ever puts anything on them, so it's pretty much one-way traffic. If I have a problem with the course, I want to speak to someone face-to-face – I'm not going to announce it to everyone in some sort of electronic chat room (Dan, GU).

On the university computer system there's a discussion board which is supposed to be used for discussing the course but it doesn't seem to be monitored and all sorts of rubbish ends up on it – students arguing and other things which have got very little to do with the course. I just check it occasionally for any news or announcements about the course but I never contribute to it. (John, SU).

Focus group data are fairly conclusive on the limited utility of the university's virtual learning environment and all the participants were broadly in agreement with Meg's comment that *'I suppose its quite handy – it saves you having to phone somebody up; you go on it for notes you've missed, web links and course announcements and that's it'*.

In general, the data reveal a high level of instrumentality in the decisions that adult students make about participation and non-participation in the practices of higher education, but there is nothing in the data to suggest that this instrumentality is not characteristic of the entire student body. The data clearly suggest that – for the students interviewed in this research – these decisions are based on careful reflection on the relative gains and merits of such participation. Interviewees seem to have 'tried-out' some aspects of participation before making a reflective decision to restrict or carefully target their participation. This underpins the evidence highlighted in much of the literature that for adult students the decision to enter higher education is rarely taken lightly, and suggests that Giddens' (1991) process of reflexively ordered life-planning – which often brings adult students into higher education – influences their negotiation of practice. However, there is also evidence that the nature of participation is shaped and restricted by the conservatism and power of exclusion which, as Wenger (1998) suggests, characterise certain communities of practice. Though students adopt an instrumental approach to their studies, there is in the data a clear undercurrent of disillusionment with this – the quotations from James and Fiona above suggest that they felt they were being prepared to pass exams rather than being inducted into the central, valued practices of their respective disciplines. Kate (GU) expressed this most explicitly when she remarked, *'I thought uni would turn me, kind*

of, into an academic – at least a trainee one [laughs] but it's all about passing exams and getting good grades . . . I thought we'd sit around chatting with lecturers and professors but we never see them outside the lectures'. Comparison of this sense of disappointment with the experience of students of former generations is outwith the parameters of this research. However, it seems reasonable to at least suggest that as the British higher education system has become more of a mass system (Scott, 1995), and per capita teaching resources have been steadily reduced, the opportunities for extended contact between established academics – the 'old-timers' of higher education – have become more limited, certainly for students in the early stages of transition. Similarly, the increasing use of on-line media – ostensibly aimed at enhancing student learning – elicited only limited participation from the students interviewed in this research. In fact, the data suggest that use of such media by younger students – as observed by some of the interviewees – seems to enhance social more than explicitly educational interaction.

In Lave and Wenger's terms, the peripherality of the majority of student interviewees is certainly evident and – even though it is equally clear that institutions strive to enhance students' recognition of their legitimacy – recent trends in institutional practice appear to have muddied students' conceptions of what central participation in the valued practices of higher education actually entails. Indeed, the instrumental focus on assessment and the ultimate degree classification suggests that students in contemporary higher education are frequently on a trajectory which is simultaneously inbound (but perhaps to a limited extent) and outbound. Thus students, like Kate who felt that she wasn't clever enough for university when she left school, have a conception of what being a student means in academic terms but find that this seems to be at odds with their actual experience. Participation and circumstantial or elective non-participation influence the identity of adult students but the data strongly suggest that their 'student identity' does not, in general, dominate other aspects of their being and most remain 'day students' (Christie, Munro and Wager, 2005) whose role as a student is one which has to be balanced with other aspect of their lives.

2. The reconciliation of multi-membership

All students arrive at university with established memberships of a range of communities of practice. For the stereotypically traditional eighteen-year-old student leaving home for the first time, some existing community memberships are clearly weakened significantly – one of the reasons that younger students may more actively seek membership of the diverse range of communities of practice associated with student life. But for many adult students their existing communities of practice are so established, significant and pervasive that they have an impact on their engagement in higher education – providing support, creating tensions, or both. Our level of engagement in these multiple communities of practice varies: in some, we are full participants; in some, peripheral; we may only be occasional participants; and the nature of our participation can change over time. How we reconcile the contrasting and sometimes conflicting requirements of participation in these various communities can have profound effects on our identity. Although we may behave quite differently within diverse communities, we are not assuming multiple identities but a flexible form of identity which Wenger (1998) describes as a ‘nexus of multimembership’. This nexus not only helps us to reconcile aspects of practice, it enables us to reconcile different trajectories: an outbound trajectory from one community may coincide with an inbound trajectory in another. But the process of reconciliation is often a difficult one and a source of continuous tension: Wenger (1998) cites the example of the hospital doctor who has to balance the sometimes competing demands of patient care with those (particularly in the USA) of corporate profitability. Although the nexus of multimembership is often an effective means of social bridging across the boundaries of communities, it is, in itself, a unique, very personal aspect of identity, almost like a social fingerprint – we may have several shared memberships of communities of practice, but it is hard to imagine a situation in which even two individuals could have identical membership profiles. There are, however, two clear, recurrent themes – related to the impact of multimembership of communities on the experience of transition – which emerge from the data.

First, the interviewees generally observed that their families and close circles of friends are a significant source of support – emotionally, financially and practically (especially in relation to childcare). However, there is evidence of some tension

affecting participation in other communities of practice. It would be too simplistic to frame this solely in terms of social class, but there are indications in the data that the expanded horizons and deeper level of critical understanding propagated in higher education *may* have the potential to create tensions in existing relationships, over and above the exclusionary effects of academic literacy discussed earlier in this chapter. Dan, whose remarks are recorded above, seems to have successfully incorporated his growing interest in more serious discussion into his social interaction with close friends but there is evidence of increased tension – particularly for males – in other communities of practice in which they attempt to maintain their participation:

I still love playing football with the team I've played with since school, with the same guys, but it's not really the same any more. The actual games are still good and the training, but I still go to nights out and football dances and – I don't know – I get a bit bored now. I don't mean to sound like a snob but a lot of the time I'm just not interested in what everyone's talking about. I try to hide it but sometimes I see some of the guys looking at me differently and I feel like a fish out of water (Dave, SU).

It is interesting that here Dave uses the opposite ('a fish out of water') of Bourdieu and Waquant's (1992) simile which describes the result of a perfect fit between habitus and field: 'when habitus encounters a social world of which it is the product, it is like a 'fish in water': it does not feel the weight of the water and it takes the world about itself for granted' (p. 127). Dave's comments suggest that there are tensions between his changing habitus and his older field and Mark recounts a remarkably similar experience:

I try to stay in touch with all the guys that work in the place where I worked for the last eight years. I still get invited along to staff nights out but I'm starting to feel like a bit of an outsider ... Why? I don't know really maybe it's because they think that I've moved on and that I think I'm better than them now . . . I don't think that, I'm just different, I've got different priorities. I remember on one of the nights out I said I had to go home quite early because I'd an essay to work on over the weekend and I got a lot of stick over that, they really tried hard to make me stay on. But I didn't and since that night I've started to feel a bit distant. A couple of times I've tried to talk about things we've been talking about at university – things I thought they'd be interested in – and they weren't really interested. I remember one of the girls looking

at me as if I was some kind of alien. All joking aside, it's quite sad really - I've known these people for years (Mark, GCU).

These data suggest that the process of enculturation into the academic habitus of higher education and, in Bernstein's (1971) terms, the adoption of an elaborated linguistic code have the potential to weaken existing social relationships. In terms of communities of practice theory, dissonance with some of the valued practices of these communities and, in the second example, largely unsuccessful attempts to influence such practices, have undermined the interviewees' sense of affiliation with the communities.

Second, the data clearly point to the significant role of existing educational communities of practice in smoothing the process of transition to higher education. In particular, the data highlight the importance of social networks carried forward from communities of practice associated with the various access courses.

I'm still close to some of the girls I did the access course with. We met up on the very first morning of the very first day here at Glasgow University and spent most of the first week together. . . I think I'd have felt pretty intimidated if I didn't have people I knew here. A couple of the girls are on the same course as me and a few are doing teaching – we still meet up even with the girls doing teaching at least once every couple of weeks . . . we just moan about various things and talk about our essays and stuff like that . . . It's really important to me, since way back when we started the access course, it's like we've been on a journey together (Laurie, GU).

There were two other guys on the pre-entry course with me who are doing the business course here. We don't really socialise much because we live quite far apart and they've both got kids. But we work together a lot and share books and articles. I think we've got a more serious attitude to studying than some of the younger students – when they head to the coffee bars or the union we often go to the library. When we can, we try to sign up to the same seminar groups – I feel a bit more confident because us three old guys are all doing the same thing. I might feel a bit more self-conscious about taking it all so seriously if I was here on my own - strength in numbers, I suppose (James, SU).

These data provide clear examples of two important facets of communities of practice – joint enterprise and shared repertoire – which were developed during participation in their respective access courses and carried forward to their subsequent participation in higher education. However, the data relating to students who gained access to university through Higher National courses suggest that the communities of practice associated with this form of educational provision are, perhaps, less tangible and have limited longevity.

Some of them were doing it [HNC social care] through New Deal and I wouldn't have said they were particularly, really terribly motivated . . . but some of us were doing it with a view to going on to do social work or doing something else (June, GCU).

When I did my HND there was a lot of kids straight out of school doing it and they didn't really seem all that interested – a lot of them dropped out and some of them hardly turned up. There was only a couple of other older students on the course but we didn't get to know each other that well – one of them was ill quite a lot – so I pretty much soldiered through on my own. I suppose I enjoyed the course overall but I felt pretty much chucked in at the deep end when I came here – it's a big step up and I didn't really have anyone to compare notes with at first (Bill, GCU).

Unfortunately, none of the people I got to know on the HND course came here. So when I started in the third year of this course I felt pretty isolated and wondered if I would be able to cope OK (Mark, GCU).

There is quite a contrast between the students on the access course and those on the HNC in social science. The HNC students tend to be much younger and, generally, have rather less clear goals. On the other hand, most of the access students are quite clear about what they expect to gain from the course – a place at university. As a result they are highly motivated, work very well together and form supportive relationships which I know, for many of them, last throughout their time at university (Mr B., FE College).

As suggested above, the nexus of multimembership is a highly individual aspect of our identity. Nonetheless, analysis of both the tensions and the positive aspects of such multimembership draws our focus towards the mutual constitution of the

individual and the social (Wenger, 1998), and thus contributes to our understanding of the complex process of transition to higher education.

3. The power of imagination

If students have indeed been driven to undertake reflexively-ordered life planning, it might be expected that imagined futures would play a central role in that process: the data suggest quite explicitly that - even though there may be some confusion about what full participation in the sometimes esoteric practices of higher education entails - students have clear hopes and aspirations concerning the eventual outcome of their education. For adult students specifically, such hopes and aspirations are often linked to their children and families, or have emerged from an unsatisfactory history of employment:

I don't want to spend the rest of my life as a redundant tradesman. Sure I could get another job but I want to do something I can be proud of. I know I'm taking a big risk coming to university but I honestly believe it's a risk worth taking, for me and my family. I'm the first member of my family to go to university so at the very least I'm setting a good example for my kids. My aim is to get a really good degree which I hope will open doors for me (Dan, GU).

I've wanted to be a teacher for some time now. After my youngest went to school, I got a job as a teaching assistant and I loved it and the teachers I worked with all said I was really good with the kids. One said that I should think about training as a teacher and that put the seed in my mind - it took a little while to grow because I had some bad experiences at secondary school and didn't think then that I was clever enough for university . . . When I think back, the teachers were so negative and discouraging, so I suppose I'm partly doing this to prove they were wrong - though they'll maybe never know. But I'm here now and I'm quite confident that if things carry on as they are I'll be a fully qualified teacher in a few years time (Ann, GU).

I've loved history since I was a kid but I just didn't do very well at school. Even after I left school and got one dead-end job after another I kept reading history books. At first it was the kind of stuff you get in tourist shops - on William Wallace and Culloden and stuff like that. But then an old guy I knew in the

trade union said, 'if you're really interested in history read this' and he gave me a battered old copy of EP Thompson's 'Making of the English Working Class'. It probably took me almost a year to read it properly but it was like opening a door to a new world where ordinary people like me – not kings and generals – made history. I was hooked on real history and since then I've decided I want history to be my job – so I'll do my best on this course and just see what happens. I'd love to teach history to kids in a way that it was never taught to me – or maybe I'll even write a book [laughs] (Ewan, US).

The majority of students interviewed in this research articulated a fairly clear imagined future, though some did so more tentatively than in the above data. Thus, as Wenger (1998) suggests, the power of imagination enhances the cohesiveness of the higher education community of practice – although students in transition may not always be fully aware of what full participation actually entails, imagination enables them to foresee an outcome which validates and encourages their participation.

4. Economies of Meaning

Meaning is an intrinsically personal and subjective experience. We may imagine that we know what someone means but the reality is that we can never know the precise nature of their interpretation of meaning. Thus the construction of meaning mediated by language, reification and participation in social practice will have different outcomes for each individual involved. The most we can probably aspire to is a degree of commonality of meaning where our meaning seems to approximate to the meaning articulated by the communities and social groups whose values and beliefs we broadly share. Where this occurs our meaning has currency in the 'economy of meaning'; where our meaning is at variance with the commonality of meaning or is apparently undervalued this may lead to social dissonance and alienation. As Wenger argues, 'Because our identities are fundamentally constituted by processes of both identification and negotiability, our communities and our economies of meaning are inherent aspects of the social fabric in which we define who we are' (Wenger, 1998, p. 215). There is some evidence in the interview data that for some students their meaning appears to be somewhat undervalued in the higher education economy of meaning. This is particularly the case for adult students where they relate that their

earlier educational experience (generally on access courses) highlighted the educational value of their life experience and encouraged careful reflection on this.

On the access course we were very much encouraged to think for ourselves – it didn't actually matter if we reached a different conclusion as long as we could explain or justify why we reached it. If that conclusion involved us drawing on our personal experience no one automatically discredited our opinion – it was a process of learning to think things through. It's different here, sure we get to discuss things in tutorials and express our opinions but the tutors seem to draw us back to one truth – the opinions of the experts. It's as if the discussion's a bit pointless really because we're going to reach the same conclusion whatever is said (Tom, US).

Sometimes I don't really feel that what I say is actually valued very much here. The access classes were like open-ended discussions but here there's no talking in the lectures and you only get recognition in the tutorial if you repeat something you heard in the lecture or read in a recommended book. I've tried to take the discussion off on a tangent a couple of times but it soon gets pulled back on track. I think it may sometimes be because the tutors are PhD students and don't really have the depth and breadth of knowledge to allow us free rein, as it were. It's really not what I expected, I'm a bit disappointed. (Dan, GU).

It all seems a bit mechanical really there's not much thinking for ourselves – OK there maybe is in lab reports and stuff like that – but in exams and essays all we do is regurgitate what we get in the lectures and the books and we get good enough marks. I tried to express my opinion in my first few essays and all I got was a big red 'source' or 'reference' or a question mark so now I think why bother - give them back what they want (Ian, GCU).

In relation to this issue, group data are rather ambiguous: the consensus appears to be that the focus group students felt that their opinion was more valued – at least in tutorials – in their second year at university. However when this concept was unpicked it appeared that the style of teaching they encountered was not significantly different from what was experienced by first-year students:

It certainly feels that our opinions are more valued and that we're probably treated with a bit more respect than we were last year (Ben, GU).

Interviewer: Is it lecturers or graduate teaching assistants who take you tutorials?
One of the lecturers takes one of my tutorials but the other one's taken by a PhD student (Jill, GU).

Yes all mine are taken by students [other participants intimate agreement] (Arthur, GU).

Interviewer: Do you feel that you are able to influence the course of the discussion or the conclusions that are reached?

I certainly think we can influence the course of the discussion but the conclusion that's a more difficult question to answer . . . I guess our discussion is not going to fundamentally change the answer to whatever question we're discussing, what does anyone else think? (Arthur, GU)

I think you're probably right – I suppose even though we sometimes have lively, interesting discussions we're just reproducing what we've been taught or read (Meg, GU).

This apparent disparity between the characteristics of their tutorial teaching and their perception of it is interesting. There is little evidence of the perceived undervaluation of students' interpretation of meaning that a number of first-year students commented on, and it is only possible to speculate on the reasons for this. It may be the case that as they crossed the critical hurdle of first year at university and possibly moved closer to central participation in higher education's community(ies) of practice their sense of legitimacy was strengthened and, at the same time, any sense of alienation (related, for instance, to the limited recognition of the value of their experience) weakened. Or, the fact that it is now more than a year since they left their respective access courses – where their role in negotiating meaning was generally foregrounded – may have ameliorated the shock of losing this significant prop to their sense of identity. On the other hand, it may be the case that enculturation into the valued practices of higher education has produced subtle but significant changes in their habitus which enable it to operate more smoothly in the higher education field. In actual fact, none of these factors is discrete from the others and it is likely that the smooth transition into and through second year is a complex product of all three acting in a unique pattern for each student.

The data do not suggest that this undervaluing of their interpretation of meaning is experienced by the majority of adult students; but the fact that some students

experience it suggests that it is a potentially insidious aspect of higher education practice of which universities should be more aware. Higher education practitioners go to great lengths to promote deep rather than surface approaches to learning (Prosser and Trigwell, 1999) amongst their students, but this ambition may arguably be undermined by – even occasional and unintentional – undervaluing of students’ personally constructed meanings.

5. Identity congruence

Building on Lave and Wenger’s theorisation of the social construction of identity, Hughes (2010) posits that a sense of belonging or ‘identity congruence’ can be examined using a theoretical framework that distinguishes between social, operational and knowledge-related congruence. She concludes that of the three forms of congruence the most significant – in terms of learner engagement – is knowledge-related identity congruence. There are clear parallels here with the concept of discourse communities and academic literacy discussed earlier: there is a wider academic discourse which focuses on general protocols and styles of discourse, but within this overarching discourse there are a number of discipline-specific discourses which serve to maintain the uniqueness of each area of academic specialisation. In relation to this research, it could be argued that social identity congruence is of fundamental importance to adult students making the transition to higher education. However, such social identity congruence is very often built upon knowledge-related identity congruence between students taking similar or identical courses: this supports Hughes’ assertion that the latter forms the bedrock of identity congruence in learner engagement. Data which highlight the significance of knowledge-related congruence relate most explicitly to the experience of students taking vocational university degrees:

Because I’m studying law it is important that I spend as much time as I can with other law students. The course is not just about learning law it is about training to become a lawyer so we have moot courts and other opportunities to practice what we are learning. I spend as much time as I can with other people on the course so that I don’t miss out on anything important (Nazir, GU).

I do still socialise with my friends from the SWAP course but not so much with the ones who aren't studying teaching. Luckily there are three of us from SWAP at [FE College] here, so we get the chance to work together on essays and lesson plans and just talk about what's expected of us as trainee teachers. I suppose I do miss seeing some of my SWAP friends more regularly but everything is based in this building down here – and in some ways it feels a bit removed from the rest of the university (Ann, GU).

The social work students all seem to stick together – even the younger ones which seems quite surprising. It's almost as if there's something that you pick up by being in the company of other social work students . . . I suppose it's a way of thinking about the problems people have, maybe empathetically, I'm not really sure (June, GCU).

This sense of knowledge-based congruence is actively fostered by the universities in these vocationally orientated degree courses. However, there is some evidence in the data of the significance of a wider knowledge-based congruence which is – in the absence of institutional intervention – heavily linked to imagined futures within academic disciplines. For a small number of students the gravitational pull of their imagined futures is so strong that it leads them to actively seek out opportunities for engagement with the knowledge-related or discourse communities of their chosen field:

I've always been interested in literature but I wasn't encouraged to think about university at school. Maybe it was the teachers or maybe it was my own fault but I left school at sixteen and got a job in catering. But I never stopped reading and dreaming that one day maybe I could go to university and study literature . . . I absolutely love being here and I love English literature, but I just wish there were more opportunities to mix with the academic staff – I want to ask them what they're reading and I want to be able to talk in the way they do. My ultimate ambition is to become a lecturer in literature and I suppose I'm a bit impatient. I'm twenty-six now and I feel like I've wasted so much time – I know I've got another three years after this one but I want to start to think and maybe even feel like an academic. So I go to every single seminar the department puts on and most of the time I'm the only first-year student there and some of it's a bit over my head. But I don't care – you've got to follow your dream (Kate, GU).

These data highlight the value of knowledge-related identity: it is not always easy or practical to promote but where it does exist it clearly has the potential to enhance academic engagement so that students feel that they are active, valued members of knowledge communities. Like many progressive ideas in contemporary higher education this may be something of an idealised goal constrained, in part, by its resource implications but, as Hughes (2010) cogently argues, the focused pedagogical practices associated with it have the potential to enhance the experience of higher education for everyone involved:

. . . teachers too have a responsibility to cultivate a pedagogy that enables identities to shift and transform. A pedagogy for identity transformation considers the detailed interactions of learning groups rather than viewing some learners as having deficits and expecting them to conform. Such a pedagogy might enable renegotiation of gender or other identities in learning groups or reconciliation of language use and academic background (Hughes, 2010, p. 61).

This chapter has focused on the fluid and context-dependent nature of learner identity. It has argued that learning is primarily a social activity and that any such situated learning is accompanied by incremental shifts in learner identity. It has drawn on social interactionist theorisations of identity (Butler, 1990, Castells, 2004) and Giddens' (1991) identification of the need for reflexively-ordered life planning in late modernity. Whilst these theories provide several insights into certain aspects of learner identity, the overarching theoretical framework for the analysis undertaken in this chapter is Wenger's (1998) theorisation of the effect of participation in communities of practice on learner identity. Acknowledging that one of the most telling criticisms levelled at Wenger's work is its limited recognition of the significance of literacy practices (Barton and Tusting, 2005), theoretical insights were also drawn from the concept of discourse communities outlined by new literacy theorists. Using Wenger's work as a heuristic, five broad themes emerge from the data. First, identity is influenced by participation and non-participation in the valued practices of academia: the evidence suggests that participation in academic discourse has the potential to have profound effects on learner identity, and that non-participation in other academic practices is frequently linked to systemic issues within higher education. Second, identity is influenced by the benefits and/or tensions of multimembership of new and existing communities of practice within and outwith

higher education. Third, the data suggest that the power of imagination – arguably related to reflexively-ordered life planning – may drive our participation in academic communities of practice with clear implications for learner identity. Fourth, the data suggest that for some students positive learner identities are undermined by a perceived undervaluing of their interpretation of meaning within an economy of meaning dominated by higher education epistemologies. Finally, some of the data from this research support Hughes’ (2010) contention that, from a pedagogical perspective, knowledge-related identity congruence is particularly conducive to learner engagement. What this chapter also highlights is the limited applicability of linear theorisations of transition – which in essence depict it as movement along a pathway towards a notional ‘student identity’ – to the experience of adult students. Such conceptualisations of transition are all too frequently predicated on an ‘ideal’ form of identity and, by implication, depict variation from this as problematic. This approach lacks sufficient flexibility to be applicable to students from an increasingly diverse range of backgrounds, and the data examined in this chapter show that, in relation to adult students, it has very little explanatory power. Adults come to higher education from a wide range of experiential backgrounds; their existing social networks have a significant effect on the nature and extent of their participation in its valued practices; and their fears and hopes permeate their experience of it. For adult students, the ongoing interaction between old and new experiences, their range of social networks, and their imagined futures, shapes what transition entails and how it is experienced by them, and the conceptualisation of ‘transition as becoming’ may have the flexibility to facilitate the clearest understanding of its non-linear nature and sheer complexity. This suggestion will be considered further in the concluding chapter of the thesis.

The analysis of the data in this chapter has utilised a comparatively narrow range of relevant theory: in Chapter 7 these initial conclusions will be examined through the compound lens of a wider and more comprehensive range of appropriate theory.

Chapter 7

Research findings: an extended discussion

This chapter presents an extended discussion of the findings of the research and interprets and evaluates these findings within a wider theoretical framework. The chapter is structured around the three broad research questions which underpin this project. To reiterate, these are: What is it to be an effective student?; What impact do adult students' networks of social relationships have on their experience of transition to higher education?; What are the effects of structural factors on adult students' experience of transition? Structuring the chapter in this way is not intended to suggest that these questions are in any sense discrete. They clearly are not: an 'effective' student may be assisted or constrained by their social relationships and these social relationships are both shaped by and are – in themselves – structural factors. The discussion is framed in this way to enable a particular focus on certain aspects of transition to higher education. The first section addresses the issue of what it means to be an 'effective' student in higher education. Of course, this may instantly raise questions of what the term 'effective' actually means: effective by what or whose criteria? Barnett (2009), for instance, laments the rise of the 'performative student' and the changing relationship between higher education and the wider society it serves; and student 'effectiveness' may lead to a diverse range of outcomes: for instance, the overall educational outcomes for a student who has undertaken an intensive study of philosophy or theology may differ quite significantly from those experienced by a student who has achieved a good honours degree in actuarial science or business management. While acknowledging that the concept of effectiveness in higher education is a value-laden and occasionally controversial one, the discussion here adopts a rather straightforward approach to effectiveness: one which foregrounds the ability of students to adapt successfully to the exacting demands of academic life. The second part of this chapter examines how students' social relationships, historical and current, outwith and within the academy, affect their experience of transition. In the third part, the focus of the discussion moves to the impact of structural factors – such as those relating to the higher education curriculum – on the process of transition.

1. Becoming an effective student

In Wenger's (1998) terms, learning is a 'process of becoming'; thus effective transition which entails learning to adapt to new or changed contexts may lead to sometimes subtle, sometimes more obvious, changes in identity. Some theorists see transition as the negotiation of 'institutionalized pathways and normative patterns' (Elder et al., 2003, p. 8), and suggest that transition represents movement along largely predetermined trajectories, the outcomes of which are shaped by social expectations. As Ecclestone (2009, p. 12) suggests: 'From this perspective, educational attainment is determined by movement through a predictable sequence of educational transitions that have normative expectations embedded in them'. More recently, research on transition has focused on the processes of 'being' and 'becoming' in transitions that are responses to the often volatile circumstances of modern life (ibid.). This focus on transitions related to changing social and economic conditions rather than more traditional 'rites of passage' also suggests that transition may – over time – involve a process of 'unbecoming': an asylum seeker, for instance, may lose some of her cultural identity as she strives to achieve integration into a new community. Feminist perspectives (Hughes, 2002; Colley, 2006) highlight the fluid and occasionally fleeting nature of transition, and Thomas and Quinn (2007 p. 57) suggest that 'we are always lost in transition, not just in the sense of moving from one task or context to another, but as a condition of our subjectivity'. This recurring experience of transition as 'a condition of our subjectivity' may, as Thomas and Quinn argue, lead to it being perceived as 'normal' and not *necessarily* challenging or problematic and 'might suggest that we should all be able to cope with it well' (Thomas and Quinn, 2007, p. 57). This would – to a significant extent – be dependent upon the degree of flexibility in and across the systems and structures between which transition occurs but, as Thomas and Quinn argue, 'systems and policies [in higher education] ensure that transitions are moments of crisis which must be traversed well or not at all, and a linear pathway suggests there is no going back and no opportunity to take an interesting byway' (p. 57). What this discussion has sought to illustrate is that transition is far from a straightforward concept that describes a predominately linear movement from point A to point B, from – for instance – access student to undergraduate: it is a dynamic, often unpredictable process that may involve stalled progress, regression or even failure, and it is experienced uniquely by those who go

through it. That said, the vast majority of students (including adult and other non-traditional students) experience an effective transition to higher education: the analysis now moves on to consider some of the central aspects – highlighted in this research – of the learning or ‘process of becoming’ this entails.

From a communities of practice theoretical perspective, learning to become an effective student takes place through participation in the valued practices of higher education. The research data highlight a number of areas where participation in these practices is consistently challenging or problematic for students in transition. Many of these relate to the occasionally alien practices or protocols of higher education which students sometimes struggle to understand in their initial experience of them. When it does arise, this difficulty is not simply a result of the complexity of these protocols; it is often a consequence of students not having adequate appreciation of their actual purpose, and their value within the higher education community. One of the themes that emerges very clearly from the data relates to the problems that some students experience with the stringent requirements of academic citation. Interviewees consistently comment on how tedious accurate and comprehensive citation of sources was for them initially, and several point to its rather negative framing: for them, it was portrayed by higher education institutions as a way of avoiding charges of plagiarism rather than – more positively – as a skill which has the potential to enhance their learning. There is also a degree of confusion around the need to use different referencing systems in separate – but arguably cognate – academic disciplines such as sociology and social history. There is, however, some evidence in the data that students who have gained access to higher education through university in-house access courses (which are often taught by tutors who are also involved in undergraduate teaching) are better prepared for this aspect of academic practice than those who have taken access courses in further education colleges, or who have entered university straight from secondary school. For those who were unfamiliar with such requirements there is clear evidence that they learned the demands of academic citation – as communities of practice theory would suggest – through participation in practice. In explaining this, Lave and Wenger’s (1991) model of how learning actually takes place within communities of practice is less useful: though it is relatively straightforward to posit that students in transition are novices it is less easy to suggest who might appropriately be regarded as ‘old timers’. Lecturers and

university tutors clearly take part in imparting knowledge about practice but they do not specifically *model* this practice in the manner described in Lave and Wenger's paradigm. Feedback from tutors on citation is clearly of some significance, but there is also evidence in the data that students work together to make sense or meaning of this requirement. In the widely noted abundance of written guides to effective study skills given to students during induction there is clear, and often extensive, guidance on academic citation: this could be seen as a reification of the concepts of 'academic honesty' and 'engagement with the discipline' they are studying. None of the students interviewed in this research suggest that they had grasped the point of academic citation *solely* by reading such guides, but there is clear evidence that they made meaning of these reified concepts (more so the first than the second) through participation in practice and often in interaction with fellow students – as had been the case for Ariel and her colleagues trying to make sense of a complex claims form in one of Wenger's (1998) vignettes.

Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory (1979) offers a slightly different but arguably compatible interpretation of how learning takes place in these circumstances. The students who interact closely with one another in their academic work are all members of one another's microsystem, and the learning takes place through repeated participation in the proximal processes of academic life. Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006) also suggest that the focus of attention has a significant effect on the learning that is facilitated by such processes. When the focus of attention is, in their terms, 'bidirectional' (2006, p. 813) – that is, when the co-participants in a learning situation exhibit similar levels of interest in each other – this has the potential to enhance the development or learning outcome. Although the examples they use primarily relate to child development, it is arguably the case that this reciprocity of focus of interest may also contribute positively to adult learning: where students are interacting with one another to negotiate a problematic aspect of academic practice (such as citation) this process may be augmented by an evident sense of shared commitment to this goal (an interpretation which is manifestly compatible with Lave and Wenger's emphasis on the central importance of joint enterprise in communities of practice). For more traditional students, whose immediate microsystem includes many other students, opportunities for learning through such joint enterprises may be greater than for adult students whose microsystem generally includes a higher proportion of family and

friends who are not participants in the higher education community. Although the actual learning related to citation is, in many ways, concerned with rather prosaic matters – such as when to use italics rather than inverted commas – there is also some allusion in the research data to the fact that interaction may help students to grasp the point of academic citation and appreciate its value in terms of engagement with their chosen discipline. This is important in terms of the development of academic literacy discussed in the preceding chapter. Wenger (1998) emphasises the role played by imagination in the formation of learner identity, and uses the example of two stonecutters: one man believes he is simply cutting blocks of stone while the other remarks proudly, ‘I am building a cathedral’ (p. 176). Drawing on this analogy, it is arguably the case that students’ *committed* participation in communities of practice (or regular engagement in interactive proximal processes) may help them to look beyond initially troublesome protocols of academic practice, to appreciate their purpose and wider value, and to see them as necessary stepping stones on the path towards an imagined future where whatever they hope to achieve from higher education is actualised. The benefits of this particular form of participation may well be enjoyed by groups across the diverse range of students in contemporary higher education, but the research data suggest quite clearly that it is frequently beneficial to adult students many of whom rely upon carrying forward previously formed supportive relationships from their access studies or, where they can, form new relationships with other mature students.

In the introduction to this chapter, brief reference was made to the elusiveness and contested nature of what constitutes student effectiveness in higher education. However, it is almost certainly the case that one essential characteristic of such effectiveness is a demonstrable level of competence in academic literacy, as discussed in the preceding chapter. The formation and continuing currency of the dominant forms of academic literacy remains a controversial issue (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990; Brookfield, 2005) but few would dispute its central place in the existing valued practices of higher education: whether it is in reading or creating written material, or in verbal discourse, literacy is at the heart of most of the core activities of academic life. One of the most frequent criticisms levelled at the communities of practice theorisation of learning (discussed in the literature review) is that it does not adequately take account of the place of writing in such learning (Lea, 2005; Tusting,

2005; Gourlay, 2009, 2011). However, although Wenger (1998) does not explicitly consider the part played by writing in learning within communities of practice, he does examine in some depth the significance of reified textual artefacts and shows how learning may take place through participation that involves the process of ascribing meaning to these artefacts. Since textual artefacts, in a multiplicity of forms and styles, are central to most of the valued practices of higher education, this conceptualisation of learning arguably has significant heuristic utility as a means of explaining how students ascribe – and perhaps – negotiate meaning. One situation – albeit an idealised one which, as the data suggest, does not necessarily reflect the general reality of contemporary higher education – where participant interaction may enhance learning, is in the tutorial or seminar. When all the participants in a tutorial have actually read the prescribed reading, and when all are willing to take part in relevant discourse, then this learning situation has the *potential* to enable its participants to achieve a deeper level of understanding than that which may have been achieved through individual study of the same material.

A second reservation concerning the applicability of communities of practice theory to explanations of learning in higher education is that it takes too little account of the factors which determine the *legitimacy* of participation, and does not adequately address the capacity that communities of practice have to marginalise and exclude potential participants. One clear example of this exclusionary capacity is when working-class students are unable to engage with the unfamiliar discourses and demands of academic literacy (Ivanič, 1998; Lillis, 2001). However, as Lea (2005, p. 184) argues: ‘It is in this nuanced examination of how participants are excluded at the boundaries that the work has the most value to those concerned with teaching and learning in higher education’. The data suggest that negotiating the demands of academic literacy is problematic for many adult students and that their experience of this does – to varying degrees – affect their ability to participate in the valued practices of higher education. Ivanič (1998) argues that the need to conform to unfamiliar academic discourses places some students from working-class and minority backgrounds in an almost impossible position - it is worth recalling part of a longer quotation examined above: ‘Most mature students are outsiders to the literacies they have to control in order to be successful in higher education’ (Ivanič, 1998, p. 68). It is sixteen years since she offered this rather stark assessment of the problems

related to academic literacy experienced by mature students, and it may be the case that it no longer applies to *most* adult students; but the data show that the negotiation of academic literacy continues to be problematic for a significant number of them. This dissonance between students' present literacy and the perceived requirements of academic literacy is encapsulated in Paula's reaction to examples of essays she had read: '*god that's not really what my essay sounds like*'. Similarly, John observed that in his first weeks of higher education lecturers were '*talking about concepts that you're not really familiar with in a way that you're not familiar with*'. Neil (GCU) framed his concerns about academic literacy explicitly within the issue of social class:

This is very middle-class place, well it is in the lectures and seminars anyway. I'm from a pretty working-class background ... sometimes I don't feel that I fit in and, a lot of the time, I don't really want to fit in. I like the way I talk and that comes through in the way I express myself in essays but it's not always just what they want. I don't really want to change but it feels like I need to, to kid on I'm somebody else to fit in and do alright here.

For these students, it may be their unfamiliarity with the predominately middle-class styles of language and discourse still prevalent in higher education – in Bernstein's (1971) terms, their less developed use of an 'elaborated linguistic code' – that makes their engagement with the required forms of academic literacy more challenging.

As and when students do become increasingly immersed in and familiar with the language of academic discourse, the data also show that this has a significant impact on their identity, both in terms of self-perception and confidence, and how they are perceived by others. This, in turn, has an effect on their social relationships: the experience of one student (Mark) who felt that he was becoming alienated from former work colleagues because of his changing interests and priorities is a particularly clear example of this. Davies and Harre (1990) emphasise the part played by language in shaping our identity and suggest that the discursive repertoire developed through prolonged participation in specific discourses is central to our sense of identity. Lillis (2001), also links academic writing to the identity formation of adult students and, drawing on Bakhtin's (1986) essay on *speech genres* which posits that human communication – through the dynamic interaction of the

‘utterances’ of those involved in it – represents a struggle for meaning-making between linguistic genres, she argues that ‘meaning making is not just about making texts, but is also about the making of our selves, in a process of becoming’ (Lillis, 2001, p. 48). Whilst the data do not suggest that such meaning-making *only* takes place in collaborative contexts, there is some clear evidence that participation in *organic* communities of practice with like-minded peers does have the potential to enhance this process in higher education.

This last point leads to necessary consideration of another criticism of the application of communities of practice theory to learning in higher education. Like so many concepts in social science, for instance, Bourdieu’s concept of habitus (see Reay, 2004) communities of practice theory has suffered from what may be described as a ‘bandwagon effect’: as it has increasingly been perceived as a particularly useful explanatory concept, it has been widely adopted to explain how learning takes place across a range of educational and workplace contexts. This is to some extent a result of Wenger’s more recent emphasis (Wenger, McDermott and Snyder, 2002) on explaining how the circumstances in which situated learning takes place may be deliberately created or ‘cultivated’. There is, however, a danger that this instrumental approach may lead to a false expectation that if people are brought together in circumstances in which the core characteristics of a community of practice *appear* to be present then appropriate learning will surely follow. In the research data considered here, the only readily identifiable social groups that had several clear characteristics of communities of practice, and which seemed to have a positive effect on students’ engagement with academic literacy, grew *organically* (as offshoots of previously formed or new relationships) amongst the students: there is no clear evidence of universities explicitly attempting to foster such communities.

Another concept which has been used to explain the process of identity formation associated with transition to higher education is that of ‘liminality’ which describes the ontological condition of being in a place between two others. It is a condition which may characterised by a degree of uncertainty, emotional instability and status confusion, all of which are frequently experienced by students in transition. It is in this state of liminality that those new to higher education are most likely to be unsure of what it is to be an effective student. Again, the significance of academic literacy to

effective student identity is highlighted by those who have applied this concept to educational transition: Scott (1992) suggests that there are 'rights of passage narratives' (p. 4) in higher education whose progressive negotiation helps students to emerge from their state of liminality. From this perspective, Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1996) which presents a radical, intellectually challenging reinterpretation of the function of education in society may be viewed as a right of passage narrative in the field of adult and community education. Employing a predominately epistemological approach, Meyer and Land (2005, 2006) argue that in all academic disciplines there are elements of particularly 'troublesome' knowledge which students in a state of liminality encounter (discussed in more detail in the literature review). The ability of students to make sense of this troublesome knowledge is contingent on their successful negotiation of certain 'threshold concepts' that open the gate to and facilitate a deeper level of understanding. It is not specifically related to any single discipline, but one example that emerges from the data of a threshold concept that students in transition occasionally find problematic is that of academic critique. Several students comment on the difficulty they had in moving from a descriptive approach in their writing to a critical one; some struggled with the idea of 'criticising' the work of those whom they regarded as experts in their field. As they came to appreciate that academic critique is concerned with the comparison of academics' work on a given subject, and with highlighting particular strengths as well as any limitations or contradictions, this aspect of academic practice generally became less challenging for these students.

In relation to the role of academic writing in student identity formation, another interesting theme which emerges from the research data is that for some students the actual practice of writing plays a central role in their learning. Aside from the issues examined above of negotiating the protocols of academic writing and adopting sometimes unfamiliar language, several students observed that the process of explaining a difficult or complex point, concept or piece of evidence actually enhanced their understanding of it. This may be related to the distinction between surface and deep learning (Marton and Saljo, 1984): the former tends to involve a more straightforward reproduction of facts and concepts, while the latter involves deeper engagement with the subject and a higher level of comprehension. So, for instance, a student might hope to achieve a high grade in an examination or essay by

peppering their answer with references to Bourdieu's associated concepts of habitus and field, and they may or may not have a particularly deep understanding of what these concepts actually mean. On the other hand, if their work includes detailed explanation of a difficult concept which is *manifestly* in their own words and does not simply involve very close paraphrasing or direct quotation, then it seems likely that a deeper level of understanding will have been facilitated. From my own perspective, as an access tutor, I have become increasingly aware of a noticeable trend in the early essay writing of a number of students: occasionally, rather than trying to present complex issues or concepts in their own words, some students will *overuse* direct, sometimes lengthy quotations to introduce them. At this stage in their studies they are encouraged to use selective short quotations from the appropriate literature which make a point particularly clearly or powerfully, but the overuse of long, often uncontextualised quotations may suggest a rather superficial level of engagement with the material. Although this issue was not directly addressed in the research interviews, it was alluded to by three students during their discussion of academic citation. Dave's remarks are particularly apposite:

The first essay I did was pretty rubbish really. A lot of what I was trying to say in it was quite difficult and I found it very hard to put it clearly enough. So I used a lot of quotations from the books and the tutor said there was too many and that I needed to express myself more (Dave, SU).

This theme does not occur with sufficient frequency in the data to enable any informed estimation of how common this practice is in early student writing, but the data do at least suggest that it is an aspect of students' negotiation of the requirements of academic literacy which is worthy of further investigation.

The foregoing discussion has endeavoured to illustrate the centrality of academic literacy in the identity formation of the effective student in higher education. The extent to which this issue is addressed in recent scholarly research and in the Enhancement Themes work of QAA Scotland suggests that it is – in relation to academic practice – an area of particular interest. Since the data examined in this thesis (see pp. 109-113) suggest that mastery of academic language continues to be one of the significant challenges of transition, this is an entirely welcome change of

emphasis – it signals that the wider higher education community is *at least* beginning to acknowledge that issues of *accessibility* are as important as those of *access*. However, as Ecclestone (2009, p. 9) cogently argues there is a danger that viewing the process of transition as ‘inherently difficult and threatening’ may lead to a view that non-traditional students are particularly vulnerable and at risk. This, in turn, may give rise to a pathologisation of the needs of such students and a resulting emphasis on the deficit or remedial model of support predicated implicitly on questions like: what necessary skills and attributes do these students lack and how can these deficiencies be addressed? Two of the higher education lecturers interviewed in this research spoke of the existence of this ‘deficit model’ of support but suggested that it was losing its currency:

When I first started teaching it was certainly acknowledged that non-traditional students needed different types and levels of support compared to average, younger students. I am still aware that mature students may need more support in relation to extra-curricular issues: family, finances, childcare and that sort of thing. But, from my point of view, and from my discussions with colleagues, I firmly believe that mature students may have slightly different academic issues but it is certainly not the case that we can generalise and say that they arrive here with specific types of need or deficit (Dr B. GU).

Student interviewees made no direct reference to a deficit model of support but a recurrent theme in the research data is that such support – both academic and pastoral – has to be sought out. In other words, for students, it is only available when something goes wrong: an inference which appears to frame support and guidance as a reactive rather than a proactive process, and points to an element of incongruence between students’ and teaching staff’s perceptions of its nature and purpose.

The overall tenor of the Enhancement Themes project points to a continuing departure from the deficit model and a significant emphasis on the imperative of developing highly flexible responses to the diversity of student needs. However, the data suggest that for both students and academic staff such flexibility operates within clearly demarcated limits, particularly in relation to assessment. As Dr A (GU) remarked, ‘*we are constantly reminded of the need for greater flexibility in*

assessment but – in reality – there’s not actually that much we can change: there are several assignments each year, a final exam for each class and a formula for calculating grades: we can tinker with it but it is really little more than that’. From a student perspective, Nazir (GU) commented that *‘we are asked to make comments on assessment and the level of work involved – and they do acknowledge our suggestions – but then nothing seems to change’.* However, most of the criticism of assessment evident in the data relates to procedural inflexibility in its implementation rather than institutional constraint of imagination and creativity in its design. Recent work on assessment has focused on how methods of assessment may be designed to develop student writing skills rather than simply test them, and Mitchell (2010) raises some particularly interesting questions about how this may be achieved in practice.

The first question Mitchell raises addresses relates to the way in which students are introduced to what constitutes good academic writing. The data suggest that there is a lack of consistent clarity in this, and that much of the feedback students receive focuses more on deficiencies in their writing than on *specific* suggestions for improvement. Dan’s comment that *‘After I’d picked up my first couple of essays I was none the wiser’* is indicative of this recurrent theme. Dr B (GU) identified specific problems in the provision of feedback on student writing:

All of the student tutors on levels one and two are graduate teaching assistants. Now don’t get me wrong, these are very able students but I don’t feel that they get enough training in how to support and bring out the best in students. It’s quite a leap for some of them to go from student to teacher sometimes in the space of a couple of years. We do monitor a sample of their marking and while we, with the external examiners, don’t generally make huge changes to the grades awarded, there is no doubt that there is considerable variability in the quality of feedback. The only way to rectify this situation would be for the tutors to be given fairly extensive training, or for us to take direct responsibility for first and second year tutorials and marking. Frankly I don’t think the university would countenance either.

The situation is slightly different in institutions which have smaller numbers of research students who are able undertake teaching duties. However, even when full-

time teaching staff take greater responsibility for tutoring students the data suggest that there is insufficient emphasis on developing academic writing skills:

Good academic writing. Well I suppose we recommend reading that generally represents good historical scholarship presented clearly and accessibly, and we give students some examples of good and bad essays from previous years. It's a bit hit and miss really; we're expecting students to pick up good writing through a process of emulation. I realise that feedback, both verbal and written – not just telling students what to write but how to actually word it – is very important but we simply don't have enough time to devote to it (Dr A, GU).

Mitchell (2010) argues that the current search for greater transparency in the requirements of academic writing has led to an increased emphasis on framing the characteristics of good practice within quality assurance and graduate attribute parameters and terminologies, and to the increasing prevalence of precise descriptions of what constitutes good writing. Burwood (2007) argues that in this headlong rush towards a culture of transparency in education we are in danger of effectively losing sight of integral aspects of practice that are nuanced, unpredictable and – in many respects – intangible. Such labelling of what constitutes good practice and the clear articulation of aims and objectives does have the potential to demystify some of the more arcane practices of the academy, but Mitchell argues that an increased emphasis on this may also tend to obscure that which is less easy to define and delineate: 'we need to exercise critical caution in the value we ascribe to them [aims and objectives] and not let them stand in for everything else that is going on' (p. 140). In relation to this very precise labelling of educational outcomes, Torrance (2007) points to the increasing currency in post-secondary education of 'criteria compliance' in which the student is encouraged to adhere very closely to carefully delineated assessment criteria. This highly instrumental approach, he argues, may well lead to high attainment in assignments and exams but has a detrimental effect on the overall quality of the learning experience. Barrs (2004) identifies a growing trend in education that sees students encouraged to approach language in academic writing in a particularly systematic – almost handbook-driven – fashion grounded in analysis of how it works and the description of specific techniques for its improvement. She argues, however, that this approach places too little emphasis on the part played by

speech, reading and imagination in the generation of new ideas and the development of self-expression. Mitchell (2010) describes this trend as a focus on ‘cracking the conventions of written forms’ (p. 145). She argues, however, that many university teachers are looking for clearer evidence in student writing of their engagement with the discipline. The academic staff interviewed in this research mentioned that students had good access to learning support but there was a simultaneous undercurrent of concern that this tended to be at a rather generic level:

It’s certainly useful that someone in learning support can spend time with students who are struggling and explain sentence structure and the proper use of the dreaded apostrophe, but it’s a pity that the guidance offered can’t focus more on some of the more nuanced aspects of historical writing. I suppose it would be helpful if each discipline had a learning adviser. Obviously this subject specific advice is available to third- and fourth-year students but not to first- and second-year students who, perhaps, need it most (Dr A, GU).

Some dissatisfaction with the effectiveness of the learning support available was voiced by five of the students who had used it and some of this dissatisfaction was explicitly related its generic nature:

She was a very nice woman and tried to help me with my essay but I just got the feeling that she didn’t know much about nursing, and because she didn’t really understand what I was trying to say she couldn’t help me to write it properly (Angela, GCU).

I wanted advice on how to write a sociology essay but she just went on about sentence structure and punctuation and references. A fat lot of good really, not what I needed at all (Bill, GCU).

In the research data, there is also significant evidence of students’ awareness of a compliance-driven approach to writing which – in some respects – has the effect of damping down their creativity. Particularly suggestive of this is Ian’s observation that: ‘*in exams and essays all we do is regurgitate what we get in the lectures and the books and we get good enough marks . . . give them back what they want*’. And in relation to tutorials – which in undergraduate teaching often focus on essay subjects

or assignment tasks – a comment made by Meg (a second-year student) suggests a similar concern that students are being shepherded along well-trodden paths rather than being encouraged to think imaginatively or creatively: *‘I suppose even though we sometimes have lively, interesting discussions we’re just reproducing what we’ve been taught or read’*. Of course, it may well be the case that many students are entirely happy with this approach to learning through which they can get exactly what they want from higher education: for many, a good honours degree and enhanced career prospects. However, amongst some of the students interviewed there was an undercurrent of disappointment with the prevalence of this predominately instrumental approach to higher education, and with their perceived voicelessness within its practices. This may stem from their experience of learning on access courses where they were frequently encouraged to reflect on and utilise their own experience as part of the learning process. Or it may be linked to the high value that they have ascribed to a university education in the imagined future that must have figured so significantly in their – for many, risk-laden – decision to enter higher education. Imagined futures entail dreams and for those for whom higher education was not an expected pathway – or a path from which they were excluded – earlier in life, these dreams may see university as a place where imagination and creativity are cherished and given the opportunity to flourish. Kate’s observation that she was the only first-year student who went to English departmental seminars (in which invited academics present and discuss their work) and that *‘you’ve got to follow your dream’* encapsulates such an imagined future very clearly.

There is substantial evidence in the research data of students interacting productively with one another to negotiate the practices of higher education. However, much of this interactive participation involves the exploitation of shared repertoires and working together to make sense of some of the reified protocols of higher education. There are only a few rather indefinite allusions to the place that such interaction in a notional community of practice plays in the development of students’ creativity. Indeed, following on from the discussion above, the evidence tends to suggest that – for some of these students – competence and the ability to meet set criteria *appear* to have more currency in higher education than individuality and imagination. Undoubtedly, more transparent academic criteria – which serve to weaken the effects of what Lillis (1999) calls the ‘institutional practice of mystery’ through which the

‘rules of the game’ are clearly aligned with certain forms of cultural capital – are necessary, but *if* we want academic writing to do more than simply meet these criteria, if we want it to unleash students’ creative and full academic potential, then how may this be achieved? Mitchell (2010) argues that one way of moving towards this would be to widen the place of writing within the curriculum. Traditionally, writing has been something that students undertake at various points in the academic year and – on most of these occasions – it contributes to summative assessment. To escape from this association of writing with the tyranny of assessment, Mitchell suggests that we should seek to create ‘spaces for writing [and] places and time to practise writing and reading that is playful and transitional’ (p. 146). What she is suggesting here is that writing should become a far more regular feature of learning in higher education, and less of a dreaded hurdle to be traversed at regular intervals. One of the most powerful, recurrent themes in the research data is the element of risk so often associated with adult student participation in higher education and the significant level of anxiety this creates. For many of the students interviewed their anxiety was closely linked to the stringent requirements of assessment in higher education, and writing was more often seen as a means to an end rather than as any end in itself. The data therefore suggest that this is a particularly challenging aspect of transition and point to the need to embed more regular, formative (and thus less threatening) writing tasks within the practices of higher education. Bioecological theory (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006) may help to elucidate what underpins this challenge, in that its proximal processes that lead to learning and development need to take place regularly and frequently: from this perspective, the regular occurrence of such non-threatening tasks has the potential to enhance students’ familiarity with and creativity in this central area of higher education practice.

This part of the discussion has examined what it means to be an effective student in higher education. It has applied a theoretical framework primarily informed by communities of practice and bioecological theory to illuminate some of the main themes relating to student effectiveness which emerge from the data. To return very briefly to Barnett’s (2009) warning on the ascendancy of the performative student – the data do give some tentative support to his contention that the *dominant* ethos in contemporary higher education practice is rather more instrumental than transformative. Of course, what function universities perform is ultimately

determined by social, economic and political factors: in Scotland – where public ‘investment’ in higher education is proportionately higher than in the rest of the UK – the government plays a central role in shaping policy. In terms of one of its stated aims – making higher education a more transformative experience – this research suggests that an increased emphasis on the development of academic literacy has the potential to enhance the transformative dimension of learning in higher education. Here, the Enhancement Themes project is very promising: it remains to be seen, however, to what extent the continuing pressure on resources will actually enable academic staff to implement the innovative curricular changes they are being challenged to develop.

2. The impact of social networks

One of the themes that emerges quite clearly from the research data is that each student’s experience of transition to higher education is, to a significant extent, influenced by their social relationships both within and outwith the academy. In the self-selecting sample of students interviewed in this research, all the participants were in an early stage of transition to higher education, and those second-year students who participated in the focus group were some way further along a trajectory towards full participation in its community of practice. A particular limitation of the research, therefore, is that because – for valid practical reasons – it did not seek to investigate the experience of those who were unable to negotiate transition and left higher education early, its analysis of the most challenging aspects of transition is necessarily incomplete. Yorke and Longden (2003) suggest that there are four general categories of reasons why students withdraw from their programmes: ‘flawed decision-making about entering the programme; students’ experience of the programme and the institution generally; failure to cope with the demand of the programme; and events that impact on students’ lives outside the institution’ (p. 104). The last category is most likely to be influenced by external relationships but none of these categories is distinct from or independent of the others and the nature and effects of social relationships may be a significant factor in each. Thus, although the research did not address withdrawal from higher education *per se*, consideration of some of the problematic issues related to social relationships that emerge from this data may point to the types of difficulty which when magnified or combined

contribute to student withdrawal from higher education. In relation to adult students in particular, social relationships are often a significant source of support that helps to ease the demands of transition: this aspect of the impact of social networks will also be considered here.

In Chapter 6 of the thesis, data relating to students' membership of multiple communities of practice was considered in some detail. Using Wenger's (1998) concept of the 'nexus of multi-membership' analysis of the data suggests that the membership of existing communities of practice has the potential to influence participation in new communities. For some of the adult students the tensions caused by participation in new communities – where the valued practices differed significantly from those of their older communities – led to a sense of 'movement away' from prior relationships. Where these tensions arise and students are able to distance themselves from such relationships it may have little effect – other perhaps than the sense of sadness that was explicitly referred to by one of the interviewees – on their experience of transition. However, it seems reasonable to suggest that when such tensions arise and the centripetal pull of existing communities of practice is strong – when they are particularly important to an individual – that this dissonant aspect of multiple membership may have a significant impact on transition. When this tension does exist it may have a clear effect on student trajectories: because of their reluctance or inability to participate fully in all the valued practices of the higher education community they are – in effect – eschewing movement along an inbound trajectory towards full participation and may remain peripheral or quasi-peripheral participants throughout their time at university. For most of the adult students interviewed this restricted participation was most evident in relation to the more social aspects of participation in university life, but for some students it represented a rejection of (or exclusion from) other, more central aspects of participation in higher education:

I don't really feel that I belong in this place: I turn up most days and I do the work I need to do. But no I can't say I'm enjoying it; as soon as the classes finish I'm out of here and back to my family and friends. I just want to get a degree and hope that it gets me a good job in the end (Bill, GCU).

I suppose I feel a bit of an outsider here ... no, not just socially. It's hard to explain but it's like everything's set up for students straight out of school and sometimes I think that no matter how hard I work I'm just not going to get as much out of this as they will (Amy, GU).

Both of these extracts from the data suggest an element of disenchantment – some bitterness in the first, and sad realisation in the second – with a level of participation in higher education which is perceived as peripheral. There is no evidence in the data to support any suggestion that such ‘peripheral’ students do not achieve very good academic outcomes, but it does seem reasonable to suggest that it may lead to some diminution of their overall learning experience.

Transition can also be seen as a movement between communities of practice and negotiation of the necessary changes in practice this entails: Wenger (1998) uses the concept of ‘boundary’ to explain the nature of these changes. Where there are distinct differences between sets of practices associated with different communities, the negotiation of boundaries may be challenging. On the other hand, when the boundaries between communities of practice are less distinct and there is some commonality of practices, transition may then require less testing shifts in practice and identity. In the research data, there is some evidence that the extent to which the practices of higher education mirror those that students have already encountered in their access or other pre-university courses has a clear impact on their experience of transition. In particular, the data suggest that access courses delivered by universities introduce students to more of the practices – for instance, academic citation and assessment by examination – they will be required to master in higher education and thus lessen the extent of ‘boundary crossing’ transition requires. It is certainly the case that there is already some co-operation between higher education institutions and other access course providers, but this research suggests that focusing on a closer alignment between the pedagogical practices of the various institutions involved in widening participation may have a significant impact on students’ experience of transition.

The application of a communities of practice theoretical framework to analysis of this data has been particularly useful in explaining some of the *processes* transition

entails. It has facilitated, for instance, an explanation of how learning takes place through students' interactive participation in making sense of the reified artefacts they encounter in transition. Similarly, it has illuminated how participation and non-participation in the valued practices of higher education shape student learning trajectories and affect the outcomes of their education. It has shown how for some adult students non-participation is a consequence of the relative impenetrability and exclusionary power of some of these practices and, on the other hand, that, for some, non-participation in certain practices is a deliberate instrumental strategy for negotiating the demands of university. In the data, several students referred to their application of a particularly instrumental approach to their studies that involved focusing only on specific areas of each subject for assignments or prospective examination questions. Whilst there was a general recognition that this is an effective approach to achieving successful assessment outcomes in contemporary higher education, there was also – amongst some of the students – an element of disillusionment with this, a sense that this was not what they expected or hoped the experience of university learning would be. A communities of practice theoretical perspective has, then, proved to be useful in explaining some of the processes involved in transition. However, it is arguably less applicable to an explanation of the role in transition of both wider social factors and the specific contexts of individual students. The problem is that in trying to apply communities of practice theory to certain social relationships it begins to appear increasingly abstract and, as a result, loses some of its explanatory power. In a tightly bounded community of practice – for instance, in a workplace setting – it is relatively straightforward to identify the social relationships and trajectories of those involved: new employees are legitimate peripheral participants, established staff or mentors are the 'old timers', and an inbound trajectory carries participants towards full occupational competence. In a more loosely bounded community – of which higher education is a very clear example – relationships are far more complex and distributed, and the process of locating individuals or even groups of individuals within such a community becomes more problematic. Throughout the thesis the term 'notional community of practice' has been used to describe the dimension of higher education that generates and controls the valued practices in which students are required to participate. This term also encapsulates the element of abstraction that begins to characterise communities of practice theory when it is applied to more loosely bounded communities. Although

it is useful in explaining what constitutes and may exclude some from peripheral participation, it is less helpful in allowing us to understand what full participation in higher education actually entails. Similarly, who are the ‘old timers’ in higher education? Students who are at a more advanced stage of their studies may be asked to address new students and may even assume the role of mentor, but even then the frequency of interaction is arguably insufficient to have a particularly powerful effect on learning. If the fully qualified academic staff are the old timers – and the argument may be made that they operate within a substantively different community of practice with its own set of valued practices – then their contact with students in transition is even more irregular. In many institutions, the academic staff with whom new students are in fairly regular contact are, in fact, graduate teaching assistants: postgraduate students who are often required to gain experience in undergraduate teaching, and whose effectiveness in the role – as noted above – is rather variable. This may be related to a number of factors including subject knowledge and training in and commitment to teaching. And as Tobbell and O’Donnell (2013) argue, postgraduate students may be victims of their own undergraduate success and the attribution to them of ‘expert’ status: across higher education, assumptions are made that because their transition to undergraduate education was clearly effective then transition to postgraduate study will be similarly unproblematic. The reality, Tobbell and O’Donnell (*ibid.*) suggest, is that transition to postgraduate study involves a significantly different set of challenges and many students struggle to form new ‘postgraduate identities’. Thus, it is certainly possible that postgraduate students who are still involved in the process of shaping their own new identities are being asked to interact with students in transition to undergraduate study, and – implicitly – to take part in their identity formation.

What this discussion has endeavoured to illustrate is that there are certain limitations to the application of communities of practice theory to explanations of wider social relationships, particularly those which exist within less delineated communities. The factors involved in shaping the experience of transition are complex, multi-dimensional and multi-layered and their analysis therefore necessitates the use of theoretical perspectives that are able to take full account of this complexity. In the brief introduction to bioecological systems theory in chapter two, the point was made that although this theoretical perspective is necessarily complex it is also highly

flexible, and its sheer fluidity means that it is applicable to explanations of learning across a wide range of contexts, practices and social relationships. The discussion now moves on to an examination through the lens of bioecological theory of some of the themes in the data related to social relationships.

One of the most recurrent themes is the importance of carrying forward existing social relationships – primarily those formed by adult students in access classes – into higher education. These social relationships provide both emotional and academic support and often involve the utilisation of joint repertoires of important resources. The point was made above that some of these social groupings exhibit several of the characteristics of communities of practice, but the degree of alignment between theory and reality is arguably rather tentative. How for instance can this theory explain the transfer or movement of the community from one context to another? Using a bioecological theoretical perspective (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006), these important social groups may be reconceptualised as elements of the microsystem of all the individuals involved. Although the microsystem is a proximal set of social relationships it is nonetheless the microsystem of the *individual* and it is – unlike a community of practice – inherently portable. Movement of a set of relationships and practices from one context to another is, therefore, explained simply by the movement of the individuals in that group.

Beyond the microsystem the next level in Bronfenbrenner's model of the context of human development is the mesosystem which encompasses the connections between our microsystems and those proximal to us which we encounter regularly. In the research data, there are clear examples of how supportive family connections in the mesosystems of several adult students contributed very significantly to their ability to negotiate the demands of academic life. A number of students comment on how close family members were an important source of reassurance which acted as a counter to the occasional experience of panic that occurred in the early stages of transition. To return to the question of student retention, it seems reasonable to posit that the antithesis of this – family antipathy towards participation in higher education – may contribute to student withdrawal. In general, adult students have a higher level of family commitments than traditional students, and the research suggests, therefore, that a more proactive focus on engaging students' families with the culture – to many

families of non-traditional students, an alien culture (Reay, 2002) – of higher education may have a positive impact on their experience of transition. The data also suggest that where students' mesosystems include connections through which they are able to draw on the experience of former students or 'external' expertise this may have a positive effect on their learning: a suggestion that is compatible with Lave's (1993) conceptualisation of the 'learning curriculum'. At the next level, the exosystem, there are factors involved in shaping experience that are frequently outwith the immediate control of the individual. One example of such a factor that might operate here is the closure of a workplace in which a student's employment helps to finance their participation in higher education. Arguably, the exosystem is the level of the bioecological model where unexpected or 'domino-effect' events are most likely to have an impact; and student participation in learning may be seriously undermined by changes or events that are – at first glance – distal to their immediate context. This is, of course, a reflection of the sheer complexity of modern life and not, therefore, something which can easily be grafted on to current models of student support. Nonetheless, appropriate sensitivity to the unexpected consequences of contemporary life that students – and perhaps adult students in particular – confront can only serve to enhance the quality of institutional support they are offered during their time in higher education.

The fourth contextual level of the bioecological model is the macrosystem: the overarching cultural and social structure that is underpinned by shared beliefs, values and practices (Bronfenbrenner, 1995). Since bioecological theory focuses on the role of *proximal* processes in human learning, consideration of the role of macrosystem offers little that is explicitly relevant to close analysis of student learning. It does, however, serve to illuminate – once again – some of the important issues around the relationship between social class and higher education, and shows how these issues permeate inwards towards individual microsystems and affect the resource characteristics (particularly those linked to social and cultural capital) of individual students. There are several examples in the data of students encountering a new, even alien cultural milieu in their experience of transition to higher education – particularly in relation to the dominant forms of spoken and written language – and this, for them, adds significantly to the challenge of transition. The chronosystem or macro-time, in a later development of the model (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006), focuses on the

passage of time and on the cumulative impact of significant changes that individuals experience over their life course. The concept of risk and the anxiety it engenders appears frequently in the research data examined in this thesis, and consideration of the chronosystem and the economic, social and cultural changes that have taken place over time helps to explain why so many adult students are prepared to expose themselves to a level of risk that undoubtedly has a significant impact on their overall experience of higher education. It was suggested above that one example of this relates to the changes in Western society during late modernity that have given rise to an increased emphasis on the need for reflexively ordered life-planning (Giddens, 1991, Beck, 1992). It could also be postulated that major changes in higher education have the potential to influence the life course decisions some individuals take. With the recent substantial increase in university tuition fees in England, the potential impact is abundantly clear, but Scottish higher education is also undergoing significant, albeit more subtle, change which may lead to further pressures on already stretched resources. It remains to be seen what effect these changes will have on levels of participation and the overall student experience.

3. The effects of structural factors

Analysis of the interplay of agency and structure in shaping individual and collective action has contributed to one of social science's most dynamic and enduring debates. Ecclestone (2009) defines agency as 'people's capacity to interact with others and with material conditions in order to shape their own destinies, both individually and collectively' (p. 15). Such agency is clearly constrained – to a certain extent – by factors like social class, gender, race and the economic and material conditions that shape the structures within which it operates. Ecclestone (ibid.) suggests that research has often demonstrated a tendency to focus on one side of this dualism rather than the other. Realistically, however, it is difficult to untangle the complex interaction of agency and structure in social relationships and systems, and as Evans (2002) argues in relation to young adults' educational and occupational transitions: 'If policies and interventions are to be made effective, we need to sharpen our awareness of the interplay of structural forces and individuals' attempts to control their lives' (p. 265).

In relation to the role of agency and structure in transition to higher education, several themes emerge from the data. In terms of agency, an overarching theme is that the majority of adult students interviewed clearly exhibit a high level of agency: this is demonstrated by their willingness to take the risk-laden decision to enter university as a life course strategy. The data also show that throughout the process of transition manifestations of student agency are confronted by structural factors that – to varying degrees – limit their overall effect. Clearly, social class is one of the most powerful structural influences on adult students' experience of higher education, and the insidious influence of social class on its valued practices has been examined in some detail at various points in the thesis. Here, therefore, the discussion will deal with structural factors that are more explicitly related to the organisational characteristics of higher education.

Several adult students reflected on their surprise and disappointment that some of the teaching and learning practices they had experienced on their respective access courses are less widely employed in higher education. One of these practices is interaction between students and lecturers in a classroom setting: a few students observed that they had asked appropriate questions in lectures but felt that it immediately became evident that although this is 'allowed' there is, at the same time, a tacit understanding that it is not common practice. Several other students reflected on how they missed the informal interaction that was encouraged in their access classes. From an academic perspective, Dr A. commented on how he initially tried to introduce more interaction in his lectures but the very limited response of students to this demonstrates – in his view – the existence of a widespread understanding that lectures do not involve a significant level of interaction. A number of students also articulated some dissatisfaction with the variable quality of the learning experience in seminars and tutorials. Another theme that emerges from the data relates to the overall quality of feedback on assessments and to unacceptable delays in the return of students' work. Particularly in the early stages of transition, students need some indication that they are successfully meeting the demands of higher education and, if there are any weaknesses in their work, they need clear and informative feedback which will help them to address these issues. Arguably, all of these problematic aspects of higher education are the result of structural factors associated with the management and organisation of the curriculum. In relation to the first of these – the

lack of interaction in lectures – it is generally the case that higher education institutions do little to foster or encourage interaction in undergraduate lectures. Of course, such classes – particularly in the first two years of undergraduate study – are very large and the practical argument may be that lecturers have a set amount of material to deliver within the hour-long lecture. Why, then could the size of classes not be reduced and – as two students suggested – lectures extended to ninety minutes to enable a higher level of interaction? The answer to this is also the answer to the question of why established members of academic staff rarely take first- and second-year tutorials: full-time lecturers have only a set number of hours allocated to their face-to-face teaching responsibilities; the rest of their contracted hours are taken up by research and other tasks. Of course, research is a central aspect of contemporary higher education: it has the potential to enhance institutional status and attract essential funding. However, this research project is not explicitly concerned with the financial management of universities; it is concerned with identifying factors that enhance or have a negative effect on transition and adult students' experience of teaching and learning in higher education. And it is arguably the case that some of the problems adult students experience that are related to structural factors call into question the frequent claim made by most, if not all, universities that they are 'centres of excellence in teaching'.

Outwith the immediate institutional context, the student experience is also affected by structural factors related to government policy on higher education. There is a particular emphasis in the public policy documents examined in Chapter 4 on the development of increased flexibility in higher education provision: a flexibility which is essential to meet the needs of an increasingly diverse study body. Focusing on the implications of the lifelong learning agenda, they also call for fundamental changes in the framework of higher education provision which will enable learners to move 'seamlessly' between learning opportunities over their life course. There are encouraging indications in the Enhancement Themes project that there is a growing emphasis in higher education on the development of more flexible and responsive pedagogical practices which – if fully implemented – have the potential to meet the diversity of student needs more effectively than some current practices. There is, however, a concern somewhat undermining these promising developments about how effectively and extensively they can be adopted against a backdrop of already

stretched financial resources. One particularly clear implication of this is a movement towards a greater use of information technology in teaching and learning. Some of this is undoubtedly a welcome development: it can, for instance, be used to provide almost instantaneous assessment of some formative assignments. Although the research interviews considered here were conducted a few years ago – arguably before the ‘electronic revolution’ in higher education gathered pace – the data suggest that the engagement of these adult students with virtual learning environments was primarily instrumental and, in general, rather unenthusiastic. Of course, this may simply be a reflection of the limitations of the electronic resources they encountered rather than an indication that adult students are generally less inclined – or able – to engage productively with electronic media than their younger counterparts are: this is another aspect of academic practice which is worthy of further study.

There are significant changes taking place in higher education and, at first glance, these may seem to suggest an enhancement of student agency. However, much of this is rather individualised agency relating to personal development plans and the acquisition of graduate attributes. The proposed involvement of students in designing assessment tasks will probably be at the formative level, and it seems likely that the overall design of summative assessments will remain the responsibility of academic staff. Universities, therefore, continue to be institutions whose practices are very heavily influenced by structural factors. The data considered in this thesis suggest that student agency largely operates on a personal level: it helps to shape their decision on participation and often drives them to academic success, but, in relation to its ability to influence or change the central practices of higher education, it is highly limited.

Chapter 8

Concluding remarks

The most apparent gap in the relevant literature which this research seeks to address relates to the predominance in that literature of approaches which are conceptually grounded in linear and deficit models of transition. The implicit premises of such interpretations are that adult students in transition require targeted support and guidance to facilitate their movement along largely predetermined pathways, and – in the ‘transition as development’ approach – that what is required is the development of a range of specific attitudes and skills (in which, by implication, there is an element of deficiency) that are closely associated with effective participation in higher education. Whilst there can be little doubt that much of the research predicated on such assumptions has led to welcome innovations in higher education policy and practice which have enhanced the ‘outcomes’ of transition for all students, it is arguably the case that such an instrumental approach relegates to the shadows the rich diversity of the experience of transition. In particular, it has a tendency to obscure many of the more subtle emotional aspects of transition as it is experienced by individuals with different life histories, social networks, hopes, fears and expectations. This peripheralisation of some of the less tangible – and often intense – emotional dimensions of transition arguably leads to a narrow, rather blinkered understanding of how it is experienced. While this undermines analyses of the transition experience of all students, it is a particularly glaring omission in relation to adult students whose individual histories, responsibilities, social networks, fears and dreams are – in general – very different to those of ‘traditional’ younger students around whose needs most models of transition support are primarily shaped. Recognition of this limitation in much of the existing academic work on adult student transition illuminates the conceptual utility of a third, more flexible approach to transition which sees it not as a discrete developmental ‘event’ with a definable beginning and end but as a lifelong process of becoming, involving continuous identity change: frequently subtle, occasionally more profound. From this perspective, transition is not linear or unidirectional: it is wavelike in that the intensity of factors leading to change ebbs and flows, often unpredictably; and allowance is made for the toing and froing of change as we negotiate and adapt to the demands of life. In relation to the experience of adult

students, this approach offers the flexibility to take account of the multiplicity of factors and influences that impact adult life; it enables more careful consideration of external factors that undermine participation in higher education, as well as those that promote and enhance it.

Through the highly flexible conceptual lens of ‘transition as becoming’, the research highlights two distinct, overarching themes that partially address the gap in the literature identified above: first, the significance, for adult students, of risk, and, second, the significant impact of external relationships. It would be no exaggeration to suggest that the first of these, risk, is the predominant theme of the research data. While several of the students interviewed intimated that they were studying their degree course because of a long-held subject interest, every interviewee suggested that their studies were linked to career aspirations for themselves and – in several cases – wider aspirations for their families. Such hopes for the future were frequently accompanied by an explicit acknowledgement of the element of risk that participation in higher education entails: attitudes compatible with the concept of reflexively ordered life-planning which Giddens (1991) asserts is increasingly necessary in the unstable economic and social conditions of late modernity. The risks described include academic failure, financial difficulties, and not gaining appropriate employment or, indeed, any employment after completion of a degree course. Several interviewees had left stable, albeit unfulfilling, employment to enter higher education, and it is hardly surprising that their recognition of the risk involved in this was particularly marked. There are also more subtle risks referred to in the data and these particularly relate to changes in identity that have the potential to strain close relationships and distance students from their existing social networks. Recognition of risk is, then, ubiquitous in the data, as is the sense of anxiety it very frequently engenders. There are of course individual differences in the ways in which anxiety is manifested: in the data these range from being ‘a bit nervous’ to feeling physically ill. However it affects individual adult students, the data clearly suggest that risk and the associated anxiety permeate their experience of transition to higher education. That anxiety affects their negotiation of many of the valued practices of higher education, particularly those associated with assessment and academic progress. Thus, adult students frequently articulate a heightened need for early validation – through assessment of their work – of their decision to participate in higher education. Many

of the most valued quotidian practices of academia are associated with specific forms of written and verbal literacy, and the data suggest that its stringent requirements are frequently associated with high levels of anxiety. In the language of communities of practice theory, anxiety also impacts student trajectories: for some it impels them towards full participation, for others – when anxiety engenders fear of rejection, or an explicit desire to sustain supportive prior networks – it maintains their peripheral position. Arguably, therefore, the twin influences of risk and anxiety are the most significant defining characteristics of adult students' experience of transition: many of the requirements of practice and participation – writing essays, seminar discussion, for instance – are ostensibly similar for traditional and adult students but what distinguishes them for the latter is the constant, insidious presence of the element of uncertainty – for them and, often, for their families – that accompanies their participation in higher education. Whilst the presence of anxiety is very widely acknowledged in the data, there is little evidence that this anxiety has any *discernible* effect on the outcome (in terms of academic progress) of transition: in fact, it may be the case that an elevated level of anxiety is a powerful motivational factor in academic success. What the theme of anxiety certainly points to is the significance of the connections between emotion and learning in higher education, and this suggests that the impact of emotional factors on the experience of transition is worthy of further, targeted research.

The second overarching theme that emerges from the data is the significance of external relationships. The data suggest that the nexus of multimembership of different social networks – or communities of practice – exerts a profound influence on adult students' developing identity as they negotiate transition. The concept of such a nexus, which is unique to the individual, is compatible with the focus in the 'transition as becoming' model on the complex interaction of a wide range of factors which shapes the experience of transition. Membership of multiple communities can have a significant effect on the trajectory of participation in the higher education community of practice. Where there are real tensions between the social norms and valued practices of students' existing communities and those of higher education, this has the potential to inhibit their movement towards full participation. This would be the case when students find the identity shifts associated with participation in higher education, that require some rejection of their background and existing networks,

difficult to countenance. On the other hand, where there is an element of overlap between the boundaries of communities – as is certainly the case between some access courses and higher education – then movement between communities may be less challenging. Similarly, some networks external to higher education have the potential to enhance learning through the operation of what Lave (1993) describes as the learning curriculum in which cognate situated learning takes place outwith the immediate higher education context.

Although the research arguably addresses some of the gaps in the relevant literature, it has a number of limitations (particularly in relation to data collection) which means that several of its initial aims were not realised. The most significant limitation which was identified early in the research planning was that those students who agreed to participate in the research were – allowing for a wide range of different experiences – still involved in transition to and within higher education. Arguably, withdrawal from higher education is – in itself – a form of transition, albeit one that is generally regarded as undesirable. Exploring the experience of those students who had taken the undoubtedly difficult decision to leave higher education would therefore have facilitated a more comprehensive understanding of transition. However, because of the difficulty involved in reaching and recruiting such students, particularly for a single researcher, this was not feasible. A second significant limitation relates to the self-selecting nature of the student sample. In the initial research design the aim was to interview a balanced sample of students across the range of academic disciplines with broadly equal numbers who had followed each of the three access pathways (university access, SWAP access and further/higher education articulation) and who had entered each of the three ‘types’ of university (ancient, post-Robbins and post-1992). Because of the unanticipated difficulty of recruiting students to take part in the research, this aim also proved to be largely unachievable: the vast majority of students who took part were studying humanities, social science and education, and only a small number had gained entry through articulation. In relation to the types of institution, the sample was more representative (although the number of post-1992 university students was comparatively low). Despite this, careful analysis of the data did not suggest that there were tangible differences in the transition experience of adult students in the different institutions, other than those related to the particular access pathways they had followed. A final limitation of the research relates to my

‘insider’ status as someone directly involved in facilitating access to higher education. I was not involved in this when the research was designed, but was during the process of data collection and analysis. Every effort was made to try and ensure the objectivity of the data analysis, but as Trowler (2012) argues such objective detachment is often problematic in close-up research. Explicit acknowledgement of insider status does, at least, open the door to consideration of the potential impact of an element of subjectivity on the findings of this research.

Finally, it is necessary to consider the possible implications of this research. In relation to policy and practice, some interesting and promising suggestions are being put forward as a result of the Enhancement Themes project and undoubtedly important innovations are being tested across the Scottish higher education sector. Many of the aspects of practice that this research suggests are particularly problematic for adult students are – to varying extents – being addressed in these developments. For instance, the issue relating to ‘economies of meaning’ in which adult students often feel that their experience and interpretations are undervalued, is arguably confronted by the Enhancement Themes project’s call for greater epistemological flexibility. However, the two major themes that emerge from this research are arguably both under researched, even though they have significant implications for higher education. The impact of risk and the accompanying experience of anxiety may have a particular impact on adult retention rates in higher education, which continue to be problematic, and – beyond issues of retention – have a tangible effect on adult students’ experience of transition. Further research could focus on areas of that transition in which anxiety may have a particularly marked effect. Acknowledging the centrality of academic literacy in the valued practices of higher education, further research might, for instance, examine how heightened anxiety affects academic writing. It was mentioned in the preceding chapter that an overdependence on the use of direct quotations is sometimes evident in early academic writing. Carefully targeted research could address the question of whether or not this is linked to anxiety and ask the question: does anxiety contribute to a lack of student confidence about their ability to express concepts and present evidence in their own words? A similar analysis of the impact of risk and anxiety could be applied to a wide range of academic practices that are negotiated in transition. Second, research could focus rather more explicitly on the impact of external social networks

on transition. There has been a considerable body of research conducted into diversity in higher education, but very frequently this has focused on student classifications linked to gender, social class, race, sexuality and other sources of difference. What is less evident in the literature is a specific focus on the impact of individuals' social networks on higher education in general, and transition in particular. This research hints at the importance of these networks and suggests that they significantly influence the experience of adult students in transition. They impact that experience in different ways, with varying intensity and at different times, and, from a 'transition as becoming' perspective, they contribute to the wavelike nature of change in transition. The nexus or interaction of different communities and networks is, in many respects, a unique aspect of an individual's social world, but by closely studying the range of different ways in which tensions between networks are resolved (or not) a far clearer understanding of the nature of adult students' experience of transition to higher education may be gained. Research into the impact of anxiety and the influence of social networks, grounded in the sociocultural theory which has underpinned this research, and viewed through the wider angle of a 'transition as becoming' conceptual lens, has the potential to depict transition as a facet of 'the enchantment of being human' (Archer, 2000, p. 318) rather than, more simply, as a problem to be solved.

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Appendix 1

UNIVERSITY of GLASGOW

Faculty of Education

Ethics Committee for Non Clinical Research Involving Human Subjects

EAP2 NOTIFICATION OF ETHICS APPLICATION FORM APPROVAL

Application No. (*Research Office use only*)

E844

Period of Approval (*Research Office use only*)

17/09/2007 to 30/09/2008

Date: 17 September 2007

Dear Douglas

I am writing to advise you that your resubmitted application for ethical approval, reference E844R for 'Adult Students' Transitions to Higher Education: Communities, Practice and Participation.' has been approved.

You should retain this approval notification for future reference. If you have any queries please do not hesitate to contact me in the Research Office and I will refer them to the Faculty's Ethics Committee.

Regards,

Terri Hume
Ethics and Research Secretary

Faculty of Education Research Office
University of Glasgow
Room 425D (Ethics 425b)
St Andrew's Building, 11 Eldon Street, Glasgow, G3 6NH

Tel: 0141-330-4101(Ethics: 3007)
Fax: 0141-330-3065
E-mail: T.Hume@educ.gla.ac.uk (Ethics Secretary)

Appendix 2

UNIVERSITY of GLASGOW

Faculty of Education

Ethics Committee for Non Clinical Research Involving Human Subjects

EAP2 NOTIFICATION OF ETHICS APPLICATION FORM APPROVAL

Application No. (*Research Office use only*)

E844 - 2

Period of Approval (*Research Office use only*)
17/09/2007 to 31/03/2009

Date: 18 November 2008

Dear Douglas

Reference E844R

'Adult Students' Transitions to Higher Education: Communities, Practice and Participation.'

I am writing to advise you that your ethical approval period has been extended as per the dates given above.

You should retain this approval notification for future reference. If you have any queries please do not hesitate to contact me in the Research Office and I will refer them to the Faculty's Ethics Committee.

Regards,

Terri Hume
Ethics and Research Secretary

Faculty of Education Research Office
University of Glasgow
Room 425D (Ethics 425b)
St Andrew's Building, 11 Eldon Street, Glasgow, G3 6NH

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Appendix 3

Plain language statement (A) – student/staff interviews

Invitation to take part in research

You are being invited to participate in the research study described below. Before you decide whether or not you would like to take part it is important for you to understand why the research is being undertaken and exactly what your participation in it will involve. Please take time to read the information provided here carefully before you decide whether or not you wish to take part. If you wish, you may discuss the information with others not involved in the study and you are very welcome to ask the researcher for further information before making a decision.

Study title

The project is entitled – **Adult students’ transition to higher education: communities, practice and participation** and aims to explore the experiences of mature students who are adapting to the requirements of higher education as well as those of university staff who witness and are involved in that process of adaptation.

Who is carrying out the research?

The research is being conducted by Douglas Sutherland, a full-time, PhD student in the Department of Adult and Continuing Education (DACE) at the University of Glasgow. His research is being funded by a three-year studentship from the University and is supervised by Dr Victoria O’Donnell, Professor Brian Findsen and Ms Kathy Maclachlan (all members of the academic staff of DACE).

Why are you asking me?

You are being approached because you are either a mature student (at least twenty-five years old) at a Scottish university or a member of staff (involved in teaching or guidance) at a Scottish university or college.

What will I have to do?

If you agree to take part in the research, you will be asked to participate in a one-to-one interview with the above-named researcher. These interviews will take place between December 2007 and March 2009. Students who are interviewed may also be asked to take part in shorter follow-up interviews for up to six months after the initial interview.

Faculty of Education Research Office
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Tel: 0141-330-4101 (Ethics: 3007)
Fax: 0141-330-3065
E-mail: T.Hume@educ.gla.ac.uk (Ethics Secretary)



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Will my data be kept confidential?

The interviews will be recorded using a mini-disc recorder and afterwards their content will be typed-up. Recorded and printed data will be stored in locked filing cabinets and electronic data will be stored in password-protected computers. The interviews should be open and honest but because of the Freedom of Information Act there may be some legal limitations on the confidentiality of the information provided. However, your real name will not be used in the written transcripts of the interview, the PhD thesis, or any other publication related to this research. The original recordings will be erased six months after the completion of the project.

Do I have to take part?

No, participation in this project is entirely voluntary. If you agree to take part you are free to change your mind at any time without any need to explain your decision. You can also request that any data you have already provided is withdrawn from the study.

Who should I contact for more information?

If you would like any more information on the research project and what your participation would involve, you can e-mail Douglas Sutherland on d.sutherland.1@research.gla.ac.uk.

If you have any concerns or questions about ethical issues or the conduct of the research you can contact the Faculty of Education's Ethics Officer, Dr George Head – Tel: 0141 330 3048 or e-mail G.Head@educ.gla.ac.uk

Faculty of Education Research Office
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Appendix 4

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Plain language statement (B) – student focus groups

Invitation to take part in research

You are being invited to participate in the research study described below. Before you decide whether or not you would like to take part it is important for you to understand why the research is being undertaken and exactly what your participation in it will involve. Please take time to read the information provided here carefully before you decide whether or not you wish to take part. If you wish, you may discuss the information with others not involved in the study and you are very welcome to ask the researcher for further information before making a decision.

Study title

The project is entitled **Adult students' transition to higher education: communities, practice and participation** and aims to explore the experiences of mature students who are adapting to the requirements of higher education as well as those of university staff who witness and are involved in that process of adaptation.

Who is carrying out the research?

The research is being conducted by Douglas Sutherland, a full-time, PhD student in the Department of Adult and Continuing Education (DACE) at the University of Glasgow. His research is being funded by a three-year studentship from the University and is supervised by Dr Victoria O'Donnell, Professor Brian Findsen and Ms Kathy Maclachlan (all members of the academic staff of DACE).

Why are you asking me?

You are being approached because you are a mature student (at least twenty-five years old) at a Scottish University.

What will I have to do?

If you agree to take part in the research, you will take part in a group discussion, known as a focus group, with other mature students. The focus groups will meet between December 2008 and March 2009.



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Will my data be kept confidential?

The focus group discussions will be recorded using a mini-disc recorder and afterwards their content will be typed-up. Recorded and printed data will be stored in locked filing cabinets and electronic data will be stored in password-protected computers. The interviews should be open and honest but because of the Freedom of Information Act there may be some legal limitations on the confidentiality of the information provided. However, the real names of those taking part in the focus groups will not be used in the written transcripts of the interview, the PhD thesis, or any other publication related to this research. The original recordings will be erased six months after the completion of the project.

Do I have to take part?

No, participation in this project is entirely voluntary. If you agree to take part you are free to change your mind at any time without any need to explain your decision. You can also request that any data you have already provided is withdrawn from the study.

Who should I contact for more information?

If you would like any more information on the research project and what your participation would involve, you can e-mail Douglas Sutherland on d.sutherland.1@research.gla.ac.uk.

If you have any concerns or questions about ethical issues or the conduct of the research you can contact the Faculty of Education's Ethics Officer, Dr George Head – Tel: 0141 330 3048 or e-mail G.Head@educ.gla.ac.uk

Appendix 5



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Letter to former access students

12 March 2008

Dear

Research on Adult Students in Higher Education

I am writing to you, and other former Department of Adult and Continuing Education Access students, to ask if you would consider participating in my PhD research project.

Based in DACE, I am now in the second year of research looking at the transition of adult students (aged 25 or over) to higher education. I am in the process of interviewing students from Glasgow's three universities who gained entry to their courses through a variety of routes. I am particularly interested in speaking to students who studied on Glasgow University's own Access course and are now in their first year of studies. Participation in the research would involve taking part in a very informal, face-to-face interview (lasting around an hour) at a time convenient to you – there are no arduous questionnaires involved. In the interview you would be asked to reflect on your preparation for and early experiences of university life. I have full ethical permission for my research from the Faculty of Education: its ethical standards ensure that the identities of all research participants remain confidential and that they have the right to withdraw from the research at any time. DACE has helped me by sending this letter to you but have not given me any record of your address. As a PhD student in DACE my research has their full support; nonetheless there is no official pressure on you to take part if you do not wish to.

If you are interested in taking part, or would like to find out more about the research before deciding, please e-mail me at –

d.sutherland.1@research.gla.ac.uk

I would be very grateful for your assistance with this and I look forward to hearing from you.

Yours sincerely

Douglas Sutherland

Appendix 6

Student interview schedule

The aim of the interview is to enable students to talk freely about their experiences and perceptions of education. Rather than adhering strictly to a set of specific questions the interviews will be semi-structured and will aim to examine the following themes and any relevant others the interviewees may raise:

Educational and occupational background

Attitudes of family and friends to HE

Study which enabled access to HE

Preconceptions of university life

The first weeks in HE

Opinions on teaching

Academic demands of HE: studying, writing and assessment

Identity and effects on external life

Memberships of groups (academic and social) within university

Perceived benefits of interaction with peers

University flexibility

Thoughts on the outcome of their university education

Other concerns, fears or hurdles

Appendix 7

Staff interview schedule

The aim of the interview is to enable university staff to talk freely about their experiences and perceptions of adult student participation in higher education. Rather than adhering strictly to a set of specific questions the interviews will be semi-structured and will aim to examine the following themes and any relevant others the interviewees may raise:

Differences between mature and traditional students

Effect of mature student participation on teaching strategy

Perception of students' pre-university courses

Mature student writing

Mature student integration with larger student body

Formation of mature student sub-cultures

Mature student institutional integration

Difficulties/benefits of growing mature student participation in HE

Appendix 8

Focus group schedule

The structure of focus group discussions will be very loose; rather than asking questions *per se*, the aim is to introduce themes for free discussion. Questions may be asked to clarify any points of particular interest. The themes for discussion are:

First-year induction

Reading lists

Writing and citation

Assessment and feedback

Teaching in first year (lecturers and graduate teaching assistants)

The value of discourse

Relationships with other students

Overall thoughts on transition



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Appendix 9

Consent Form

Title of project: adult students' transition to higher education: communities, practice and participation

Name of researcher: Douglas Sutherland

I confirm that I have read and understand the appropriate Plain Language Statement (A for interviews, B for focus groups) for the above study and that I have had the opportunity to seek further information and clarification of what my participation in the study will involve. I am aware that my verbal contributions to this research will be recorded and that a pseudonym will be used in any citation of my remarks in written material related to this research.

I understand that my participation in this research is entirely voluntary and that I am free to withdraw from the research at any time, without giving any reason.

I agree to take part in the above study.

Name of Participant

Date

Signature

Researcher

Date

Signature

Appendix 10

Details of research participants (anonymised)

Amy: 28 years old; single, no children; left school with 4 Standard Grades; last worked in the Civil Service; university access course; MA Social Sciences; Glasgow University (GU).

Angela: 32 years old; single, no children; left school with 3 Highers; last worked in retail management; SWAP Access to Health Care; BN Nursing; Glasgow Caledonian University (GCU).

Ann: 31 years old; married, 1 child; left school with 3 Standard Grades; last worked as a teaching assistant; SWAP Access to Social Science; BEd Primary Teaching; GU.

Bill: 43 years old; married, 3 children; left school with no qualifications; last worked as an HGV driver; FE articulation; BA Social Sciences; GCU.

Claire: 26 years old; single, no children; left school with 2 Highers; worked in financial services; SWAP Access to Humanities; BA English and Sociology; Stirling University (US).

Dan: 38 years old; married, 2 children; left school with 3 standard grades; last worked as an electrical foreman; university access; MA Social Sciences; GU.

Dave: 29 years old; single, no children; left school with 3 Highers; last worked in the Civil Service; university access course; BA Politics and Psychology; Strathclyde University (SU).

Eilidh: 28 years old; single, 1 child; left school with 2 Standard Grades; last worked in hospitality; university access; BA Psychology; (US).

Emma: 30 years old; married, no children; left school with 2 Highers; last worked in retail; university access course; MA Arts; GU.

Ewan: 31 years old; single, no children; left school with no qualifications; last worked in building trade; university access course; BA History; US.

Fiona: 28 years old; single, no children; left school with 5 Standard Grades; last worked in customer service; university access course; BA English; US.

Ian: 32 years old; single, no children; left school with two Highers; last worked in manufacturing; SWAP Access to Science; BSc Environmental Management; GCU.

James: 32 years old; single, no children; left school with 5 Standard Grades; worked in retail; university access; BA Business and Economics; SU.

Jennifer: 31 years old; married 3 children; left school with 3 standard grades; last worked in auxiliary nursing; university access; BN Nursing; GU.

John: 28 years old; single, no children; left school with 4 Highers, attended drama school; last worked as an actor; BA English and Politics; SU.

Julie: 25 years old; single, no children; left school with 3 Highers; last worked in voluntary sector; BA Psychology and Politics; SU.

June: 33 years old; married, 2 children; left school with 4 Standard Grades; last worked in social care; FE articulation; BA Social Work; GCU.

Kate: 26 years old; single, no children; left school with 3 Standard Grades; last worked in catering; SWAP Access to Humanities; MA Arts; GU.

Kathy: 31 years old; single, 2 children; left school with no qualifications; last worked in insurance admin.; university access; MA Social Sciences; GU.

Keith: 32 years old; single, 1 child; left school with 4 GCSEs; last worked in leisure management; university access; MA Business and Management; GU.

Laurie: 32 years old; married 2 children; left school with no qualifications; last worked in nursery education; university access; MA Social Sciences; GU.

Mark: 33 years old; married 1 child; left school with 2 Highers; last worked in insurance sales; FE articulation; BA Social Sciences; GCU.

Mary: 25 years old; single, no children; left school with four standard grades; last worked in childcare; SWAP Access to Social Science; BEd Primary Education; SU.

May: 41 years old; married 4 children; left school with 4 O Grades; last worked in school admin.; SWAP Access to Social Science; BEd Primary Teaching; GU.

Nazir: 28 years old; single, no children; left school with 5 Highers; last worked in family business; university access; LLB Law; GU.

Neil: 34 years old; married, 1 child; left school with no qualifications; last worked in manufacturing; FE articulation; BA Business; GCU.

Norma: 35 years old; married, 3 children; left school with 3 Standard Grades; last worked in retail; university access; BA English and Psychology; SU.

Paula: 37 years old; married, 2 children; left school with no qualifications; last worked in childcare; SWAP Access to Social Science; BEd Primary Teaching; GU.

Penny: 27 years old; single, no children; left school with 4 Standard Grades; last worked in retail; university access; BEd Primary Teaching; GU.

Peter: 30 years old; single, no children; left school with 2 Highers; last worked in local government; university access; MA Politics and Sociology; GU.

Richard: 36 years old; married 2 children; left school with 4 GCSEs; last worked in Royal Navy; university access; BA Psychology; US.

Rob: 42 years old; divorced, 3 children; left school with no qualifications; last worked in shipbuilding; university access; MA Politics and Sociology; GU.

Tom: 26 years old; single, no children; left school with no qualifications; last worked in manufacturing; university access; BA History; US.

Tony: 34 years old; married, 2 children; left school with 2 Highers; last worked in local government; university access; BA Education; US

Una: 27 years old; single, no children; left school with 4 Highers; last worked in travel industry; university access; BA English and French; US.

Second-year focus group participants

Arthur: 40 years old; married, 1 child; left school with 3 Highers; last worked as a police officer; university access; MA Politics and Sociology; GU.

Ben: 28 years old; single, no children; left school with 2 Highers; last worked in local government; university access; MA Politics and Economic History; GU.

Jill: 27 years old; single, no children; left school with 4 Standard Grades; last worked in retail management; SWAP Access to Humanities; MA Economics and Politics; GU.

Kevin: 32 years old; single, no children; left school with 2 Standard Grades; last worked in manufacturing; university access; MA Economic History and Sociology; GU.

Marie: 33 years old; married, no children; left school with 5 Standard Grades; last worked in financial services; university access; MA Art History and Philosophy; GU.

Meg: 36 years old; married, 3 children; left school with 2 A Levels; last worked as a teaching assistant; university access; MA English and History; GU.

Staff research participants

Because of the ethical requirement for participant anonymity, only minimal details regarding each of the members of academic staff interviewed in this research are provided here.

Dr A teaches history in Glasgow University. At the time of the interview, he had been teaching in higher education for 9 years.

Dr B teaches a humanities discipline in Glasgow University. At the time of the interview, he had been teaching in higher education for 14 years. He also had several years' experience as a student adviser.

Dr C teaches on the science access programme in Glasgow University. At the time of the interview, he had over 15 years' experience of teaching in higher education.

Dr D teaches on the arts and social sciences access programme in Glasgow University. At the time of the interview, he had over 15 years' experience of teaching in higher education.

Mr A leads and teaches on a SWAP Access to Humanities programme in a Glasgow further education college. At the time of the interview, he had been the programme leader for 8 years.

Mr B leads and teaches on a SWAP Access to Social Science programme in a Glasgow further education college. At the time of the interview, he had been the programme leader for 14 years.

Appendix 11a

Interview transcript A – Dan

Interviewer (I): Can I start by asking what school was like for you?

Dan (D): *School was OK I suppose, em it was a happy enough time. Looking back, I certainly didn't have to worry about anything much. My mum and dad looked after everything and I just did what I wanted, as long as I did my homework [laughs].*

I: Tell me how you found the actual school work.

D: *I think I enjoyed it most of the time, but it depended on the teacher. I remember I liked maths in primary school and first year at secondary, but then the teacher changed and I didn't get on so well with it. My mum and dad made sure that I did enough work but as I got older I was more interested in playing football and hanging around with my pals, and then I couldn't really wait to get out and get a job.*

I: When did you leave?

D: *Sixteen, as soon as I sat my Standard Grades.*

I: How did they go for you?

D: *I got three: English, modern studies and tech, I think. But I knew I was going to get an apprenticeship – my dad and I thought that was the best thing to do, to get a trade as an electrician. Times were different then; it seemed like if you had a good trade you had a job for life, those were the days eh? I got through it fine and as I worked my way up I earned a good living out of it. Eventually I was a foreman for [electrical contractors] it was a lot of responsibility but a really good, well-paid job, at least it was until I was made redundant, nearly three years ago now.*

I: Was going to university something you ever thought about when you were at school? Was it something that was ever talked about at home?

D: *Em, I don't really think it was something I thought about, and I don't remember it being talked about much at home, or even at school. It wasn't really an ambition I had, I didn't think I was brainy enough to be a doctor or a lawyer or even a teacher and that's what university seemed to be about. Don't get me wrong, I'm from a very hard-working family and my parents wanted us to do well at school and get on in life, but there wasn't anyone in the family that had gone to uni and it just didn't crop up really. It was important to get a good, skilled job and back then that was a lot easier.*

I: Can I ask what it was that made you consider coming to university now?

D: *Like I said a couple of minutes ago, I was made redundant a few years ago: that was a real bolt from the blue, the firm was taken over by a bigger company. At first I thought I'd get another job quite easily but it didn't quite work out like that. Sure I could have got another job OK but as a basic electrician and probably on short-term contracts; but I'd been a foreman, almost a manager really, I just didn't want that. I've got a wife and two children now and I didn't want to go backwards. But the problem was I'd worked my way up in [name of contractors] and there just weren't jobs available at that level. Luckily, I got a pretty good redundancy package when I lost my job, and my wife's got a good job as a nurse so we didn't have any real financial worries. But after a few months, in fact a year or so, I started to think is this it? That's when I started to think about coming to this place and changing direction completely.*

I: What do you hope to get out of higher education?

D: *Well I know it's stating the obvious a bit, but a new career, a new direction in life. I'm not certain exactly where this is going to take me but I'll still be in my early forties when I get my degree. I'll see if that gets me into a management job or I might even consider training to be a secondary teacher.*

I: OK, thanks very much. Can we talk about your access course now? What made you decide to take the access course here at Glasgow University?

D: *Well when my wife and I started talking about this I thought I'd maybe have to go back to college or night school and take Highers. But I thought I'd need to pass at least four and that was a bit off-putting. Then my wife was speaking to someone at the hospital whose sister had done the access course here and is training to be a teacher now. My wife got a chance to speak to her, and she said the access course was great – the thing that got my attention was that she said all the students were a bit older and it was absolutely nothing like school. So I plucked up my courage and phoned the admissions office; they directed me straight to the adult education department. I got the form back to them quickly, came in for a chat and they offered me a place on the course.*

I: Did you consider any other courses?

D: *No not really, the Glasgow course suited me fine. I did find out there was one at Strathclyde but I live on this side of the city and it was easier to come here.*

I: How did you find the access course?

D: *It was great, I did Scottish history and politics and it was like a door opening for me. I liked the way we got to talk things over in class and the tutors were really helpful. I wasn't sure about my writing when I got there but they're good at showing you how and what to write, how to answer questions that don't seem like questions, if you know what I mean.*

I: Yes, I know what you mean.

D: *I've got nothing but good things to say about the access course – it made me really believe I could do this.*

I: How well do you feel it prepared you for university?

D: *Very well really. There might be some things that have been a bit of a shock that I didn't feel that ready for. But I suppose I expected that – you can't train an apprentice electrician for a week and then expect him to rewire a house the week after that. No, overall it was pretty good preparation for university and it was bloody hard work [laughs].*

I: How did you feel when you got your results and found out you'd done well enough to get into university?

D: *Over the moon. I remember my kids being puzzled about why I was so excited; they didn't really understand the access course or what it was all about. No, I was absolutely delighted and I had a few drinks to celebrate that night.*

I: In the time between the access course and coming here did you develop a picture of what you expected life at university to be like?

D: *I can't actually remember thinking about it that much; em but I must have done. Well I knew it would be full of clever people, and some pretty snotty ones as well [laughs] Seriously, I knew it was going to be very hard work and that I wasn't going to be like most of the other students.*

I: In what way?

D: *Well obviously I'm a good bit older and I'm here for a purpose, not to get drunk and go to parties all the time. I'm passed all that. I've got responsibilities now and I'm taking this very, very seriously.*

I: What was the first week at university like for you?

D: *There was just so much going on, so much to take in, but three of us who'd done the access course made a pact that we'd keep in touch and we met up on the very first day, and stuck together whenever we could. I was a bit nervous the first week, but excited as well. There were tours of the university and the library and talks about all sorts of things. Some of the talks were better than others and told you things that you*

needed to do to get by here. They were about things like sources of advice . . . personal tutors, the SRC, effective learning and so on and I remember thinking there seems to be plenty of support if you need it. But a couple of them were a bit high-brow – talking about educational journeys and personal transformation, and making a contribution to society [laughs]. A couple of times, I thought what's this guy on about? . . . but I was with a couple of friends I'd done the access course with and we just smiled at each other, just kind of laughed it off. But they kept giving you these printed guides, or introductions, to things you needed to know . . . and by the end of the induction week there was loads of them. To be honest I didn't really look at them properly until the weekend . . . When I started reading them I got a bit bamboozled and I had to get out the brand new dictionary my kids, my wife really [laughs], had got me for uni. But there was just so much of it and I started to feel worried about taking it all in, you know, picking it up. That was the first time I felt a bit flat and worried about whether I was doing the right thing.

I: I understand. Can you talk a bit now about your first impressions of university teaching? Was it what you expected?

D: *Well, I remember being a bit shocked by the size of the classes in the lecture halls, especially in politics. I had expected the classes to be big but I was a bit taken aback at the first one. But most of the lectures are good, really interesting; some of them are pretty dreadful though.*

I: In what way are they dreadful?

D: *It's down to the lecturer really; some of them are not that great. A couple of them just drone on for an hour; it's like they're really just reading it out and they don't care if you're taking it in or not. The best lecturers are more lively, more animated; it's as if they're really passionate about the subject and that kind of rubs off on you. The really good ones even manage to add a bit of humour into the mix. Most of them are OK though.*

I: What about the kind of language, the kind of words used in lectures and tutorials, does that make any difference?

D: *Yes, I know what you mean. Some of the lecturers seem to love using really fancy words a lot of the time; it's like they're trying to show us how smart they are compared to us. It wasn't like that in my access class and if you didn't know the meaning of something you just asked. It's very different here but we have one younger lecturer – he doesn't seem to use any, or at least that many, of these posh words – and I really get a lot out of his classes.*

I: Can you give me an example?

D: *Well I remember the first time I heard the words 'critical reflection'. I remember thinking, what the hell does that mean?*

I: Now that you're coming towards the end of your first year, is this still an issue for you?

D: *I just snigger at some of the posh professors now – to be honest, there's only a couple of them, old guys – I just take a note of their fancy words and look them up later but I'm having to do that less and less ... One of the tutors showed us a PowerPoint on critical reflection which was quite straightforward really – I wouldn't say I'm very clear on it yet but I'm getting the hang of it [laughs].*

I: How do you find the tutorials?

D: *Some of them are good, some of them not so good. They're so different to the access classes, in a couple of them I've felt like I've been talked down to by the tutor, a guy a lot younger than me. Sometimes it's as if, well that makes sense but it's not what I want to hear ... a bit patronising really. Access was so much better; it was like a genuine conversation.*

I: Can you elaborate a bit on that, please?

D: *Sometimes I don't really feel that what I say is actually valued very much here. The access classes were like open-ended discussions but here there's no talking in the lectures and you only get recognition in the tutorial if you repeat something you*

heard in the lecture or read in a recommended book. I've tried to take the discussion off on a tangent a couple of times but it soon gets pulled back on track. I think it may sometimes be because the tutors are PhD students and don't really have the depth and breadth of knowledge to allow us free rein, as it were. It's really not what I expected, I'm a bit disappointed.

I: Can we talk a bit now about essays and assignments? How did you feel about the first essays and assignments you had to work on here?

D: *More nervous than I expected really, I knew I'd done very well on access but I also knew this was a different ball game entirely; it felt like the safety net had been pulled away. If you wanted advice on how to write an essay, you could ask for it on access.*

I: Again, can you expand on that a bit, please?

D: *When I was working on my first essay I kept looking at the grade descriptors, or whatever they're called, and tried to follow them. It wasn't easy – I didn't really know what some of them meant like what's theory and what's evidence? After I'd picked up my first couple of essays, I was none the wiser - the comments on the essay didn't really mention any of the grade descriptors. My tutor's a PhD student and he's quite good in the tutorials, a nice enough young guy, but I can't help thinking that when it comes to marking he doesn't really know what he's supposed to be doing.*

I: Have things improved over the course of the year?

D: *The feedback's not got any better - a guy from access and me tend to do the same questions so we can share books and articles . . . we look at them when we get them back and we've got much the same marks unless there's something obviously different – it seems fair enough.*

I: What do you think of the academic support that's available, from learning advisers for instance?

D: *To quite be honest, I know it's there but I've never really made any use of it.*

I: What about the library and electronic learning resources?

D: *The library's great but I don't study in there. I just wish they had more copies of the books and you could get them for more than four hours. We have this online thing called Moodle but to me it doesn't seem very useful. You can go on it to get notes if you miss lectures and there are these forums we're all supposed to use to discuss our course – but apart from the lecturers and the admin. staff nobody ever puts anything on them, so it's pretty much one-way traffic. If I have a problem with the course, I want to speak to someone face-to-face – I'm not going to announce it to everyone in some sort of electronic chat room.*

I: OK thanks. I'd like to talk about something different now. Can I ask you if you think that being a student here has changed you in anyway?

D: *Well it certainly means I've got a lot less spare time on my hands ... but I'm not sure what you mean really.*

I: Sorry, what I mean is that do you think studying here is making you a different person in any way? I know that it may seem like a slightly strange question.

D: *I'm not sure really . . . I'm pretty much the same guy I've always been.*

I: Putting it another way, do you think your family or friends might have noticed any changes in you, even very small changes?

D: *Ah, I know what you mean now ... things might have changed a bit between me and some of my friends, but they're still my friends.*

I: Can you give me an example of how things might have changed?

D: *OK, let me think ... I used to go to the pub with my friends and we'd have discussions about politics and football and more often than not they'd turn into slanging matches – good-*

natured but we'd basically just be shouting each other down. After a few months at uni I started to try and have more sensible conversations with them and would say things like 'but you've got to look at things from this angle'. At first they thought this was hysterical and would call me a jumped-up smart-arse and other things I won't mention but they came round to my way of thinking – we still slag each other off about football but we usually have grown-up conversations about most other things.

I: What about your family?

D: *No, nothing's changed. Well, maybe I'm a bit more serious now, I certainly go on at the kids a lot more now about their homework, and tell them I want them to go to university too.*

I: Are there any friends you don't see as often as you used to?

D: *Maybe some of the guys I used to work with, but I make sure I stay in touch with my closest friends. I need them to keep me from going nuts [laughs].*

I: How do you get on with the students who are much younger than you, I mean the ones that are pretty much straight out of school?

D: *Fine really, but I tend to spend my time here with other mature students. We all seem to be a bit more serious about things: I know that's maybe a bit of an unfair generalisation though. But I do talk to them sometimes, when they're not embarrassed about being seen talking to one of the old guys.*

I: When you say mature students are more serious, what do you mean?

D: *I mean more serious about their work. I don't know what marks the younger students are getting but a lot of them miss a lot of lectures, and some even miss tutorials. To be fair though, I think a lot of them need to work part time and that might make a big difference. And I've noticed they don't speak up so much in tutorials: perhaps that's because they haven't done the reading or maybe it's a confidence thing.*

I: Do you socialise with younger students on the same course?

D: *No not at all. I have the odd drink with some of the people from access, but other than that I've very much got my own social life.*

I: You don't ever feel that there is anything you're missing out on in university life?

D: *I don't really want to take part in the social life of the younger students here but I can't help worrying that in the middle of all the boozing and carrying on some valuable information about what's happening in the course – like a book or an article perfect for an essay – is passed around. It would be a bit embarrassing hanging around with young students but I am aware that I might be missing out on something.*

I: You said that you and other mature students tend to stick together, do you cooperate on academic work at all?

D: *We certainly do, we share books, journal articles and even photocopy stuff for each other. We talk about our work a lot as well.*

I: Anything else?

D: *Sometimes we read over each others essays to check for mistakes and maybe make some suggestions. Just knowing that we're all in the same boat makes a hell of a difference.*

I: Just one final question on your social life here. Have you joined any clubs or societies within the university: the Mature Students' Association, for instance?

D: *No, I've got no time for any of that I'm afraid.*

I: I'm conscious that I've taken up quite a lot of your time today, so I've just got another two or three questions to ask. You said earlier that there were one or two

things you were less happy with; do you feel that there any appropriate channels for taking things like that up with the university?

D: *I suppose there are complaints procedures but there's nothing that serious, yet. I know I said I was unhappy with one of my tutors but he's a nice enough guy, and I wouldn't like to get him into trouble.*

I: What if there were ways of raising your concerns as a general issue without actually pointing the finger at anyone?

D: *I don't know if that's possible in a place this size, I'm just one student among thousands, and this place has got a pretty good reputation after all. They must know what they're doing, I suppose.*

I: Thanks, we're almost done. You spoke a little earlier on about your reasons for coming to university, can I ask you to sum up what you hope to achieve from higher education?

D: *That's easy enough ... I don't want to spend the rest of my life as a redundant tradesman. Sure, I could get another job but I want to do something I can be proud of. I know I'm taking a big risk coming to university but I honestly believe it's a risk worth taking, for me and my family. I'm the first member of my family to go to university so at the very least I'm setting a good example for my kids. My aim is to get a really good degree which I hope will open doors for me.*

I: Last question: we've talked about quite a lot this morning but I just want to ask if there is anything else about your experience here you would like to discuss.

D: *No not really, we've talked about a lot of things, and some I hadn't really thought about before. So I can't really think of anything else.*

I: OK we're finished then, thank you very much.

Appendix 11b

Interview transcript B – Norma

Interviewer (I): Can I start the interview by asking what school was like for you?

Norma (N): *Oh goodness, that was a long time ago ... I suppose I look back on it now, and see it as a bit of a wasted opportunity for me. I wish I'd worked a lot harder and got more out of it.*

I: Do you have happy memories of it?

N: *Oh of course I do, I was young then and I had my whole life ahead of me. I had a lot of fun with my friends and I've got such happy memories of my parents. I just wish I'd realised how important it was and got more out of it. But then, I suppose, life might have been different for me and maybe I wouldn't have had my three children. I wouldn't change that for all the world.*

I: How was the learning side of it for you?

N: *I think primary school was OK but then I lost interest in secondary school ... Maybe I just grew up a bit too quickly and I was more interested in other things, outside school. I suppose I was just impatient to get on with life.*

I: Were there any subjects you enjoyed more than others?

N: *Let me think ... Maybe English and history, they allowed me to use my imagination more, and I was a bit of dreamer really. But it did depend on the teacher, some of them were better than others, a few of them just made you feel stupid, especially in maths. and science. Thinking about it, I probably liked English most, I remember one English teacher who was great, she seemed very young and she made us laugh a lot. But I'm afraid most of the time my head was in other places, and I got out of school as quickly as I could.*

I: Had you thought much about what you would do when you left school?

N: *Not really, mum and dad, bless them, tried to get me to think about it a bit more seriously but I just wanted a job, any job that would give me money so I could get on with life. Silly, I know but I was young.*

I: Was going to university something you ever thought about when you were at school? Was it something that was ever mentioned at home?

N: *No not at all. University seemed like another world, it wasn't for people from where I grew up. I don't remember it ever even being mentioned at school. Maybe they thought I was too stupid to even think of it ... but to be fair, I wasn't giving them any reason to think anything else. I remember my mum once said she would like me to think about training to be a nurse, but back then you didn't go to university for that.*

I: Can I ask what it was that made you consider coming to university now?

N: *When I was young I never really thought about a career or anything. I left school when I was sixteen with a few standard grades, and mainly just worked in shops until I got married and had the kids in my early twenties ... It was great when I could stay at home and be a housewife, like my mum, and look after the kids all day. But when they'd all started at primary school I just had too much time on my hands. I got some part-time jobs, one in an office and some in shops but second-time round I didn't really enjoy them and started thinking 'is this it?' I looked at other jobs and applied for a couple but it was obvious I just didn't have enough qualifications ... So here I am, studying for a degree, working as hard as I can, and hoping for the best.*

I: What do you hope to get out of coming to university?

N: *Well the main thing is that I want to be able to get a decent job, something that feels worthwhile. I know it's tough out there and there'll be lots of young people just out of university competing for the same jobs, but I'm going to try my best. Another thing is that I want to set a good example to my kids ... it's all very well saying 'stick in at school' but then they ask what I was like at school and that seems a bit*

hypocritical ... And when I go to parent-teacher evenings I feel like I'm more on their level, I maybe don't feel as intimidated as I used to. If I get my degree, I might even consider becoming a teacher.

I: When you first started thinking about university how did you go about getting information?

N: *Well there's a community education centre in [area of Glasgow] that I used to go into, they did classes on computing and writing CVs and that kind of thing. Anyway, I asked for their advice. They couldn't have been more helpful and encouraging. First of all they told me about an access course in [FE college] so I got in touch with them. They were very nice but the course was nearly full-time and I was worried that I wouldn't be home enough for the kids coming home from school. Then I found out about another access course here at Strathclyde that was just one evening a week. So I spoke to them and got as much information on it as I could; I decided that it looked ideal for me. I was really nervous about applying though, and I spent ages on the application form. But I was lucky enough to get a place, so it worked out well.*

I: What did you study and how did you find the course?

N: *I studied English and psychology ... The course was really good but it was also very demanding. One of the best things was that almost right away I met another three women around my age who were more or less in the same position as me. Their children were at school now and like me they wanted to get qualifications that would lead to better jobs. That was fantastic, it made me feel so much better about what I was doing.*

I: What was the work side of it like?

N: *I found it pretty hard really. I remember finding the actual classes interesting but then I'd try and read the stuff they recommended at home and quite often I found it hard to understand, especially the psychology. It was good to talk it over with the other girls; that made it feel a bit better. But I was really terrified when it came to writing essays. I spent hours and hours on the first one; I just didn't know how to*

write it. I remember when I put it in I thought it was just complete rubbish, and that it was bound to fail. But I had to put it in anyway. Then I got it back and it wasn't as bad as I thought. I didn't get a great mark but the tutor said there were some good ideas in it. But the important thing was she showed me how I could have done it another way, and made it better. That was just so helpful and my next one was a big improvement.

I: Were the tutors very helpful then?

N: *They were absolutely brilliant, they couldn't have been more helpful. The main thing was that they were so encouraging and just kept telling us we could do it. There were some people dropped out of the course – quite a few actually – but I think that was maybe because the work was just too much for them, I don't think it was because of the tutors.*

I: How well do you think the course prepared you for university?

N: *Let me think about that ... Well it was a bit of a shock coming here and at times I've maybe not felt that ready for it. But remember the course was only a year long and I arrived there with a couple of pretty rubbish standard grades from nearly twenty years ago, so to get me up to where I am now is amazing really.*

I: Can you remember how you felt when you got your results and found out you'd done well enough to get into university?

N: *I'd done quite well on the course, but not that great so I was pretty nervous about the final results. I was so relieved when I got the results but a bit nervous too about what was ahead. But no, I was absolutely delighted really. My husband made some jokes about being married to a student, but he was delighted for me as well.*

I: In the time between finishing the course and coming here did you have an image of what university life would be like?

N: *Yes, I was very nervous about it so I did think about it a lot. I knew it was going to be really hard work, but I tried to look on the bright side and imagine what life might be like in a few years time.*

I: Can you expand a bit on what you were worried about, what made you nervous?

N: *Well I suppose I was worried about being in amongst all these bright young kids, that I wouldn't be as smart as them and I wouldn't be able to keep up. I was worried too about not having enough time with my family and whether or not we can really afford me being here for three or four years. But I suppose the biggest worry was that I might just fail, I might not get any degree, let alone a good one; and then I'd look really stupid for believing I could actually do this.*

I: Thanks, I understand. Can you remember what the first week at university was like for you?

N: *It's a bit of a blur now. I remember there was an awful lot going on, and I remember I felt a bit old and out of place sometimes [laughs]. I remember walking by students giving out tickets to dances and all sorts of things, but they never gave them to me. I don't care about that really, but it did make me feel a bit strange. Luckily I had arranged to meet up with a couple of girls from the pre-entry [access] course and we laughed about it together.*

I: What about the academic side of things, was that helpful and well organised?

N: *Yes, it was pretty well organised; lots of talks and tours and introductions to things. I found it all very helpful; it made it clear what the university expects from us and what we should expect from them. The most encouraging thing was finding out how much support was available, if I needed it.*

I: Did they provide you with a lot of written material on academic requirements?

N: *Yes, a bit too much really and some of it was a bit worrying. When I opened my first course handbook my heart sank a bit, I couldn't believe how long the reading list*

for the course was. I'd bought a couple of textbooks for that course but there were at least another five or six books on the reading list. I'd bought the books so I wouldn't have to compete with other students for them in the library. . . I didn't want to waste time I could be spending with my kids traipsing back and forth to the library. For different bits of the course, there was recommended reading and additional reading but what did that mean? Was recommended reading what you needed to do just to pass and additional reading what you needed to do to get a good mark? I didn't know and I really started to panic a bit? How could I find out how much you really needed to read?

I: OK, thanks very much. Can we talk a little now about your first impressions of university teaching? What was that like for you?

N: *On my pre-entry [access] course, there was about twenty of us and we were free to ask questions any time we didn't get something . . . in fact our tutor was always asking us questions and half the time three or four people might be speaking at the same time, but he didn't mind really . . . I suppose it showed we were interested. Here we go to lectures in these huge rooms . . . there might be two or three hundred people there and once it gets going nobody really speaks apart from the lecturer. I think a couple of them did say at the start that it was OK to ask questions but nobody ever does, really. There have been quite a few times when I didn't really understand something and I wanted to ask the lecturer a question but I just couldn't risk sounding stupid in front of all these people.*

I: What do you think about the standard of the lectures?

N: *They're all very good really, all the lecturers really know their stuff ... they wouldn't be here if they didn't.*

I: Do you find any of them more interesting or useful than others?

N: *Yes, I suppose some of them are more interesting; it depends a bit on the lecture. My English lecturer is lovely, she's got a lovely lilting voice and she's obviously so*

devoted to her subject ... she really brings it to life for me. She's probably in a class of her own, but I would say they're all very good.

I: What about the language, the kinds of words used in lectures and tutorials, does that make any difference?

N: *Sorry, I'm not really sure what you mean.*

I: OK, what I mean is do you ever find that some of the words or phrases lecturers use make it a bit more difficult to understand what they're talking about?

N: *No, not really ... I've got more difficulty with that when I'm reading at home, but then I've always got my trusty dictionary close at hand.*

I: How do you find the tutorials?

N: *The tutorials are great, I really get a lot out of them; they give me a chance to talk and ask questions, about the subject and what we should be reading. I just feel far more confident talking about things than writing about them. Sometimes I might even talk a bit too much, I certainly speak out a lot more than a lot of the younger students. Maybe they don't mind though, it means they won't get caught out for not doing the reading [laughs].*

I: Are the tutors helpful?

N: *Yes, I find them all very helpful: I think they maybe appreciate my enthusiasm. I've got three tutors and they're all research students so I think they understand some of the problems we have ... it's not so long since they were in much the same position.*

I: Can we talk a bit now about essays and assignments? Do you remember how you felt about writing your first essay at university?

N: *Do I remember my first essay here? I don't think I'll ever forget it. Access is one thing but this is, you know, something else, a lot more serious. I was like a nervous*

wreck and I kept starting it again and changing it. Every time I changed it I thought it was even more rubbishy. I just wasn't sure what, really how to write it. I'm afraid I took it out on my husband, as usual, and the kids a bit. That wasn't fair; they were just asking why I wasn't watching the telly with them. But I was just so worried and scared that I'd made a big mistake coming here, you know that it might be too much for me ... I calmed down when I took it in, but I was pretty nervous until I got it back.

I: How did you feel when you did get it back?

N: *Well I was mainly just relieved ... I didn't get that great a mark for it, but at least it passed. I was really terrified it might fail.*

I: Was the feedback you got on it helpful?

N: *Yes, it was very helpful, it was clear about what I should have done in the essay, what else I should have written about, to make it better. That was a big help. I remember a comment that I had to try and be a bit more objective in my writing: it's OK to have an opinion but you mustn't let that dominate your essay.*

I: How do feel about that advice?

N: *Fine really, that's just the way you have to write at university. It's maybe not the way I would write in normal day-to-day life but it's what you have to do here, and I'm getting used to it.*

I: So how are you getting on with essays and assignments now?

N: *Much better really, my marks are getting better; I haven't had an A for anything yet but they're mostly Bs now so I think my writing's improving. I wouldn't say I'm working any harder, I've always worked hard, it's just that I'm getting better at knowing what to write, what they expect us to write.*

I: What do you think is helping you to pick that up?

N: *Just practice I think, and always paying attention to the feedback I get on my essays. I remember early on one of the tutors saying to us that a lot of students just look at their mark and don't pay enough attention to the feedback comments, and that's really foolish. Since he said that, I always make sure that I follow any suggestion in the feedback to the letter. I'm very conscientious about that.*

I: OK thanks. Have you made any use of other sources of academic support that are available, like learning advisers?

N: *Yes I did earlier on. I'd worked myself into such a state over the first essay that my husband said I couldn't go on like that; and he said is there no one you can go and talk to, it shouldn't be like this. So I made an appointment to see one of the study skills advisers, she was fantastic, and managed to calm me right down.*

I: What kind of advice did she give you?

N: *Well the very first thing she said was that the draft essay I'd sent her in advance was really well-written. That was like a giant weight off my mind. She pointed out a couple of things that I could do in a different way, but it was really more like a counselling session. I remember her telling me that it was completely normal to get anxious about writing at university and that everyone – even people who seem very clever and confident – get stressed about it. She even spoke a little about what university was like for her when she first went. She was just so kind and helpful, I realised I wasn't some crazy woman, and that anxiety was a normal part of life at university. I felt so much better after that.*

I: OK, how useful do you find the university library and its online learning resources?

N: *The library is very good but I don't really spend much time in there, I certainly don't spend any time studying in it, I want to get home to my kids. Even if I'm studying in another room, they know I'm around to keep their dad right [laughs]. Sometimes I wish the library had a lot more copies of the books we need and we could keep them for longer, but maybe that's a bit selfish.*

I: What about the online learning resources?

N: *Sorry, which ones?*

I: I think Strathclyde University has a virtual learning environment, at Glasgow it's called Moodle.

N: *Oh yes Moodle, I use that quite a lot. They give out some notes at the lectures but they can't print out everything so they put links to a lot of other things on Moodle, to journal articles and things like that. They've even got some recordings of poetry on the English one, I love listening to them. And I check it quite often for any announcements about my courses, cancellations and that sort of thing. Yes it's pretty helpful.*

I: OK thanks. I'd like to talk about something a bit different now. Thinking about life at university, can you think of any ways that being a student here might have changed you?

N: *OK let me think ... Well at first it turned me into a nervous wreck, a crazy person that just couldn't see the wood for the trees. But now ... I've calmed right down and I think I'm getting more and more confident every day. I still know that I've got a lot to do to get through this but I'm starting to believe that it's something I really can do ... unless something goes badly wrong. I'm starting to feel that I belong here as much as anyone else. I wish I could go back in time and say to those teachers who tried to keep me on track, 'look at me now'. I certainly feel happier in myself than I did two or three years ago.*

I: Have you noticed any changes in your relationships with close friends?

N: *To be honest I don't have that many friends, before I came here most of my time was spent being a wife and mother so I didn't have a lot of time for going out. I've got two very close friends that I grew up with; they're like sisters to me and nothing has changed with them at all. When I want to get a way from this place completely I meet up with them. I made a few good friends on the access course and we meet up*

pretty regularly to moan about how much work we've got to do. A couple of them are doing the same courses as me.

I: And with your wider family?

N: *I'm the youngest in my family, I've got three brothers and a sister and I think they're all quite proud of me for doing this. My brothers don't actually say that, but I can tell they're happy for me.*

I: OK thanks. Getting back to your experience here at university, how do you get on with the younger students, the ones that are more or less are straight out of school?

N: *Fine, I don't spend that much time with the younger students, except the ones that are in my tutorials. The people that I do spend more time with are the other mature students I know, we've got much more in common. But the ones I do know are nice enough.*

I: A little while earlier you mentioned younger students being a bit quieter in tutorials. Is that just the case in one tutorial, or is it something you've noticed more generally?

N: *No it's something I've noticed in all my tutorials. There are only two or three young students who seem confident about expressing their opinion. Like I said earlier on, I sometimes find it hard to shut up. I think that's because of the access class where we were encouraged to talk, I don't know what it was like for these kids in school; maybe they were a bit more spoon-fed. Perhaps it's just because they're young and not that confident about things, and they're frightened of sounding like they don't know what they're talking about. They're certainly an awful lot more noisy and talkative outside and in the coffee bars [laughs].*

I: Do you socialise with any of the younger students on the same course as you?

N: *No, I don't socialise with anyone here really, it's kind of like a job, I'm in for as long as I need to be and then I go straight home to my family.*

I: Do you ever think that by not socialising with other people on your course you might be missing out on something.

N: *No, not at all. Time with my family's far more important to me.*

I: You mentioned a few minutes ago that you spend more of your time with other mature students; do you cooperate with each other on academic work?

N: *Yes, we do: we share reading materials and sometimes bounce ideas off one another. Most of the time, we just give each other moral support.*

I: OK, thanks. Overall, you seem to be fairly content with how things are going at university, would it be fair to say that?

N: *Yes, I don't think it's going too badly.*

I: If there was something that you weren't happy with about the way academic matters are handled by the university, do you think there are channels through which you could make the university aware of your concerns?

N: *That's a difficult one ... there are academic advisers and other people you can go and see, and there is a student staff committee but I don't know which students are on it, or even when it meets. But if I was really unhappy about something, I'm not sure what difference they could make. Let's just hope things carry on as they are.*

I: OK, I've only got a couple more questions. You spoke a little earlier on about your reasons for coming to university, can I ask you to briefly sum up what you hope to achieve from higher education?

N: *OK, I'll try ... I think the most important thing about this is that it has given me a sense of purpose. I've been a wife and mother for a long time, and I always will be I hope. I love my family more than I can say, but for a few years now I've felt that I needed something else in my life. My husband's a skilled mechanic; I think, I know he really enjoys his work and he says he wouldn't want to do anything else ... But he's*

said to me for years that I'm bright and that I should make more of it ... I took quite a lot of persuading but here I am. There have been times when I thought I'd made a mistake but I'm not going back now. I'm going to work as hard as I can and get the best out of this, for myself and my family. I don't know exactly what the future holds for me but I hope this will open up opportunities for me ... perhaps even some opportunities I haven't even thought about yet.

I: Thank you. Last question: we've covered quite a lot this afternoon but is there anything else about your experience at university you would like to talk about?

N: *There's nothing else I can think of ... we've talked about quite a lot of things, I hope it helps your research.*

I: Thank you.