AN EXPLORATION OF NON-TRADITIONAL STUDENTS' TRANSITION INTO HIGHER EDUCATION

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as a thesis for the degree of

Doctorate of Education in Education

01 August 2015

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This thesis provides a critical insight into the nature of non-traditional students’ transitions into higher education (HE) over the course of a year at a newly established hybrid HE institution in England. It generates information of relevance to those concerned with enhancing the non-traditional student experience and promoting widening access to HE opportunities. The enquiry specifically focused on learners navigating the transition from a foundation year of study into undergraduate studies. Understanding their experiences of transition between different levels of study permits an understanding of how to sustain participation by improving the experiences of those on the edge of further participation in HE. Time is recognised to play an important role in student transitions, yet there are limited longitudinal research data available to develop an understanding of non-traditional students’ experience during this phase of transition.

A longitudinal instrumental case study was conducted over the course of one academic year. Data were gathered via individual in-depth semi-structured interviews with 12 participants on three occasions. All data were initially analysed using a structural coding framework and subsequently following a pattern coding framework. The participants’ experiences of transition into HE varied, although all were noticeably influenced by their prior educational experiences. Whilst they had largely positive interpretations of their transition; their previous educational experiences were significant in shaping their anticipation, expectations and experience of their transition into HE. Participant confidence within the HE environment and their appreciation of the purpose of HE were two themes that permeated their responses throughout their period of transition during which data were collected. The complexity of their engagement evolved over the course of the year and became more multifaceted, developing from a principally utilitarian understanding to a more holistic appreciation of its meaning and value to them as individuals.
The findings have recognised that sustaining participation in HE for non-traditional students is a complex issue. Combinations of both structural and personal factors have been established to have had a dynamic and evolving relationship on the nature of non-traditional students’ engagement and transition into HE. The recommendations of this study suggest that future strategies for individual practitioners, and more broadly within an institution, aimed at sustaining participation should consider multi-faceted approaches which recognise the range of institutional and personal factors that can potentially inhibit successful transition for this group of learners. Such strategies should seek to address the perceived low-status of foundation year programmes of study, recognise the need to tailor institutional support structures such that they are attractive and engage non-traditional learners entering HE, via ensuring that the relevancy of the curricula is explicate and support mechanisms encourage engagement from learners. In this way the practices of all within an institution can combine to encourage and evolve to embrace a more transformative approach to embedding widening participant policy; resulting in a more coherent experience of transition and promote sustained engagement in HE for non-traditional students.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

With grateful thanks to the following:

- My supervisors, Nadine and Deborah for their advice, support and patience throughout the study.

- My family and friends for their constant encouragement.
  - Simon
  - Philippa
  - Guy

- My colleagues for all of the support that has been given.
  - Darren
  - Paul
  - Jane
LIST OF CHAPTERS

1 INTRODUCTION----------------------------------------------- 11
2 LITERATURE REVIEW ----------------------------------------- 26
3 METHODOLOGY----------------------------------------------- 65
4 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION----------------------------------- 105
5 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PRACTICE-------------------------------- 167
6 CONCLUSION----------------------------------------------- 183
APPENDIX 1----------------------------------------------- 194
APPENDIX 2----------------------------------------------- 195
APPENDIX 3----------------------------------------------- 199
APPENDIX 4----------------------------------------------- 206
APPENDIX 5----------------------------------------------- 215
APPENDIX 6----------------------------------------------- 218
7 REFERENCES----------------------------------------------- 220
## LIST OF CONTENTS

1 INTRODUCTION--------------------------------------------------------------- 11
1.1 Researcher positionality------------------------------------------------- 12
1.2 Rationale--------------------------------------------------------------- 16
1.3 Context of the study--------------------------------------------------- 21
1.4 Thesis structure------------------------------------------------------- 25

2 LITERATURE REVIEW-------------------------------------------------------- 26
2.1 Widening participation-------------------------------------------------- 27
2.1.1 Higher education provision in England------------------------------ 27
2.1.2 Understandings of widening participation--------------------------- 32
2.1.3 Classifications of student transition------------------------------ 41
2.2 Factors that impact upon transitional experiences for non-traditional students------------------- 45
2.2.1 Regional variation in non-traditional students’ HE participation--- 46
2.2.2 Reasons for non-traditional students to enter HE------------------- 47
2.2.3 HE entry routes for non-traditional students------------------------ 49
2.2.4 Sustaining HE participation for non-traditional students---------- 50
2.2.5 Non-traditional students’ self-positioning in HE------------------- 53
2.2.6 Non-traditional students’ negotiations during initial entry into HE--- 56
2.3 Gap in current knowledge----------------------------------------------- 61
2.3.1 Contribution of study to educational knowledge base------------ 62
2.3.2 Research questions-------------------------------------------------- 63

3 METHODOLOGY-------------------------------------------------------------- 65
3.1 Research context------------------------------------------------------- 66
3.1.1 Participant summary----------------------------------------------- 66
3.2 Review of research aim----------------------------------------------- 67
3.3 Research design------------------------------------------------------- 69
3.4 Case study------------------------------------------------------------- 71
3.5 Data collection method----------------------------------------------- 74
3.5.1 Staged interview phases------------------------------------------- 76
3.5.2 Interview design-------------------------------------------------- 77
3.5.3 Pilot study--------------------------------------------------------- 80
3.5.4 Recruitment of participants---------------------------------------- 81
3.5.5 Sample size--------------------------------------------------------- 84
3.5.6 Conducting of the interviews--------------------------------------- 86
3.6 Data analysis----------------------------------------------------------- 88
3.6.1 Structural coding-------------------------------------------------- 89
3.6.2 Pattern coding------------------------------------------------------ 91
3.6.3 Computer-assisted and manual data analysis.................................................................................................................. 94
3.7 Ethical Considerations ................................................................................................................................................................. 95
3.7.1 Negotiating ethical research....................................................................................................................................................... 98
3.7.2 Double agency........................................................................................................................................................................... 99
3.7.3 Voluntary consent..................................................................................................................................................................... 101
3.8 Summary .................................................................................................................................................................................... 103

4 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION .......................................................................................................................................................... 105
4.1 Structure of findings chapter ........................................................................................................................................................ 105
4.2 Participants’ initial reasons for entering into HE ........................................................................................................................ 107
  4.2.1 Initial motivations for deciding to engage with HE ................................................................................................................... 107
  4.2.2 Future aspirations ................................................................................................................................................................... 112
4.3 Ongoing engagement in HE .......................................................................................................................................................... 117
  4.3.1 Participants’ expectations compared to previous educational experiences .............................................................. 117
  4.3.2 Participants’ anticipation of HE experience......................................................................................................................... 121
  4.3.3 Participants’ positive and negative experiences of transition ............................................................................................ 127
4.4 Participants’ negotiations during their transitions .................................................................................................................. 132
  4.4.1 Impact of curriculum and assessment on participants’ transition ....................................................................................... 132
  4.4.2 Social and personal challenges during participants’ transition ........................................................................................... 139
4.5 Participants’ adjustments within the HE environment ............................................................................................................ 150
  4.5.1 Participants’ value of learning and HE .................................................................................................................................... 150
  4.5.2 Institutional practices and culture ........................................................................................................................................ 154
4.6 Summary of opportunities for enhancing experiences of transition into HE ........................................................................... 164

5 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PRACTICE..................................................................................................................................... 167
5.1 Research recommendations for individual practitioners .......................................................................................................... 168
5.2 Research recommendations at an institutional level ................................................................................................................ 172
5.3 Specific changes to my role and practice ........................................................................................................................................ 175
5.4 Reflection on changes in my professional practice arising from research .................................................................................. 178
5.5 Generalisability of recommendations ........................................................................................................................................ 181

6 CONCLUSION .................................................................................................................................................................................. 183
6.1 Reflection upon professional impact of undertaking the enquiry ............................................................................................ 186
6.2 Limitations ...................................................................................................................................................................................... 189
6.3 Suggestions for further research .................................................................................................................................................. 191

APPENDIX 1 ......................................................................................................................................................................................... 194
APPENDIX 2 ......................................................................................................................................................................................... 195
APPENDIX 3 ......................................................................................................................................................................................... 199
APPENDIX 4 ......................................................................................................................................................................................... 206
APPENDIX 5 ......................................................................................................................................................................................... 215
### List of Tables & Figures

**FIGURE 1:** Transition Pedagogy (Gale and Parker, 2014, P.740)  

**TABLE 1:** Participant's Engagement with Each Phase of the Data Collection  

**FIGURE 2:** Theoretical and Methodological Framework  

**FIGURE 3:** Summary of First and Second Stage Data Analysis  

**TABLE 2:** *A Priori* Categories Arising from Literature and Professional Experience  

**TABLE 3:** *Posteriori* Categories Arising from Second Cycle, Pattern Data Analysis  

**TABLE 4:** Themes and Sub-dimensions That Emerged from Pattern Data Analysis
LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

BIS Department of Business, Innovation and Skills
DfES Department for Education and Skills
HE Higher Education
HEFCE Higher Education Funding Council for England
HEI Higher Education Institution
HESA Higher Education Statistics Agency
NAO National Audit Office
NTS Non-traditional student
OFFA Office for Fair Access
PT Part-time
POLAR Participation of Local Areas
SEEHEI South East England Higher Education Institution
( pseudonym for study institution)
UCAS Universities & Colleges Admissions Service
WP Widening Participation
1 Introduction

The aim of this educational enquiry was to examine and expand understanding of the nature of non-traditional students' (NTS) transition into higher education (HE). The enquiry has been concerned with gaining insight into the consequences for non-traditional learners of the way HE currently embodies the English policy on ‘Widening Participation’ (WP). More specifically it has sought to articulate the changing shape and experience of HE in England for those NTS moving from further to higher level study within the same institution. By exploring the experiences and expectations of students negotiating the transition from a foundation (level three) study to year one of undergraduate (level four) study, this research identifies opportunities and makes recommendations for how to promote positive experiences of transition and sustain the engagement of NTS in contemporary HE.

The enquiry’s focus derived from a belief that understanding students' decisions to engage (or disengage) in HE can positively enhance recruitment and retention, promote future successful engagement with HE and inform future policy development. The findings could then assist in identifying how institutions can target support aimed at: promoting WP, broadening the appeal of HE and sustaining the expansion of HE.

The research has been undertaken and written at a time when higher education is undergoing extensive internal and external change driven by political, economic and social demands. It seeks to provide a critical insight into the nature of NTS’ transitions into HE over the course of a year at a newly established HE institution in England. Presently, limited information is available regarding student experience of completing level three and progressing to level four studies within the same institution and thus the findings of this study have implications for developing sustainable educational and organisational practices for those concerned with enhancing the NTS experience and promoting widening access to HE opportunities.
For the purpose of this enquiry ‘non-traditional’ students were considered to be those entrants to higher education who have population characteristics not usually associated with entrants to HE; and as such are identified as “under-represented” (HEFCE, 2010b). Specifically the participants of this study had the following characteristics; first generation entrants HE and from lower socio-economic groups 4-7 (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills [BIS], 2011). Throughout this thesis, the following understandings of key terms are used:

- **Transition**: the capability to navigate change.
- **Widening participation**: a government-driven initiative to increase the number of students from underrepresented groups in HE by raising aspirations, encouraging applications, ensuring progression, retention and success.

Each of these terms is critically explored within chapter two.

The first chapter has been written to provide a brief history of the researcher’s professional career development in order to locate the professional within the framework of the enquiry. It also supports how the choice of focus emerged as a result of professional experiences and engagement with the Doctorate in Education (EdD) programme. Notably this chapter has blended narratives to structurally reflect an evolving internal understanding and subsequent sections have been written in a mix of first and third person styles. Continuing on the chapter provides clarification of the key terms and a synopsis of the specific context within which this enquiry was undertaken. Finally, the chapter concludes with a rationale for the study by locating the research subject within the context of HE and outlining the implications of WP for today’s learners. The closing section offers an outline of the structure and content of subsequent chapters.

### 1.1 Researcher positionalilty

Throughout much of history, education has predominantly belonged to a privileged and sometimes elite few. Often this has been rightly so – highly skilled tasks require highly skilled individuals and the sort of creative thinking
that sparks revolutions in subjects like science, politics, economics, education etc. is worth nurturing in those who possess potential to benefit from HE. In short that is to say: no one wants a clumsy surgeon or an ignorant tutor - we want the best people for the tasks at hand. But how do we discover that potential? What if the systems of education we currently employ miss out on a wealth of expertise because some persons simply do not “fit” within those structures? William Wilberforce, the iconic worker for equality in the slave trade once wrote:

We have different forms assigned to us in the school of life, different gifts imparted. All is not attractive that is good. Iron is useful, though it does not sparkle like the diamond. Gold has not the fragrance of a flower. So different persons have various modes of excellence, and we must have an eye to all.

(cited in Belmonte, 2009, p.172)

He meant, I think, that although a person may not appear to be a great achiever under our current system of measurement it does not mean that they do not have their own “mode of excellence”.

I have of course not always thought this way. My own background as a radiographer followed a very traditional and well-established route: GCSEs, A-levels and then an undergraduate degree, followed by postgraduate study combined with professional experience as a radiographer and lecturer. It would be fair to say that prior to commencing an educational role in radiography, I had had a very limited and naïve appreciation of how people’s educational experiences might vary from my own. I had never really considered in any depth the implications to myself or an institution of the increasing learner diversity that has been witnessed as a result of policy drivers such as WP (Gale and Parker, 2014).

In 2009, however, I moved from a research-intensive to a teaching-focussed HE institution, which placed a heavy emphasis on WP. I became involved in the delivery and assessment of a level three Science Foundation Year programme that was designed to provide a preliminary year of study for those aspiring to
gain an undergraduate science degree, but who did not necessarily have the prerequisite qualifications to do so. It was here that I encountered for the first time a cohort comprised almost exclusively of NTS. I found myself being required to support learners who had very different educational experiences and backgrounds to my own; it was whilst engaging with this group that my interest in WP was stimulated and the focus for my enquiry emerged. I started to realise that this group of students might face potential challenges. It was observations such as the following which started my inquiry:

Many students feel under-prepared for higher education, and find that their academic experience is not as they expected it to be, and this may lead to early withdrawal.

(Thomas, 2012, p.11)

How is it, I asked, that learning for such students can become meaningful and student centred? And what does it mean that they have not followed a similar route to myself? Moreover, how can we retain them within HE? These are fluid and dynamic issues and concerns that continue to motivate my study as much as they acted as a catalyst for this enquiry.

Based on the experience of working with non-traditional learners and the observations such as the one quoted above, I chose to further explore my interest in WP and the challenges that such initiatives have heralded in terms of the diversification of higher education during the ‘Critical ideas and issues in education, training and development’ module of the EdD programme. The insights I gained during this module, together with experiences from my professional practice, prompted me to focus my thesis on exploring the experiences of those learners whom the WP agenda aims to attract into HE. My thesis is therefore an attempt to understand WP policy as experienced by such learners. I engaged with a small group of students in order to explore how, in the context of their experiences, current policy seems to be shaping their transition into HE.
The journey to appreciating the challenges faced by such non-traditional mature learners has not, of course, been so clear cut as this section may suggest. In fact I must concede that my own style remains largely (and I believe rightly) informed by a linear outlook, influenced by my professional, positivist, background as a radiographer working within a very scientific environment. Nevertheless I am striving to integrate the lessons that I have learnt during the completion of the EdD programme and from the initially positivist attitude I held, I now believe that knowledge and the ways in which it is interpreted are subjective and concur with Dewey (1938) and Schön (1987) who advocate that the importance of knowledge lies in our own interpretations. That is why this thesis is written in two distinct styles: the third person passive voice reflects my own preference, is the style that I find most comfortable to write in and the one that the scientific community – reflecting my own professional background – most readily relates to. The first person narrative is an attempt to place myself personally and securely within my work and reflects my attempt to bring together new lessons with old ones. It is an acknowledgement that students (as well as service users) are individuals who are not necessary as “linear” as I might like.

WP is a concept which can be argued to pervade many, if not all, aspects of my professional role. I cannot pretend to be detached and objective in either my theoretical consideration of it or its implications within the context of my study. Whilst many external influences have shaped my present position, and will no doubt continue to do so, my current understandings have been heavily influenced by my personal/professional experience and by my colleagues/students. Acknowledgement of the existence of such dynamic human relationships highlights the evolving influence of my environment on my appreciation, understanding and perception of WP and education.

My study explores and reflects upon the experiences of NTS as they negotiate a specific part of today's higher education system; just as the student-participants have made choices to contribute to my study, the written form of my thesis is an expression of the reflective choices that I have made in terms of the
focus of my enquiry and how I have presented that enquiry. The remaining sections within this chapter continue with a rationale for undertaking the enquiry and a précis of the within which the research was conducted.

1.2 Rationale

Presently, despite the advances being made in terms of the overall numbers of individuals participating in HE, it is becoming clear that expansion has not been synonymous with inclusion. Both people’s dispositions and their social positions can act to enable and/or constrain their engagement with HE opportunities; consequently an individual’s engagement with learning is not necessarily a positive experience and does not always have positive outcomes (Teaching and Learning Research Programme (TLRP), 2008a). Day-to-day HE experience may reasonably be expected to be very different for students with greater social and cultural capital when compared with those NTS who typically possess less (Green et al, 2015). Taylor and House (2010) conjectured that the learning experience is likely to be more disjunctive for NTS because of the additional need for them to critically explore some of the underlying assumptions on which their lives have been built. Consequently the realisation of the WP agenda has created a challenging context for those working within HE due to the demands of increased learner diversity, a necessity for greater flexibility of provision and requirement of more varied support throughout the HE journey (BIS, 2011). Yet, in spite of these challenges, HEFCE (2010f) urge that HE should not waste talent because of a reluctance to foster it and that it should instead acquaint itself to those for whom HE seems beyond their reach. It can therefore be argued that practices within HE should seek to promote positive experiences of transition in order to sustain engagement and ensure that potential talent is nurtured and ultimately realised.

Historically, it is institutional factors that have played a large part in the non-participation of certain groups with HE. For example, McGivney (2001) noted that the ethos, characteristics and practices of institutions can act to promote or impede access and include factors such as: untargeted promotional literature,
The work of Bathmaker and Thomas (2009) and more recently Crozier and Reay (2011), recognised that for NTS, their choices regarding engagement with different types of HE provision is not solely influenced by their backgrounds and experiences; sustained engagement in HE was in fact significantly influenced by the habitus and practices of an institution. These conclusions echoed Smyth and Bank's (2016) earlier assertions that student’s continued engagement can be significantly influenced by institutional habitus. ‘Habitus’ is a key concept in Bourdieu’s (1990) work where he used the term to refer to an operationalised
set of expectations and understandings based on the collection of experiences a given individual gathers that shape his or her sense of the ‘rule of the game’ and what individuals deem reasonable to expect from their experiences. It could therefore be argued that whilst HE is currently possible for a greater number of people than ever before, it should not be assumed that all forms of HE are either universally available to or, more significantly, accessed by all potential students. Bourdieu’s (1990) work would propose that for NTS, issues of habitus could be understood to represent a far stronger deterrent to sustained engagement than for their ‘traditional’ counterparts. Commensurate to this, the findings of Bathmaker and Thomas (2009) emphasised the need to do more with regard to the institutional habitus, not only to enhance student engagement but ensure that all forms of HE provision seek to promote widening access.

In order to respond to some of the challenges arising from the WP agenda, specifically that individual institutions must promote widening access opportunities and seek to realise HEFCE’s (2010f) vision that HE should not waste the talent of potential NTS because of reluctance to foster it, some institutions have sought to diversify entry routes and provide foundation level courses. These are specifically designed to provide an entry route for those who do not possess the necessary formal qualifications to begin degree level work. According to the UK’s Framework for Higher Education Qualifications (FHEQ), which was itself designed by the HE sector, undergraduate degrees comprise levels 4-6, A-Levels Level 3, GCSEs grades A-C level 2 and grades D-G Level 1. Within this framework, foundation year courses are identified as level three.

At the time of writing foundation courses represent an increasingly attractive way to implement widened participation as they are designed to tackle many of the issues that have historically resulted in non-participation of certain groups within HE. Students for whom continuation of study from level three to four within the same institution is possible, these courses seek to ensure that the experience of transition into and through individual institutions may be made evermore coherent. However, the challenging nature of transitions to degree level study (Hockings et al., 2007; Gale and Parker, 2014) indicate how complex
Chapter 1: Introduction

the task of providing a coherent experience can be. Sanders and Daly (2012) caution that little is known about the effectiveness of foundation courses to achieve this. Their caution is supported by the earlier reflections of Duty (2012) who argued that very few studies actually examine people’s life experience during HE transition. Such an examination by necessity would need to engage with the challenge of transforming individual HE institutions in order to address factors that suppress access, impede the success of WP initiatives and limit transition between levels of study. This study sought to address this gap by exploring the ‘life’ experiences and expectations of NTS who transition into HE, commence a level three and subsequently progress to level four studies at the same HE institution. The aim was to generate knowledge, inform the development of institutional practices that would better sustain the engagement of NTS with HE and promote positive experiences of transition.

For many NTS who commence HE programmes of study, adapting to different styles of learning and teaching than previously experienced can present difficulties. This is particularly pertinent for mature students whose experiences of formal education are likely to have been significantly different to those undergraduates who have progressed into HE from very recent study. Fragosa (2013) and Murray and Klinger (2012) recognised that for many NTS choosing to enter HE later in their life-course, they are also likely to be experiencing simultaneous changes in their social and domestic circumstances; this combination can potentially act to suppress the success of their engagement. In recognition of this, many foundation year courses aim to prepare students for degree level study by equipping them with necessary skills, improving confidence in their identity as learners and providing an apportionment of further degree study. Typically, these courses focus on study skills and material relevant to the degree into which they feed in order to promote positive student experiences that will sustain engagement and minimise early withdrawal.

The need for institutions to provide positive early student experiences that sustain engagement has become paramount, especially with greater diversification of the student body as a result of expanding access to HE
opportunities (Watson et al., 2004). Understanding the expectations of NTS and their experiences of transition between level three and four studies engenders therefore, an understanding of how to successfully extend participation and promote widening access to HE opportunities by improving the experiences of those on the edge of further participation. Identifying areas for such improvement in HE practice can produce knowledge concerning which initiatives are likely to function for WP within an institution. These new understandings of student transition between levels of study can subsequently be used to make recommendations for all educational practice and inform the design of future institutional strategies. Additionally, such understandings may help to enhance retention and reduce the attrition that is acknowledged to happen early on in a student’s HE career (Duty, 2012).

Smit (2012) and Fragosa (2013) acknowledged that expectations can be the key to successful adaptation and transition through HE and that a mismatch between expectations and experience can be an indicator of the failure of institutional WP initiatives. Through direct interfacing with learners and synthesis of pertinent academic literature, the aim of the study was to articulate the experience of the participants as they made their transition from level three to level four study, and thereby provide critical insight into the nature of NTS transitions into HE over the course of one academic year.

Increased demand for HE has presented not only significant challenges for existing institutions, but also necessitated the establishment of new HE providers/opportunities within an increasing number of towns, cities and regions (HEFCE, 2008a). Between 2003 and 2008 11 towns benefited from new universities and HE provision (HEFCE, 2008a). Such locally based provision has been particularly important in meeting HEFCE’s key principles and reaching out to adults who have previously been unable to access HE (HEFCE, 2011b). Via the provision of locally based HE opportunities, individuals who had been excluded from participation because of geographical limitations have been afforded the opportunity to participate to a greater extent.
The institution that participants were recruited from is a cardinal example of such development and is situated in a rural county where there has historically been no local university provision; it serves as an exemplar of new HE provision supported by HEFCE to address challenges of low levels of participation in HE arising from geographically limiting factors. The county within which the institution is situated has been subject to a steady decline in the numbers of resident young people, causing a drain of skill and talent and resulting in a hollowing out of communities. Local HE provision can help an area retain skills since many people choose to stay and work within their university town (BIS, 2008a; BIS, 2008b). The following section explores the specific context within which this enquiry was conducted, to illustrate the unique features of the institution and how it is located within the wider context of national HE provision.

### 1.3 Context of the study

The institution where the research was undertaken is a dual sector establishment located in the liminal zone of HE provision. Within this context, ‘liminal’ is take to mean the boundary between further and higher education. It offers both further and higher education, as well as a significant proportion of work across other sectors, such as the health service. One challenge such institutions face is that often they do not have a singular institutional culture, this is particularly pertinent that place a heavy emphasis on WP. This section provides a synopsis of the context of the institution from which students were engaged as participants within the study.

In 2006 only 1.77% of the county’s residents participated in HE - below the national average of 2.26% - and it was the only English county with a population over 0.5 million without direct HE provision (BIS, 2008a). The opening of a new HE institution in 2007 – known forthwith under the pseudonym: South East England Higher Education Institution (SEEHEI) - aimed to address the concerns relating to the hollowing out of communities and realise the Local Development Agency’s key goal of developing a region-wide skills base capable of supporting a world-class economy. Coupled with this was the aspiration that by increasing
HE participation the net export of graduates, which had adversely affected the county for many years, could be reversed (BIS, 2008a).

SEEHEI has been created from a partnership between two existing HE institutions in neighbouring counties with long established reputations in both teaching and research; as such it might be deemed to be a hybrid institution. The term ‘hybrid’ in this context has been used in relation to the management theory developed by Borys and Jemison (1989), in which it is used to describe an institutional arrangement where two or more sovereign organisations combine to pursue common interests. When the proposal for SEEHEI was originally made the key institutional drivers were:

- To increase participation in HE
- To improve skill levels
- To raise levels of aspiration in education and careers

The HE provision at SEEHEI is principally aimed at local people and business, making its provision clearly distinct from that offered by its two partnership HE institutions. It was considered by BIS (2008a) to be a radical collaborative approach to addressing the county’s skills deficit by the extending local access to HE. The positioning of SEEHEI in the liminal zone is deemed pivotal in enabling it to address the county’s challenges of low aspiration, low rates of participation in HE and of delivering effective learning in a rural environment (BIS, 2008a).

Following its establishment in 2006, the first students were enrolled at SEEHEI in September 2007. Key to the business case for its development were the aims:

- Satisfy demand for courses from students
- Have an economic impact on the area
- Reverse the county’s brain-drain
- Enhance participation in HE
as well as enabling students to fulfil their potential and realise a societal value of their participation in HE. These aspirations are reflections of HEFCE who articulated that new HE centres should:

increase the HE provision available locally, especially where low levels of HE provision coincide with low levels of participation in HE. They will be important in widening participation and unlocking talent…have the potential to make an important contribution to raising the skills capacity of those already in the workforce.

(HEFCE, 2008a, p.9)

and further that SEEHEI would contribute towards the Leitch agenda for developing higher skills (Leitch, 2006).

Central to the missions of SEEHEI has been increasing participation of non-traditional entrants to HE and the profile of the student body reflects this. Amongst the full-time HEFCE-funded students there is a spread of socio-economic status: 30% from routine and semi-routine occupations, 8% from lower supervisory and technical occupations, 50% from intermediate occupations, and 12% from managerial and professional occupations. 55% of students are mature (over 21) with 65% being female and 35% male. Ethnic minorities account for 7.7% of learners (against a background figure for the county of 2.8%); 41% of students had full state support with their tuition fees, 11% had partial state support, and 48% paid their own fees. Only 30% of entrants have standard A-level entry qualifications, 65% come from within the county where forty-seven wards have been designated as being within the most deprived 10% nationally (information sourced from SEEHEI, 2010).

In 2008 the institution was shortlisted for a Times Higher Education Award in the ‘Widening Participation Initiative of the Year’ category due to its commitment to addressing low participation rates. When shortlisted for the award only 12% of full-time HEFCE funded students had had parents with managerial and professional occupational backgrounds. In 2009, SEEHEI was one of nine HE centres to receive investment from HEFCE as part of a programme to enhance learning opportunities for local people and increase the skill levels of those who
have little or no experience of HE (BIS, 2008a). Following the investment Sir Alan Langlands, Chief Executive of HEFCE, declared;

We [HEFCE] are committed to improving access to high quality learning and teaching. Developing existing higher education centres has enabled us to raise the relatively low levels of participation in many parts of the country. These centres have the capacity to transform people’s lives and broaden their horizons.

(HEFCE, 2009, np)

Local HE provision, such as SEEHEI, is therefore essential in enabling adults to benefit from HE participation who may not otherwise have been able to experience it.

Locally based HE provision is therefore not only important in terms of propagating social capital by ensuring skills and talents benefit the local area, but offers opportunities to those who represent a latent demand for it (BIS, 2008a; HEFCE, 2010f). At the time the institution was established, the extent of such demand was estimated by HEFCE (2008b) to be approximately five million adults, all of whom possessed level three qualifications, but had no experience of HE. The programme that participants were recruited from is a prime example of how such locally based HE provision has been able to reach out to adults who had been previously unable to access HE. It is a level three Science Foundation Year programme that provides a preliminary year of study for those aspiring to study an undergraduate science degree, but not necessarily possessing the prerequisite qualifications to do so; the typical learner demographic is non-traditional. The participants who were recruited for this enquiry were all NTS who had participated in the same programme of study. It was therefore deemed that understanding their expectations and experiences could positively inform the development of future strategy and institutional practices which would seek to promote a more sustained engagement in HE for such learners.
1.4 Thesis structure

This chapter has considered my background and the professional and personal experiences that culminated in my choice of research focus; it has subsequently introduced key terms used throughout the thesis, some of the contemporary issues related to WP and NTS transition into HE. Further, it has contextualised some of the unique institutional features within which this enquiry has been conducted and located. Subsequently, chapter two provides a literature review relevant to the study drawing upon the key themes introduced within chapter one and brings into view social, political, theoretical and economic perspectives to explore the development of current WP initiatives and the implications of these on NTS’ experiences of transition into HE institutions in the twenty-first century. Chapter three describes the research methodology that was adopted in order to explore the research questions and discusses the use of a case study methodology, interviews, data analysis and ethical issues arising as a result of the methodological choices made. The fourth chapter presents the findings of the enquiry and discusses the emergent themes in relation to both the timeline of transition throughout the course an academic year and the literature identified in chapter two. Chapter five presents the recommendations for future practice at both an individual and institutional level, this is followed by a reflection on how the research has impacted upon my own professional learning before the concluding chapter draws together the research and identifies the limitations of the study and proposes areas for further research. The chapter closes with a critical reflection and evaluation of the research process.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

2 Literature Review

This chapter draws upon the two key themes introduced within chapter one and brings into view social, political, theoretical and economic perspectives to explore WP and transition. Presently, there is a lively debate about both the evidence base and the contested understandings of both of these themes. The contents of this chapter are reflective of this and draw upon key theoretical work, empirical studies and policy documents to critically review literature most pertinent to the study of transitions into HE. The chapter focuses upon the role of HE in meeting the WP agenda and promoting successful transitions into HE. The synthesis of literature within this chapter has subsequently informed the methodological design of the study.

The literature review is presented in two distinct section, the first is related to the English policy on widening participation, it begins by providing a contextual overview of English HE provision to illuminate the broader landscape within which WP discourses are located and NTS transitions occur. WP is perceived and defined in competing ways, similarly, the concept of transition is subject to being understood from different perspectives. Therefore first section of this chapter continues with a systematic and critical review of the contested understandings of WP and transition. The second half of the chapter moves on to explore how the wide range of personal circumstances and institutional factors can impact on NTS throughout their transition into HE. It has been sequenced to reflect the chronological way in which NTS will engage and experience their transition into HE. It commences with considering the reasons they choose to engage and continues to explore factors that can lead to early withdrawal during their transition. It then continues to consider the impact of institutional and personal factors on the way in which NTS negotiate and navigate the change and challenges arise during their transition into HE. Finally the chapter concludes with a section which summarises the gap in current knowledge, by identifying the distinct contribution of the study to the existing body of knowledge.
2.1 Widening participation

The process of globalisation has had profound implications for HE provision. Towards the end of the twentieth century it became clear that national success in a global economy rested upon the assumption that knowledge (as represented by qualifications) was a more important factor for national competitiveness in a global economy than land, labour or financial capital (Macfarlane, 2004). Barnett (2005) argues that there has therefore been a consequential narrowing of the vision of the purpose of HE to account for economic changes brought about by globalisation. Underdal (2010) expands on this to propose that the role and value of HE is now primarily viewed as a means for skills development leading to an increase of the competitiveness of individuals and thus the economy as a whole. These assertions are based on the premise that personal fulfilment will result from economic/financial success both at an individual and collective level. However, the realisation and achievement of a knowledge-based global economy still faced one significant challenge: the need to promote engagement and empower greater numbers of individuals to engage with HE? For a country to meet the challenge, HE needed to reach out and widen access to previously under-represented groups within society, encourage greater equality of access and offer opportunities to adults who had missed out on HE in the past (BIS, 2008a, 2015; HEFCE, 2010f). The following section provides a précis of higher education provision in England.

2.1.1 Higher education provision in England

Government reforms of the public sector aimed at improving efficiency and service provision have borne witness to extensive changes to the nature of HE provision. Yet despite the pace of change being witnessed, widening participation - and the ensuing massification of HE - has continued to be dominant in policy drivers at both a national and local institutional level. Indeed the 2011 HEFCE publication ‘Opportunity, choice and excellence in higher education’ emphasised the importance of widening participation as one of its key principles for sustaining future HE provision. More recently BIS (2015)
reaffirmed the continued importance via plans to drive social mobility by further increasing participation from disadvantaged and under-represented groups.

Increasing engagement with HE necessitated both changes within educational policy documents and the re-shaping of institutions to meet policy aspirations. At a policy level, HE provision in England presently remains a ‘unified system’ that was introduced following the 1988 and 1992 Education Acts; more providers entered the sector in the last five years than any time since the last major expansion in 1992 (BIS, 2015). SEEHEI represents an example of such new provision; having been specifically conceived to increase access in a community where historically there has been no HE provision. At an institutional level, Barnett (2005) and more recently Gale and Parker (2014) both acknowledge that HE provision has evolved to meet the WP agenda in a diverse range of ways. Consequently, concern remains that whilst a greater number of learners than ever before are accessing provision, such advances have fallen short of realising an HE system that has unified its provision and offered all learners the opportunity to access all parts of it (Barnett, 2005).

Whilst the 1988 and 1992 Education Acts abolished the previous divisions within the field HE Bathmaker and Thomas (2009) advance a convincing argument that although unified via the same funding regime, the HE landscape remains stratified and many structural inequalities prevent access to all parts of it, especially for NTS. The earlier work of Barnett (2005) and more recently Bathmaker and Thomas (2009) furthers this point, questioning whether all types of HE provision in England are genuinely open to all, or whether they are closed in some way. Noting that this may be due to both the institutional ideologies that they represent and/or the resources that they demand for their occupation by learners. Suggesting, therefore, that the orientations of individual HE institutions may embody structural and ideological inequalities that can consequently both promote and impede the choice of where NTS engage in HE and their subsequent experiences of transitions into HE.

The work of Trow (1973) posited that HE provision could be broadly categorised into three different types; elite, mass and universal. He argued that within an
elite system, 5% of the population would access it, resulting in access being considered a privilege; while under a mass system of HE provision, access increased to 15% and it is considered to be a right rather than a privilege. Finally, he categorised that the third type of HE provision is a universal system, within which access rises to 50% and is seen as a necessity or obligation.

Although Trow’s (1973) work was undertaken prior to the 1988 and 1992 Education Acts, his more recent work (Trow, 2006) still advances an argument that these classifications are representative of the current HE system. SEEHEI can be considered an example universal provision. Bathmaker and Thomas (2006) believe that different groupings of potential students will position themselves differently, based on their expectations, with their orientations influenced by; social class, race, gender, age, disability. Therefore, as suggested by Green et al. (2015) and French (2013), it is important to gain an understanding of the networks within which particular classifications of HE are placed; reasoning that this will subsequently have implications for how WP policy is translated into practice.

HEI are not just placed within the field of HE, but have to construct a place for themselves in an HE market. Mann (2008) suggested that institutional positioning was defined by a tension between the values of social justice, support for the realisation of individual potential, social and educational inclusion and lifelong learning opportunities. Students, universities and academics are therefore all caught up in conflicting tensions. In relation to universal provision, Gorard (2013) rationalised that such tensions arose from the need to stretch a system that was once designed for elite to accommodate a much wider social mix of students, resulting in greater diversity of student need. Prompting debate as to the extent to which HE should respond or transform to successfully engage NTS in learning opportunities (Taylor and House 2010).

HEI’s purpose can therefore be categorised as allowing the transmission of skills and preparation of learners for technical and economic roles via a more utilitarian approach to provision. This contrasts with the assumed purpose of elite provision where preparation for occupational roles involving membership of an informal ruling class is assumed (Underdal, 2010). Such distinctions between the purposes of different parts of the HE system can be understood to
reflect the concerns of Barnett (2005) regarding the purpose of HE has become narrowed. Worryingly, it also implies that the expectations of students engaging in different parts of the HE system will be significantly different and the opportunities open to them upon completion of their studies will equally be different. Therefore, I would conjecture that the effectiveness of the HE system to bring about upward social mobility for NTS presently remains limited.

Whilst Trow’s (1973, 2006) work is helpful in terms of broad categorisation of current HE provision in England, Bourdieu and Passeron (1990) caution it to be too reductionist in understanding. They argued that HE must be considered as a system, rather than reduced to labelling individual institutions in isolation, stressing the need for relational understanding of the field of HE. Bourdieu and Passeron (1990) conceptualise HE as a social classification which is implicate and reproduces individuals according to an academic classification which is explicate. Building on this, it is important to develop an understanding of the networks which create hierarchies of more and less valued HE. In universal provision, HE value is constructed primarily in terms of skill development to increase the competitiveness of individuals; under the premise that personal fulfilment will result from financial success achieved through an increase in academic ability.

Although Bourdieu did not write about educational policy explicitly, his work on education and social reproduction can be judged to directly relate to the way in which NTS access HE. Especially around concepts of reproduction in education, society and culture (Lingard et al, 2005). These can be linked to WP as much of his later writing considered the negative effects of globalisation. Of particular relevance to the context of this enquiry are Bourdieu’s conceptual triad of; habitus, culture and fields (Rawolle and Lingard, 2008). These underpin his version of practice theory (Throop and Murphy, 2007). Each of these are considered below, and related to WP.
**Habitus** – is considered to be the most significant of Bourdieu’s work (Rawolle and Linguard, 2008). Whilst numerous definitions exist throughout his work, it is often characterised as “an internalised structure or set of structures (derived from pre-existing external structures) that determines how an individual acts in and reacts to the world” (Throop and Murphy, 2002, p.186). He considers that it is created through social processes. Therefore the practices of an institution, for example, whether transformative, academic or utilitarian in their orientation to WP could all influence the likelihood of NTS to engage in specific types of HE provision. Bourdieu (1984) reasons that an individual’s dispositions are shaped by past events. Therefore their choice of engagement in HE is likely determined by this because of the way they perceive the practices within it. Importantly, he suggests that social norms influence the way individuals think feel and act. Subsequently he reasons that they will embody social structures into their internalised structure, which will influence their experience of transition in HE and dictate the likely success of their sustained engagement.

**Capital** – for Bourdieu (1984) this goes beyond material to refer to social, cultural and academic; with all being equally important and transferable to different contexts. It is argued that the move from more material/financial capital to social, cultural and academic forms can hide inequality. Resulting in an unconscious acceptance of social differences and hierarchies (Bourdieu, 1986). In relation to WP, this could be considered to undermine the premise of it offering a more socially just and inclusive society. Furthermore, such accepting of existing hierarchies does little to address inequalities of factors beyond education, e.g. health (Marmot, 2010).

**Fields** – this concept helps to explain differential power and refers to the setting within which individuals and their social positions are located. The position of a particular agent (individual) is a result of interactions between both habitus and capital. As such Bourdieu (1984) considers them hierarchical and subordinate to the larger field of power and class relations. Disappointingly, Bathmaker and Thomas, (2009) suggests that the present system can be seem to embody inequalities and hence reproduce existing power and class relations.
The expansion of HE, stimulated by the WP agenda has resulted in greater numbers of learners than ever before enrolling onto both under- and post-graduate programmes, leading to ever-more diverse student groups (HEFCE 2011b,c; BIS, 2015). Currently there are twice as many students enrolled at English HE institutions as there were in the late 1980s (BIS, 2011). Although HE is argued by HEFCE (2011b) to be overwhelmingly positive for those who experience it, Hale (2006) cautioned that for many NTS, their experiences have been negative because of the need for them to critically explore some of the assumptions on which their lives have been built. A finding mirrored by Leathwood and O’Connell’s (2003) and more recently Reay et al (2010) work that also found that for many NTS, getting into university was not a positive experience. Mann (2008) suggest this is due to a wide range of economic, social and cultural barriers persist in restricting, and even inhibiting, their access to all parts of current HE provision. Therefore, it could be argued that the disparity of uptake of HE opportunities evidenced in the Dearing report (NCIHE, 1997), is still embodied in today’s HE provision. Interestingly, the SRHE (2010) publication advances a more positive outlook; suggesting that HE engagement for NTS not only transforms individuals, it also addresses socio-economic disadvantage, power economic regeneration and enriches arts and cultural lives. The following section explores how WP policy seeks to achieve this and explores the conflicting ways in which it is understood.

2.1.2 Understandings of widening participation

The concept of WP is not new and can be traced back as far as the eighteenth century (Ward and Steele, 1999). WP can be understood as a positive move towards equalising opportunities for an individual’s economic wellbeing, personal and social development and to encourage upward social mobility (BIS, 2008a, 2015). Taken at face value Grubb and Lazerson (2004) suggest it appears to offer a socially just stance to and role for education. In contrast, Duke and Layer (2005) caution that to deliver a fairer system, the system itself needs to be expanded, and that expansion alone does not support upward social mobility. Despite such cautions over the expansion of HE via WP initiative, policy drivers continue to urge a more
positive interpretation of the WP agenda by citing a rationale of enhanced educational experiences, opportunities and aspirations for learners; aligned with a positive contribution towards the social justice agenda (Blunkett, 2000; Tight, 2007; Mann, 2008; BIS, 2015). Yet interestingly, the promise of upward social mobility is often perceived as secondary to the promise that WP can help to promote economic regeneration resulting in increasing global competitiveness (Tight, 2007). Such contested understandings may be understood to have arisen because WP is not an absolute term, as such, it can be understood differently by different people. This is further explored within the following section.

Jones and Thomas (2005) suggested that three contrasting approaches to WP, with a different emphasis, had evolved: academic, utilitarian and transformative approaches. Within these, they argue that higher status institutions (offering elite provision) most frequently adopt an academic approach, and less prestigious institutions (offering universal provision) are more likely to embrace a utilitarian approach; SEEHEIs approach aligns with this. Whilst all three models have the potential to realise the WP agenda to differing extents, Jones and Thomas (2005) caution that limited adoption of the transformative approach may suppress access and limit the extent to which HE opportunities are available across all types of provision. Consequently, it may be conjectured that the approach that individual institutions adopt has a direct impact on where NTS position themselves, reinforcing the concerns of Bathmaker and Thomas (2009) that some parts of HE are not open to all types of learner. Furthermore that the necessity of transforming educational institutions in order to promote positive transitions and sustain the engagement of NTS will remain only a relatively peripheral concern.

It has been demonstrated that as a phenomenon, WP is complex and seeks to empower individuals by reducing the disparity of access to HE and ensuring that all who have the potential to benefit from it do so (HEFCE, 2010f; BIS 2015). WP in HE therefore holds much appeal both in terms of benefits to the individual and to the wider society. Despite this, WP remains a broad concept
that embodies a diverse range of challenges and, as noted by Layer (2005) and Wilkins and Burke (2015), the understanding, interpretation and engagement of WP initiatives has been varied across the HE sector. Tight (2007) suggested that such variations have arisen as a result of different understandings both operationally and ideologically.

The disparity between traditional and non-traditional groups HE participation rates (and subsequent underachievement) leads to high costs both at the individual and societal level. At a person level it affects employment prospects and health whilst on a national level it bequeaths the country a lower skilled workforce, lower productivity and results in a hollowing out of communities (Gale and Parker, 2014; BIS, 2008a). The implementation of WP initiatives has sought to address the challenges arising from asymmetry of access and associated underachievement of historically poorly represented groups in HE: to ensure that all who may benefit from it, have the opportunity to do so (HEFCE, 2011b; BIS, 2011, 2015).

Exactly what constitutes a non-traditional group has been the source of much discussion in recent research. In a review of literature, Moore et al (2013) identified that most often age has been the defining characteristic. However, Fragosa (2013) implies that age acts as a proxy variable that captures a large, heterogeneous population of mature students who often have family and work responsibilities as well as other life circumstances that can interfere with successful engagement in HE. Other variables typically used to characterize NTS are associated with their ethnicity, first generation HE entrants, disability, being from lower socio-economic groups 4-7 (BIS, 2011). I would conjecture that in the future, as WP initiative are successful, such population characteristics will need to be reconsidered. To the extent that it may arguably be different between different institutions based upon the typical demographics of their learners? Yet within funding circles (BIS, 2015) and for the purpose of clarification within this enquiry, participants of the study have been classified as NTS following the institutional classification based upon the HEFCE (2010b) classification and the SEEHEI Office for Fair Access (OFFA) agreement.
Specifically, that they were all first generation entrants to HE and from lower socio-economic groups, classes 4-7, (BIS, 2011). Additionally, ten out of the twelve participant were classified as ‘mature’.

Underdal (2010) identified that amongst HE providers WP is often deemed to refer to initiatives that enable greater access to existing provision. Yet WP is not simply about increasing the number of participants in HE; it is also about broadening the appeal of HE and can also refer to improving access to it. This can be achieved, for example, by diversifying the range of entry routes or qualifications that are accepted in order to gain entry onto a given HE course. Additionally, encouraging a broader range of students to apply via specifically focused and targeted recruitment and marketing drives could similarly deliver its goals. WP is also taken to mean developing provision within institutions to encourage a broader range of students to apply and enrol onto courses and, principally to stay and gain a qualification. Murray and Klinger (2012) advocate this latter and more holistic conception, proposing that it is increasingly understood to refer to tailoring learning to the needs, priorities and preferences of historically under-represented groups. The need for further research focusing on exploring ways in which sustained engagement of non-traditional learners can be achieved therefore becomes obvious. This enquiry intended to address this aspect of WP by making recommendations for institutions and individuals within HE that could help provide more positive experiences of transition for students and sustain their engagement through to successful completion of academic qualifications.

Considerable focus and justification for the drive to widen participation in HE and include historically under-represented groups concerns the return on investments in HE to the individual in terms of social and cultural capital. Therefore the goal of WP can be seen as not just worthwhile for individuals, but also as a means of re-dressing class-based systems and creating upward social mobility (Gale and Parker, 2014; HEFCE, 2010d; BIS, 2015). Since both statutory and non-statutory guidance drive the desire for widened participation in HE, it is reasonable to posit that all of those engaged in HE provision assume
some degree of responsibility for accomplishing both institutional and national ambitions in respect of WP. If increasingly sustained engagement of non-traditional learners is to be achieved the need to establish an evidence base upon which future institutional policies and practices can be based is imperative. Taylor and House (2010) recommended that for institutions to be successful in this endeavour they need to accept that access for NTS does not end at the point of entry. Rather, account should be taken of necessary changes in assessment, curriculum and student support offered throughout the learning journey. Duke and Layer (2005) furthered this and cautioned that failure of institutions to appreciate this fact may mean a higher chance of academic failure as a result of reduced engagement from NTS. Therefore, understanding the experiences of non-traditional student’s transitions into their HE engagement can help to identify how institutions can better target future support, broaden the appeal of HE and promote more positive experiences of transition. This would result in a more sustained engagement and diminished risk of early withdrawal or academic failure. Reflecting upon this, the following section discusses the rationale for the enquiry’s focus on exploring ways in which NTS’ transitions into and through HE can be promoted to better sustain engagement.

WP initiatives may be understood to be a political pre-requisite of today’s HE provision. Policy makers have repeatedly implied that WP is relatively easy; however, both Gale and Parker (2014) and Smyth and Banks (2012) commented that realising the WP agenda has not been as simple as they had hoped. Current policies are largely concerned with economic competitiveness, ensuring curricula and students meet the needs of a global market place and espouse solutions that seek to include greater numbers of learners from historically under-represented groups of society (HEFCE, 2010b). Whilst the numbers of participants within HE is one of the demonstrable outcomes, the main focus of WP could arguably be understood to be about broadening the appeal of HE and enabling upward social mobility. Murray and Klinger (2012) and Reay et al (2010) suggested that it is frequently this aspect of WP that policy makers ignore, arguing that for many individuals the decision to
participate in HE is a complex one that involves significant risk, for example debt.

Notwithstanding, HE makes a major contribution to the economy (Tight, 2007). In relation to WP specifically, the increasing emphasis on an individual’s economic success resulting from participation in HE had positively stimulated uptake of learning it has also negatively reinforced traditional hierarchies of qualifications (Bathmaker and Thomas, 2009), such that I would argue that the historic divisions that led to under-representation in HE may still not be addressed. Underdall (2010) also warned that a discourse may exist between the espoused financial gain to individuals and the amount of appropriately paid work opportunities available, potentially resulting in individuals being under-employed after successful engagement in HE, which he cites to arise from an incongruous relationship between supply and demand for graduate level jobs. Such explicate linking of knowledge, the economy and financial gain has frequently seen WP policy embodied as a utilitarian concept, whereby increasing access to HE is about identifying the most efficient and cost effective way of organising expansion.

Nationally, HE represents a significant destination for government resources, following the Dearing report (NCIHE, 1997) the issue of WP became a priority and funding was made available to encourage HE applications from wider mix of people. Gorard (2008) suggested this investment to be approximately £2 billion. Between 2001-02 and 2007-08, BIS and HEFCE allocated £392 million of WP funding to HE institutions, yet despite this funding progress has been slow and performance across the HE sector varied. Data from the National Audit Office [NAO] (2008) continues to evidence that socio-economic background remains a strong determinant of HE participation. Worryingly, the evidence from HEFCE (2010d; 2011a) not only documents that this group of NTS remain underrepresented, but that there has been a fall in young entrants from lower socio-economic classes.
Broadening HE access is frequently justified as a way of drawing on all pools of talent available through a meritocratic system, which embraces an economic vision that is becoming dominant throughout the developed world (Underdal, 2010). In contrast to such utilitarian understandings, more liberal interpretations are based upon the premise that scholars and academics have a moral duty to share their knowledge and expertise with the widest community. From this perspective, access should be widened not primarily for reasons of economic efficiency but for reasons of social justice (Wilkins and Burke, 2015). Under this rationale, emphasis is much more on exclusion from education being understood as one aspect of being disadvantaged (Smit, 2012). Burke (2012) advocated this latter interpretation, arguing that widening access initiatives needed to challenge utilitarian perspectives since these frequently result in maximally maintained inequality. Moore et al. (2000) concurred, citing education as a major driver of social mobility and that life chances can be significantly increased by access to HE.

HE operates in a very unequal society, where cultural norms and peer group dynamics have a powerful influence on whether or not people participate in higher education (Bowl, 2001; Reay et al, 2002; Burke, 2012). HEFCE (2011b) insist that widening participation is vital in creating a fairer society and securing improvements in social mobility. Enabling upward social mobility is deemed pivotal in promoting more active citizenship within society and is also one of the key aspirations of the HE reforms (BIS, 2015). Forde et al (2006) suggest that this has resulted in the HE sector no longer residing in society, but is now considered of society. In the social domain, understanding of widening participation involves consideration of cultural, social, psychological and attitudinal factors, to appreciate not only how WP may be understood by the individual; but also how these factors in conjunction with the attitudes of employers and organisations may further serve to shape our understanding. In this sense, WP can be understood to embody some of the more inspirational and emancipatory elements of lifelong learning (Blewitt, 2004).
The location of WP within the wider neo-liberal project of self-development and improvement through lifelong learning is considered by Jones and Thomas (2005) to be frequently presented as meritocratic and available to all who have the potential to benefit from it (HEFCE, 2010f; BIS 2015). Further they suggest that the policy context places emphasis on individuals to take responsibility to change their aspirations, dispositions and values. Non-participation is often represented as an individual failing, rather than it being more symptomatic of the system per-se (Barnett, 2005). Sociologists argue that WP tends to operate around contradictory claims: i) the claim of a classless society or death of class and ii) the powerful ways that class is invoked in moves to draw young people from deprived areas into HE (Jones and Thomas, 2005). Stuart (2002) also acknowledged tensions citing that frequently HE is presented with a naïve vision of as having a magic wand to solve social problems, however, he did acknowledge that it can make a difference to people’s lives but is not a panacea for all social ills.

As HE has continued to embrace a plethora strategies to ensure a more inclusive approach to its provision (Moore et al, 2013); institutions too have adopted a range of initiatives to promote diversity of opportunity and inclusivity. Whilst changes in provision have been embraced; it is cautioned that the fundamental ethos underpinning HE should remain central to provision (NCIHE, 1997). Recognising that, HE must continue to play a major role in shaping a democratic and civilised society, promoting social regeneration and driving business and institutional innovation. Yet paradoxically, the current drive for inclusivity gives little thought to the discourse which is created between the drive to ensure increasing participation and the rationale that participation within HE is optional rather than compulsory for individuals (Burke, 2012). Furthermore, it fails to address that notion that engagement in HE does not always have positive outcomes for those who engage, e.g. enabling them to meet their aspirations. Furthermore, it is often the individual is deemed to have failed to successfully engage in HE. Layer (2005) suggest that such blaming of individual frequently arises because universities frequently fail to take accountability for institutional failure to embrace WP. Further citing that frequently they point accusations in two directions: towards compulsory
schooling for not providing the entrants and towards employers for failing to respond to a more diverse and democratic body of graduates. Whilst this negatively implies that HE seeks to avoid accountability, it is perhaps also reflective of much of the work advanced by Gorard (2008, 2013) who has repeatedly identified that HE alone cannot widen participation.

At present the fundamental idea of a liberal understanding of the role HE and the subsequent contextualising of WP within a system that espouses education as intrinsically worthwhile for emancipatory ends provides a stark contrast to HEFCEs strategic vision (2003; 2011b). A vision which is grounded in a more instrumental understanding premised on the usefulness of knowledge. Consequently, Burke (2012) reflects that students increasingly see a degree as a key to future success and adopt a utilitarian approach to their engagement with HE (Lee, 2014). This has resulted in individual institutions frequently embracing equally utilitarian approaches to WP, which Thompson (2000) described as being based on cost effective ways of organising expansion. Jones and Thomas (2005) argue that this broad interpretation is too simplistic, stating that different parts of the HE system have embraced a utilitarian approach to different extents. Yet they also advance concerns that limited aspects of HE provision are adopting a transformative approach to WP at an institutional level. Further strengthening concerns regarding where NTS are likely to position themselves in terms of access to HE and therefore if some parts of present HE provision are ‘closed’ to them.

Despite concerns about the way in which WP is understood and embraced across the HE sector, BIS (2015) advanced an optimistic outlook, in which the challenges have forced HEIs to positively diversify their provision and identify new ways of responding that seek to promote engagement and transition through HE for NTS. This positive interpretation harmonises well with the work of Stuart (2002) who highlighted that the role of education is not only in developing skills for the world of work, but as a major contributor to social cohesion. A point reflected in the work of Duke and Layer (2005) who asserted that HE could evidence its transformative possibilities via its ability to deliver
social effects. These points were furthered by Sir Alan Langlands at the HEFCE (2011c) Annual Conference when he suggested that, via the work of the Office for Fair Access (OFFA), it had been evidenced that HE was proving to be an engine for social mobility. Despite the current role of HE in developing skills being promoted as a positive contributor to social cohesion, Burke (2012) advised that paradoxically a negative consequence of increased participation in HE could be argued to be that those who do not participate will feel more socially excluded. Reinforcing claims that WP tends to operate around contradictory perspectives of: i) the claim of a classless society or death of class and ii) the powerful ways that class is invoked in moves to draw young people from deprived areas into HE (Jones and Thomas, 2005).

Barnett (2005) commented that in response to the WP agenda, HEIs operating in different parts of HE provision have embraced a plethora of strategies in order to reshape themselves and encourage participation from those historically under-represented in HE. One such example of this is the establishment of foundation level courses, such as the SFY, which has been the focus of this enquiry. He further proposed that the greatest barrier to positive development and re-shaping future HE provision was the imagination, energy and courage of academics, in particular, academic’s willingness to try things out and to keep going, suggesting therefore that the ultimate question that needs to be asked is: do we have the will to re-shape the university? In response to Barnett’s (2005) question, my thesis is an attempt to explore the experiences and expectations of today’s NTS as they make their transition into HE in an effort to identify what can be done at an individual and institutional level to re-shape and promote positive change at a personal and institutional level to sustain future their engagement. The following section of this chapter considers the way in which transition is understood.

2.1.3 Classifications of student transition

Ingram et al (2009) suggest that contemporary research related to student transitions is part of a broader field focused on life transitions. Field (2010)
notes that within this field, student transition dominates which reflects the growing importance of lifelong learning in late modernity. Gale and Parker (2014) explain this importance to be reflective of the shift of HE systems towards participation, which Belyakov et al (2009) observed had increased the numbers of HE students from diverse backgrounds. Consequently, student transition has become more broadly conceptualised than just being about access, to include outcomes of student studies. The expansion of HE towards universal participation has arguably increased the centrality and importance of students transitions into HE and the associated research field (Colley, 2010).

Ecclestone et al (2010) concur, but caution that “there is no agreed definition” (p.5). In contrast, whilst Gale and Parker (2014) agree that the concept of “transition” in relation to students and HE remains largely based upon taken-for-granted understandings; they propose that it is broadly understood as “change navigated by students in their movement within and through formal education” (p.734). Whilst Colley (2007, p.428) describes it as “a process of change over time”, Gale and Parker (2014 argue that this is too reductionist. The earlier work of Bonassi and Wolter (2002) also supports this, as they argued it to be a multidimensional process extending over a particular time. Within these more complex understandings, Sellar and Gale (2011) suggest that transition is related to mobility, aspiration and voice. Such an understanding can be understood to align with many of the present drivers for WP in terms of mobility, raising aspirations and helping individuals achieve more. Moreover, the idea of mobility could be considered to resonate with Bourdieu’s (1984) work, as representing a marker of social distinction.

Gale and Parker (2014, p.737) suggest that three broad conceptions of transition exist:

- **Induction** ($T_1$): sequentially defined periods of adjustment involving pathways of movement from one context to another.
- **Development** ($T_2$): qualitatively distinct stages of maturation from one student identify and/or career to another.
- **Becoming** ($T_3$): a perpetual series of fragmented movements involving whole-of-life fluctuations from birth to death.
Whilst much research does not explicitly state the concept of transition that underpins the study, Gale and Parker (2014) argue that it is implicate and allocation to one category or another is frequently based upon the practices advised in the findings and the view underpinning them. They also recognise that in many cases the view of transition may not neatly fit into one category and demonstrate characteristics from more than one. Each of these categories is explored below.

**Transition as induction** ($T_1$) refers to students moving into HE. Within which transition is considered to be the journey and is largely conceived as a linear progression through HE, frequently broken down into phases. Typically the focus of research is on how students encounter HE when they first enter, rather than experiences prior to HE (Gale and Parker, 2014). Kraus and Coats (2008) identified that the first year (induction) was the most critical time because it often informs the student’s latter success/failure. This period of transition is considered complex, especially for NTS, because of the adjustments required of them to successfully navigate HE culture, convention and expectations (Bathmaker and Thomas, 2009). A challenge with this understanding of transition is that the emphasis is largely on the student to fit in with transitions managed by the institution. $T_1$ approaches are justified on the premise that transition is best managed by institutions to support the adjustments required of students to successfully navigate HE (Gale and Parker, 2014). Consequently, a limitation of this understanding is that it often considers global institutional responses which subsequently require an increasingly diverse student body to fit with these. Wilson (2009) characterises such responses into two categories; firstly university support services and other curricula activities, e.g. induction; secondly, curricula activities including pedagogy and assessment. The combinations of these responses result in a transition pedagogy approach to designing HE;


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<th><strong>Coherent</strong></th>
<th>institution-wide policy, practice and governance structures</th>
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<td><strong>Integrated</strong></td>
<td>embedded across an entire institution and all of its disciplines, programs, and services</td>
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<td><strong>Coordinated</strong></td>
<td>a seamless first year experience that is institution-wide, rather than separate, 'siloeed' initiatives</td>
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<td><strong>Intentional</strong></td>
<td>an awareness that curriculum is what students have in common and using curriculum to influence the experience of all students</td>
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<td><strong>Cumulative</strong></td>
<td>a long-term approach to learning; gradual withdrawal of scaffolding</td>
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<td><strong>Interconnected</strong></td>
<td>curriculum principles that stand out in the research as supportive of first-year learning engagement, success, and retention</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Explicit</strong></td>
<td>with links between what is taught, why, and its assessment</td>
</tr>
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</table>

Figure 1: $T_1$ transition pedagogy (Gale and Parker, 2014, p.740)

Ecclestone et al. (2010) cautioned that this understanding ignores the need for spaces in HEIs for diverse knowledges and ways of knowing, as it focuses on providing institutional spaces for different kinds of students by requiring them to navigate existing systems, hence the need of the system to change is neglected.

**Transition as development ($T_2$)** is focused on identity, which Ecclestone et al. (2010, p.5) characterise as “a shift from one identity to another”. Developing an HE student identity therefore suggests that during transition students will become somebody else, e.g. a radiographer, transforming from one life stage to another (Gale and Parker, 2014). Specifically for NTS, Thomas (2012) recognises that if a student feels they do not fit in because they do not have the social/cultural capital or be successful, their identity is challenged and they are more likely to be unsuccessful in their transition. Quinn (2010) is cynical of this understanding, arguing that transformations are not synchronised to pre-defined time periods. Whilst both $T_1$ and $T_2$ are conceptualised as linear processes, a significant difference between them is that $T_1$ transition is an attribute of a social system, whereas $T_2$ transition is an attribute of an individual. Hence solutions for facilitating transition in $T_1$ research evolve at the level of the institution and in $T_2$ arise at the level of the individual.

**Transition as becoming ($T_3$)** is an understanding of transition that acknowledges the dynamic and fluid way that individuals engage in learning across the life span (Quinn, 2010). Gale and Parker (2014) suggest that this
understanding emphasises the dynamic relationship between public and private aspects of an individual’s life course. As such it is conjectured that $T_1$ and $T_2$ understandings of HE transition are inappropriate due to the linear assumptions about the nature of transition, and that instead researchers should develop a more dynamic account of student transition. Furthermore, that transitions are not always at times of crisis and challenge. Whilst I concur with this understanding, I would also conjecture that based on the work of Thomas (2012) for NTS there is a greater likelihood of experiencing challenge during their transition into HE, based on the need to additionally explore some of the assumptions upon which their life is based.

In the case of this enquiry a dual approach to the way in which transition is conceptualised has been adopted based on both $T_1$ and $T_2$ understandings. This reflects the focus of the EdD to be embedded within my practice and that changes will arise for me on a personal level as a result of the research, and also acknowledges broader way in which it has been evidenced within the literature that institutional practices can impact upon individual experiences of transition into HE (as discussed in the following half of this chapter). Gale and Parker (2014) advocate this approach, further reasoning that the findings are likely to result in HE being more flexible and responsive to NTS. They also advocate that further research between different contexts, with a focus on pre-entry to HE is needed. Therefore reinforcing the need for further understandings of the nature of student transitions into HE from foundation years of study. The second half of this chapter explores factors that impact upon the experience of transition into HE.

### 2.2 Factors that impact upon transitional experiences for non-traditional students

This second half of my literature review has been sequenced to reflect the $T_1$ and $T_2$ understandings of transition as being a linear journey into HE (Gale and Parker, 2014). It commences with a short section that acknowledges the way in which participant for NTS is affected by geography and moves onto consider
the reasons that NTS enter into HE. The chapter then explores, how the participation in HE for NTS may be sustained and how they where they choose to engage. Further consideration is given to the negotiations in terms of challenges that they may face in successfully continuing their transition. Before concluding by identifying the gap in knowledge and the specific research questions that have framed this enquiry.

2.2.1 Regional variation in non-traditional students’ HE participation

HEFCE (2013) advocate that a pre-requisite to understanding variation in participant for NTS is to acknowledge how participation varies geographically. As was evidenced in chapter one, SEEHEI is situated in a rural county where there has historically been no HE provision and it was the only English county with a population over 0.5 million without direct HE provision (BIS, 2008a). Consequently this led to a steady decline in the numbers of young people within the county, causing a drain of skill and talent, resulting in a hollowing out of communities (BIS, 2008a). Local HE provision can help an area retain skills since many people choose to stay and work within their university town (BIS, 2008a; BIS, 2008b). Specifically if personal and/or financial commitments limit an individual’s ability to move. In particular for mature NTS HE entrants, a quantitative analysis reported by the OpinionPanel (2011) compiled a list of attributes rated as 'very important' by applicants when selecting their universities, 41% of respondents rated geographical location as a very important non-academic factor that had influenced their university choice. Students from poorer backgrounds often have limited money to travel, therefore awareness of local provision is key (Stuart, 2002). This was mirrored in the findings of Griffic et al. (2009) who found that debt aversion amongst poorer students affected where to study, but positively had not influenced what to study. They found that lower-income families were more likely to attend local university (60% compared to 50%).

Despite the advances being made with the increased availability of locally based HE provision (BIS, 2015), regional variation in HE participation continues.
Evidence from the Participation of Local Areas [POLAR] survey evidenced that large differences existed between the participation rates of areas in quintile 1 (those areas with the lowest proportions of HE-qualified adults) and quintile 5 (those areas with the highest proportions of HE-qualified adults); with those living in quintile 5 areas are 3-4 times more likely, on average, to participate in HE than those who live in quintile 1 areas (HEFCE, 2013). Suggesting that there are significant opportunities for institutions such as SEEHEI to positively increase participation in HE and promote upward social mobility. However, geographical factors are in many respects beyond the scope of the institution to influence, in order to address factory that may serve to undermine successful transition into HE, the reasons why individuals chose to enter HE must be explored.

2.2.2 Reasons for non-traditional students to enter HE

The drive to widen participation to HE assumes that it is desirable to those it seeks to include, and subsequently that there will benefit for the individual and wider community. Hale (2006) identified many negative experiences of learners entering HE via WP initiatives and in common with early findings of Leathwood and O’Connell (2003) and more recently, Reay et al (2010) argued that for many, getting into university was no longer a positive experience. Specifically, Reay et al (2010) attribute this to many NTS feeling like a “fish out of water” (p.117) when they enter into the HE environment. Keep and Mayhew (2004) considered that; many NTS viewed HE as a continuation of compulsory education, reasoning that presently graduate qualifications are required for a range of jobs that 10 years ago were open to non-graduates. Acknowledgement of enhanced future career prospects as a key motivator for engagement may inform the development of institutional policies and practices. Particularly for those institutions such as SEEHEI who adapt a utilitarian approach to WP. Greenwood et al. (2007) suggested that the reasons NTS enter HE may arise from a combination of redundancy, recognition and regeneration. Within both recognition and regeneration, there is a clear link between future career and the reason for HE engagement. Human Capital Theory proposes that an individual will regard their engagement with HE as worthwhile if their investment will result
in a return on that investment over time that is greater than the cost (Baron et al., 2000). Whilst the findings of Greenwood et al. (2007) would suggest NTS reasons for entering HE are utilitarian in understanding; it is worthwhile noting that, there are substantial non-financial benefits associated with the attainment of a degree, including improved health, greater opportunities for children of graduates and reduced crime rates (Marmot, 2010).

Understanding the reasons that NTS enter into HE can help to identify ways in which institutions may be shaped to positively promote access and successful transitions. It is often argued that the reason that poorer students do not choose to engage with HE to the same extent as their more affluent counterparts is because they do poorly at school, due to limited/lower expectations of themselves and from others. However, the findings of a quantitative analysis undertaken by the TLRP (2008a) suggested that there was no bias in terms of teachers underestimating poorer student achievements in compulsory education, suggesting that lower rates of uptake of HE by poorer students are more closely related to lower self-expectations and not anticipating going to university, which was linked to familial expectations and social status. The work of McKenzie (2001), French (2013) and Crozier and Reay (2011) concurred that the differences in uptake of HE between poorer students and their richer counterparts arises as a result of a more complex association between disadvantage; based on financial, social and academic capital, all of which are linked to their socioeconomic status. Consequently, many NTS are attracted into HE later in their life-span via WP initiatives and are subsequently classified as mature students, having never previously anticipated entering HE.

Evidence from BIS (2011) would suggest that overall the HE sector has been successful in engaging latent demand from mature learners. However, the Independent Commission on Fees (2013) cautioned a more cynical interpretation, citing that for some NTS, notably mature students, HE acceptances fell faster than the overall trend with fewer acceptances between 2010-12 with 7.6% fewer applications (twice that of younger entrants). Part of the solution is arguably for institutions to encourage participation of this group,
who represent latent demand for HE (HEFCE, 2011b). But more significantly promote positive experiences of transitions so that NTS not only enter, but sustain their engagement and achieve their academic qualifications. A challenge acknowledged by Moore et al (2013) was that the outcomes of WP students may not be a straight forward reflection of their ability or achievement. The OECD (2015) reason that many factors beyond the control of HE impact upon the transitional experience for NTS. Therefore within the context of new HE provision (SEEHEI), this study sought to address this and identify dimensions of the proviso that were successful and where further enhances might be made to improve the experiences of NTS.

2.2.3 HE entry routes for non-traditional students

Awareness of the reasons that NTS enter HE (Greenwood et al, 2007) and acknowledgement that it is frequently later in their life span when experiences of compulsory education may be distant has necessitated HEIs to not only adapt their current provision and support mechanisms (Fragosa, 2013), but also develop more flexible and alternative entry routes into their provision that take into account the different starting point for NTS. Examples of such diversified entry routes include access courses, foundation year courses and a range of vocational qualifications. Despite this, Jones and Thomas (2005) disappointingly suggested that this resulted in individuals accessing HE via WP entry routes, being perceived as contaminating academic standards within institutions. This point is furthered by the work of Bathmaker and Thomas (2006) who cautioned that many non-traditional entry qualifications have been plagued with issues surrounding identity, credibility and support. Presently, the University admissions process is based upon both attainment and potential (Burke and McManus, 2011). To this end, the Schwartz Report (2004) acknowledged the challenges for NTS and non-traditional qualifications, recommending HE admission processes should take into account “contextual factors such as educational context and personal circumstances” (p.54). Yet challenges associated with a lack of conceptual clarity surrounding personal circumstances prevail. Arguably complicated by the OFFA, who favour the absolutes that measuring attainment offers, rather than the ambiguity that
measuring potential carries. Burke and McManus (2011) posit that the present admissions system fails to engage with the complexity of the relationships between social inequalities, educational achievement and life chance. To this end, Layer (2005) suggested that these tensions are perpetuated by the discourse created between the need to provide equity of access and HEs traditional pursuit of excellence. Such discourses potentially give rise to sustained concerns about where NTS are likely to opposition themselves reinforcing concerns that some parts of HE being closed off to NTS (Bathmaker and Thomas, 2009). Yet, regardless of difficulties of the way in which alternative entry routes for NTS are perceived, perhaps encouragingly, the net effect has been that overall there has been a sustained increase in the numbers of individuals participating in HE (BIS, 2011, Higher Education Statistics Agency, 2013). Sustaining the participation of NTS upon entry into HE remains challenging and Reay et al, (2010) cautions that many factors can act to both constrain and enable NTS transition into HE. Thomas (2011) considers that WP and retention have often been separated out in policy and funding streams, yet within HEIs the boundaries are frequently blurred. The following section explores how participation can be sustained for NTS.

2.2.4 Sustaining HE participation for non-traditional students

Sustaining the participant of NTS is central to meeting the WP agenda. Generally those institutions seeking to serve the elite HE provision (i.e. Russell group institutions) perform worse than their equivalents serving mass and universal parts of HE provision (BIS, 2008a). The SRHE (2010) commented that often such poor performance of elite institutions is misrepresented as a failure of the HE system as a whole.

Increases throughout HE provision in NTS participation numbers have positively evidenced success in meeting the government’s desire to widen participation, it has in many cases come at a cost. Specifically, large class sizes and a reduction in contact time between students and academics (Barnett, 2005). A negative consequence of which could be understood to be a more limited scope
of human relationships within the curriculum and less flexibility to be able to respond to individual needs of NTS, therefore a more fragmented experience of support during transition, which it is conjectured will undermine sustained engagement, resulting in early withdrawal. Consequently, it is conjectured that the ability of individual institutions to provide a coherent experience of transition may not be satisfied leading to early drop-out and poor retention (Sanders and Daly, 2012). In this way, WP has created an interesting tension between increasing student numbers and the ability of effective support to enable successful transitions and reduce attrition.

For those students attracted into HE via WP initiatives, successful outcomes of their engagement are about more than initially attracting larger numbers of historically underrepresented groups. Successful initiatives seek to ensure good quality attainment and promote successful completion of the programmes onto which they enrol. Griffic et al. (2009) argued that students who do not complete their programme of study represent a substantial cost to the public sector, and cite that retention and successful completion is effected by three elements; institutional factors, economic factors and personal factors. They identified that out of these factors, personal characteristics of the learner represent the most significant determinant of an individual's success in relation to sustaining their HE engagement. This echoes the suggestions of many other authors who also advocated that WP and the efforts needed by the HE sector to sustain the engagement of NTS is broader than initially eliciting their engagement and having the financial means to remain in HE (Bowl, 2001; Crozier and Reay, 2011; Wilkins and Burke, 2015). In contrast, Hale (2006) predicted that the removal of the cap on tuition fees would have a detrimental effect on participation, due to the perceived adverse economic implications of entering into HE. However, following the removal of the tuition fee cap, Griffic et al (2009) suggested that debt aversion was not something unique to NTS.

The majority of students who fail to sustain their engagement in HE withdraw from courses in their first year (Thomas, 2012). A study by Trotter and Roberts (2006) identified that the factors which influence retention of NTS during their
initial year of enrolment into HE were personal reasons and that financial and debt related issues were not identified as a factor affecting retention. Trotter and Roberts (2006) reasoned that many NTS are likely to live at home due to existing financial constraints and whilst this positively reduced debt aversions as a reason for early drop-out; they cautioned that this itself can have a detrimental effect on NTS willingness to fully integrate into HE. Additionally, it is recognised that learning, teaching and assessment can all impact significantly upon the successful transition for students (Roberts, 2011).

Establishing the reasons for NTS early withdrawal from HE programmes is complex, and often affected by a multitude of dynamic factors, as such it is a process, rather than an event (Basit et al, 2006). The work of Jones (2008) identified the following five categories of reasons why students withdraw;

- poor preparation for HE
- weak institutional and/or course match resulting in poor fit/lack of commitment
- unsatisfactory academic experience
- lack of social integration
- financial issues and personal circumstances

The ‘What Works’ project identified the following three key reasons why students consider leaving prior to completing their programmes of study as being; academic issues, feelings of isolation and/or not fitting in and concerns about future aspirations (Thomas, 2012). What is notable is that these three reasons overlap with the first four identified by Jones (2008) suggesting that institutional policy and practices are pivotal in promoting (and indeed impeding) the sustained engagement and successful transition of NTS into HE. However, understanding the reasons for students early withdrawal from HE is not as simple as such reductionist understandings would suggest, Jones (2008) and Griffic et al. (2009) both acknowledge that there is rarely a single reason why a student leaves and in many cases it will be due to a combination of factors that contribute to their decision to terminate their engagement early.
The work of Reay et al. (2002) and Gorard (2008, 2013) and suggest that for those NTS who choose to engage in HE later in life, having previously had negative educational experiences, their lower self-expectations and uncertainty about their academic abilities result in them being less likely to fully participate and at a higher risk of early withdrawal. Jones (2006) suggested that institutions can overcome such challenges and promote better retention with NTS by specifically considering transition support, including personal and financial support. Therefore, leading to the development of institutional strategies that seeks to not only promote engagement, but also reduce withdrawal; as a result of the barriers they face during their transition being minimised. The suggestion of Jones (2006) was echoed in the findings of surveys undertaken by the ‘What Works’ project who found that between 33-42% of NTS think about withdrawing from HE during early phases of their transition. This work advocated that in order for individual institutions to reduce this number, improving students belonging should be a priority (Thomas, 2012). The following section considers the ways in which NTS sense of belonging is encouraged by exploring how NTS position themselves and where they engage in HE.

2.2.5 Non-traditional students’ self-positioning in HE

Many NTS attracted to HE via WP initiatives continue to find themselves as outsiders to mainstream education (Stuart, 2002). A consequence of this was identified by Bathmaker and Thomas (2009) to adversely mean that many position themselves relative not only to their imagined future as their wealthy counterparts do, but more significantly where their current circumstances, e.g. dependants and/or ability to travel dictate. Bourdieu and Passeron (1990) suggest that such student’s behaviour can be understood to convey what they deem to be ‘reasonable’ to expect. Their behaviour arguably therefore recognises the inequality of the HE system and where they perceive they should be located within it. Most worryingly, it perpetuates and reinforces stratification of the HE system.
HE can be a powerful engine for upward social mobility, enabling people from low-income backgrounds to earn more than their parents and providing a route into the professions for people from non-professional backgrounds. But as identified in the ‘Opening Doors, Breaking Barriers’ publication (Cabinet Office, 2011) there are significant barriers in the way people from the most disadvantaged backgrounds access HE; namely the negotiations that they have to make in order to both initially engage and subsequently sustain their engagement. Griffic et al. (2009) identified the institutional factors that support learners to negotiate their transitions through HE are the most significant determinant of successful sustained engagement. Hayatt (2005) concurred and emphasised that effective support systems are significant to help NTS to integrate into the HE environment. Seago and Spetz (2005) reported how such an approach to student support in California reduced attrition amongst ethnic minority nurse students to zero. Yet, effective support goes beyond teaching and requires an institutional awareness of the personal circumstances and situations of its learners in order to establish mutually valued relationships between students and staff. This enquiry sought to understand these relationships in order to make recommendations to promote positive experiences and successful transition for NTS.

Work based on the theories of Pierre Bourdieu (1990, 1997) provides insights into the idea that institutions have their own ways of doing things, ‘habitus’, which can serve to embed structural inequalities within educational practices; subsequently this can both enable and constrain non-traditional student’s transition. As a result of this, institutions can make it harder for some students to feel like they belong than others. Bourdieu (1990) reasons that this arises from differences in the ‘cultural capital’ of an individual, or their social and cultural practices and their tacit knowledge, all of which may be deemed less appropriate or inappropriate and they may be more prone to withdraw early. Typically it could be argued that those individuals from WP backgrounds are likely to possess less cultural capital in contrast to traditional students and consequently are more at risk of being marginalised with an institution through greater fears of not belonging and potentially at risk of early withdrawal.
Bourdieu (1997) characterises such students as often having no direct family experience of HE, being more debt averse and hence more likely to want to study at home and stay with family to have good levels of support with their study. This subsequently requires them to undertake more negotiations in order to sustain their engagement as their values are challenged. Foster et al (2011) suggest that at times of such challenge, NTS have identified support from family and friends as the most frequently cited reason for them to sustain their engagement and continue their transition. Awareness of this can help to develop institutional support systems that aim to promote a more positive experience of transition, based upon the recognition that NTS are most frequently challenged by academic concerns, by generally social factors are what cause them to stay (Foster et al, 2011). Interestingly, Blewitt (2004, p.1) suggested that the ability of institutions to adapt is often constrained, citing “universities are notoriously conservative creatures, and many in the academic community will be resistant to such change”, this observation resonates with many of my professional experiences of working within HE today. To address such concerns, HEFCE (2008) advised it to be good practice for all programmes to make provision to support their non-standard entry students. The findings arising from this educational enquiry are an attempt to do this and embed more successful support structures.

The findings of research undertaken by TLRP (2008a) identified that NTS are more likely to position themselves to attend lower status institutions (where status is measured in terms of research quality and institutional prestige). Reaffirming the concern that not all parts of present HE are open to all potential learners. Nevertheless, the OpinionPanel (2011) reported that students typically believe that the most important reason for going to university is to improve their job prospects, with improved salary earnings and enhanced knowledge in an area of interest also scoring highly as motivators. Quantitative evaluation of student decisions regarding which university to choose evidenced that students have increasingly placed greater emphasis on future employability being a ‘very important’ factor in their decision from 44% in 2007/08 to 48% in 2009/10 (OpinionPanel, 2011). These understandings resonate with an explanation proposed by Greenwood et al. (2007) regarding an individual’s motivation to
engage with HE. However, TLRP (2008a) caution that as a result of NTS frequently positioning themselves in typically lower status institutions, they are likely to earn less than their fellow graduates from institutions with higher research assessment exercise scores. In this way it could be argued that the present HE system continues to embody and perpetuate historical inequalities that many would consider WP ideologically seeks to overcome.

It is clear that a number of factors will effect an individual’s sustained engagement and where they choose to engage in the broad field of HE. Similarly for those NTS who do choose to embark upon an HE programme of study, a number of factors can contribute to potentially promote, and inhibit, their successful transition. Despite much being known about these factors Sanders and Daly (2012) comment that little is known about them in respect of foundation years of study and that further work is necessary in order to expand the existing knowledge base in terms of identifying successful strategies that promote transition from level three into level four study for entry routes such as the SFY programme that was the focus of this enquiry. The following section explores the ways in which institutional factors contribute to way in which NTS negotiate their transition into HE in order to sustain their engagement.

2.2.6 Non-traditional students’ negotiations during initial entry into HE

Many of the factors identified to impact upon transition remain beyond the control of an individual institution to influence, therefore in seeking to promote participation and successful transition through HE for NTS, individual institutions should seek to address both structural and cultural factors that can affect the way in which learners experience the HE environment throughout the course of their life-cycle (Bowl, 2001; Bathmaker and Thomas, 2009). This study has therefore focused on the expectations and experiences of transition through a foundation year of study in order to provide an insight and evidence that can be used to inform future practices at SEEHEI and other institutions offering similar provision. The following section explores how factors at an individual institutional level can impact upon the transition of NTS through HE.
The institutional factors that can shape NTS experience of transition can be broadly considered to be divided into structural and cultural factors. These together will have a complex and dynamic impact upon the nature of transition throughout the student’s life-cycle and hence the success of an individual advancing between levels of study (Bowl, 2001; Bathmaker and Thomas, 2009). In order for institutions to successfully meet the needs of an increasingly diverse student body, changes in terms of institutional provision have included; improved pastoral provision, new and different kinds of course content, alternative pedagogies, new forms of assessment, different modes of study, e.g. part-time and distance learning provision and a range of retention strategies. Each of which have had a subsequent effect upon the policies and practices within an institution in order to sustain the engagement of it’s learners. As a result of such changes, HEFCE (2011b) has asserted that WP has been a success and participation rates from underrepresented groups have increased consistently. However, OFFA (2011) cautioned that there remains a perception in some communities that HE is ‘for others’, which negatively effects aspiration and attainment. Subsequently this can be argued to limit potential and have a regressive effect on the potential for HE to result in upward social mobility. Therefore in establishing new HEIs and providing new entry routes, a key to planning for future success is to understanding the expectations of those NTS who engage with it in order to challenge the perception that HE is ‘for others’.

Griffic et al. (2009) suggested that NTS generally have poor support in terms of information and this can lead them to have misconceptions, especially in relation to the financial cost of HE. They consider that NTS overestimate the cost of university and underestimate the benefit of acquiring a degree and financial considerations have a significant impact on where they choose to study. Most worryingly, their work identified a number of poorer students in HE did not claim the financial support they are entitled to. Davies et al. (2008) identified the following main sources of information about finance that students accessed prior to entering HE; university website (33%), prospectus (36%), UCAS (33%), friends and siblings (15%), parents and guardians (17%), and teachers (7%). These findings reinforce the need to ensure that NTS receive appropriate information regarding finances in order that they are not deterred
from entering HE and in recognition that not all avenues of advice will be open
to many NTS, e.g. they cannot seek help from teachers. Notwithstanding, the
OpinionPanel (2001) survey identified that over a quarter of students (28%) believed that their expected debt at graduation was ‘definitely’ an acceptable
investment. In acknowledgement of the need to provide better and more tailored
student support, many institutions have sought to provide many additional
services focussed on support for NTS, e.g. personal tutors and counselling
services. To this end, it could be conjectured that WP without appropriate
support does not truly widen access, as it frequently fails to sustain
engagement. However, Moore et al (2013) comment that there is limited
evidence regarding the extent to which support sustains engagement and
promotes the student experience of transition in the long terms across the HE
sector, suggesting additional research is needed..

Bartlett and Burton (2006a) posit that all aspects of education are ideologically
shaped, and that an individual’s own personal preference for certain ideologies
will help define their personal and professional identity and therefore shape their
individual educational experience and the adjustments that they may
individually need to make in order to successfully achieve their academic
qualifications. Duke and Layer (2005) question the extent to which HE needs to
change to meet the needs of NTS versus the extent to which NTS should be
required to fit into existing HE provision. To this end, additional research that
combines both $T_1$ and $T_2$ transitional conceptions (Gale and Parker, 2014) is
recommended. Bowman et al. (2000) consider the strongest inhibitor to a
student’s successful transition to be a negative self-perception’s that may have
arisen from compulsory educational experiences. More recently, the work of
Smyth and Banks (2012) found that negative self-perceptions of students’
during compulsory education did not deter them from engaging in HE early in
their life span. Frequently this is a reason cited by mature learners for why they
did not engage with HE earlier in their life span (Fragosa, 2013). These reasons
resonate with the findings of TLRP (2008b) who identified that the risk NTS
associated with their choice to engage with HE was largely related to their
anticipated academic success or failure based upon previous success/failure
they had experienced during compulsory education. Griffic et al (2009) further
advised that NTS engagement was directly influenced by their choice of institution and course, the perceived individual risk as determined by the anticipated value of the qualification versus the risk of academic failure and the constructed identity arising from a conflict between the need to construct a new learner identity contrasted against an individual’s cultural identity. McGiveney (2001) concurred with many of these, suggesting that factors that both inhibit participation and successful transition can be understood to arise from either practical, psychological or structural adjustments that an individual is required to make during their transition. What is significant about all of the above is that frequently educational policy cite reasons of non-engagement as being an individual failure, rather than a failure of the HE system *per-se* (Barrett, 2005).

Griffic et al. (2009) comment that for many NTS, the decision to terminate their engagement with HE will be a difficult and complex one. This is echoed by Moore et al (2013) who argued that decisions to participate in HE are unlikely to be based solely on financial considerations, rather on a complex mix of personal aspiration, parental educational achievement and an individual’s perception of a particular course. Harris (2010) reiterated these suggestions and advocated that programmes can make a significant difference to participation via the NTS experience of transition, which can subsequently promote sustained engagement. Furthermore, that in order to do so they need to be engineered to engage students in order to prevent the wide range of economic, social and cultural barriers restricting WP access into HE for NTS. In recognition of this, this enquiry sought to identify opportunities, misunderstandings and responsibilities for those within HE to promote a more coherent experience of transition for students making their transition through a level three SFY programme.

Preece et al (1998) asserted that the root of non-participation still resides in power relationships and dominant values in society, which he argues conspire to give outsider status to individuals who do not conform to middle-class norms. More recently, Gorard (2013) also supported this and cited that the influence of families in creating learner perceptions that do not recognise HE opportunities
as appropriate, interesting or helpful to confound an individual’s low educational self-concept and is a strong inhibitor to engagement. Encouragingly, changes to recent trends in participation has seen an increase in participation of the least privileged socio-economic groups and in 2010 the growth in participation from these groups was higher than that of the more advantaged groups (BIS, 2015). Although raising aspirations of learners is one facet of WP for NTS, Jones and Thomas (2005) emphasise that aspirations are not individually formed, but are interrelated and dynamically reproduced throughout an individual’s engagement with HE. The expectations and behaviours of an individual will all impact upon their experience and in turn is heavily influenced by structural and ideological understandings based upon all aspects of their engagement (Bartlett and Burton, 2006b). Such challenges to an individual often result on students not only needing to make compromises in order to continue their transition through the institution, but perhaps more importantly, the need to make adjustments in order to sustain their successful engagement.

Bathmaker and Thomas (2006) also identified that HEIs are pivotal in offering advice that guides students into HE. This can be considered especially pertinent in the case of foundation years of study where students have the option to progress to level four studies within the same institution. Interestingly they also warn that such advice is frequently given in the context of institutional drives to retain students. Specifically within hybrid institutions that serve universal participation, such advice might frequently be understood to reflect the need for academics to justify their course provision, especially since hybrid institutions often attract lower volumes of applicants that those HEIs serving the elite and mass parts of the sector.

For NTS, the university experience is typically one of change and also of challenge. Reflecting upon Greenwood et al.’s (2007) suggestion for why NTS return to study, e.g. redundancy, regeneration or recognition, it can be understood that within each of these different motivations, a student’s relationship with learning will be challenging, requiring adjustments and often at a time of significant change within their life (Swain and Hammond, 2011). All of
which can potentially serve to undermine the success of a student’s sustained
engagement in HE. Research undertaken as part of the TLRP (2008b)
highlighted the risk associated with this, suggesting that learning can damage
people’s agency when they find that things are too difficult or that they cannot
cope. Therefore Tett (2004) argues that institutional support mechanisms
should seek to acknowledge such challenges through the range of support
systems available. Furthermore that via the practices of individuals within an
institution, the experiences of transition into HE may be made evermore
coherent, a challenge for this is for academics to know who their students are
and what motivates them. Subsequently systems could be conceived that are
attuned to the needs of NTS, rather than forcing them to become attuned and
‘fit in’ to existing institutional structures, many of what were designed at a time
of greater learner homogeneity. The following section outlines the current gap in
knowledge, the contribution of this enquiry to the educational knowledge base
and cites the specific research questions that have framed this research.

2.3 Gap in current knowledge

So far this chapter has considered the context within with HE is provided,
contrasting understandings of WP, differing ways in which transition may be
classified and the factors that may impact upon transitional experiences for
NTS. The context for this enquiry has been to focus on provision seeking to
serve the universal part of HE within the liminal zone of provision. Within which,
there is a particular focus on foundation courses as an alternative entry route
into HE. In light of the literature review, there appears to be a gap in terms of
knowledge relating to how WP policy is experienced by students in a newly
established institution that was designed, in part, to meet HEFCEs (2008a) goal
of providing more locally based and accessible access routes to HE and hence
promote WP. It has be argued that there was a need to specifically undertake
research where the study institution is located (Gale and Parker, 2014), in order
to guide institutional decision makers as they plan their future strategies by
identifying how transition into HE may be encouraged for NTS. Reasoning that
there is a limited amount of existing knowledge due to the short time the
institution has been in existence.
In seeking relevant literature for consideration within this chapter, there was a paucity of studies that considered how to promote transitions from level three to level four. With Sanders and Daly (2012) advocating the need to increase understandings as little is presently known about the effectiveness of foundation years of study in respect of the WP agenda and improving students transitions. Literature reviewed has helped to provide some insight into provision made more generally throughout the HE sector. But the extent to which these resonate with liminal zone HE provision is arguably more limited and caution should be exercised in trying to directly transfer findings. This again evidences the need for contemporary and more situated understandings. Finally, perhaps the most significant limitation associated which much of the literature presented within this chapter is that the findings have not explicitly articulated the type of transition that they have considered, i.e. $T_1$, $T_2$ or $T_3$, and in a number of cases have been derived from studies that have been conducted at single points in time, rather than a longitudinal analysis of student transitional experience. Therefore it was the intention of this study has sought to recognise the dynamic and evolving relationships between expectations and experiences of transition throughout a foundation year of study, by conducting a longitudinal study.

### 2.3.1 Contribution of study to educational knowledge base

In light of the literature reviewed in this chapter and the rationale for the study presented in chapter one, there is a gap understanding of how NTS experience transition in the universal part of the system located in the liminal zone of provision. It has been evidenced that NTS dispositions and their social positions can act to both enable and constrain their engagement with HE opportunities. Consequently an individual’s engagement with learning is not necessarily a positive experience and does not always have positive outcomes (TLRP, 2008b). Especially for those whose experiences of formal education are more distant, they are likely to have been significantly different to those who have progress into HE from very recent study. The need to promote positive early experiences of transition for such learners is therefore paramount in order to sustain their engagement. Understanding the experiences of NTS’ participation and transition at level three therefore permits an understanding of how to
successfully extend participation and promote widening access to HE opportunities, by improving the experiences of those on the edge of further participation. Gale and Parker (2014) further support the need for this enquiry to contribute to the existing knowledge base. They cite that in terms of research into student transitions, better understandings of experiences of those moving into HE from alternate entry routes, i.e. foundation courses is needed.

It is well established that students expectations of HE can be key to successful negotiation and adjustment during transitions (Cook, 2004; Wilcox et al., 2005; Gale and Parker, 2014). A mismatch between expectations and experience can be an indicator for failure of WP initiatives. Presently, foundation courses represent an increasingly popular part of the WP driver as they are designed to tackle many of the issues that have historically resulted in non-participation of certain groups within HE (Sanders and Daly, 2012). Especially for those NTS for whom continuation of their studies from level three to four within the same institution is possible, they seek to ensure that the experiences of students’ transitions into and through individual institutions may be made evermore coherent. However the challenging nature of transitions to degree level study (Mercer, 2004; Hockings et al., 2007; Gale and Parker, 2014) emphasises how complex the task of providing a coherent experience may be.

2.3.2 Research questions

The main contribution to educational knowledge takes the form of informing my professional practice ($T_2$ – transition as development) and local policy formation within SEEHEI ($T_1$ – transition as induction). Such that the integration of activities, policy and procedure designed to help meet the WP agenda. It will provide a strong evidential basis upon which to inform future practice’s for developing sustainable educational practices in an increasingly diverse HE sector. The aim of the study was to contribute to the understanding of the nature of transitions into HE, as experienced by NTS, by exploring their expectations and experiences of making the transition from level three to level four study. Reflecting upon the review of literature within this chapter enabled a
further refining of the aim into specific research questions, the following areas emerged as more specific questions for the enquiry to address;

1. How do non-traditional students settle into the HE environment?

2. What negotiations do non-traditional students have to make throughout the course of their transition in order to sustain their engagement in HE?

3. How do non-traditional students adjust during their transition in order to sustain their HE engagement?

4. To what extent do future aspirations of non-traditional students inform transition into HE and what are the implications of this?
3 Methodology

This chapter discusses the methodological choices made in order to undertake the enquiry. Stenhouse (1975) visioned that practitioners researching their own practice could successfully result in them adapting to changing political, economic and social pressures, through the self-determining and self-authoring nature of their research. He also espoused the value of professionals conducting research within their own occupational specialities being that it is context bound and relevant to ‘real-life’. Giving currency to Stenhouse’s work, Gray (2013) suggested that the present global marketplace demanded contemporary research situated in practice, not laboratories, in order that decisions based on the reality of context related evidence may be implemented. Within the context of this enquiry, I have engaged with NTS from my own professional context, in an attempt to understand the nature of their transition into HE at one HEI. Aligned to the work of Gray (2013), the aim was for emerging understandings to inform changes in my professional practice and more broadly identify implications for institutional practice and policy. As a consequence of this, it is conjectured that more sustainable self-determining and self-authorising practices for the future at an individual and institutional level can be realised.

The chapter begins by providing a synopsis of the context of the enquiry and a précis of the participants. The research aim is reviewed in context of the methodological choices that were made to frame the enquiry and locate the subsequent knowledge produced. It continues with a systematic description of the methodology and method choices that have been made and provides a rationale to justify these choices in respect of exploring the study aim. The chapter moves on to address how data were analysed to produce the new understandings of the nature of participants’ transition into HE at the study institution. Acknowledgement of the practical and ethical considerations that arose during the planning, undertaking, write-up and dissemination of the findings is presented and the chapter closes with a summary that reflects upon the methodological choices and process of data collection.
3.1 Research context

The programme from which participants of the study were recruited was a level three Science Foundation Year (SFY) programme that provided a preliminary year of study for those aspiring to study an undergraduate science degree, but not necessarily possessing the prerequisite qualifications to do so. The typical student learner demographic is non-traditional. The programme aims to provide students with the subject knowledge, study skills and personal confidence to succeed at degree level in a science related subject; notably most successful students do progress to a science degree. The typical entry requirements are 60 UCAS tariff points (or equivalent).

Since the programme was first offered, there has been a strong tradition of attracting mature applicants with non-traditional entry backgrounds. These students are largely accepted on the strength of their experience and enthusiasm for the subject. The programme itself follows a modular design consisting of six modules delivered over two semesters and assessed at the end of each semester. Attendance is spread over three days and involves 15 hours contact time each week. The participants who were recruited for this enquiry were all NTS who had participated in the same SFY year of study. It was therefore deemed that an understanding of their expectations and experiences could positively inform the development of future strategy and institutional practices, which would seek to promote a more sustained engagement in HE for such learners.

3.1.1 Participant summary

The final sample of participants for the enquiry included twelve NTS, four undertaking level three and eight undertaking level four studies. They ranged in age from 21-40 years old. With the exception of one participant, they had all had previous full-time working experiences which included the armed forces, professional football, administration and healthcare. It was the intention of this study to interview all participants at three staged points across one academic year. It is worth noting that not all participants engaged in all three interview
phases of the study; however, their data have been included and used to inform the findings. Table 1 below summarises the participation in each of the phases by participant.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Level of study</th>
<th>Previous full-time (F/T) part-time (P/T) work</th>
<th>Participation in interviews</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Delia</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>F/T</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gill</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>F/T</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sarah</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>F/T</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vera</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>F/T</td>
<td>✓ X X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bella</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>F/T</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bill</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>F/T</td>
<td>✓ X X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harry</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>F/T</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joe</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>F/T</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>F/T</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jess</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>F/T</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mike</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>P/T</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ray</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>F/T</td>
<td>✓ X X</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: Participant’s engagement with each phase of the data collection

### 3.2 Review of research aim

This enquiry aimed to better understand the experiences of transition into HE for NTS, in order to identify how to more successfully extend participation in HE at the study institution. Within the literature review, it was evidenced that further research into the nature of student transitions, particularly related to alternative
entry routes is needed (Sanders and Daly, 2012; Gale and Parker, 2014); based on the notion that individuals and institutions can make significant differences to the successful participation and value that NTS attach to their HE journey (Burke, 2012). Therefore it was conjectured that policy and practice should be planned so as to harmonise in order to appropriately engage NTS in their learning journey; such that it results in a positive experience of transition that aligns with their expectations. In order to do this, the enquiry aimed to collect data to illuminate the experiences and expectations of NTS during a one year period of transition. Specifically, it has been the intention of this enquiry to understand the experiences of NTS transitions in two dimensions; firstly, transition-as-development ($T_2$), and secondly, transition-as-induction ($T_1$) in order to identify ways individuals institutions can shape future educational systems and continue to strive to maximise participation. The findings of the study seek to articulate how individual practices ($T_2$) and institutions ($T_1$) can be developed to promote positive experiences of transition that results a more sustained engagement of NTS throughout their HE journey.

The research design for this enquiry was chosen to reflect the desire to gain an in-depth understanding of a specific part of education provision at one HE institution (SEEHEI), which is located in the liminal zone of HE provision. This new understanding can inform both individual educational practices ($T_2$) and institutional policy making ($T_1$). A major consideration for the design of the research framework in relation to the enquiry’s aim was that it needed to be capable of acknowledging that an individual is affected by their past experiences and their background, which they use to construct their own understandings of their lived experiences. Therefore in order to understand the nature of NTS’s transition into HE, the research framework needed to acknowledge that there is a dynamic relationship between the world and the person that mutually affect each other to construct and reconstruct understandings. The study was designed to reflect this and therefore followed an interpretive framework. This allowed the collection of data that permitted complex and multifaceted influences and dynamic relationships to be explored in-depth. It also acknowledged that the application of scientific methodologies to educational research frequently result in research designs that fail to address
the contextual and situational nature of educational enquiries (Yates, 1971; Maclure, 2003; Denzin and Lincoln, 2005). Most importantly, the research design sought to explore NTS experiences over time. The methodological choices have therefore been made to permit the generation of longitudinal data that explored participants’ reflections and anticipations of their experience of transition and trace these over time, rather than provide discrete ‘snapshots’ of their experiences. The following section explores the overarching rationale for choosing to conduct this enquiry within an interpretive framework and how this choice was aligned to both the broader context of conducting educational research and specifically investigating this enquiry’s aim.

3.3 Research design

The research design chosen was a case study conducted within an interpretive framework. This was chosen as it had been identified during the literature review to have been a methodology successfully used in previous studies undertaken in similar research contexts (Crozier and Reay, 2011). Yin (2003) advocates this choice to be appropriate within the chosen framework, reasoning that the enquiry seeks to investigate a contemporary phenomenon (transition) within its real-life context of NTS experiences at SEEHEI. Case studies are deemed to be good for illuminating educational policy, in this case WP. Further, that they offer a pertinent structure, due to their bounded nature, to generate outcomes that focus on enhancing educational practice; in this case the experience and expectations of NTS transition into HE (Stake, 1995). This rationale further harmonises with the ethos of the EdD being embedded in professional practice and the desire to ensure that the enquiry has implications for my own professional practice has been integral to the study design from the outset, resulting in the enquiry aligning with a $T_2$ understanding of transition. It further sought to consider the wider institutional implications, aligned with a $T_1$ understanding of transition. Gale and Parker (2014) advocate this approach to be pertinent to exploring the nature of NTS transition into HE.
One of the central considerations in choosing the research design has been the advice of Maclure (2003, p.175) that; “truths are always partial and knowledge is always ‘situated’”. Therefore, via engaging students-as-participants in interviews staged throughout one academic year, the study design intended to bring to the fore a deeper understanding about their ‘situated’ experiences in order to better understand the dynamic nature of their transition to bridge the gap between policy and practice (Buchanan, 1998). The following table summarises the research design that was planned at the outset of this enquiry;

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Epistemological Assumption</strong></th>
<th>Knower and known are inseparable, with knowledge being a subjective point of view</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Ontological assumption</strong></td>
<td>Ontological relativism; which assumed that there are multiple social realities that are products of human intellects and that any can change as their constructors change</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Axiology</strong></td>
<td>Inquiry is value bound</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Theoretical perspective</strong></td>
<td>Interpretivism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Methodology</strong></td>
<td>Case study</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Method</strong></td>
<td>One-to-one semi-structured interviews, staged at three points throughout the duration of data collection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Generalisation</strong></td>
<td>Time and context free generalisations are not possible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Causal Linkages</strong></td>
<td>All entities simultaneously shape each other. It is impossible to distinguish causes from effects</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 2: Theoretical and methodological framework

Staged interviews, undertaken at three different points throughout a one year period of transition, were chosen as a data collection method. They enabled exploration of participants’ attitudes, opinions and perceptions due to their often open ended nature; and were a relatively inexpensive way of obtaining rich qualitative data (Grey, 1997). The staged approach permitted iterative revisiting of topics to further explore the dynamic relationship of the participants’ attitudes, opinions and perceptions throughout the period of their transition. Furthermore, interviews were deemed an appropriate method to choose for this study, as the research was concerned with obtaining insights and understandings of each
participant’s experiences and expectations as they moved through their HE journey.

The research design for this study has taken a longitudinal approach, in recognition of the significance of time to the experience of transition for learners (Gale and Parker, 2014). By engaging with participants on multiple occasions, it was the intention of the research design to trace participant’s experiences over time. This longitudinal data collection – conducted at staged points throughout the academic year – enabled participants to look back on previous experiences and revisit them in light of their ongoing experience of transition. As well as exploring how their ongoing HE engagement influenced their future aspirations. The following section discusses how the case study methodology was used within the context of this enquiry to address the study aim.

### 3.4 Case study

Attree (2006) advises that within an educational enquiry, the main methodological challenge is to ensure that the research reflects the complex nature of the phenomena under investigation. Therefore, my choice of methodology had to reflect the perspective of the participant’s experience of transition as the central issue, to address the research aim. The methodology chosen for this enquiry was a qualitative case study. Scott and Morrison (2007) state that case studies represent one of the most frequently chosen educational and social science research methodologies. Freebody (2003) concurs, suggesting they can be utilised within a variety of research paradigms since they can be exploratory, descriptive or explanatory, he acknowledges that there is a more frequent resonance between case study methodology and interpretive framework. Yin (2003) also advocates this choice to be appropriate within this study, reasoning that the enquiry seeks to investigate a contemporary phenomenon (transition) within its real-life context of NTS experiences at SEEHEI.
Stake (1995) identified that case study research can be broadly classified into three different categories; intrinsic, instrumental and collective. Aligned to his categories, an instrumental single-case design was chosen. Stake (1995) suggests that in an instrumental case study, the ‘case’ itself is secondary to understanding a particular phenomenon. Specifically, within this enquiry:

- The ‘case’ – NTS experience at SEEHEI
- The ‘phenomenon under investigation’ – NTS transition into HE

It was the intention that the design of this instrumental case study would facilitate the collection of data to describe a specific case (NTS experiences at SEEHEI). Subsequently, through analysis of the specific case, e.g. the study participants' experiences and expectations, the generation of new knowledge about the nature of NTS transition into HE would emerge; resulting in a new contribution to knowledge and a more general understanding of the particular phenomenon that the case study was concerned with (NTS transition into HE).

Yin (2003) deems this to be an appropriate choice to capture the circumstances and conditions of an everyday situation, this the case of the enquiry, NTS experiences of transition into HE at SEEHEI. Freebody (2003) also supports this choice, reasoning that the relevant theory which underpins the case, i.e. the existing body of knowledge, is holistic in nature and consequently the focus of the study is more likely to be known in advance, enabling the researcher to identify a ‘bounded system’, which Stake (1995) cites as a pre-requisite for successful case study design.

The case study methodology selected for this study was based on ontological relativism; which assumed that there are multiple social realities that are products of human intellects and that any can change as their constructors change. And a relativist epistemology; which assumed that the knower and known are inseparable, with knowledge being a subjective point of view (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005). Ader and Mellenbergh (1999) advocate the case study approach as an appropriate choice to understand how people interpret their
Eisenhardt (1989) commented that the use of an instrumental case study methodology to conduct an enquiry frequently focused on understanding the dynamics present within single settings, e.g. one HEI, in this case SEEHEI, and can involve numerous levels of analysis. Aligned to this, the use of an instrumental case study methodology was judged appropriate due to the single setting from which students were recruited. The staged nature of the interviews allowed for the participants’ dynamic understandings of their experiences to be revealed. Furthermore, it was evidenced within the literature review that the experience of transition is complex and multifaceted. Whilst such complex relationships can be a challenge for a researcher to fully understand, Eisenhardt (1989) suggests that if the research question is well defined and data collected systematically, the complexity of the case can be fully understood. To this end, the use of semi-structured interviews as a data collection method have helped to ensure the systematic collection of data with each of the study participants. Additionally, Freebody (2003, p.81) advises that “the goal of a case study, in its general form, is to put in place an inquiry in which both the researchers and educators can reflect upon particular instances of education practice”. In the case of this enquiry, NTS transition into HE and tracing the influence of time on their understandings has provided findings that have enabled me to reflect upon particular instances of my educational practice. These reflections have helped me to further identify implications for improving my professional practice.

Holloway and Wheeler (2002), supported by Punch (2005) agree that a noteworthy weakness when choosing an instrumental case study design is that the findings cannot be generalised. However, Scott and Usher (1996) disagree with this, arguing that its greatest strength is its ability to particularise rather than generalise. Whilst they acknowledge that the findings cannot be generalised in a statistical sense, they argue that the data can be generalised to themes, which subsequently permits comparisons to be made with other contexts. This point is further supported by Yin (2003) who also advises that the
theory generated from this type of instrumental case study, constructed within an interpretivist framework, has applications beyond the specific context from where it is generated. He reasoned that whilst the data generated as a result of this study will remain context specific; the resultant themes and findings will have implications for other contexts and NTS moving into contemporary HE. However, he also cautions that the resultant global approach may not allow the investigation of an individual phenomenon, potentially resulting in the entire case being constructed at an abstract level. Another consideration for the researcher when choosing this type of methodology is that the nature of the case may shift during data collection (Stake, 1995). In acknowledgement of these considerations, the data collection method was designed to specifically address them in order to limit their impact on the emergent data. The following section of this chapter describes how the data collection method of interviews were used within the context of the enquiry to explore the research questions.

3.5 Data collection method

The data collection method selected for this enquiry was one-to-one semi-structured interviews. These were conducted in a staged manner (three times) throughout the duration of one academic year. Each participant was invited to attend an interview at each of the three stages within the academic year. These enabled qualitative data to be collected that explored the participant’s experience of transition over one academic year, to provide a multi-layered account of their experiences and expectations. Most importantly, they enabled the data to reflect the dynamic influence of time on the participant’s experiences to be captured and traced throughout the duration of data collection.

In the context of this inquiry, a one-to-one semi-structured interview method was further deemed appropriate as they typically have a high response rate and the flexibility within the data collection process means that the researcher can pose follow-up questions to gain a deeper understanding. This dynamic element also affords the researcher the opportunity to clarify responses from the interviewee and explore additional areas of interest that may have arisen during
Chapter 3: Methodology

the conversation (Clarke, 1999). The dynamic aspect of this method ensured that the data obtained moved beyond a ‘snapshot’ of the participants’ experience to produce data that traced their experiences over time. A further advantage is that the researcher can be highly responsive, which also assists in keeping the interviewees interested by not being posed with questions that participants do feel are irrelevant to them. This can lead to a better rapport between researcher and participant and increase the willingness of the interviewee to be open and honest (Kvale, 2007). This leads to participants’ verbally validating the data, which strengthened credibility of the data. Yates (2004, p.151) advocated the use of participant verbal validation of their data citing; ‘With subject defined data, the length, detail, content and relevance of the data are not determined by the researcher, but recorded “as spoken” [...] usually in the form of notes or tape recordings’, (Yates, 2004, p 151). Therefore the data produced from the interviews were defined by the interview participants, rather than by the researcher.

A further advantage that made them pertinent to this enquiry was that they facilitated the generation of data beyond pre-determined categories (typically associated with quantitative studies). Meaning that interviewee’s responses were not constrained and multi-layered accounts of their experiences and expectations could emerge (Weaver and Olson, 2006). It was essential that the method chosen facilitated the collection of data which would illuminate the experiences of the participant’s transition. Whilst interviews can open up what participants say, there are limitations in their recall of events. For example, a participant may modify their feelings or recount events in light of more recent experiences that have continued to shape their understanding of their ongoing engagement with HE. Whilst frequently cited as a potential limitation (Polgar and Thomas, 2000), within the context of this enquiry, this was deemed a benefit due to the requirement for the research to capture an understanding of how participants recounted and modified their feelings in light of new experiences as they continued their transition across time. The following section discusses the longitudinal staging of the interviews throughout the data collection period and the rationale for when each was conducted.
3.5.1 Staged interview phases

A longitudinal data collection design was deemed to be most appropriate as the research aim sought to explore participant experiences and expectations of transition in HE, throughout a specified time period of one academic year. Therefore enabling participant experiences to be traced throughout the data collection period. The staging of interviews was done such that they were conducted at what were considered to be ‘key’ points within the academic year. These key points were planned with the intention that it would not only permit longitudinal data collection, but significantly that it would enable participants to look back on previous experiences and revisit them in light of their ongoing experience of transition. They were based upon times within the academic year that were identified within the literature to be significant. Furthermore, the staged approach permitted ongoing discussion and reflection with the participants regarding the impact that their transition had with regard to their future aspirations. As well as exploring how their continued HE engagement influenced their future aspirations. The timing and rationale for the choice of when each of the specific data collection interviews was staged is detailed below;

- Phase 1: October, commencement of academic programme
- Phase 2: February, start of semester 2 following first summative assessments
- Phase 3: May, end of the academic year and just prior to final summative assessments

Data collection with each of the participants followed the same pattern and was conducted in three phases as detailed above. Below is a more detailed rationale for the choice of each phase.

**Phase one** represented the point at which participants had just commenced their programme of study and represented a significant point of transition for students entering HE. This is a time when it is recognised that many students feel challenged and where there can potentially be the greatest mismatch between their expectations of HE and the reality of commencing their journey.
Chapter 3: Methodology

**Phase two** was scheduled to take place in February; this represented the start of the second semester for all participants. It was chosen to capture a time of the year when all participants would have undertaken summative assessment in January and would have received their results. Assessment is acknowledged as being a significant point in a student’s transition, due to the potential anxiety that it can evoke and the consequences of not being successful in terms of students making a transition. For participants in this study who were undertaking the SFY, it represented the first formal feedback that they would have received on summative assessments.

**Phase three** of data collection was undertaken in May. This point represented the end of the academic year and data collection was scheduled to take place in the participants’ last week of their second semester. This phase was deemed to be significant in terms of the participant’s transition as it provided an opportunity for them to reflect on their HE journey throughout the academic year and for them to anticipate the next stage of their transition as they moved onto the next level of study.

At each of the three data collection phases, participants were invited to attend an interview, these were held in a private room at SEEHEI. The following section of this chapter discusses the design of the interviews.

3.5.2 Interview design

Denscombe (2002) highlighted that conducting interviews involves assumptions that are not normally associated with casual conversation, therefore that they require careful planning and design if the data is to truly reflect the views of the interviewee and positively contribute the subsequent generation of theory. In order to effectively plan an interview, he suggest the following stages:

i. Draft interview
ii. Pilot your questions
iii. Select your interviewees
iv. Conduct your interviews
v. Analyse interview data
Each of the above stages is considered in turn to describe how the interviews within this enquiry were planned.

Kvale (2007) advised that to conduct a successful interview requires considerable training and can be both time consuming and expensive. Therefore careful planning and preparation is necessary in order to maximise the utility and elicit rich data that will address the research aim. In order to appropriately plan and prepare, Wilkinson and Birmingham (2003) suggest that the first consideration is to identify the type of interview that will be conducted. Within this enquiry, staged semi-structured interviews were chosen as these enabled some degree of control and direction by the interviewer over the flow of the interview, but were flexible enough to permit the interviewee an opportunity to shape the flow of information. Freebody (2003) considers this element of control to be of particular benefit for novice researchers with limited experience of interviewing.

A key feature of semi-structured interviews is that there are pre-defined areas for discussion, which although this decreases the flexibility, does mean that the emergent data can be more easily combined for analysis; especially when interviewing multiple participants on multiple occasions as was the case in this enquiry. The pre-defined areas for discussion had one further advantage within the context of this study, as it helped to address the limitation of participants using the interview as a way to voice their opinions about subjects beyond the scope of the research study (Weaver and Olson, 2006).

The primary purpose of interviewing participants within this study was to obtain insights that could not be gained from other sources of existing data, or from different data collection methods. It was therefore essential that when drafting the interview questions were phrased in such a way as to gain a deep insight into their expectation and experiences. To achieve this, an interview schedule (see sample in appendix 1) was devised for each phase of the data collection. These sought to record key questions in relation to the research aim and ensure
that during every interview with each participant, key areas were not overlooked. The drafting and design of the interview schedule was informed by the research aim and the themes that emerged from the literature reviewed in chapter two as well as ‘insider’ knowledge gained from my professional role, e.g. familiarity with the structure of the programme from which participants were recruited. This helped to ensure that the emergent data was relevant to the answering the aim by permitting successful combining and theming of data during the data analysis phase. Corbin and Strauss (2008) refer to this as the ‘theoretical sensitivity of the researcher’, advocating that both the background and experiences of the researcher combined with the literature review and immersion within the topic enable the researcher to make sense of the data during the analysis stage.

Wilkinson and Birmingham (2003) suggest that when drafting an interview schedule, a funnelling technique can be helpful in relation to the sequencing of the questions, and that by starting with general questions related to the participant’s experience, the interviewee will be more willing to be open and honest about more sensitive areas if these are addressed later in the interview and as more specific focussed questions. The design of the interview schedule reflected this advice and for each interview throughout the academic year, a general question was posed to each interviewee at the start of the interview, prior to addressing more specific areas of research interest. Although designing the perfect interview schedule is impossible, the use of pilot studies are considered beneficial during initial planning to determine the effectiveness of the draft interview questions to be used as probes and structure of the interview (Polgar and Thomas, 2000). In accordance with this advice, a pilot study was conducted prior to commencement of the final data collection, the following section details how this was conducted and how the outcome subsequently informed the study design.
3.5.3 Pilot study

Within the context of this study a pilot study involving a number of participants was undertaken to specifically consider if any of the questions were ambiguous and ascertain feedback from the participants of the pilot study with regard to flow and structure of the question sequencing. Secondly a one-to-one pilot interview was conducted to gain feedback in respect of timing and my conduct during the interview.

The initial pilot study was undertaken in September 2010 with 8 undergraduate students who had commenced a BSc (Hons) Radiography degree in September 2010. The second pilot interview was also conducted in September 2010 and involved one student enrolled into the second year of the same programme. This group of students were easily accessible to the researcher and also represented a group who had recently enrolled at the study institution; therefore they were deemed to have similar amounts of experience of the institution to many of those participants who were subsequently recruited to participate in the study.

During the initial pilot study, the participant interview schedule sheets were circulated and comments sought with regard to clarity of information and the appropriateness of the phrasing to be used for semi-structured interviews. Freebody (2003) advises that clear phrasing of questions is essential to the quality of the data gained during the interview process. Feedback from the pilot study suggested that the phrasing of the questions was clear and they were easy to understand, therefore it was judged that they did not need to be amended. Subsequently the interview schedule of questions was circulated and feedback was sought from the participants in respect of the following questions; ‘did any of my questions annoy you?’ and ‘were there any questions you didn’t understand?’ Again feedback from the participants in the pilot study suggested that the phrasing of the questions was appropriate and participants were in agreement that they understood the questions, and had not been annoyed by any of them. Therefore it was deemed that the phrasing of the questions would
The purpose of the one-to-one pilot interview was to consider the conduct of an each of the semi-structured interviews. Specifically, the duration that answering questions would take, the behaviour of the researcher during the interview, length and the technical aspects of audio recording. The pilot interview enabled me to develop my interviewing skills and the feedback from the interviewee was also invaluable with regard to considering my non-verbal communication. For example, it was commented that I frequently nodded when they made positive statements about the institution, which encouraged elaboration, whereas when negative things were being communicated my non-verbal communication was far more limited, potentially meaning that as an interviewer I could have a significant effect on the outcome of what was recorded and what participants felt comfortable to share with me. Therefore, prior to conducting the research interviews, I considered carefully how my responses to both positive and negative statements might influence further contributions and also future participation within the study as I wanted to engage with participants on a number of occasions throughout the year. Following the pilot interviews being conducted, the interview schedule was confirmed and the recruitment of participants commenced. The following section details how this was done and the challenges that arose which necessitated a modification of the initial research design.

3.5.4 Recruitment of participants

Recruitment of participants requires the researcher to identify how participants will be found. Within this study the population was defined as, all students enrolled onto a level three SFY programme at SEEHEI. These students were identified to be accessible and have experiences which would be relevant to exploring the research question. As was identified at the start of the chapter, the programme from which participants were recruited was a level three foundation
year programme of study, where the typical student learner demographic is non-traditional. Therefore it was deemed that they represented individuals who would have experiences directly relevant to the study aim. Furthermore, I was involved in the delivery of this programme; my familiarity with the context and my ‘insider’ knowledge helped to inform the study design and embed the study within my professional practice.

At the outset of the study, it was envisaged that participants for the study would be selected using a purposive sampling technique, this aimed to select participants the researcher deemed to be important to understanding the phenomena of NTS transition into HE that the enquiry sought to investigate. The choice of purposive sampling technique also aligned with Bloor’s (2001) recommendation that sampling within case study-based research enquiries involving interviews as a data collection technique is best done via purposive sampling; reasoning that this permits transferability of the findings following data analysis. Furthermore it was hoped that the use of a purposive sampling technique would permit the researcher some degree of control over the process of selecting the final sample so as to ensure some degree of homogeneity with regard to the characteristic the participants’ had which classified them as NST and not typically associated with entrants to HE, e.g. mature students. This decision was based upon the premise that the nature of transition might reasonably be expected to be different for different types of NTS, therefore understanding ways in which it can be enhanced would again be understood differently for different types of NTS.

Their importance of the participants being recruited from the SFY programme was based upon the knowledge that the typically the students enrolled onto this programme were NTS. Therefore participants recruited from this programme of study would possess the key characteristic desirable to exploring the research aim and their participation would enable the understanding of NTS transition into HE to be explored. Furthermore the SFY programme has a typical cohort size of 75 students, which was considered to provide a population size that would enable the desired sample size to be achieved.
Initially it was aimed to recruit 8-10 participants, Bloor (2001) advocated recruiting multiple participants reasoning that more confident positive inferences are less easy to make without a small sample of participants. If multiple participants are involved the strength of the inference, which can be potentially made increases, although this is still generally limited to the sample rather than population. The final selection of participants was based upon a combination of methodological and practical considerations. Most significantly, this was limited due to lack of students who volunteered to participate, which resulted in an adaptation of the recruitment strategy of the participants.

Recruitment of participants commenced prior to the commencement of the SFY. All students who had enrolled online were written to by a member of the administrative team and sent details of the study, with an invite to participate upon commencement of the SFY programme. Additionally, they were informed that further information regarding the study would be made available during the induction day for the SFY. Subsequently, upon commencement of the programme, an information session (about the study) was provided by a member of the administrative team during the induction day. Students who were willing to participate were asked to leave their contact details and these were followed up by myself. Each student who initially indicated that they were willing to participate was emailed and provided with written details of the study and informed consent sheets to read. They were also given a date and time for their first interview, which was followed up with a text message.

Following the initial recruitment process, fewer students than anticipated volunteered to participate within the study and hence although initially a purposive sample had been desired, the final sample was one that was achieved out of opportuneness. The following section considers the implications of this and describes how the final sample of participants for the study was achieved.
3.5.5 Sample size

Following recruitment a total of 6 students initially volunteered to participate in the study. Due to the low numbers of students volunteering to participate, and concerns regarding potential drop-out through the data collection process, it was decided to additionally recruit students who had completed the SFY programme 2009-10 and had subsequently progressed to studying either a BSc (Hons) Sport and Exercise Science or BSc (Hons) Nutrition and Human Health. Recruitment of the participants was undertaken in the same manner as with level three participants and an additional 9 students volunteered to participate. This ensured that there would still be multiple participants even if some dropped-out throughout the duration of the data collection period. The low numbers of students volunteering to participate in the study meant that a purposive sample from those who volunteered was not achievable and all students who volunteered were recruited.

The final sample comprised of a total of 12 individuals. All of the participants were categorised as NTS under the HEFCE (2010) classification criteria, specifically that they were all first HE generation entrants, from lower socio-economic groups 4-7 (BIS, 2008a). Out of which, 6 were male and 6 were female. Of these, the level three participants comprised of 4 females, and the level four participants comprised 2 females and 6 males, and all of the participants shared the same experience of undertaking the SFY programme, but in different academic years. All but one of them had previously worked full-time in roles including the armed forces, professional football, administration and healthcare. They ranged in age from 21-40 years old and 10 out of 12 were classified as ‘mature’ students. Reflecting upon the final sample of participants, although recruited out of opportuneness, there were common characteristics that they shared in terms of the reason that they were classified as NTS, therefore the final sample was deemed to have some degree of homogeneity.
four. The implication of the research design arising from recruiting a final sample of participants from two different levels of study were minimised to an extent due to the semi-structured nature of the data collection interviews, which enabled the same questions to be posed to all participants, although the lenses through which the participants considered their transition was arguably different for level three and four participants. Specifically, for the level three participants, their participation in data collection permitted a contemporary description of their experience into HE to be documented; whereas, for participants in level four much of what they spoke about was a retrospective contemplation of their experiences of moving into HE. Their reflections on their experiences were influenced by not only their transition into HE, but also their ongoing experiences of transition through level 4. It is also perhaps notable that for these participants the concerns related to assessment anxiety may be very different, particularly at phase 2 because they had already been successful. Therefore it should be observed that the final sample comprised of 8 students who had successfully made the transition into HE. Nonetheless, their experiences and contemplations provide valuable insight into ways in which the phenomena under consideration (NTS transition) can be understood, particularly in respect of what works.

As explained in earlier sections of this chapter, the design of the study necessitated the participants to engage in the data collection process at staged points throughout the academic year. Following recruitment, the initial students who had volunteered to participate in the study were contacted and given details of date, time and location for their interview. This process was again repeated in phases two and three of data collection. The following section of this chapter precis how the interviews were conducted and explains how the conduct of the interviews was managed to minimise the impact of limitations associated with interviews as a data collection technique limiting the richness of the emergent data.
3.5.6 Conducting of the interviews

A potential limitation of interviews identified earlier within the chapter was that interviewees can have their own agendas other than those agreed to talk about and some may recall things differently from their experience during the interview, whilst preparation of an interview schedule is one way in which this can be overcome, there were a number of other considerations that were addressed in the practical set-up of each interview to encourage participants to be open and honest. Firstly, interviews were conducted in private rooms away from lecture and teaching spaces to enhance confidentiality for participants. Secondly, interview rooms were arranged so that the participant and I were sitting adjacent to one another rather than across a desk in a non-teaching room, this was done to try to remove potential barriers and reduce the effects of myself acting with double-agency impacting on the emergent data, Wilkinson and Birmingham (2003) suggest that this puts interviewees at ease and is less intimidating. Finally, each interview was audio-recorded to ensure that there was a permanent record of the participant’s contribution; this was deemed a more reliable mechanism for recording data than making notes and summaries during the interview (Kvale, 2007). It also enabled me to be more aware of my non-verbal communication and body language by focusing my attention on the interviewee, rather than on noting what was being said.

The conduct of each interview followed the guidance of Wilkinson and Birmingham (2003) and is summarised below:

i. Introductions
ii. Outline purpose of interview and intended format
iii. Gain informed consent – explain how will data from interview be used, in what format will anonymity be preserved
iv. Interview – following interview schedule
v. Thank interviewee for their time.

Each interview was scheduled for 1 hour’s maximum duration, however, the interview schedule (see appendix 1) for each interview was timed for 30-45
minutes to allow for interviewees to expand or take into account that a participant may have a different agenda and still cover those areas agreed to talk about in relation to the study’s aim. All interviews started with the same question, but the semi-structured style permitted the flow of questions to be influenced by the responses of the interviewee, therefore in all interviews, the same areas were covered. Once all interviews had been conducted participants were thanked for their time and the data was subsequently transcribed verbatim and analysed.

At each interview, informed consent of all participants was sought, via participants being asked to formally sign an informed consent form (see appendix 2) to indicate that they were willing to participate. A signed copy was retained by the researcher and a copy given to the participant. Specifically when using interviews as a data collection method, Kvale (2007) advises that personal interaction affects the interviewee, and the knowledge produced by the interview affects the understandings of the human situation, therefore gaining informed consent from participants is essential throughout the data collection process. All participants were talked through the informed consent sheet prior to each interview that they participated in and reminded that participation was voluntary and they were free to withdraw at any point. Ferguson et al. (2006) further stress the importance of this and advice that when a research study involves human participants, there are a number of ethical areas that must be considered to ensure ethical practice for the researcher and participant prevail. Subsequently, both the researcher and participant can be assured that the study will be conducted in an ethical manner and comply with ethical approval guidelines. Each of these ethical consideration made in respect of this study is detailed within the following section.

Due to the longitudinal nature of data collection within this study, participant verification of transcriptions was not feasible within the timeframe; and that it would place a significant burden on participants which may negatively increase drop-out in subsequent phases of the study. However in acknowledgement of the benefits of increased trustworthiness of the data arising from participant
verification of transcripts, during all interviews conducted in February and May, the researcher began by initially summarising the content of the previous interview and verbally seeking verification from participants of the content and understanding of what had been recorded. This harmonised with the advice of Corbin and Strauss (2008) who consider it enables a researcher to become further immersed in the data and leading into interpretation but if also added an element of triangulation to the data collection and analysis (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005). The way in which the participant transcripts were analysed is explained in the following section.

### 3.6 Data analysis

Throughout each of the three phases of data collection, key areas were explored in order to give participants the opportunity to make connections between what were interrelated periods – rather than discrete points – of their transition into HE. This section of the chapter discusses the way in which the emergent data was analysed. The approach to data analysis followed Saldana’s (2009) recommendation. He suggested that following initial transcription of the interview data, a two stage approach can be undertaken, he terms these two stages ‘first cycle’ and ‘second cycle’ coding frameworks. These frameworks require that the data is analysed by initially considering and working with all of the raw transcription data, which requires the researcher to analyse the participant’s language. Subsequently, the second cycle analysis entails a more abstract analysis of the data which moves beyond the participant’s language. During this second cycle, the subsequent layers of coding become progressively more abstract and as the analysis moves beyond the data towards the generation of themes and more conceptual understanding of the phenomena (NTS transition) under investigation. Within each of these coding cycles, Saldana (2009) describes a number of different approaches, the data from this study was analysed following a first cycle ‘structural’ coding system and subsequently, the second cycle followed a ‘pattern’ coding format. The following figure (figure 1, adapted from Thomas, 2006, p.242) provides an overview of the two cycles of data analysis and their purpose.
3.6.1 Structural coding

The aim of the first cycle of coding was not merely to label all the parts of the interview transcripts about a category, but rather to ascribe meaning to them and subsequently bring them together so they can be reviewed. Within a structural coding framework, this process of ascribing meaning and bringing them together is considered to be a type of elemental coding. Saldana (2009) advises that this type of coding is used to apply basic filters to the data, these filters typically apply a content based phrase representing a topic of inquiry to a segment of data to both code and categorise data. Subsequently these codes form the foundation of further detailed coding and are driven by the specific research question of this enquiry and were derived from the literature reviewed in chapter two as well as the researcher’s ‘insider’ knowledge. Whilst this type of analysis is broadly considered appropriate for all qualitative studies, Saldana (2009) recommends it to be particularly appropriate for studies employing multiple participants and when semi-structured interviews have been used to generate data. Flick (2006) concurs and recommends initially organising data
around specific research questions or broad topic areas that are typically identified prior to commencement of data collection and informed by the existing body of knowledge.

Wellington (2000) also advocates this approach as the most rational. Within the context of my data analysis the a priori categories were derived from both my initial reflective consideration of my professional experience (from which the initial research idea emerged) and the literature reviewed in chapters one and two. These initial a priori areas were used to inform the study design; firstly they were used to inform the design of the interview schedules during the data collection phase. Subsequently, this set of a priori areas were used as a basis for categorising the data during the initial structural coding and formed an inductive approach to data analysis. This approach required broad areas and categories to be applied to the data. These areas and categories that formed the a priori categories are demonstrated in table 2 below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Area</th>
<th>a priori categories</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Settling into the HE environment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Participant negotiations during their transition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Participant adjustments within the HE environment</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- Settling into the HE environment
  - Expectations compared to previous educational experiences
  - Integration with peers and students with greater cultural capital
  - Anticipation of experience
  - Positive experiences
  - Negative experiences

- Participant negotiations during their transition
  - Why make the choice to come to start HE now?
  - Attitude towards assessment
  - Social engagement with HE environment
  - Challenges faced since starting

- Participant adjustments within the HE environment
  - Comparison of experiences at other HEIs, serving other part of the sector, reasons why they positioned themselves at SEEHEI
  - Independence / personal growth
  - Finances
  - Perceived value of HE to participant
Following the structural data analysis, it became clear that whilst the *a priori* areas had positively provided a structure to make data collection and the initial stages of analysis manageable. However, these were too restrictive, therefore the second cycle, pattern analysis sought to revisit these and apply a more deductive approach to exploring the participants’ experiences. This stage of the data analysis is described below.

### 3.6.2 Pattern coding

Following the initial structural coding, data had been split into large amounts of text on broad themes these were then subsequently coded in greater detail to enable deeper understanding of the phenomena of transition for NTS (Guest and MacQueen, 2008). This second cycle of analysis referred to as ‘pattern coding’ and represents an advanced way of reanalysing data coded through the first cycle structural method. Miles and Huberman (1994, p.69) define pattern coding as “explanatory or inferential codes, ones that identify an emergent theme, configuration or explanation. They pull together a lot of material into a more meaningful and parsimonious unit of analysis. They are a sort of meta code...Pattern Coding is a way of grouping those summaries into a smaller number of sets, themes or constructs”. The primary goal of this stage of data analysis was to develop a sense of categorical and thematic understanding of the data.
four broad areas were deemed to reflect the participants’ experiences, the development of the posteriori categorises sought to convert the participant’s expectations and experiences into themes and concepts, by moving beyond the participants language to a more abstract analysis and understanding of the data. This was necessary to make sense of the combined experiences of all participants and consider more holistically the common and dissimilar experiences that they had during their transition into HE. The specific areas (1-4) that emerged as posteriori categories are demonstrated in table 3 below. It is also presented a list of those a priori categories that were deemed to be redundant after the second cycle of pattern analysis.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Area</th>
<th><strong>posteriori categories</strong></th>
<th>Redundant <strong>a priori categories</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| 1    | Settling into the HE environment | Why make the choice to come to start HE now?  
• Expectations compared to previous educational experiences  
• Anticipation of experience  
• Integration with peers  
• Positive experiences of SFY, e.g. support  
• Negative experiences of SFY | Integration with peers who have greater cultural capital |
| 2    | Participant negotiations during their transition | Negative perception of foundation year of study  
• Attitude towards assessment  
• Challenges faced since starting  
• Impact of finances on promoting and impeding transition | Social engagement with the HE environment |
| 3    | Participant adjustments within the HE environment | Comparison of experiences at other HEIs, serving other part of the sector, reasons why they positioned themselves at SEEHEI  
• The impact of finance of HE engagement  
• Perceived value of HE to participant  
• The value of HE to personal development |  |
and growth and future independence
- Time management and meeting course requirements alongside commitments external to HE
- Reasons for on-going engagement

<p>| | | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Future aspirations</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Future aspirations upon completion of HE</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Barriers to successful engagement in HE and realizing aspirations</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Assessment success and associated concerns</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Anxiety about the future and making sense of the reasons for engaging with HE</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Expectations of future years of transition through HE</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Family implications of future aspirations</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 3:** *Posteriori* categories arising from second cycle, pattern data analysis

Reflecting upon the categories presented in table 3 above, it is demonstrated that whilst my literature review identified specific areas (*a priori* categories) to explore. I also wanted to create a space for new themes and nuanced understandings (*posteriori* categories) to emerge during data collection. Following analysis, it can be seen that no new areas were identified, but it did reveal a new multifaceted understanding of the complexities and dynamic nature of NTS transitions throughout the year. Further inductive analysis of the posteriori categories resulted in the data being coded into themes. Four separate broad themes emerged and within each of these were a number of key dimensions. The following table (table 4 below) presents the four key themes and sub-dimensions;
### Table 4: Themes and sub-dimensions that emerged from pattern data analysis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Sub-dimensions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Participants’ initial reasons for entering into HE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Initial motivations for deciding to engage in HE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Future aspirations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Ongoing engagement in HE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Participants’ expectations compared with previous educational experiences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Participants anticipation of HE experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Participants’ positive and negative experiences of transition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Anticipation of HE experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Impact of curriculum and assessment on participants’ transition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Social and personal challenges during participants transition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Adjustments within the HE environment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Participants value of learning and HE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Institutional practices and culture</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The following section details the practicalities of how data analysis was undertaken using both computer assisted and manual analysis.

### 3.6.3 Computer-assisted and manual data analysis

Both the first and second cycle stages to data analysis can be recorded using both manual and computer assisted packages e.g. NVivo. During analysis of the participant’s transcripts from this enquiry, all data was initially uploaded into NVivo and coded for the first structural cycle of data analysis. Advocates of computer assisted analysis cite that not only does this enable the researcher to work ‘live’ with the data about a specific category (Saldana, 2009), but that it also permits easy re-coding of data as ideas develop. It is also cited that it can enhance the reliability and consistency of analysis by provided a clear audit trail that can be followed and hence the findings of the study may be considered credible (Polgar and Thomas, 2000).
Following the initial use of NVivo, the second stage of the data analysis (pattern coding) was undertaken using a paper based approach; as the researcher felt better able to engage with the data in this format. Whilst the functionality of being able to work with ‘live’ data during the first structural coding had enabled large amounts of data to be considered efficiently, as the analysis moved to a more abstract level and away from the participants’ language, the restriction of being limited to the size of the computer screen (rather than seeing all of the data as a whole) was judged to be restrictive for the researcher. Polgar and Thomas (2000) comment that many researchers prefer to manually code and theme their data to permit a greater engagement with, and subsequent understanding of, their research findings. Regardless of the type of analysis that is undertaken, it is vital that throughout the data collection and analysis stages of an enquiry that the researcher ensure that all aspects of the study design and execution are undertaken in an ethical manner to ensure that ethical practices for both the participant and researcher prevail. The final section of this chapter details the ethical considerations that arose in the planning of the research design and how these were managed throughout the research process.

### 3.7 Ethical Considerations

Flick (2006) believes that when choosing an instrumental case study methodology, due to the usually qualitative nature of the research data, it is essential for the researcher to be aware of their preconceptions, if the research data is to actually portray the opinions of the participants. As identified within the introduction, my own background and educational experiences to date have informed my choice of focus for this enquiry; but more significantly have shaped all aspects of the study design and interpretation of the resultant data. Therefore as a researcher undertaking this enquiry, I cannot pretend to be detached either from the nature of the enquiry or the students who volunteered as the study participants. Consideration of my own positionality in relation to the conduct and analysis of the data was essential and informed the all aspects of data collection and the ethical design of the study.
This enquiry has been undertaken at a time when financial crises were not only being witnessed within education, but also within the wider social context, which may have resulted in individuals feeling vulnerable and uncertain of their futures. It could therefore be conjectured that perhaps the greatest challenge to undertaking an interpretive enquiry within these circumstances is not so much exploring and understanding participants’ experiences, but in ensuring that the ethical frameworks devised for the inquiry acknowledged the dynamic social contexts within which the inquiry is framed. Regardless of the specific nature of the enquiry, there is a requirement for all of those engaged in educational research to be aware of ethical issues which will affect their activity. Burgess (1989) furthers this point by stating that such considerations are not only paramount whilst undertaking the inquiry, but should continue through to the write-up and dissemination stages.

Ethics is often associated with following guidelines and/or gaining ethical approval from professional or academic bodies prior to commencement of data collection. However, rather than being considered a regulatory code, Banks (1995) argues that such codes (or principles) should be considered as a minimum, and that these in combination with the experiences of others within the field should inform a researcher’s ethical decisions. Downie and Calman (1987) urged that researchers need to be aware of the limitations of such codes, citing that rigid adherence to codes may result in professionals effectively being ‘given’ ethics rather than bringing their professional values to bear on their research. Seedhouse (2009) furthers this cautioning that ethical codes assume a consensus on values between the researcher and the participants, which he considers is unlikely to hold true as the boundaries of society are dynamic, and therefore the expectations of researcher from society are also fluctuating. Nonetheless, Kvale (2007) recommends that ethical codes can positively serve as contexts for reflection when making specific ethical decisions throughout the duration of the enquiry.

Reflecting upon the considerations outlined within this chapter so far, and in order to ensure that potential ethical dilemmas for either myself or participants
were avoided, the enquiry followed the Code of Ethics and Conduct set out by The British Education Research Association (BERA, 2011). Written permission to undertake the research was obtained from the Research and Ethics Committee of the institution supporting the research (see appendix 3) and the SEEHEI (see appendix 4) prior to commencement of data collection, due to the different requirement for different institutions.

Once the ethical considerations outlined so far had been addressed, consideration needed to be given to practical considerations that may give rise to ethical dilemmas for both the researcher and participants. Specifically issues of both confidentiality and anonymity needed to be addressed, to ensure that the research process entailed no harm to the participants. Anonymity of participants is deemed by Ferguson et al. (2006) to be an effective way of ensuring participant privacy. However, Shaw and Barrett (2006) comment that this is more readily achieved with quantitative research, and that when research involves qualitative forms of data collection; this then becomes more challenging, but nonetheless essential. These along with considerations for informed consent.

Confidentiality: Records of the data collected (including transcripts and audio recordings) were stored in a secure and safe place. Electronic information was only be accessed by the researcher with their username and password. This information was stored on a secure system with recognised virus protection. Electronic and paper information was locked in a secure building.

Anonymity: Information was coded using pseudonyms to ensure anonymity. This remained anonymous in the write-up and dissemination of the research. Collected written information will be destroyed by shredding and securely disposed of when it is no longer required. All audio recordings will also be disposed of digitally.

Informed Consent: Informed consent was gained from participants at each interview (see appendix 2). Records of when, how and from whom consent was obtained, was recorded. Participants were made aware of how the research findings were to be used. Essentially, informed consent was an ongoing
process throughout the research. Participants were reminded that they had the right to withdraw from the research at any given time and that data related to them would then be destroyed.

In addition to considerations outlined above, the design of data collection and conduct of the interviews sought to ensure that by participating in this study, the participants were not caused any harm, detriment or unreasonable stress. These considerations are outlined in appendix 6.

3.7.1 Negotiating ethical research

Research involving my own professional practice raises key ethical issues which must be considered in order to ensure that potential moral dilemmas for either myself, as researcher, or participants were avoided. Whilst arguments exist, especially from those who espouse the benefits of the scientific paradigm that it is not ethical for individuals to research their own practice (Clarke, 1999; Stenhouse (1975) and Hillage et al. (1998) advocate that individuals should research their own professional practice. Flick (2006) believes that when choosing a case study methodology, due to the usually qualitative nature of the research data, it is essential for the researcher to be aware of their preconceptions, if the research data is to actually portray the opinions of the participants.

As identified within the introduction, my own background and educational experiences to date have informed my choice of focus for this enquiry; but more significantly have shaped all aspects of the study design and interpretation of the resultant data. Therefore as a researcher undertaking this enquiry, I cannot pretend to be detached either from the nature of the enquiry or the students who volunteered as the study participants. Consideration of my own positionality in relation to the conduct and analysis of the data was essential and informed the all aspects of data collection and the ethical design of the study. A specific ethical concern arising from my positionality and research
design using one-to-one interviews as a data collection method is highlighted by Carey (1995) and Edwards and Chalmers (2002) who caution that the influence of the interviewer, acting with ‘double-agency’ can potentially limit the emergent data.

3.7.2 Double agency

The concept of double-agency is frequently considered within healthcare research contexts and derives from the acknowledgement that both healthcare educators and clinicians will frequently have multiple roles with their research participants (Seedhouse, 2009). Such roles may require them to engage as both a researcher and a clinician, resulting in multiple relationships that frequently have different power balances, and conflicting demands/interests. Such dual roles need careful consideration throughout the research design process to ensure that potential conflicts of interest are limited. The following section considers in more depth the impact of my double agency within the context of this enquiry.

This enquiry was situated within an interpretive framework which demanded that the researcher (myself) must get close to the ‘case’ under investigation (NTS students) in order to gain insight, into the phenomenon of ‘transition’ in order to portray the individuality and complexity of a specific research situation. Therefore my knowledge and relationship to the participants was a necessity within the philosophical and methodological framework of the research design. In such circumstances, both Carey (1995) and Edwards and Chalmers (2002), suggest that when a researcher (myself) has a dual relationship with the participants (students) as both researcher and educator, it results in me acting with ‘double agency’, which can create both tensions and ethical dilemmas. The simultaneous relationships I held with the participants was firstly one of both an educator-with-student, where a clear power imbalance existed. Secondly, I also had a relationship of a researcher-with-participant, within the context of data collection, with less of a differential power imbalance. Carey (1995) and Edwards and Chalmers (2002) suggest that in such circumstances additional
ethical considerations arise in order to ensure that ethical approaches to both the teaching-learning relationship and researcher-participant relationship prevailed.

I maintained a relationship of double agency with the participants throughout data collection, which necessitated specific ethical considerations to be addressed. Seedhouse (2009) concurs, reasoning that students-as-participants in this research study were considered captive, due to the status and power relationship between the researcher and participant. This differential status based on differences in terms of knowledge and skills; can negatively limit the participant’s ability to consent voluntarily. Moreno et al. (1999) cautioned that these differences may be further exaggerated if the researcher has an evaluative role in the grading of student achievement, and their subsequent progression through the programme.

Studies by Richardson and Turnock (2003) and Williamson et al. (2004) have both successfully used interviewers acting with the same double agency. Both studies concluded that, assuming a safe environment for participants to express their feelings had been created; issues of double agency were not likely to adversely affect the emergent data. Although such relations and privileged access are generally conducted with the best of intentions, without proper safeguards they can result in unintended harm. While students-as-participants may be deemed to be vulnerable when such power imbalances exist, a study by Orb et al. (2001) found that students believed that ethical principles would inherently prevail in both teaching-learning relationships and researcher-participant relationships.

Throughout the process of data collection, I remained aware of the dual agency I held with the participants and this gave rise to both interesting and challenging experiences as a researcher. Positively, it enabled me to quickly establish a rapport with all of the participants during the first interviews. However, as the data collection process continued, I felt challenged on a couple of occasions
when participants wished to discuss matters beyond the remit of the data collection during the interview. For example, one of the participants asked if I would speak to the admissions tutor for a programme she had applied to and not heard back from. This experience emphasised the challenges of conducting research within my own professional context and the difficulties that can arise from engaging in multiple relationships with participants. This experience challenged my professional understanding of my role and emphasised the need for appropriate ethical safeguards to be engendered within qualitative research because bracketing and separating teaching-learning and research-participant relationships is problematical.

The issue of power relations remained an ethical consideration throughout the data collection process. During the planning of the interviews, steps were taken to reduce possible coercive effects of my double agency with the participants of the study to ensure that their consent to participate was voluntary, these steps are outlined below.

3.7.3 Voluntary consent

In order to address the possible coercive effects of power imbalances within the study that could arise from the double agency that I had with the participants; which may result in a lack of voluntary participation, the following steps were taken to ensure that the student’s participation was voluntary:

I. Prior to the induction day for the level three Science Foundation course at SEEHEI, each student was written to by a member of the administrative team and provided with a sheet briefly detailing the project. This included a return sheet for them to complete and indicate if they may be willing to participate within the study upon commencement of the programme (see appendix 5), a pre-paid return envelope was also included.
II. Upon commencement of the induction programme, a short verbal overview of the project was provided to students by a member of the administrative team to again invite them to participate within the study. Specifically it was described that although the researcher was a member of staff, everything said in the context of the study would be treated confidentially and anonymity given. This was done in order to clearly distinguish between my two roles and researcher and teacher. Students who were willing to participate were asked to leave their names and contact email addresses to enable me to subsequently contact them with further details of the study and arrange for voluntary informed consent sheets detailing what was involved to be sent to them (see appendix 2). This allowed each student who had initially agreed to participate to reflect on the specific purpose of the study and consider if they were still willing to participate over the course of a year.

The distribution of this information via an administrator had both practical and ethical advantages. From a practical perspective, the input of an administrator reduced the burden on the researcher in terms of time to collate student details, post invites, and receive and collate responses. Ethically the intention was to reduce any coercive effects that students may have perceived due to the power imbalance if I - as one of the academic staff – had distributed the information. Due to the double agency of my future dual role, they may have felt compelled to participate due to the role I had in grading their work and hence their transition through the programmes.

This chapter has presented the research design that was used to undertake this enquiry and considered the ethical implications that arose throughout all stages. Acknowledgement has been made of the way in which the design evolved through the process of undertaking this enquiry, specifically the way in which recruitment changed and the implication this had for the final sample of participants. The concluding summary of this chapter draws together all of the methodological considerations presented so far, before the thesis moves on to present the findings of the enquiry in chapter four.
3.8 Summary

This chapter has provided a summary of the methodological decisions that were made in designing and subsequently undertaking this study. Whilst the initial focus of the enquiry was to consider the transition of level three students only, the final sample of participants necessitated additional recruitment of participants due to initially low numbers of participants. Therefore, the final sample of participants included level four students in their first year of undergraduate study. This positively provided an opportunity to explore the retrospective reflections of their transition into HE, but further permitted exploration of their on-going transition into and through level 4.

Throughout the process of data collection, write-up and dissemination, ethical concerns pertaining to undertaking research within my own professional context have dominated decisions that have been made. Through the methodological design choices made, I have sought to ensure that not only are the participants of my study protected, but further that my professional integrity is not compromised. Whilst engaging with students as participants has been an empowering process, it has also been one in which I have at times felt uncomfortable due to the double-agency with which I have engaged as both a researcher and educator.

Through the direct engagement with the participants of my enquiry, I have generated data related to the nature of NTS transitions within one specific HE context (SEEHEI). This data has been analysed to build a more comprehensive understanding of the ways in which both my individual educational practices can be informed, and also the broader implications for the institution. These findings are presented and discussed within the following chapter to provide a more nuanced understanding of the contemporary nature of NTS transition through HE at a hybrid institution located in the liminal zone of HE provision.
This chapter has presented the research design that was used to undertake this enquiry and considered the ethical implications that arose throughout all stages. Acknowledgement has been made of the way in which the design evolved through the process of undertaking this enquiry, specifically the way in which recruitment changed and the implication this had for the final sample of participants.
Chapter 4: Findings and Discussion

4 Findings and Discussion

The aim of this educational enquiry was to generate new knowledge in relation to the experiences of those NTS undertaking a level three SFY programme and making the transition into HE. It was acknowledged in the introduction and literature review chapters that for many of these students, their disposition and social positions can work to both enable and constrain their engagement with HE opportunities (REFS). It is already established that NTS’ experiences of HE transition through can be key to successful engagement and retention (REF). Furthermore, that any mismatch between their expectations and experiences can limit the success of strategies designed to sustain their engagement with HE (REF). Therefore, the need to understand their experiences and actively envision practices that promote positive early student experiences of transition into HE is paramount.

The rationale for this study further sought to address the current gap in knowledge, as it was established that little was known specifically about the experiences of NTS transition in relation to foundation level study, with Sanders and Daly (2012) commenting that additional research is necessary to improve awareness and understandings. Consequently, it was conjectured that the experiences of those on the edge of further participation could be improved by broadening the appeal of HE to successfully sustain their future participation. The context within which the enquiry was conducted further served as unique to much of the literature reviewed in chapter two. Specifically, that SEEHEI is a newly established HE institution, therefore, limited evidence existed regarding particularly what worked within that institutional context, and how the NTS experience may be made evermore coherent.

4.1 Structure of findings chapter

Throughout each of the three phases of data collection, key themes were explored in order to give participants the opportunity to make connections
between interrelated periods of their transition into HE. This aimed to better understand the ongoing impact of transition into HE through the participants’ reflections and anticipations of their experience. This chapter presents the participants experience of transition and the connections that they made between each of different phases of data collection. During interviews the participants have described their expectations and experiences of making their transition. They have expressed changes in themselves, their behaviours and their attitude towards their sustained engagement with their programme of study and the institution more broadly. Within the exploration of each theme, the findings are presented to articulate the participant’s reflections on their HE engagement and indicate how these evolved during the course of data collection (one academic year). Subsequently these are discussed in relation to existing literature and opportunities for how to promote positive experiences of transition and sustain the engagement of NTS at SEEHEI are made. These are later synthesised in chapter five and specific recommendations for practice at an individual and institutional level are made. Finally, this chapter concludes by contextualising the research findings against the contested theoretical understandings of WP and transition.

This chapter has been separated into four distinct themes for discussion;

- Initial reasons for entering HE and future aspirations
- Ongoing engagement in HE
- Negotiations during transition
- Adjustments within the HE environment

Throughout each theme, there is a recognition of the significance that time has had upon participant understandings and the way in which the evolving relationships between the individual and the institution have changed throughout their transition. Selected verbatim quotation excerpts from the participant’s interviews have been used to form exemplars in support of my interpretation of their recollection of the nature of their transition into HE.
4.2 Participants’ initial reasons for entering into HE

Understanding the reasons why a student chooses to engage in HE can afford a deeper understanding of not only their initial motivations to make changes to their life, but can also afford understandings of the way in which institutions can, and do, impact upon these choices. These understandings can help institutions to ensure that their efforts may continue to sustain the engagement of its learners and broaden the appeal of its provision to those who have characteristics not historically associated with entrants to HE (HEFCE, 2010a). This section begins by examining participants’ reason for entering into HE.

4.2.1 Initial motivations for deciding to engage with HE

The participants in this study all cited some degree of dissatisfaction with their job and career at the time of making their applications to HE as their primary motivation for their application and engagement. Rationalising that increasing their academic qualifications was a way of improving, or addressing, what they perceived as negative conditions in relation to their working situations. What was notable within all of the participants’ responses regarding their original reasons for engaging with HE was that they had all very deliberately made conscious decisions that they wanted to participate at that specific point in time and none of them had passively entered because of no other available options. As Ray summarised;

*I joined the army for five years, came out and basically fell into truck driving and that was it basically, I mean with my girlfriend doing her education and everything and I thought “I don’t want to be a truck driver all my life”*

(Ray, phase 1)

Ray’s reasons also resonated with Gill who similarly described, “I knew I wanted to do something else.” (Gill, phase 1). Equally, what was common for all participants as they reflected back on their motives was that they had all, in some way, made well-thought-out lifestyle changes to enable them to participate in HE. In some cases this had involved making changes to their personal circumstances, e.g. by changing their living arrangements and moving
back to parental homes as a result of the financial pressures arising from stopping full-time working. John acknowledged the support he had received from his parents (who had allowed him to move back into their home and not pay rent) had made it possible for him to give up his “well paid job” and become a full-time student;

\[
\text{I don't pay rent which I'm really grateful for, but I have to obviously help out around the house and things, but you know I'm really grateful for that and appreciate that.}
\]

(John, phase 1)

The participants motivations for entering HE closely resonated with each other and were seen to fall into several categories; practical needs (in terms of gaining a specific job or career), wanting to escape from recent working situations by furthering their careers (that they had previously felt constrained them) and the desire to become more financially independent from their current situation. As Vera explained, for her, wanting to engage in HE related to a desire to further her career;

\[
\text{I used to work in [name of company], I did an NVQ there and then I moved onto [name of workplace] house which is social care again and did some meds. training and got a bit better in that and then went onto this charity that helps people with head injuries...but it's kind of a dead end thing I think...}
\]

(Vera, phase I)

Vera’s ambition for her engagement in HE was to avoid continuing in what she describes as a “dead end” role. This motivation was echoed by Sarah, who also described that her initial stimulus was that she wanted “something that’s more rewarding than administration” (Sarah, phase I). In contrast to Vera, however, Sarah’s age (40) and working history meant that she has had a far more prolonged engagement with employment, most recently as an office manager, which she described as “a very good job” (Sarah, phase I). Following a change in her circumstances that had resulted in her being made redundant and the birth of her daughter, she had reflected upon what she wanted for her future and had decided that she wanted a change in her career. She felt that returning to education would enable her to make the necessary changes in order for her to pursue a future career in midwifery;
I just felt that during that time I spent at home with her, I need that if I’m going to leave her in nursery; I want something that’s more rewarding than administration. And I started thinking along the lines of where would I… I done a counselling course and I learnt a lot about myself from that and I came up with the midwifery route.

(Sarah, phase I)

Sarah’s motivation was clearly based upon more than a desire to gain an HE qualification. She articulated a strong determination to take control of her life and on several occasions, she referred to a desire to gain a “professional qualification” in midwifery. She was very aware that this would be a benefit in terms of her future employment security, reasoning “I’m not likely to be made redundant like I have been twice now, people will keep on having babies, so there’ll be something [job] for me somewhere” (Sarah, phase 2). Describing his motivation, John’s purpose for engaging with HE resonated with both Sarah and Vera as he described;

_I went out and got a job with a local insurance company and just started doing admin work and mundane chores, things like that. Then moved to a different insurance company to start doing motor claims and actually claims handling, answering phones and dealing with personal injury claims. The job was good for the first few years, but then it kind of just got too repetitive for me and it just started changing my whole demeanour. I started turning into someone I didn’t ever want to be, I was grumpy and stressed out all the time. I just didn’t enjoy the job, I liked the people I worked with, but that was the only thing really keeping me there._

(John, phase I)

Like many other participants, John had started working at 16 as soon as he left compulsory schooling. Although he had initially found his job enjoyable, he also recognised that this enjoyment had diminished the longer that he had been in the role. Consequently, this resulted in a lack of motivation towards it, but he also identified that it had begun to change him as a person. Although he acknowledged that there were positive aspects of his work, e.g. the people he was working with, he was still not happy with his situation. On a personal level, he felt that his lack of motivation and the repetitive nature of his work was adversely changing his personality, whilst also in-part resonating with Vera’s comments about feeling that her job was “dead end”. Interestingly, John’s dissatisfaction was not solely about the nature of his work, he also recognised the role of his own values and the importance they had for him in terms of his
character and personality, aspiring to a better way of ‘being’ as a result of engaging with HE. John went on to explain:

*I’m the sort of person who thinks if you don’t like something, do something to change it; don’t just sit there and moan about it… and I wanted to basically do a career change, but do it as quickly as possible… I really hated my job and needed a change…but because of recession and what not, it was difficult to get into something completely new without having years of experience or qualifications in something else. So I thought, well the only other option is to go and get a qualification in something else and take the plunge as such!*

(John, phase I)

John, like Sarah, considered that enrolling on a degree course would offer him the opportunity to make positive changes to his current situation in terms of enabling him to “do a career change” in different areas of work to the insurance companies that he had worked for since leaving school. John was very aware of the labour market and the present demand for qualifications in order to make changes and get different jobs, he viewed going to university as a way of opening up future employment opportunities. However, he remained focused that once he had decided to “take the plunge” (John, phase I), he wanted to limit his engagement in HE to the shortest possible time. He reflected that his initial decision has been “difficult because I was on a very good wage doing what I was doing” (John, phase I), and he adopted a very utilitarian approach to getting what he wanted from his HE experience and then leaving. Stating “I’m here to basically learn and get in and out as soon as possible. You know, I just want to get my head down, get the best qualification I can and move on from there” (John, phase 1).

Joe and Bill on the other hand, although they had left school at 16 like John, had gone on to enjoy successful careers in playing professional football. Unlike John, Vera and Sarah, Joe had not decided to make a change and apply to HE because he was frustrated with his working life to date, but rather because he recognised that as he was getting older and the duration of his current career was limited, as he explained:
I signed professional, so I played there and moved around different clubs, played professional for a few years afterwards. Then obviously I was getting to the point where I dropped down and like going semi-professional...so I joined [name of city] City football club semi-pro. So the first year I was there I was sat there thinking “well, what do I want to do?”

(Joe, phase I)

Joe, like Sarah, reflected on his current situation and, similar to all of the participants, recognised that he did not want to end up in a job which he would find boring or “repetitive”. Interestingly, none of the participants believed that they had been unsuccessful in their jobs and careers to date and did not judge themselves to have ‘failed’. But rather as summarised by Joe, believed that undertaking a degree would “get me a better job” (Joe, phase I). In summary, all participants were able to clearly articulate their reasons for decisively choosing to enter in to HE at this point in their lives. Whilst initial drivers had variances (e.g. redundancy versus career stagnation) they all articulated a resolute belief that their engagement with HE would have positive personal outcomes. Therefore, their initial rationales for engaging in HE can be further classified as: a mechanism for enabling change, improving their working lives and overcoming the negative aspects of their current work situations.

Greenwood et al. (2007) suggested that, for individuals who decide to engage in HE later in their life span, their decisions can be understood under one of three broad motivations: redundancy, recognition or regeneration. The primary reason that the participants of this study expressed as the motivators for them to commence HE was regeneration. However, it became clear throughout the duration of the data collection that a combination of both redundancy and/or recognition had also contributed to their initial stimulus to consider applying to HE. This would suggest that categorising the reasons that individuals decide to participant in HE later in their life span into discrete categories is too reductionist in understanding and that a more complex set of influences will determine the likelihood of an individual to make life changes and engage in HE later in life.
At the start of the academic year, the participants all expressed that they believed that SEEHEIs primary task was helping them get well-paid jobs at the end of their degrees. Implying the potential value of a greater integration of career-related foci within programme delivery. This resonates with the construction of the role of HE advanced by Gale and Parker (2014) and Tight (2007) who suggest that the role of WP is to promote economic regeneration. Research by Jones and Thomas (2005) highlighted that as elite (Russell Group) institutions have been encouraged to become more research intensive, the less prestigious institutions are encouraged to become more attuned to the needs of the economy and adopt a utilitarian approach. The participants of this study all initially expressed a very utilitarian approach with regards to their reasons for engaging in HE. As one of SEEHEIs key institutional drivers aligns with this, it is therefore perhaps not surprising that the NTS participants of this study have articulated a similar motivator. As a consequence, during early phases of their transition, they frequently spoke of a desire to “get in and out as quickly as possible”.

4.2.2 Future aspirations

Throughout my engagement with the participants across the three phases of data collection, all participants had a very clear sense of what they hoped their engagement in HE would result in for their future. This section explores how participants envisioned themselves on completion of their studies and is therefore perhaps of most significance to the participants themselves. It explores how the participants have tried to make sense of their decisions and realise their future aspirations.

Delia commenced her HE journey with a clear determination to follow her study by working in a research lab and focusing on human nutrition. As she continued through the programme, she identified that a positive feature of her ongoing engagement with HE was that it had “given me that more ambition to get higher than I was doing before.” (Delia, phase 2), and cemented desire to work in a lab upon completion of the programme “Coz obviously now working in a lab, I enjoy
working in a lab and enjoy finding out things and even if it’s not nutrition that I go into, I want that type of job.” (Delia, phase 2). For Sarah and Gill, they aspired to entering healthcare programmes of midwifery and radiography respectively. Sarah was very much aware that having been made redundant twice in previous careers, one of the significant aspects of her future ambition was that she wanted a career that she perceived would minimise the chance of this. Both Gill and Sarah were very specific that their decisions and future career aspirations were focused on ensuring that their HE engagement resulted in a clear professional vocational route for their engagement. Sarah rationalised her choice saying, “I’ve been looking at the different courses on offer, and some of them interest me, but I’m like, where am I going to go once I’ve achieved this degree?” (Sarah, phase 3). It was very clear that she had considered her options and had a very realistic awareness of the future job market.

In contrast, whilst Vera also believed a degree would enhance her employment prospects, she was less clear about the specific direction she would take upon completion of the programme, “I wanted a degree because I know that with a degree you have much better chances of getting a job, well, statistically anyway, and Nutrition because I’m a vegan and very passionate about nutrition.” (Vera, phase 1). Vera articulated her decision to gain a degree as “the most direction I felt I ever had” (Vera, phase 1). Her reasons for her future aspirations resonated with Delia’s who also described that her future ambition arose more from her passion “I’m fascinated about everything about like nutrition and diet…you know when you just want to learn more…I just want to learn and learn and learn” (Delia, phase 2). The vocational aspect that Gill and Sarah identified to have driven their future career goals did not as clearly shape their future aspirations.

Jess, in common with Sarah and Gill, had a very clear career ambition. This was shaped by both a desire to become a professional and a desire to be successful. Describing her aspirations upon completion of her degree;
For Jess, her measure of this was focused on gaining more qualifications in the future. Like Sarah and Gill, she remained aware of the professions where employment would have a far more specific focus, e.g. teaching, and reflected Sarah’s comments saying, “hopefully there won’t be much difficulty in gaining a job and stuff.” (Jess, phase 1). In phase two she had also retained a clear sense of wanting to gain a professional qualification “Obviously having a profession and belonging to one, being able to obtain a good job in the future hopefully. It’s like a passport, that’s what they say, like a degree’s a passport to a good job.” (Jess, phase 2). She continued to demonstrate a strong desire to gain additional qualifications and on several occasions described herself as “passionate about education” (Jess, phase 2).

Many of the participants undertaking a sports and exercise degree wished to work with athletes in the future, although they did not have such specific roles in mind as Gill and Sarah. John described his ambition as being “to work for a top level football club as some kind of conditioning coach perhaps, or you know, evaluating the performances of the athletes” (John, phase 1). Joe also aspired to work with athletes and become a sports scientist for a top level football club or gain experience in the London Olympics. For Bella, she was resolute that a degree would give her financial stability in the future, but remained very passive to exploring possibilities. She acknowledged that teaching staff, “keep telling us ‘you could do this with this and go on to do that with that’, ” (Bella, phase 1). But she decided that “I think I’ve got a couple of years to worry about it…so…I’ll worry about it then.” (Bella, phase 2). She adopted a very fatalistic approach and was satisfied that she had a broad focus in terms of her future career aspirations and did not feel concerned or that she may not be successful.

In contrast, Ray had been for more proactively considering his future options throughout the year. He had considered undertaking a masters to further
enhance his future employment prospects and was aware that he wanted “a 2:1 minimum is what I’m looking for, to go on and do a masters.” (Ray, phase 2). Mike remained as focused as John and Joe were on working with top-level athletes and, like Joe, considered that the Olympics would provide positive employment prospects upon completion of HE. Whilst all agreed that “getting a decent job coming out of it [SEEHEI]” (Mike, phase 2) was important, they did not actively seek to enhance their employment prospects beyond completion of their degrees; believing that achievement of a degree alone would be enough to secure their anticipated futures.

The findings of this study resonate with Keep and Mayhew’s (2004) conclusion that many students view HE as a necessary step in order to achieve a desired job. Reasoning that this trend occurs because graduate qualifications are now required for a range of jobs that historically were open to non-graduates. All participants identified that their primary aspiration for engaging with HE was to increase their qualifications and gain a better paid job. Many of them explicitly linked the value of HE and gaining a degree with improving their future career prospects and providing more financial stability in the future. Interestingly, and in contradiction to Keep and Mayhew’s (2004) suggestion students deemed HE as a continuation of compulsory education, none of the participants considered HE as a continuation of their compulsory education and all deemed that their engagement was optional.

What was interesting in terms of the participant’s future aspirations upon completion of their studies was that these remained reasonably static throughout the period of transition. For the participants of this study, the decision to engage in HE was stimulated by a very specific desire to make changes to their future. Whilst this varied between participants, all had a strong sense of purpose and this continued to drive them and provided a positive stimulus to sustain their engagement during the period of transition. As discussed, the participants of this study all commenced their HE journey with a very clear aspiration and utilitarian understanding that their desired outcome e.g. enhance their employment prospects. This resonates with the strategic
vision of HEFCE (2011b) and BIS (2015), which are grounded in an instrumental understanding premised on the usefulness of knowledge. Indeed, their initial reasons for engagement might be deemed to embody Underdal’s (2010) concerns and align with Taylor and House’s (2010) suggestion that learning and knowledge are frequently understood as utilitarian concepts. However, throughout the course of their engagement in HE (and as we will see in the later themes) they developed a more positive, transformative understanding. This evolving of a deeper and more multifaceted understanding of their engagement arguably reinforces the findings of Jones and Thomas (2005) who emphasised that aspirations are not individually formed, but are interrelated with complex autobiographies, multiple identifies and social positioning’s that are dynamically reproduced throughout an individual’s engagement with HE. In recognising the value that learner’s individually place on their academic qualifications, there is greater scope to align curricula with this. For example, a clear focus on careers within programme delivery can help to promote interest and hence sustain engagement. This could be achieved for example by the inclusion of sessions delivered by successful professionals, especially when they themselves have achieved success via non-traditional routes.

In contrast to their reasons for initial engagement, the reasons for participants’ on-going engagement in HE were more varied, multifaceted and overlapping and, over the course of the year, these motivations for engagement were seen to change and evolve. Throughout each of the phases of data collection, the changes articulated by participants were explored in order to give them the opportunity to make connections between interrelated phases of their transition. It is therefore the intention of the following sections of this chapter to recognise and explore how the participants made these connections and discuss the significance that time played on participant’s expectations and understandings.
4.3 Ongoing engagement in HE

As previously discussed, the participants of this study took very deliberate decisions to engage in HE in anticipation that it would result in a positive outcome. This section explores the participants’ experiences of settling into the HE environment and how their expectations and anticipation of their engagement compared with the reality of their experiences of on-going engagement. The participant’s experiences of settling into HE fell into several dimensions:

- Participants’ expectations compared to their previous educational experiences
- Participants’ anticipation of their transition into HE
- Participants’ positive and negative experiences of transition

This section will explore each of these dimensions and identify how, in many cases, the participants on-going engagement in HE resulted in an evolving understanding of the importance and significance of each of the above categories throughout the academic year. The findings in relation to this theme have been presented chronologically (in relation to the participants’ life experiences). Initially it considers the participants’ previous educational experiences and the implications of these in terms of their anticipation of what their HE experience at SEEHEI would be like. The section then examines how the participants have integrated with their peers and finally it explores the positive and negatives experiences of the participants as they settle into the HE environment.

4.3.1 Participants’ expectations compared to previous educational experiences

During phase one of data collection, participants all voiced a determination to make positive changes to their working lives and recognised that via engaging in HE such changes would be possible (upon gaining qualifications). Yet despite this underlying assertion that the result would be positive, for many participants, their experiences of compulsory school (and for some, their experiences of further education) had not been positive. These experiences had a significant
impact upon their anticipation of what their experience at SEEHEI would be like. When describing their previous experiences in education it was notable that the participants expressed strong negative recollections. For some, these experiences were focused toward the pedagogical approaches that they had experienced. Whilst for others, especially those whose educational experiences were further in the past, it was their identity as a learner had been challenged and shaped.

Delia explained that the way in which staff had engaged with her during further education had considerably contrasted with her experiences of HE;

*I keep looking and I keep thinking, you’re gonna get told off if you’re late, obviously get kicked out of the class if you’re late, you’re not allowed to do stuff when you’re like at college. But when you come to uni it’s different because when you come to uni like they don’t mind if you’re late, you can turn up at any time and eat and you don’t get told off or anything.*

(Delia, phase 1)

She went on to describe that the more relaxed way in which discipline was maintained had been very different to her anticipated experience, explaining “It wasn’t what I quite expected; I thought it was going to be more intense. But when I got here it was quite a relaxed atmosphere, so it was quite easy.” (Delia, phase 1). For Delia the mismatch between her previous educational experiences and those of entering HE has been positive. She continued to explain that her experiences of compulsory and further education had left her expecting her experience of HE to mirror these. These experiences continued to have a strong influence on her. During phase two, she again reflected on her previous educational experiences as being very strict in terms of discipline. Interestingly, despite her suggesting that the more formal style of discipline that she had experienced prior to HE was not something that she had enjoyed, she had anticipated that her experience of HE would be similar “I was thinking, is it going to be the same as college” (Delia, phase 1). Her understanding resonated with all other participants that their initial reason for applying to HE (e.g. gaining a degree) outweighed the risk in terms of the changes that they have had to
make, e.g. ceasing full-time working, even though they anticipated engaging in HE would not be a positive experience.

Other participants recognised that their previous experiences of education had not successfully resulted in them progressing into HE due to their own choices. John explained that when he finished compulsory education, he had commenced further education but ‘dropped out’ within the first term because “I wasn’t ready or mature enough for it” (John, phase 2). He described that now he had completed his foundation year of study and was part way through his level four studies, he felt much more mature and focused on his future, compared to when he initially embarked on his A-levels;

*Whereas now, I know I want to succeed and I know exactly what I want. I can actually plan my life around uni, as opposed to you know, fit that report in for the last five hours before it’s got to be in you know?* (John phase 2)

Vera also described similar previous experiences to John, suggesting that her current experiences of HE positively contrasted with her previous ones. Further, that the different attitude of her peers was a positive aspect of her experience;

*It’s a more adult environment for a start; you got people that actually want to be on the course. I know that sounds a bit funny because in sixth form you should want to be there but…here people actually have a reason and might have a career in mind or something.* (Vera, phase 1)

Her final point echoed John’s discussion about having a clear focus and “knowing what he wants”. All participants remained focussed on their anticipated future. Throughout the year, they continued to link their previous experiences to achievement of a degree. Like John, Sarah too described that having had a number of jobs prior to entering HE to be positive for her. She explained, “I feel I’m more ready for it now than I was then” (Sarah, phase 2).

The notion of participants having a clear sense of purpose in relation to their engagement with HE was something reflected in discussions with Gill and
Sarah. Like John, they had both left school at 16, but unlike John they were older and had both had a number of jobs since leaving school. Both Sarah and Gill discussed that they believed the education system they experienced had limited their opportunities and that they had been very accepting of this at the time, Gill explained; “I feel like you probably didn’t get the support I don’t think at school” (Gill, phase 1). Sarah also felt that she was not encouraged to consider entering HE upon completion of compulsory schooling. She described what she considered to be inequalities embodied by teachers, recalling that teachers directed which students did and did not belong within the HE system stating;

\[
\text{You know, they [teachers] noted your potential and they obviously decided and put you in the groups and that’s where you went, the direction…maybe if given more support then…}
\]

(Sarah, phase 1)

Neither Sarah nor Gill seemed resentful of the choices that they believe were taken for them by teachers during their previous educational experiences. Interestingly, as they continued their transition, it was these previous experiences that had then highlighted to them the positive experiences they had gained at SEEHEI. During phase two of data collection, Gill reflected;

\[
\text{I’ve noticed now how the relationship between students and teachers are so much better now, they’re more willing to help you and they’re more interested in you doing better, rather than just letting you get on with it and if you can’t keep up, tough you’re left behind. So ummm…big change.}
\]

(Gill, phase 2)

Remarkably, none of the participants of this study recognised negative academic experiences as the reason they did not engage in HE earlier. Furthermore, whilst some did reflect that they were not encouraged to consider HE, they did not recall this as a negative educational experience. This contrasts with the work of Gale and Parker (2014) who advised that negative early educational experiences are the most frequently cited reason for why learners did not engage with HE earlier in their life span. Gorard (2008) suggested that individuals who have previously had negative educational experiences are likely to also have lower expectations in relation to their success. The findings of this study would refute this, as all participants expressed the firm belief that their
engagement would lead to their desired outcome (enhanced employment). Previous educational experiences were therefore not evidenced to have resulted in learners who were uncertain about their own abilities. Whilst this positively implies a willingness to succeed, failure to acknowledge potential threats to success can result in early withdrawal due to academic failure. As academics, recognition of the significance of previous educational experiences in determining the anticipated nature of a student’s experience is important. If the previous educational experiences were a number of years ago, there can be a mis-match between a students anticipated learning and the delivered teaching styles which could necessitate a need for additional and different support to be made available to them. For example, web-based learning may be something that mature learners have no previous experience of. An awareness therefore of the motivators for initial engagement should therefore be considered by professionals and institutions to ensure that institutional mechanisms are tailored to support students in achieving their desired outcomes.

Whilst participants decisions to engage with HE were deliberate and made in the belief that the outcome of their sustained engagement would be positive, they all expressed mixed feelings of both apprehension and excitement in relation to commencement to the programme and what their HE journey would be like. The following section considers further how their anticipation of their experience upon enrolment into HE affected their transition.

#### 4.3.2 Participants’ anticipation of HE experience

For all participants, it was clear during phase one of data collection that commencing their HE journey had involved some degree of anxiety. Most of the apprehension that participants experienced upon entry to HE related to not having a clear understanding of the expectations of them as learners. For Delia, she recalls “I was quite scared coz I didn’t know what to expect…and I was like a bit…wary” (Delia, phase 1). Jess also recalled feelings of anxiety and being nervous, suggesting that this was her being;
apprehensive about what to expect in terms of lectures, I thought it would be totally different from what I was used to at college. You know I thought they’d be using innovative teaching techniques and that you won’t have to rely on the lecturer and do independent study and stuff like that, so I was quite scared about that.

(Jess, phase 1)

Other participants also recalled initial anxiety in anticipation of their experiences, many described this as being related to not having clear understandings of what their HE experience would be like. For Joe the experience was less formal that he had anticipated “well, I don’t know. Usually you expect like the big lecture halls with rows of seats. Obviously we came in here and it’s just like a new room with we just all had chairs just around. It was a bit more relaxed, it didn’t seem as formal.” (Joe, phase 1). Gill and Mike explained that unlike Joe, they had very little anticipation of what their actual experience of HE would be like, Gill commented “I don’t know, I think I had an open mind. I didn’t know what to expect, I didn’t have no vision of what it was going to be like so, I think I’m not shocked or surprised because I didn’t form an opinion before I came.” (Gill, phase 1). Interestingly, whilst Gill claimed not to have formed an opinion of what her learning experience would be like in terms of academic delivery, she clearly had pre-conceptions of her expected educational experience at SEEHEI based on her experiences during compulsory schooling. Furthermore, she had obviously considered the implications of returning to learning as a ‘mature student’ and the potential impact this would have on her experience and discussed this in phase one and two.

Gill explained that on her first day she was, “very nervous, not knowing what to expect I suppose one of my things was if there was going to be any more mature students there…ummm yeah, I think it’s just nerves really.” (Gill, phase 1). For Gill, being a ‘mature student’ was significant to her and is something that was also mirrored in discussions with Sarah (the oldest participant). She also identified that as a mature student, she was initially most concerned about “how the youngsters were going to be more than anything else” (Sarah, phase 1). During phase 2, Gill positively discussed how she began to recognise the value
of learning alongside her peers of all ages “You’re just one of the gang really; it’s not an issue so much now really. Yeah, and you can get different views from different ages can’t you?” (Gill, phase 2). She described how by February she felt like a “student” and that she had begun to feel more comfortable with her decision to start HE. She acknowledged that many of her friends joked with her about being a ‘student’ saying, “of course you’re not working now’ and ‘you’re bummy it at uni now’ all that sort of stuff.” (Gill, phase 2). For Sarah too, who had also had concerns about being a mature student, as she continued her transition and reflected back at the end of the year described;

that putting on forms that I’m a student and now I’ve got to put that I’m unemployed. You know I felt it was my job at the time and succeeding and getting a qualification from it. To me it felt a bit of a status here and yeah, better, better than what I thought.

(Sarah, phase 3)

Sarah, who had described herself as having had a number of good jobs in the past, her perceived her change in status to becoming a ‘student’ had been something she had struggled with. She explained, “yeah, I am conscious that I’m a mature student on that particular course, yet when I move about the building, or across to the library, you see a lot more [mature students] about.” (Sarah, phase 3). By phase three, her experiences and wider awareness of SEEHEI had helped her to settle into the HE environment and made her less self-conscious of her age.

Interestingly, during my phase one interview with Mike, the youngest participant, he also discussed his initial concerns around possible challenges to integration within the HE environment and the impact that diversity in the ages of his peers might have upon his experience;

the only sort of worry is probably I thought there was going to be a lot of mature students. That was the only worry, there wasn’t going to be a lot of people my age on the course and so the social side of getting to know people my age and getting to know people on my course a problem.

(Mike, phase 1)

He described being concerned that he thought the foundation year cohort would be made up of mostly mature students and having come from an A-level
background he had not previously experienced peer diversity in terms of age. However, he also reflected;

*I got here and everything turned out ok. There’s a variety of different people, loads of backgrounds and stuff, and I got to know pretty much everyone off the course to a pretty much ok degree.*

(Mike, phase 1)

As Sarah continued her transition, and felt less self-conscious of her age, her self-conception as a mature student continued to constrain her engagement with academic support systems. She explained;

*but you feel as though as a mature student that you should know a lot of this stuff, but for me...it’s not like I’m back at school but it’s like I’ve never heard this stuff before, so it’s all new to me. Then I don’t ask so many questions of the lecturers, coz I feel stupid and I don’t want to make myself look stupid, coz there’s all these youngsters who are saying all this stuff around you*  

(Sarah, phase 2)

Sarah recognised that there were gaps within her understanding and where she needed to address these. Equally she was aware that there were opportunities during lectures when she could seek further clarification of her understanding. However, her concerns for how she was perceived if she sought help continued to act as a barrier to her fully engaging with the academic support structures throughout the year. Her consideration of her actions and practices within the HE environment seemed to contradict her recollection of her previous educational experience when she was first interviewed and suggested that if she had been given more support and encouragement at school she may have entered HE earlier. Whilst she cited support as a motivating factor that may have promoted her to enter HE earlier, she makes deliberate attempts not to access it during the SFY programme. Instead, Sarah’s support network outside of SEEHEI was something that she was heavily dependent on. Her partner had just completed a health degree and as well as being a source of encouragement for her to commence her studies. He was also where she was most comfortable seeking her academic support; “I tend to take it all home and start asking Paul questions, so I’m perhaps not using the lecturers as much as I could do” (Sarah, phase 2). Sarah rationalised her decisions by saying that she
did not want to make herself “look stupid” and that as a mature student she has the self-expectation that her level of knowledge should be in excess of her younger peers.

One aspect of the participant’s experience that was seen to link through many of the themes and dimensions presented within this chapter has been their integration with their peers. For some participants such as Gill and Sarah, the defining of themselves as ‘mature students’ is something that they have been aware of throughout the period of transition. Equally, for Mike, the youngest participant, he entered his HE experience apprehensive of the implications that increasing numbers of mature learners may negatively have on his HE experience and his social engagement with his peers. For Jess, the diversity within the cohort and the opportunity to progress to level four studies with her peers was a strong motivating factor in her deciding to continue her studies at SEEHEI. Jess described the impact that her peers had upon her decisions to continue with her studies;

*being here made me want to, it made me like the university and make friendships that are good, so going somewhere else would feel like I would have to make a fresh start, so that’s one of the reasons that I really wanted to stay here.*

(Jess, phase 1)

Joe also acknowledged the benefits of peer support and continuing from level three to four studies at SEEHEI, “it is essentially our second year now and you know everyone now, obviously there’s a few new faces now…but then they’re the new ones.” (Joe, phase 2). He recognised that as he continued through his HE experience he felt under less pressure as he did not consider himself a ‘new one’ when he commenced his level 4 studies.

In contrast to the experiences of Jess and Joe, Delia’s experience of integration with her peers had not been as positive. During phase one she explained that her integration had been limited and she cited as reason for this as being; “I think its maybe age range”. Her explanation echoed the initial anxieties that Gill,
Sarah and Mike had acknowledged in relation to the age of their peers. But whilst they had all gone onto have positive experiences of integration with their peers during their initial time at SEEHEI, Delia found it more challenging. During phase two of data collection, she suggested she felt she had integrated better, but still felt this was not what she had anticipated her experience would be. She described that during her experiences in compulsory education, she had also struggled to fully integrate with her peers and that her expectation of HE was that her peers would be more inclusive. At the end of phase two she summarised;

*I think it’s just the people was a bit different to what I was expecting, coz when you go to other uni’s they’re a bit more closer…I think it’s just the people in our specific course coz I think they’re just not like that.*

(Delia, phase 2)

Whilst Delia felt her integration had improved, she cited the challenges she had experienced were perhaps unique to the cohort she was in. Interestingly, she sought to consider that if she were in a different course it would be a more positive experience, but did not consider that she could change the situation. In contrast, Joe, who was living with his parents and commuting to SEEHEI, discussed that his focus remained playing semi-professional football and he did not want to integrate with peers beyond participating in lectures. He explained, “I came in and did the lectures I did a few bits, but coz I wasn’t living here you don’t really get involved” (Joe, phase 1). For Joe, he viewed participating in HE very similarly to John who wanted to “learn and get in and out as soon as possible” (John, phase 1). He perceived that the basis of his experience, e.g. limiting he engagement with HE, to be positive concluding that he found it “relaxing”.

As evidenced above, the notion of belonging is something that initially caused anxiety for many of the participants of this study throughout their transition. When they described their anticipated experiences of commencing HE, many expressed that they were unsure what to expect. In a number of cases, their anxiety centred around an uncertainty of if there would be other students who they perceived to be similar to them. For a number of participants this related to the age of their peers and the associated anxiety regarding if they would be
able to develop friendship and support networks. For the majority of participants they found that whilst the initial experience of commencing HE was daunting, the environment was supportive and they quickly established friendship groups. The experiences of the participants on this study contrasts with the findings of work undertaken by Hale (2006), who identified many negative experiences of non-traditional learners, and in common with Leathwood and O’Connell (2003) and Reay et al (2010) suggested that for many NTS getting into university was no longer a positive experience. Interestingly, whilst the participants expressed that they had initially experienced anxiety, they did not recount this as a negative experience. Awareness of such challenges for NTS, particularly at the start of a period of transition, evidences the need for careful planning of support during induction period. Not only to introduce learners to the HE environment, but to also support them in the establishment of peer networks.

Interestingly, the anticipation of experiences shifted as participants began to make their transition and whilst they all retained a clear sense of utilitarian purpose for their engagement (aligned with their future aspiration). They equally began to acknowledge the transformative nature of their engagement describing personal growth and gaining a sense of self-fulfilment to be unexpected benefits from their experience. In conjunction with their initial anticipation of what their HE experience upon entry to SEEHEI would be like, the reality for participants making their transition evoked the recall of both positive and negative experiences. The following section explores some of the self-reported positive and negative experiences that participants have recalled in relation to commencing the SFY programme.

4.3.3 Participants’ positive and negative experiences of transition

For many of the participants, they considered their experience of the SFY programme as being positive. Bella, a level four participant, reflected back on her experience of the programme and commented;

*It gives you a good idea of the workload like to expect a little bit more when you start your degree and how hard it can be, but how much help*
you can be given if you ask for it. If you need help, you got to ask for it, you can't just sit there and expect it to come to you. So if you need help, they always say to ask.

(Bella, phase 1)

Bella’s comments were also echoed by a number of the participants, who again commented on the level of support from teaching staff that had been given as being considered a particularly positive feature of their HE experience during their transition. Mike observed, “All the tutors are approachable. If there's anything you don’t understand, you can go to them afterwards and arrange individual meetings and whatever.” (Mike, phase 1). Through many of the interviews with participants, a key positive aspect that had promoted their transition frequently referred to was the accessibility and availability of support from teaching staff. Jess discussed how this support has positively helped her to successfully make the transition into level four, “I was surprised I guess by the support of people [staff] around, it got me through the year.” (Jess, phase 1).

For some participants, the aspects that made their engagement positive were identifying a sense of feeling comfortable within the HE environment. John recalled that when he commenced the SFY programme, his previous educational experiences were of a very formal delivery of learning. However, as he explained during his first interview;

It was far more relaxed actually; I thought it was going to be kind of everyone at a desk. Kind of how school was coz I mean that’s my only memory of education. I didn’t expect it to be as relaxed as it was and inviting as well.

(John, phase 1)

The atmosphere was something that was frequently cited as being a positive feature of their transition by participants. For example, Gill observed “overall it’s a friendly atmosphere” (Gill, phase 3). The participants identified that especially during the early parts of their HE journey this had been particularly significant as it had reduced the level of their anxiety. Whilst positive descriptions of the friendly atmosphere continued to resonate throughout discussions in all three phases of data collection; during phase three, one particular comment that was
mirrored by many participants was summarised by Jess. She reflected back on the positive aspects of her HE journey and spoke about her achievements saying:

* I would say I feel that I’ve improved as an individual in terms of you know my writing skills and my motivation and my attitude towards my study. I’ve been encouraged more towards achieve what I want to achieve and want to get.*

(Jess, phase 3)

For all participants who were interviewed in phase three, there was a clear recognition of their own achievements, as evidenced through their perception of their assessment results. Yet, more significantly to the way in which participants discussed the positive aspects of their journey was how their motivation to continue with their studies had been reinforced because of their positive experiences. Gill recognised the role of teaching staff who she said “If anyone sees you looking confused or lost, they always stop and ask if they can help”, which she had found particularly encouraging, especially towards the start of her engagement in HE.

Yet whilst participants recognised positive aspects of their experience that had sustained their engagement and resulted in successful transition, they also identified negative experiences which they felt to some extent had impeded their initial experience of entering into HE. The main challenge that participants had faced was in respect of the administration and support to enrol them onto the SFY programme. Whilst all participants felt that the process of application had been straightforward, following this a number of the participants had faced ongoing challenges. For Sarah, although her application and enrolment was straightforward she became frustrated with the administrative support within SEEHEI. Following her enrolment into SHEEHEI she was not able to access the virtual learning environment. Sarah explained;

* I have to say, the ummm…the admission got in a muddle, I’m still not on [virtual learning environment], so that could be a bit tighter, they seem to have missed how I first applied…so that’s a bit of a mess. They’ve given me my student log-in again and they did say the end of the week…but…I don’t know, it seems quite slow, they’ve gone wrong along the way and now they’re trying to backtrack.*

(Sarah, phase 1)
During phase two, Sarah was still having difficulty with student finance. However unlike during phase one where she described how she had taken a very proactive approach to sort her enrolment out, by the end of semester 1 her attitude had changed. She recognised that there was institutional support available, she was far more reluctant to fully explore this,

\[
I \text{ know they're there for me, but I don't want to sound stupid and sometimes one of them explains something and I'll come away, but I daren't ask again coz I just feel a bit like I don't want to feel like a dim-wit! Maybe it's maturity and that's why you feel that way.} \\
\text{(Sarah, phase 2)}
\]

Again, Sarah referred to being older than many of her peers and rationalised that this meant she should be more capable of functioning independently from the institutional support systems. In contrast, Ray, who was also older than many of the other participants, did not share her reluctance to seek help. He too suffered administrative problems with student finance and identified how he had accessed the support services a lot to resolve his problems;

\[
I \text{’ve had to use them quite a lot because I had a few, especially coming onto my degree; obviously with the work I was doing I had a few money issues during my science foundation course and they have actually helped quite a lot in all that and tried to sort it all out. So now it is all sorted, at least I was able to enrol onto my course.} \\
\text{(Ray, phase 1)}
\]

Gill also had problems with student finance, but unlike Ray, had chosen not to seek support to resolve them. As a consequence, by phase three of data collection, she was still having problems with her childcare describing it as “a total nightmare” (Gill, phase 3). Whilst Gill conceded that student finance is “never straight forwards”, like Sarah, she was reluctant to seek support. Logistical challenges to do with institutional administration were the focus of the participant’s negative experiences upon commencement of their HE experience.

The findings of this study therefore support the suggestion of Smyth and Banks (2012) that when students chose to engage later in their life, their previous educational experiences can act as a barrier for their full participation in HE. This was seen to resonate through many of the discussions with participants.
and related to their broader engagement with SEEHEI. Specifically, it manifested in a reluctance to seek help from institutional support mechanisms. Necessitating the development of avenues of support that are more tailored towards, and therefore inclusive of, NTS who are likely to have commence their HE journey from very different starting points than those entering via more traditional routes.

Many studies have acknowledged that an individual’s engagement with learning is not necessarily a positive experience and does not always have positive outcomes (TLRP, 2008b). Taylor and House (2010) conjectured that the learning experience is likely to be disjunctive for NTS arising from of the additional need for them to critically explore some of the underlying assumptions on which their lives have been built. In contrast to such concerns, the anticipation of the participants of this study was not one of a disjunctive engagement and throughout their transition, they articulated a coherent experience. During which, they judged they had made very deliberate choices regarding the extent that they wished to engage with various different aspects of SEEHEIs provision, e.g. support, financial assistance. All participants summarised their experience to be overwhelmingly positive and in this sense, it could be deemed that their experiences align with HEFEC (2011b) who suggest that, for those who engage in HE, they find it to be a positive experience. Furthermore, it was found that the expectations and experiences of participants were largely aligned, and in agreement with the work of Cook (2004) and Fragosa (2013) who suggested that positive HE experiences are significant in sustaining NTS engagement. This further implies that SEEHEI has been successful in terms of providing a coherent experience for NTS entering level three studies and continuing. Awareness of such positive outcomes can help to ensure that existing practices are further supported to continue in the future.

As they continued their journey with HE, the participants continued to face a number of different challenges often resulting in them needing to make compromises in order to successfully negotiate their transition. The necessity of transformation and negotiation were seen to have shaped the participants
Chapter 4: Findings and Discussion

Throughout the duration of data collection, all of the participants of this study successfully progressed academically. Whereas Vera chose to withdraw from HE in December, the other participants all continued their engagement. At each of the phases of data collection, the participants described the challenges they faced in order to negotiate and sustain their on-going engagement in HE. The findings, as presented within this section, represent the participant’s perceptions of how they have negotiated their way through their educational experiences. These experiences fall into one of two dimensions:

- Impact of curriculum and assessment on participants’ transition
- Social and Financial challenges

Assessment was significant to all participants and provided a very specific focal point that both gave rise to anxiety and doubt about continuing in HE, but also provided a tangible measure of the participant’s success and affirmed their decisions to engage in HE. This section will therefore begin by exploring the impact of assessments upon the participants’ transition. The section will continue by considering the social and financial challenges that the participants have faced and the impact upon them and their experiences.

4.4.1 Impact of curriculum and assessment on participants’ transition

Over the course of the participant’s engagement in HE, their success in their assessment was deemed by all to be pivotal to their successful transition. Furthermore, it provided a tangible way for participants to justify their on-going engagement and the changes that they made to their circumstances in order to initially enter HE. All of the participants of this study successfully passed summative assessments held in January. When they were interviewed in phases two and three of the study, it became clear that not only had their
achievement helped with their motivation; but that their overall attitude towards study had begun to change as a result of what they frequently described as increased confidence as a result of their success.

Success and anxiety in relation to assessment was something that all participants were very aware would dictate their continued engagement with HE, as Delia summarised;

\[\text{If I don't pass my modules and gotta retake a certain year or retake a module or retake a exam and sometimes they won't let you onto further years coz they don't have to so I just want to make sure that I pass every year and get through to the end.}\]

(Delia, phase 1)

As the participants made the transition through the year and undertook summative assessments, the implications to them became more multifaceted: in addition to the participants initial understandings of the role of assessment as a means to continue to progress, they began to acknowledge the impact on them as individuals and the effect it has on their attitude towards education. Joe reflected back on his experiences during his level three studies;

\[\text{Actually the exams were ok, it was the coursework when you had to get everything done and the deadlines. You sort of like actually had to work quite hard, it wasn't a low point coz I actually quite enjoyed it.}\]

(Joe, phase 1)

For Joe, he found the need to work hard and meet deadlines to have been a positive experience because the sense of achievement associated with successfully meeting deadlines was deemed to further justify the initial risk he had associated with commencing HE and subsequently motivated him to continue. This was mirrored by many of the other participants who had all received exam marks by the time they participated in phase two of the study. All participants discussed assessment results as a significant and motivating point throughout the duration of transition. Sarah described how she felt when she got her results, “I feel that the results have just given me a real boost and like I can conquer anything now” (Sarah, phase 2). John also described how his results had stimulated his motivation and promoted his sustained engagement;
I have had assessments back and I’ve had some really good results, which I’ve been really pleased with. So that’s spurred me on a little bit more to keep me enthusiastic about the course and kind of with the good results that I’ve had in the coursework

For Mike, whilst he shared the sense of personal achievement that Sarah and John had got from their results, he also described how he had found the feedback helpful and he had a clear determination to want to continue and improve his future results;

For Mike, whilst he shared the sense of personal achievement that Sarah and John had got from their results, he also described how he had found the feedback helpful and he had a clear determination to want to continue and improve his future results;

I’ve got a couple of 2:1s and 2:2s, so that’s what I’m aiming for to be honest. So I’m really happy with them, really happy. The feedback that I’ve got has been really constructive, so it’s working towards helping and improving the next sort of assessment and assignments that I do. So it’s useful to get that sort of feedback, to give me an idea of where I’m going wrong to improve the next one

(Mike, phase 2)

During phase two of the study, many participants acknowledged that they could have put more effort in and undertaken more studying for their semester one assessments. Sarah described “I was slack in areas where I could have done better” (Sarah, phase 2). She also went on to acknowledge that one of the negative aspects of her achieving well in her assessments was “I just got to be careful that I don’t get a bit above my station and a bit lax with my study” (Sarah, phase 2). She went onto explain that her initial intentions to dedicate time to study each evening had quickly reduced, commenting that “That dies a death, it was only when I was doing reports and thought ‘right, I need to find this in a book’, I said today, that I’m determined, but life gets in the way unfortunately” (Sarah, phase 2). Joe also suggested that he could have worked harder, saying “I wouldn’t say I’ve stretched myself too hard on anything” (Joe, phase 3). However, unlike Sarah’s reason of ‘life’ getting in the way, Joe had made a conscious decision not to work too hard. He reasoned that he “wasn’t too fussed” (Joe, phase 2) as the results that he achieved would not contribute towards his degree classification. But he remained very aware that next year he would need to adopt a different approach “Next year I’m going to try and be a bit more organised I think, coz obviously it does count” (Joe, phase 3). Remaining determined to not only succeed at his engagement in HE, but that he wanted to
ensure that the outcome in terms of his degree classification was as high as it could be.

For other participants, the assessment period had provoked anxiety. Bella described how, after being successful during her level three studies, she had found the transition and assessment associated with level four “a bit more nerve wrecking” (Bella, phase 2). She explained that she felt like this because the focus of what she was studying was less generic than in the SFY therefore, if she had not been successful, she would have questioned her ability more than during her level three year. For Bella, the possibility of not being successful during level four was significant, as it would have undermined her future aspirations. This resonated with comments from Sarah, who also acknowledged that she had struggled to engage with some material that she deemed irrelevant to her anticipated study of midwifery next year: “I think probably this year is going to be my hardest year [SFY], coz I’m going to be dabbling in things that perhaps necessarily I won’t need for midwifery.” (Sarah, phase 1). Sarah was very clear that she would only engage in what she perceived as being necessary for her anticipated future and that if she did not recognise the relevance, her engagement would be limited, which resulted in concerns that she could be self-limiting her achievement.

Participants’ levels of anxiety diminished as they continued their transition. Although initially anxious about her success or failure of assessments during phase one, by phase two Delia’s apprehension over successfully passing her assessments had resolved and she was pleased with the outcome. In common with many other participants, such as Joe, Delia acknowledged that she could also have “done better at some of the assignments” (Delia, phase 2). Yet when interviewed in phase three, she described how she had not done any revision and she continued to be concerned about her assignments, commenting “I’ve been more worried about the assignment than anything else” (Delia, phase 3). Despite these persistent concerns, Delia also discussed how she had not sought help. Her reasons were aligned with similar concerns of other level three participants. She perceived that she should be able to cope without additional
academic support and that engaging with academic support systems may not be an efficient use of her time, both in terms of academic and personal commitments.

Those students in level four who had successfully completed one year of their HE engagement, perceived that the SFY had helped them cope with assessments encountered in level four better than many of their counterparts. Daly and Saunders (2012) suggested that a significant aspect associated with a student’s first deadline and exam is that it can stir up challenges that may not have surfaced under less pressured circumstances. The findings of this study, in terms of the increased anxiety associated with earlier phases of transition, supports that. Assessment represented not only a way of justifying their sustained engagement, but all were very aware of the consequence of not being successful (being withdrawn) and the impact it would have on their anticipated future (Wilkinson and Burke, 2013; Moore et al, 2013). This reinforces the argument that support targeted early within the programme via both explicate expectations of assessment outcomes and the provision of formative assessment opportunities would be the most effective time for support to be provided. To this end, some of the early anxieties that participants expressed can be seen to resonate with the work of Fragosa (2013), and therefore supports the need to take cognisance of the differences between those learners entering HE with recent study, versus those whose last engagement with education was more distant.

For all participants, it was clear that they perceived academic success to be highly motivating in terms of ongoing engagement; especially at the points where summative results were received. John summed up many of the participants comments when he said:

*personally the reason that I do keep going is that I can see that I’m kind of there or there abouts. I can see I’m taking it in from the results of the coursework I’ve had so far. So I’m thinking ‘well, I’m actually achieving quite well in this area, so I don’t see why there’s any reason why I shouldn’t want to go on and complete it really’.*

(John, phase 2)
For Jess, in contrast to other participants, her assessment results in January were not as good as she had hoped;

I've had to submit three assessments so far and I got one back yesterday. I wasn't very happy I'm afraid, but it was the first one...I don't know, I wasn't very pleased...I'll see how I go. I just need to be happy and not put myself down. I guess I found it quite hard; I'm not very good at practical write-ups and stuff, I kind of struggle with them, but hopefully I'll get used to them and hopefully improve.

(Jess, phase 2)

She reflected that she had found that her experience of transition had been more isolating as she had progressed into level four. As she reflected on the differences between her experiences in level three and her current one in level four. She described feelings of isolation and not being supported by her peers;

I think it's more tougher, like everyone is more into their work. So you're not like there giving advice to each other and stuff, because before we're not that familiar with the whole assessment thing and we were all new to uni lifestyle, but now it's like we're more independent and everyone's just doing their own thing.

(Jess, phase 2)

The expectation of more independent working was something that Jess had found hard to adjust to. She felt that this new way of working (more independently) had negatively impacted on her achievement, she described her frustration “I got like frustrated when I didn't get like the mark in the work I wanted, I always want to put in 100% where I can and I always want to do my best.” (Jess, phase 2). Despite her frustration with the marks she had received, she also explained she was very passionate about education and although she experienced frustration, she remained determined to continue her engagement in HE. She, like other participants, referred back to her initial motivation for starting the programme and the desire to enhance her future remained unchanged, which she judged justified her ongoing engagement, even though her experience had not been positive, citing “I just have to go for this as it's my future.” (Jess, phase 2). When I interviewed Jess during phase three of data collection, she had had a far more positive experience since February in terms of her assessment results. She explained, “I'm quite pleased with myself so far,
and plus my grades have been improving like since my first grade that I got so I’m actually really pleased with it.” (Jess, phase 3).

The anxieties and challenges expressed by the participants of this study resonate with Smyth and Banks (2012) who state that for many NTS adapting to the different styles of learning, teaching and assessment than those previously experienced can present difficulties. Fragosa (2013) suggests that this is especially relevant for mature learners whose experiences of formal education are likely to have been significantly different to those learners who have progressed into HE from very recent study. In contrast, the participants of this study (who ranged in age from 22-40) all expressed similar experiences in relation to curriculum and assessment.

Another issue that arose for a number of the participants was identifying the relevance of the curriculum contents. This is a specific challenge relating to foundation year programmes, whereby the teaching needs to be broad in order to ensure the skill set students gain upon completion is sufficient to enable them to be successfully progress through future HE study. This resulted in a degree of disengagement from some of the participants during aspects of the curriculum that they did not perceive as being directly relevant to their anticipated future. The work of Jones (2008) identified that learners who fail to identify the relevance of curriculum contents are at risk of early withdrawal and are less likely to make successful transitions due to a perceived unsatisfactory academic experience. This is reinforced by the findings of Thomas (2012) who also identified low satisfaction with academic experience as a key reason for early withdrawal. It is further acknowledged that students who have such specific motivation may become frustrated when asked to perform in types of assessments that they consider do not reflect the career skills they need, or fail to demonstrate their aptitude well (Morgan and Haughton, 2011). Whilst participants in terms of their discussion of assessment did not evidence this, many identified that their engagement with taught content was lower when they did not recognise that it would be something they would use in future years of study or their anticipated future career.
In light of this, it is essential that programmes are developed and delivered in such a way that a clear link is articulated between the learning curriculum and the future routes of progressions. At SEEHEI specifically, greater recognition and reinforcement of this by the teaching staff would enable better alignment of the learning experience to the key institutional driver of raising levels of aspiration in careers. Interestingly, whilst academic issues can negatively limit the success of student transitions, for the participants of this study; it was academic issues in relation to assessment that provided one of the most significant sources of motivation for them to sustain their engagement. Consideration should therefore be given to the design of the assessment in order to sustain and maximise engagement and reduce the likelihood of frustration for assessments that do not reflect career skills. Closer alignment of programme delivery with future careers may increase the relevancy for learners. This would also further seek to align programme level delivery with institutional level key drivers.

Despite the overwhelming sense that the outcome of gaining a degree and success in assessment justified the participants continued engagement with HE, all remained aware of the financial cost of their sustained engagement. In addition to the financial challenges that participants had faced, their ongoing transition gave rise of a number of adjustments that they perceived they had been required to make since commencing their journey into HE. The following section addresses this aspect of the findings.

4.4.2 Social and personal challenges during participants' transition

Having commenced their transition into HE, all participants expressed that whilst there had been many positive aspects that had prompted their desire to commence the SFY programme at SEEHEI, there has also been a number of ongoing challenges that had arisen once they commenced their engagement. These had necessitated them to adapt in order to successfully sustain their engagement with HE. For some of the participants, a significant challenge had been trying to undertake part-time working alongside studying. Many of the
participants articulated that they needed the financial income associated with part-time working, but that this had resulted in additional pressures that perhaps had not been fully anticipated at the time they made the decision to commence their HE journey. A further challenge arose for participants due to the global financial crisis, which resulted in reductions for work that was available. Despite this, throughout the period of transition, participants remained largely positive regarding their financial circumstances.

All participants of this study had some level of awareness of the financial support that was available to them as students. Whilst they had all received the same information from SEEHEI, Ray described how he was additionally aware of student finance “Obviously I knew about students finance with my girlfriend being a student, turns out you get more now than she did when she was doing her degree.” (Ray, phase 1). For Ray, although this had been a benefit, he also expressed the need to undertake part-time work. He went on to describe how he had found combining part-time work and studying a challenge “I got to admit, during the foundation year it was hard because I was actually working nights as well…it was better money and the only chance I had to really work…I was usually up for about 24 or 25 hours.” (Ray, phase 1). Whilst Ray had found that the hours were extremely long, he justified it saying that there was a limited choice for him about if he should undertake part-time work due to the financial commitment. He commented that he needed the additional source of financial income “if you want any sort of social life, or even money for food or anything” (Ray, phase 1). Whilst this was something that Ray had found an acceptable compromise during level 3, he also acknowledged that with the increasing academic level expected during level 4, he was no longer able to undertake such long shifts and felt that prioritising his academic studies was a worthwhile risk in order to complete his degree.

Delia also sought part-time working, but acknowledged that after the first couple of weeks she quickly realised that she would need to reduce her hours in order for her to dedicate enough time to study and successfully pass the programme. She explained that she “had to try and tell them [her employers] to change my
hours” (Delia, phase 1). Though when I met her again during phase two, she described that although she had reduced her hours, she was not happy, “Yeah, I cut my hours. I managed to do that, so now I’m only working one day a week. But now I hate only working one day a week coz I want to work more!” (Delia, phase 2). Delia found that the change from full-time working to being a full-time student had more of an impact than she had anticipated. She explained that the change in her financial circumstances, although living at home and not paying rent, had significantly reduced her social life. For Ray, whilst he had initially been able to get part-time work, he had found that the amount had reduced after Christmas and like Delia, he also described how his social life had changed and he was not able to go out as frequently as he used to. In contrast to Delia who saw it negatively, Ray also identified that there were some positive outcomes; referring to the global financial crisis he said, “now I have to think about money and stuff and budget a bit better…but then that’s just a good thing with the way things are going at the moment, I need to budget early on” (Ray, phase 2). During phase 2, he described how he continued to look for an additional part-time job, but that although he had not been successful, it meant that he was able to see his girlfriend more.

For other participants, such as Gill and Sarah, they also identified that whilst their financial situation had changed, their focus with their free time was to spend it with family and neither had been actively seeking employment since commencing HE. During phase one, Gill explained that, she had wanted to “draw a line under work” (Gill, phase 1) in order to focus on studying. She also referred to the challenges she had faced in terms of her transition in to HE resulting in her needing to make compromises to her family situation;

*I suppose the biggest sacrifice for me was ummm…putting my son into childcare. Coz obviously I’d been at home and my shifts had been worked around whether my husbands at home? So I suppose that’s the biggest sacrifice, having to have a completely different routine. But it’s working out well, so I don’t know what I was worried for anyway.*

(Gill, phase 1)

Gill discussed that prior to starting she had initially been apprehensive about putting her son into childcare, but had positively found that the situation was easier than she had anticipated. In phase two she also expressed a further
reason for not wanting to undertake part-time work was that she did not want to put any additional pressure on herself. She felt that managing her family time alongside part-time working may limit the success of her engagement in HE and she wanted to ensure that the choices she made did not undermine her success at SEEHEI. Sarah’s circumstances mirrored those of Gill, in terms of having a young child at the time of commencing her HE study. She also chose not to look for part-time work and described how she felt under-pressure to ensure that she did regular studying to keep on top of her workload “I want to read tonight I have to get some reading in every night, otherwise I’m going to get behind” (Sarah, phase 1). Sarah found managing her time to do this was difficult. Within the first phase of interviews, she expressed concerns;

So yeah I am noticing that I’m constantly thinking; when am I going to get time read this and do that and you’re juggling the household chores, so I can see that changing even within the first week…I’m dying to get up in a room and bury my head in a book and catch up on reading.

(Sarah, phase 1)

However, by phase two of the study she had also decided that she would need to undertake part-time working due to a grant being stopped. Although she acknowledged that this had not been something she had anticipated needing to do, she felt that she had no choice if she wanted to sustain her engagement. Similarly to Ray, she also identified that whilst the situation had not worked out as she had initially planned, she remained optimistic and discussed that she was exploring the possibility of getting a job in a hospital in order to try to enhance her midwifery application. The decisions that Sarah made very clearly demonstrated that she retained a sense of purpose and a strong desire to align all of her choices to her future career. Yet, by the end of the academic year, Sarah reflected back on the changes and compromises she had made, this time not describing them so positively “I suppose low points would be the work you have to do at home, but that is to be expected. You have to realise that things have to go, there’s a bit more of a ‘no I can’t come round and see family’” (Sarah, phase 3).
John was also aware of the financial compromises he had made, at the start of the year he explained the impact that they had on his relationship with his family;

   But I'm the sort of person where if I'm not happy with something I want to change it, but I also want to improve my lifestyle as well. So he [step-dad] kind of begrudges me and I don't know...but he's kind of hasn't really been that supportive and I've heard him say a couple of times 'well, why does he want to go and do that for?'

   (John, phase 1)

Although he felt his step-dad was not supportive, he described how giving up his full-time job meant that he had little choice about having to move back to his family home. Despite not being in a fully supportive home environment, John’s determination to make a career change remained high and during phase two he again articulated how the sacrifices he had made to sustain his HE engagement would be worth it for him in the future;

   Obviously there’s things like finance takes a bit of a hit whilst you’re studying, but at the same time you have to put that in balance with seven, eight, nine years down the line; what’s my earning potential going to be then? This debt that I’ll have from fees and loans will actually be nothing compared to potentially what I’ll be able to earn, and potentially the rewards that I’ll be able to get when I’m doing a job and working with children, something like that I suppose. So that’s kind of the reason I want to do it. I can see that far ahead that I know where I want to be in say 10 years’ time and that’s my motivation.

   (John, phase 2)

Interestingly, by phase three, John reflected on how he had changed and perceived himself as ‘lazy’ now that he was not in full-time working employment, and did not recognise the number of hours per week that he was dedicating to studying as being equivalent to when he was undertaking paid work. Other participants who had a self-perception that as a student they were perceived as ‘lazy’ echoed this. Although this has not deterred any of them from their desire to complete their programme of study, all participants’ equated ‘work’ with paid employment and they gave themselves little recognition for the ‘work’ that they had invested in successfully completing their academic studies. In some cases, as with John, this negative perception was reinforced by wider support networks, e.g. family; whilst for others, like Sarah and Gill, it was not something that they felt was reinforced by wider friends and family.
For all participants the decision to commence an HE programme of study had resulted in them giving up previous paid employment, which had adversely affected their current financial situation. Despite the collective belief that at the end of their engagement their earning potential would be in excess of what it was prior to gaining a degree, they remained aware of the financial debt that their choices had resulted in and all had taken out the full student loan. For some participants the financial cost of gaining a degree had made them very debt aware, whereas for other participants they adopted a far more fatalistic approach and were not as debt adverse. It is worth emphasising that at the time of data collection, the participants were undertaking programmes of study prior to the removal of the tuition fee cap.

Jess, who described herself as “passionate about education” the prospect of gaining a degree justified the financial burden incurred as a result. She explained;

\[
\text{I think it would of been something in the back of my mind that worried me so much, but for the sake of me getting my education and getting my degree I would have gone for it…I think it would have been the only choice I had, you know, going to university is something that some people only dream about and you can’t take that chance for granted can you?}
\]

(Jess, phase 2)

Equally, for Delia, she was very aware of the financial implications and had obviously considered when she would have to start to repay the loan that she had taken out. Delia was not concerned and did not feel that any future increase in tuition fees would have affected her decision to engage in HE, explaining her reasons she paralleled the repayments to getting a take-away meal and described;

\[
\text{To me, I don’t know why people bother about it to be honest; to me it’s like yeah tuition fees might go up, but you pay the loan anyway, so what does it matter, yeah you’re paying it for longer but when the loan money comes out, you just don’t notice it coz it’s just such a measly amount…so it’s like, ‘why’s everyone so bothered about it?’ And that amount every month is not very much and you might of ended up wasting it on take-away or doing something you didn’t even want to do…so I don’t see the}
\]
problem, going to uni’s something you always wanted to do, so if you really want it, you shouldn’t moan, that’s how I see it.

(Delia, phase 2)

Similarly, Sarah had a very pragmatic approach to repaying the fees, recognising that in order to fulfil her ambition of becoming a midwife; she would have to take out a loan as she did not have the financial means to support herself;

Yes I know that it’s money that I’m borrowing, but I just, I’ll pay it back as and when they want us to pay it back…so no, I don’t look at it, for me it’s getting the career that I’m looking for. So no I don’t really, I know it’s real money but that’s what I want to do and unfortunately I haven’t got money to back me up. I’ve got to take the loan and I’ll pay it back as and when they ask for it really. By then, I don’t even really look at the salary, I think it’s having that job and being fulfilled, ummm I think that outweighs the money that going to be owed.

(Sarah, phase 2)

What was also interesting about Sarah’s discussion during phase two of the study, was that in contrast to phase one where her motivation for engaging in HE was very specifically in order to achieve financial stability through a career where she perceived there to be very limited chance of her being made redundant. By phase two of the study, she had begun to reconstruct her reasons for her ongoing HE engagement. She now had a very clear emphasis on the importance of her future that she is “fulfilled”. However, for Sarah as she approached the end of her first year in HE, she did acknowledge that “the reality is that I’d want to start this year to get in before them [increased tuition fees]” (Sarah, phase 3). Although her reasons for her ongoing engagement were more complex, she remained debt aware and for herself recognised that there would be a limit in terms of the overall amount of debt she was willing to take on.

For other participants, the risk of debt and the external conditions (possibility of fees increasing to nine thousand pounds a year) was also judged a deterrent to them participating in HE. Mike commented that;

but I think that would of put me off of going to university. It’s a lot of money, like nine grand per year, is like what you’ll pay in the three years
that I’m doing that the tuition fees near enough, so that is it would of probably put me off

(Mike, phase 2)

Joe who had been considering whether to get a job or start an HE course after finishing playing full-time professional football mirrored his comments. He concluded that an increase in tuition fees would have made him consider “do I want to do that when I can get a job?” (Joe, phase 2). He recognised that it was not just the cost of the tuition fees, but that there were also considerations in terms of the living costs and he concluded “that probably would of changed my mind [about entering HE]” (Joe, phase 2).

Trotter and Roberts (2006) found that the factor, which most significantly determined the retention of students during their initial year of enrolment into HE, was personal reasons. Citing and that financial and debt related issues were not commonly factors that influenced retention. They reasoned that many NTS are likely to live at home due to existing financial constraints and, whilst this positively reduced debt aversion as a reason for early withdrawal, they cautioned that this itself can have a detrimental effect on non-traditional student ability to fully integrate into HE. Interestingly, the participants of this study did remain debt aware, but were not debt adverse in terms of paying for their education. Reasoning that the financial return on their investment, in terms of future careers, would justify short term financial sacrifices. Their perception of debt in relation to their HE engagement aligned with the findings of the OpinionPanel (2011) survey that identified over a quarter of students (28%) believed that their expected debt at graduation was definitely an acceptable investment, which aligns with Human Capital Theory regarding the return on investment justifying the initial cost (Baron et al, 2000).

The findings of this study are reflective of the work of Trotter and Roberts (2006): a number of participants chose to live at home which positively enhanced their financial situation, but also constrained their engagement with the broader HE experience. Gorard (2008) suggested that such circumstances (living at the familial home) can negatively impact of an individual's educational
self-concept. He reasoned that families with no previous experience of HE can be a negative influence in creating learner identities which do not view HE opportunities as appropriate, interesting or helpful. In contrast, whilst the participants of this study were all first generation entrants to HE, none expressed concerns about their learner identity being undermined from family. Furthermore, this choice was considered by the participants to positively enable them to sustain their engagement in HE

Negotiations made during transition were something that all participants recognised. Of particular significance was their perception of the SFY programme. There were a number of adverse comments regarding their perceived need to undertake a foundation year programme (rather than directly commence level 4) during the initial phases of the study. These mostly arose in relation to the participants not having an awareness of the standard of their own academic ability. A number of the study participants described that they had a strong desire to enrol directly into level four. However, as they progressed through the SFY and encountered more learning experiences, the value of the SFY became apparent to them particularly in terms of assessments. Additionally, later in their transition they were able to recognise the positive impact that this would have on their future academic success. Participants in level four in particular recalled how they felt better able to successfully undertake assessments compared to their counterparts who had enrolled directly into level four, citing that they felt advantaged due to the skill set, e.g. scientific report writing, which had made their transition easier. It was also clear that this provided a source of motivation and reduced their anxiety levels at summative assessment points within their transition. This suggests an opportunity for peer support and mentoring that could be embraced within cohorts. Particularly at level four where students could ‘buddy’ with those who have previous experience of study within the institution and those who have newly joined. Such interventions would positively integrate NTS with their more traditional counterparts and offer opportunities for peer assisted learning and feedback.
TLRP (2008a) citing the often perceived lower status of entry routes that NTS take, considered that many NTS are attracted into HE based upon the assumed outcome of a degree, but once there, see themselves as outsiders to the provision. This was not something that the participants of this study identified with. However, their perceptions of the value of the SFY do, to some extent, resonate with this, as many participants did not perceive it to be part of SEEHEIs HE provision. To this end, it could be conjectured that the positioning of SEEHEI within the liminal zone as a hybrid institution challenges the coherence of transition for NTS entering into HE via foundation year programmes. This would resonate with the work of Bathmaker and Thomas (2009) who identified that the lack of single institutional culture within hybrid institutions can undermine the coherence of student learning journeys.

Disappointingly, the findings also affirm Bathmaker and Thomas’ (2006) concern regarding non-traditional entry qualifications being plagued with issues surrounding identity and credibility. It is clear that the perceived value placed on such entry routes may need to be reassessed. In contrast, Moore et al (2013) argued that the decisions to participate in HE are likely to be based on a complex mix of an individual’s perception of an individual course, personal aspiration and parental educational achievement. Although parental educational achievement is beyond the scope of HEIs to address, personal aspiration of participants remained a strong motivator for their continued engagement throughout their transition. This does therefore suggest that recognition of an individual’s aspiration is needed throughout their transition. It also reinforces the need for HEIs to review the relative value that is attached to programmes of learning within their provision. In this way, early withdrawal may be avoided and a more sustained engagement of learners can be achieved.

Fragosa (2013) recognised that many mature students choosing to enter HE are also likely to be experiencing simultaneous changes in their social and domestic circumstances. The combination of which can act to potentially suppress the success of their engagement, which can consequently affect upon their successful performance in assessments. All participants of this study had made changes to their social and domestic circumstances in order to commence the SFY. Over the course of the year, a number of them had needed
to seek additional part-time working and this had reduced the amount of time that they were able to dedicate to study. Interestingly, whilst participants all acknowledged that, they had needed to make such changes; none believed that these had adversely affected their engagement with HE or their performance in their assessments. Though as discussed earlier, it should also be remembered that the participants of this study were all successful in their assessments and making their transition, therefore perhaps it would have been surprising if they had discussed that these changes had suppressed the success of their performance in assessments. Nevertheless, institutional recognition of the need for students to undertake part-time working can inform programme delivery patterns. In this way, opportunities to facilitate part-time working without limiting engagement with the curriculum can be built into the programme design. For NTS, the additional consideration of when academic support is made available may encourage additional engagement if it can be supplied in a way that does not interfere with social and domestic commitments. Consequently, this may make NTS feel better integrated into the institution and less reliant on developing external support structures in preference to existing institutional ones.

For many NTS, their choice to engage in HE involves a degree of risk associated with social and domestic changes made in order to participate. For all participants, in common with the findings of Thomas (2012) the risk that they attached to the changes they had made was calculated against their successful achievement of a degree and the anticipation of gaining a more highly paid job. Their achievement in assessments was deemed significant as it represented a tangible way to justify the changes (risk) that they had made since the start of their HE engagement, especially in relation to their personal and domestic circumstances. This suggest the need for there to be not only planned opportunities to recognise achievement within programmes. But that institutions also need to target careers support and guidance at such points, when learners are motivated not only to sustain their engagement, but when they are likely to be most engaged with considering their future careers.
4.5 Participants' adjustments within the HE environment

This section is divided into three specific dimensions:

- Participants’ perceived value of learning and HE
- Institutional practices and culture
- Participants self-positioning within the field of HE

The findings of each of the above dimensions are explored, commencing with an in-depth consideration of the complexities that the participants have faced, and how experiences during their transitions have challenged their understanding of the value of HE. These challenges and subsequent adjustments resulted in new understandings of the value of learning, gaining an academic qualification and the role of HE. This section concludes by specifically considering the impact of institutional practices and culture and the participants’ self-positioning within the field of HE.

4.5.1 Participants’ value of learning and HE

For many of the participants of this study, the decision to stop working and commence an HE programme of study was significant. All had a clear sense of purpose for what they wanted to achieve from the outset of their engagement. However, for many, over the time that they participated in this study and made their transition into HE, the experiences, both within and outside of HE had continued to shape their understandings. As they progressed and discussed the value that their sustained engagement had to them as individuals, it was clear that their relationship with learning and the significance of gaining further qualifications was dynamic and as they continued their transition, it became more multifaceted.

For many participants their transition into HE had also focused them on exploring the value that their HE engagement - in terms of learning and gaining qualifications - had for them. For some, initially completing the SFY had been something they had found demotivating, Bella describes how she had, “hated the fact that I had to do the foundation course, but then I found out the fact that I
really needed to.” (Bella, phase 1). Her feelings resonated with many other participants who also believed that they did not need to do the level three study prior to commencing level four, reasoning that they considered they already had the necessary academic knowledge that this would prolong their engagement with HE. Yet for all of them, they quickly acknowledged that having commenced it, there was a need for them to do it. Bella explained how her feelings had changed:

*Probably a few weeks into it, coz I realised how much I needed to learn and then by the end of it I realised it was beneficial, coz otherwise I’d of started a degree that I probably wouldn’t of liked and would have been a waste of time….I probably maybe would of quit.*

(Bella, phase 1)

Joe also described similar feelings, he had wanted, like John, to minimise the length of time that he was in HE, however when he commenced level four, he described how he had quickly realised the benefit. He explained that the difference in expectation of general study skills and writing skills between the years was very different and he believed he would have struggled without doing the foundation year. Whilst Joe had not found the transition particularly difficult, Jess acknowledged in phase two that it was something she had struggled with, despite having undertaken the SFY. Interestingly, from her initial scepticism about the value of her level three study, Bella reflected that, “if I did the degree straight not from doing the foundation, I think I’d be totally scared off!” (Bella, phase 1). For many all of the participants in level four, they all identified the value to engaging with level three study at SEEHEI and how this had enhanced their experiences of transition into and through level four.

A positive feature that both Sarah and Ray commented on in terms of their level three studies that had aided their transition was the academic skills they had developed. Ray described, “I think those who did it are finding it a bit easier than those who didn’t do the course. We already know how to write up the write-ups.” (Ray, phase 2). Which echoed Sarah’s comments in phase two that having developed her academic skills; she felt that the prospect of her transition into semester two had seemed less daunting.
For all participants, it was clear that the value they attached to their participation in HE initially centred on job prospects upon completion. Bella’s explanation for her initial engagement during phase two interviews summarises many of the participant’s initial feelings;

*To get a better job, to have the qualifications to get a better job, coz nowadays they kind of look a that if you’ve got a degree, if you haven’t then they look at the people who’ve got degrees more than the people who don’t. Coz it used to be experience didn’t it, now it’s more the degree.*

(Bella, phase 2)

However, as the participants continued their transition and engaged in later stages of the study the emphasis and motivation for their sustained engagement became broader and they increasingly spoke of their personal growth. Jess believed that it had “given me a sense of independence and so that’s good.” (Jess, phase 3). Similarly John, who had entered HE because “did not like the person he had become” (John, phase 1), reflected on the positive changes that his HE engagement had afforded him;

*Yeah, I mean it’s changed massively I think. It’s changed my whole look towards life. I feel like a completely different person, I’ve become far more outgoing than I was and I’ve become interested in things that I never thought I’d become interested in. Like it sounds stupid, but when you go on the quiz machines in the pub, if you’ve got a science section I’ll pick that section, coz I think I might be half decent at that rather than food and drink or something like that. It’s kind of given me a different aspect of knowledge that I never thought I would ever have or would ever be able to gain. So I’m really pleased with how I’ve come along really.*

(John, phase 1)

For Gill, the opportunity to engage in HE had given her a “gateway” to get out of what she described as a “dead end” and had “proved to myself that I can actually do better than I think I can.” (Gill, phase 3). Sarah also spoke about personal changes to her as an individual and her personal growth, as she described;

*Highlights have been just how you’ve grown yourself. Just what you’ve learnt as far as writing and researching. It’s like I’ve become a different sort of person, I don’t want to leave this sort of environment, I want to stay here and learn all the time…I just find it interesting that I’m quite lucky to be in that sort of position, I know I have to pay for it, but I’ve*
really sort of enjoyed having that focus and working towards something higher education.

(Sarah, phase 3)

For Mike, there was also a similar sense of self-development and the reflection that he had “accomplished something that I suppose quite a lot of people do, but quite a lot of people don’t go to university” (Mike, phase 2). Interestingly whilst he acknowledged his achievement, he also commented “I suppose you could say it’s something that I’ve always wanted to do” (Mike, phase 2). For Mike, unlike many of the other participants, entering HE was something that he had always wanted to achieve in terms of furthering his career options. In contrast, the other participant’s stimulus was more closely aligned to gaining a specific job or career and wanting to escape from recent working situations. Gill also commented on the fact that a positive for her had been the sense of recognising that she was capable and made her glad she had “made the step” to start HE (Gill, phase 2). For Delia, the most significant thing that she had found was that her own self-confidence had developed and this had increased her enjoyment of her engagement.

At the end of phase 3 all participants described that, their sense of personal growth and fulfilment because their HE journey had been significant to them. As Sarah summarised, “I just find it interesting that I’m quite lucky to be in that sort of position, I know I have to pay for it, but I’ve really sort of enjoyed having that focus and working towards something higher education.” (Sarah, phase 3).

In common with the findings of Greenwood et al (2007), all participants recognised that by participating in HE and increasing their qualifications, it would improve their employment prospects in a financial sense. This reason resonated with the suggestions of Lee (2014) that gaining a degree can help individuals to meet the demands of an increasingly competitive labour market. Underdal (2010) cautioned that the explicit linking of gaining a degree with employment success had falsely narrowed the vision of the purpose of HE. Suggesting instead that its role and value is currently primarily constructed in terms of skill development to increase the competitiveness of individuals, and
that personal fulfilment for an individual will result from economic/financial success. Remarkably, both the Russell Enquiry (NCIHE, 1973) and the Dearing Report (1997) linked self-fulfilment of the individual with economic stability, and it is on this basis that many of the current educational policies in respect of WP have been based. It is therefore perhaps not surprising that the participants of the study echoed this. For institutions, it is important to recognise that whilst learners may seem to be focused on the economic value of their educational qualification, the role of HE is broader. The realisation of career aspirations and the upward social mobility that HE promises means that individuals also need to develop greater cultural capital in order to be successful (Bathmaker and Thomas, 2009; Bourdieu, 1986). Therefore, the mission of HE should not neglect the development of this and should actively seek to support learners in the holistic development of skills needed for their future success.

All of the participants acknowledged a need for on-going adjustment and compromise in order to sustain their engagement. Whilst the adjustments required had been different for each in terms of lifestyle, childcare and financial sacrifices the day-to-day engagement in learning had been the same for all participants. With this commonality of experience in mind the following section will explore the impact of institutional practices and culture on the participant’s experiences of transition and subsequently considers how the participants perceive SEEHEI is positioned more broadly within the field of HE.

4.5.2 Institutional practices and culture

Within the HE environment of SEEHEI, all of the participants had undergone teaching in the same learning spaces. For some of the participants, they had knowledge or experience of visiting other HEIs. Whilst for others, beyond their previous (mainly compulsory) educational experiences, they had no other HE experience upon which to make comparisons to SEEHEI. For the participants of this study many commented on both the habitus of the institution and how they perceived SEEHEI to be positioned in in the broader field of HE. A striking feature of SEEHEI that many of the participants commented on was the friendly
atmosphere that existed. This was significant to all of the participants and via the positive experiences such as this and the culture of the institution being small and relaxed all believed that it had positively encouraged them to engage with learning and had positively promoted their transition throughout the year.

When describing the institution, all participants were enthusiastic in their praise and their confidence that they would recommend it as a place to study. This is interesting, as throughout the process of data collection, many of the participants had described negative experiences (including some, which related directly to their learning experiences and others that related to changes and challenges that had arisen within the wider context of their lives). Despite these experiences, all participants had remained resolute that their sustained engagement would have a positive outcome upon completion of their programme of study and that the habitus of the institution would enable them to achieve their goal.

Gill described it as “a friendly place, spacious, fantastic opportunities and good lecturers.” (Gill, phase 3). Bella’s experiences and perceptions were also similar to Gill’s with her commenting, “it’s brand spanking new and everyone’s really enthusiastic. All the teachers are really enthusiastic and everything” (Bella, phase 1). Reflecting upon her experience throughout the year, Delia described the ways in which she felt SEEHEI had promoted her transition;

*I’d say it’s good because it’s calm and it’s laid back and I probably would encourage people to come here because I think the lecturers are a lot nicer than I’ve heard from other unis, from my friends lecturers in other unis. Obviously they’re very helpful, all you got to do is email them and ask, and they’ll help you out and encourage you and everything.*

(Delia, phase 3)

Interestingly, in phase three Delia also reflected back to her initial experiences of the culture at SEEHEI and specifically the challenges that she had found integrating with her peers. She had begun to make friends with peers from across the institution and did not feel so reliant on the peers specifically undertaking the same programme as her for support. She continued;
I think it is a good place to go really overall even if you’re not always going to have nice people on your course. Overall on most courses you will anyway, like it’s not always going to be good, but if you’re just looking to improve yourself and your intelligence and stuff and you want to go far, I would say here is the best place to go because obviously you have got that support here 24/7.

(Delia, phase 3)

But by the end of the academic year during her phase three interview, Delia had again become more focused on what she wanted to gain from her HE experience at the end of it, rather than her experience during transition. Like many of the other participants, she considered that regardless of negative experiences she had, the end (gaining a degree) would justify the experiences of transition throughout her engagement in HE. By the end of the year, and in line with many of the other participants, Delia demonstrated a more multifaceted reason for engaging in HE and advocated that she considered HE to be as much about development and personal fulfilment as it is about gaining an award to secure a more highly paid job in the future.

For participants who were in level four during data collection, they reflected on their experience of level three and like Gill and Delia, both Joe and Bella commented on the friendly environment they had experienced at SEEHEI;

it’s quite a relaxed sort of environment…you can sort of get hold of all the teachers and on a personal level you can see them whenever you want. You can talk to them whenever you want, you can pretty much talk to them straight away. It’s quite a sort of friendly atmosphere really; you don’t feel like they’re just a lecturer telling you what they know sort of thing.

(Joe, phase 1)

its really good environment, you can go to some unis and they look like prisons don’t they? And this doesn’t really does it, so, it’s smart and spacious and it’s got loads of computers and software and its good.

(Bella, phase 3)

Whilst all participants’ reinforced the notion of a friendly and relaxed culture existing, there was also an awareness that due to the short duration of time that SEEHEI had been open, that this could negatively impact upon the perceived value to their degree. Furthermore, that there were areas within the provision
that was not up to the same standard as available at other HEIs that had been established for longer. Ray commented that SEEHEI “isn’t very well known” (Ray, phase 1) and continued to identify that the resources, e.g. the library, was not as large as many at other institutions. He also identified that whilst many learning spaces were what he would expect from an HE experience, there were areas that were older and “felt more like being at high school” (Ray, phase 2). Joe also described it as being on a much smaller scale than many other HEIs. For him the locality and proximity to the football club he played for was the main reason for choosing to study there. By the end of the year still had a very utilitarian understanding in relation to his engagement in HE, explaining “I just take it as going in and doing all the work…so it’s kind of just good enough for me.” (Joe, phase 3). He did not want to engage with other aspects of the HE provision.

Throughout my engagement with the participants of this study, they remained overwhelmingly positive about their experiences of transition and the value of their engagement in HE to their futures. What was also apparent was that they has some awareness of the positioning of SEEHEI broadly within the field of HE. Perhaps the most astute was Joe. Of all the participants of the study, only he had acknowledged that he was not sure about progressing into level four at SEEHEI “it was the thought that well after that I might go somewhere else because it would just be a uni that hold more of a stature sort of thing.” (Joe, phase 1). He was very aware about the positioning of individual HEIs within the field of HE and have a clear sense of the implications of this for him in terms of the value of the qualification that he hoped to achieve;

*If I did it all again, I would probably try and go to a specific sport college and obviously the Loughborough’s and Bath’s. You know, they’re specifically for sport and focussed on it, whereas…I don’t know, if I did it again, but I’m happy here and I’ve got other things going on locally so it kind of works out alright really.*

(Joe, phase 3)

Having chosen to study Sports and Exercise Science, combined with his background as a professional footballer; he articulated very clearly how he felt a degree awarded from SEEHEI could be perceived as compared to those from traditional institutions with a long history of sports science;
Still get the same degree at the end of the day, so obviously it’s not held as highly as somewhere else. But if I do well in the degree and get a good degree with my background as well, I’d hope to get into a job that I want really. Hopefully my background will compensate for not having a degree at a well-recognised college or uni, so that’s the idea anyway

    (Joe, phase 3)

Joe ultimately had made the decision to continue his studies at SEEHEI due to his football commitments, and although he was concerned about his choice to stay at SEEHEI, he believed that his professional background would compensate for not having a degree from an institution that is well recognised.

Bella also accepted that the reputation of SEEHEI was yet to be established; and recognised that this meant that the majority of her peers were all from the local area;

But it’s only been a couple of years hasn’t it? It’s not long at all to get a bigger reputation yet, but hopefully in years to come more and more people will come. Coz mostly its people from round here, if you speak to someone I mean last year I don’t think there was anyone who came out of the area.

    (Bella, phase 3)

The point was also identified by Joe to be one of his primary motivations for making his application to SEEHEI. John had had to move back to his parental home once he decided to stop working; necessitating him to attend a local HEI. Yet in contrast to Joe, far from perceiving this as a constraint to his choice, John considered being local and attending local HE provision to be a positive thing for both himself and SEEHEI;

It’s all about because I’m local; it’s all about trying to build. No one’s going to come if no one goes. So you’ve got to be that initial type of group that decides to go to the uni to try to help it make its name for itself. So it feels good to be part of that you know?

    (John, phase 3)

In common with many of the other participants of the study, their choices of where to apply to undertake their studies had been heavily dictated by their personal circumstances. Whilst some participants spoke pessimistically of their qualifications being less valued than those gained from institutions with a longer history of provision they also acknowledged that their personal circumstances
had limited their choice of HE provision. For others the geographical location was the most important determinant of where to engage and therefore they were happy with any slight perceptions of a lower status of their final qualification if it suited their personal circumstances.

The participants self-positioning and discussions of the value of their degree resonates with the work of Bathmaker and Thomas (2009) who suggested that the diversification of HE and alternative entry routes had positively encouraged some excluded students to participate, but that the alternative entry qualifications often directed students to particular types of course within new (post-1992) universities. It is perhaps inevitable that different stakeholders within the university system will have various and contrasting ideas on what the main objective of a university, and more broadly HE, is. This can negatively give rise to the development of institutional practices and policies that do not always embrace the WP agenda and ultimately see institutions struggle to be inclusive of NTS (Moore et al, 2013). Tight (2007) cautioned that such differences in perspectives are frequently divergent and may be understood to be reflective of what Readings (1996) termed a ‘discourse of excellence’, whereby HE values excellence and espouses diversity. Jongbloed (2002) suggested that such a discourse can result in the reinforcement of traditional hierarchies of qualifications. This can consequently result in NTS positioning themselves in specific parts of HE provision. Whilst Bathmaker and Thomas (2009) suggest this may result in aspects of current HE provision being ‘closed off’ to some NTS. Some of the participants of this study echoed this concern perceived that their academic qualification would have less value than the same qualification gained from a ‘traditional’ institution. This implies that an awareness of such potential challenges for learners upon completion of programmes can help to identify ways in which the perceived status of academic qualifications can be enhanced to permit those successfully achieving their academic qualifications to be able to successfully compete with other who have been awarded qualifications from ‘higher status’ institutions.
All participants had some degree of experience of engagement outside their individual HE programme of study. Whilst all acknowledged that support structures were in place to help them on a range of different aspects of their transition into HE, e.g. student finance, many were reluctant to engage with these, remarking that they were there for “others”. They articulated feelings of perceived failure associated with the need to engage with these, reasoning that having entered HE later in their life cycle than many of their contemporaries they should be able to successfully complete their transition without the need for additional support. This particularly resonated with the older participants. Consequently, they not only had to develop their own support networks in isolation from the HE structures, but in some cases this continued to have adverse effects on their circumstances and experience of HE. For example, by not seeking financial assistance one participant had still not received the money that she was entitled to at the end of the academic year. What is interesting about this study is that, whilst all participants had an awareness of the support that existed at SEEHEI, it had been developed through enquiries or talking to their peers rather than via the institutional support mechanisms. Suggesting the need to further promote institutional support mechanisms to NTS. Furthermore, no participant identified that their awareness of support structures had arisen because of course tutors or promotional material that had been made available in advance of the start of the course. Therefore, significant opportunities exist for targeted material to be provided at the outset of programmes. This should explicitly detail support in a student-friendly and inclusive manner in order to encourage early engagement with the institution.

The findings align with the work of Smit (2012), who noted that the ethos, characteristics and practices of institutions can act to both promote and impede access, specifically citing that untargeted literature can have a significant impact upon the success of a student’s transition into HE. In this way, it could be argued that the practices of SEEHEI have been demonstrated to, in part, constrain the extent of the successful transition of the participants. Specifically, the practices of the institution have not encouraged participants to engage with support structures. In the case of the participants of this study, all have successfully sustained their engagement with HE. For those NTS who do not
have existing support structures, e.g., friends and family support, it is perhaps questionable as to what their experience of transition might look like and if it would have such positive outcomes in terms of sustained engagement.

Griffic et al. (2009) identified that institutional factors that support learners integrating into HE are the most significant determinant of successful transition, particularly during early stages. Tett (2004) concurred and emphasised that effective support systems should help learners to integrate both into the HE environment and their programmes of study. The findings of this study would support this. During the initial phase of transition, participants articulated feelings of anxiety towards their engagement in HE, specifically about belonging, and the SFY in relation to expectations of assessment. Suggesting that more could be done, particularly within the early stages of transition to enable learners to develop a sense of belonging. Encouragingly, the findings also suggest that the engagement of teaching staff and the supportive learning and teaching environment that was maintained (especially in level three), was effective to some extent in helping the participants integrate into the HE environment and the SFY. It is important for institutions to acknowledge that, although supportive environments exist, differences in pedagogy can be challenging for NTS to adjust to. Consideration should be given to the additional need for them to often ‘learn how to learn’ within systems that espouse what are often very different teaching pedagogies and learning ideologies to those previously experienced.

Jones (2008) suggested that institutions can promote better retention with NTS by specifically considering their pre-entry information preparation and admission, induction and transition support, including financial support. This would reinforce the findings of this study. Although the experiences of the participants throughout the study were largely positive, their expectations of their experiences at the outset of their transition was significantly varied. This suggests that better pre-information is necessary and offers an opportunity for SEEHEI to promote a more positive early HE experience by reducing anxiety. In contrast, the findings also suggest that support is largely available once NTS
enrol. However, there is an acknowledgement that all do not equally access this; therefore, better signposting of support could potentially result in higher level of timely engagement and promote a more positive student experience. Such interventions can also seek to allay feelings of isolation and/or not belonging. Specifically, for participants of this study, some implied that they felt aspects of support at SEEHEI to be ‘for others’. This is a key area that future policy and practices should address. This would not only result in a better engagement, but also empower NTS. Thomas (2012) identified concerns about future aspirations to be a key reason why individuals may not sustain their engagement in HE. The findings of this study imply the opposite, i.e. all participants were confident in their future aspirations. Though as previously identified, they were all successful and perhaps for those who do not experience assessment success, it may give rise to concerns about their future aspirations. To this end, as identified in the previous section, support particularly at points within the transitions period where assessments are being undertaken is critical. This needs to specifically involve discussion of future career aspirations.

The ‘Learning Lives’ project (TLRP, 2008b) highlighted the significance of effective institutional support systems for learners, cautioning that learning can damage people’s agency when they find things are too difficult or cannot cope, which in turn impacts on their sense of self. Whilst support structures exist within SEEHEI, it is clear that a number of participants of this study have developed strategies to circumnavigate these. Although to date the participants have had a predominantly positive experience of transition and HE engagement, their self-development of barriers (strategies to avoid institutional support) may potentially inhibit their success during their future transition. In order to avoid the development of such barriers, Bathmaker and Thomas (2009) emphasised the need to do more with regard to the institutional habitus to promote better engagement throughout transitions. Solutions in the shape of better sign posting or acknowledging that NTS may possess less social and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986) have the potential to encourage a greater engagement from students with wider institutional support mechanisms. The development of tailored institutional policies and practices may help to promote
this. Although the existence of barriers to engaging with support have been identified, the participants did not express concern about possessing less social or cultural capital than those learners who may be more readily classified as ‘traditional’ learners. This is perhaps reflective of the fact that for the level three participants, the majority of their peers were similarly NTS. Interestingly those participants in level four, for whom there was greater learner diversity within the cohorts, also did not identify concerns related to social or cultural capital differences between themselves and their peers. Jones (2008) suggested that students often need to confirm their own identities in order to be successful. However, the findings of this study have not evidenced this either by means of participants expressing a need to distance themselves from their old self, or by seeking to generate multiple versions of themselves. Indicating that the culture and practices at SEEHEI positively foster supportive environments, which do not undermine individuals’ self-concept.

A particular challenge for academics within HE can be recognising when students need support and that this is an on-going requirement throughout the duration of their engagement. Many academics in HE tend to be people who have been successful scholastically and who have thrived within the organisational structure of a university. Consequently, they may be less likely to realise the potential barriers that NTS may face, or the need for institutional change in order to address barriers that can inhibit access or reduce the extent to which students engage with support structures across the institution (Tett, 2004). Within an HEI, the students-as-learners have less knowledge than an academic, yet increasingly there is an expectation of independence and autonomy in terms of them being able to access the individual support they need in order for them to be successful and sustain their engagement. This can put up barriers from the start of the students’ transition that need to be challenged in order to gain maximum benefit from all that HE can offer. Equally, institutional practices and policies need to be conceived in such a manner as to address the barriers that exist to a student’s successful participation, rather than identifying the individual differences between those learners that might be considered ‘traditional’ or ‘non-traditional’. The following section concludes this chapter and draws together the findings and discussions presented thus far to
consider how the findings of this enquiry relate to the theoretical understandings of WP and transition.

4.6 *Summary of opportunities for enhancing experiences of transition into HE*

This chapter has drawn upon the findings of the study and discussed them in light of the current body of knowledge reviewed in chapter 2. It has been recognised where the findings have been both confirmatory and where they present new understandings and insight regarding the nature of NTS transition into HE. A key consideration when contemplating the professional ($T_2$) and institutional ($T_1$) implications that emerged from the findings of this study was to ensure that what arose was not simply an adaptation of current practice. Rather that more nuanced understandings developed from analysis of the data resulting in original understandings that would challenge and change current practice to result in a better harmonisation of expectation and experience for NTS during their transition into HE. Throughout the discussions presented within this chapter, it has been recognised where opportunities exist throughout the duration of early transition into HE to promote positive experiences of transition into HE for NTS. It has sought to recognise that in terms of whether HE is currently accessible, or not, is only one part of the challenge, perhaps a more significant test is whether - via WP initiatives - it actually empowers or limits individuals to want to sustain their engagement in HE.

Returning to the theoretical work of Bourdieu (1984, 1986), he noted that reproduction in education could be linked to three concepts; habitus, capital and fields. These three theoretical concepts were seen to resonate throughout the participants’ transition. The findings suggest that the individual ($T_2$) and institutional ($T_1$) practices at SEEHEI were both empowering and limiting for the participants’ as they transitioned, and ‘reproduced’ themselves through their journey into HE.
• **Habitus**: Encouragingly, none of the participants’ judged that the habitus of SEEHEI had resulted in them not ‘fitting in’ or feeling like a “fish out of water” (Reay et al, 2010, p.117). The participants’ choice of where to engage was based upon a combination of personal and practical considerations again suggesting that institutional habitus did not deter them from applying. Yet it should be remembered that whilst participants’ self-reported that they had not found institutional practices to challenge them, their initial motivation for engaging in HE was enhance future job prospects. SEEHEIs utilitarian WP approach may suggest that such habitus was subconsciously attractive to all participants’ Furthermore, a number of the participants’ adopted strategies to circumnavigate support structures, suggesting that there are aspects of institutional habitus and practice that constrain the engagement of NTS.

• **Capital**: Of Bourdieu’s three concepts, this is the one where during the course of their transition, participants were most pessimistic. This related to their perceptions of the lower status of the SFY entry route. And for some of them the academic value of their degree having completed it at an institution they perceived would provide them with less capital to make them competitive upon completion of their study. Interestingly, whilst pessimistic regarding this, they remained resolute that their future gains in terms of academic capital justified their engagement; and as they progressed into HE the increase of social and cultural capital became more significant t them.

• **Fields**: The combination of both habitus and capital was the aspect of the participants’ engagement that they spoke to the least. The wider field of power and class relations was not determined to be something that participants’ perceived they had consciously had to confront as part of their transition into HE. The notion of needing to distance themselves from their old self and reconstruct themselves (Jones, 2008), was not something they had experienced. Although this positively suggests that their agency as a learner was not undermined, it may also negatively reinforce existing power and class relations. As such, the extent to which SEEHEI is considered transformative, empowering and enabling of upward social mobility could be challenged.
Throughout the data collection process, participants’ embodied a very utilitarian approach to their understanding of the role of HE. This is perhaps reflective of SEEHEI institutional drives, but it does reinforce the work of Jones and Thomas (2005) and suggests opportunities for practices to evolve to a more transformative approach. In this way, students may be able to more readily identify the wider benefits that HE can offer beyond those related to future employment and embrace the more emancipatory aspects of provision. Not only would this benefit the individual learners, but more widely, it would help to enhance social mobility and learner to the potential for gaining additional social and cultural capital.

The following chapter draws together the findings and discussion to explore and reflect upon the implications and opportunities that have been outlined within this chapter. It offers recommendations for both my professional practice and institutional practices, in order to better empower the NTS whom I teach by adopting less restrictive approach that better seek to acknowledge and celebrate their diversity.
Chapter 5: Recommendations for Practice

5 Recommendations for Practice

As educators working in HE, we have both responsibilities and opportunities to improve access and experiences for our NTS. If we are to successfully evolve our provision we need to take these responsibilities seriously, listen to our NTS and explore opportunities to sustain their engagement. By so doing we will optimise their experience and encourage them to continue in engagement. Fundamental to achieving this is evolving a better awareness about who are our NTS are and what motivates them. The findings noted, and the journeys to obtain them, have helped to enhance my professional practice and offered suggestions for informing future institutional changes. They can also help to renew SEEHEI’s commitment to its key institutional drivers of: increasing participation in HE, improving skill levels and raising aspirations in education and careers. At a more global level, the findings can inform how HE renews itself to meet the demands of societal change and learner diversity arising from WP initiatives. This chapter draws together the findings of this enquiry and puts forward recommendations for practice. Following the recommendations a reflective section is included that seeks to articulate the way in which the recommendations have impacted upon my personal understanding of my professional role. The chapter concludes with a final section that considers the extent to which the recommendations may be generalised.

The findings of this educational enquiry have resulted in a number of recommendations that can help to enhance the transitional experience of NTS and promote more sustained engagement with HE. Each recommendation has been grounded within the findings of this study and a short illustrative quote from the participants is included. Recommendations have been made at both the practitioner ($T_2$ – transition-as-development) and institutional ($T_1$ – transition-as-induction) level in order to advise how to positively enhance retention, promote future successful engagement with HE and enrich the experience of transition into HE for NTS. In considering the recommendations arising from this enquiry it is important to remember that many factors influence successful transition into HE and the actions of individuals, institutions, HEFCE
and OFFA cannot widen participation alone (OECD, 2015). Despite this it is equally important to emphasise that all within HE need to assume some degree of responsibility for ensuring that provision continues to be appealing for all those it seeks to attract throughout the duration of their engagement, rather than solely at the point of entry.

5.1 Research recommendations for individual practitioners

The following are recommendations made at the individual ($T_2$ - transition as development) level so that practitioners (including myself) can engage in praxis (namely: action that is informed and linked to values so that education enhances the individual, the institution and society) for NTS in such a way that HE can be for everyone who is willing to engage. These predominantly emphasise that as individuals working within HE we hold the ability to both enable change and bring into operation systems that are supportive and enabling for those NTS entering the current system of HE. Perhaps more importantly however, through our own professional practices we can provide supportive opportunities that our NTS can fully engage with so that their experience is a positive one within which potential thrives.

Embrace learner diversity within cohorts

_I got here and everything turned out ok. There’s a variety of different people, loads of backgrounds and stuff, and I got to know pretty much everyone off the course to a pretty much ok degree._

(Mike, phase 1)

Staff responsible for the support of learners undertaking foundation years of study should be aware of increased diversity within the student group and seek to positively draw upon the range of experience that students possess. Such a practice could help to foster engagement from all students as fully as possible in the learning experience and also positively benefit all students, particularly those who may not have a range/understanding of non-traditional academic experience. Such practice can include things like creating student leaders or assigning roles within work groups to NTS, allowing time for students (particularly NTS) to share previous experiences (perhaps as part of a communication skills element), or a current-skills-checklist to compare and
sensitise students to the value that NTS might bring due to their different experiences (perhaps represented via kinaesthetic activities). This approach will positively impact retention rates and problems with isolation by modelling and ensuring that individuals feel valued as they are and not as preconceptions might lead them to believe they should be. Such an approach may also decrease anxieties related to perceived academic ability as it allows all students to contribute in a meaningful but structured way.

Support for non-traditional learners

I know they’re there for me, but I don’t want to sound stupid and sometimes one of them [lecturer] explains something and I’ll come away, but I daren’t ask again coz I just feel a bit like I don’t want to feel like a dim-wit! Maybe it’s maturity and that’s why you feel that way.

(Sarah, phase 2)

Many participants adopted strategies that resulted in them actively avoiding engagement with institutional support structures. Awareness of a potential reluctance to seek help and an associated loneliness/anxiety could help to sensitise students and staff to create a more effective culture of support. Explicate sign posting towards existing support (eg via and to personal tutors) as well as the creation of a culture where it is normal, or indeed expected, to seek help may promote better levels of engagement and access of support for all learners. A willingness to expand the appeal of/entrance to existing systems of support, or to put in place alternative structures, may foster the environment necessary for NTS to either choose to engage with such structures or to seek and find the support they need to succeed. A form of student buddy system similar to those operated within other non-HE environments could be beneficial to promote such support.

Academic skill development

I have had assessments back and I’ve had some really good results, which I’ve been really pleased with. So that’s spurred me on a little bit more to keep me enthusiastic about the course and kind of with the good results that I’ve had in the coursework

(John, phase 2)
The value of foundation programmes, such as the SFY considered within this enquiry, in providing students with skills to support their future learning in level four and beyond should be more explicitly articulated early within programme delivery. This will both enhance the perceived relevance of learning to the individual and reduce anxiety related to perceived academic ability. Furthermore the development of academic skills may lead to: an increased level of learner engagement when positive assessment experience becomes available; an increased level of success for all students as they become better equipped to complete academic assessment; and an awareness of the need to continually progress through a learning journey (and thereby avoid complacency).

Relevance and currency of curricula

*I think probably this year is going to be my hardest year, coz I’m going to be dabbling in things that perhaps necessarily I won’t need for midwifery, but the whole course in itself is going to give me the step [to study midwifery].*

(Sarah, phase 1)

Staff teaching on the SFY programme should clearly articulate the relevance of all material taught to future options and in terms of underpinning knowledge. It was clear that when participants understood ‘relevance’ their engagement with material and motivation for learning was significantly increased. Providing opportunities and strategies (e.g. peer teaching or reporting) for students to put learning into practice may also assist in the retention of skills/knowledge and increase learner success. Clearly articulated career paths or wider-benefits based on units that may appear to be “less relevant” should help to focus motivation.

Assessment support

*I would say I feel that I’ve improved as an individual in terms of you know my writing skills and my motivation and my attitude towards my study. I’ve been encouraged more towards achieve what I want to achieve and want to get.*

(Jess, phase 3)
Many students articulated the purpose of assessments in terms of their career aspirations and they were deemed to be motivational/help sustain engagement. Significantly, they also provided a way of on-going justification for participant’s engagement in HE (both as a specific instance of career progression and also as a way of building individual confidence, learning skills and self-esteem).

Academic and pastoral support guided towards assessment success in relation to student needs can promote sustained engagement in HE.

Many students articulated the purpose of assessments in terms of their career aspirations and as a way of building individual confidence, learning skills and self-esteem). Academic and pastoral support focussed on assessment success and mindful of student needs can promote sustained engagement in HE, therefore specific classes/times to practice will benefit students. At the beginning of courses questionnaires, for example, that assess support NTS have previously had, been used to or desire along with the setting of targets to encourage independent work and identify what strategies the NTS will employ to address any changes in support or areas of weakness could be a useful tool when paired with a personal tutor. Mock assessments, guided assessments with model examples, videos of exemplar material and peer testing (e.g. assessments given and ‘marked’ by peers) could all be ways to increase assessment confidence and therefore progress/engagement.

**Clear expectations of HE experience.**

*I didn’t know what to expect, I didn’t have no vision of what it was going to be like.*

(Gill, phase 1).

In many cases, participants were unclear of the expectations of their anticipated experience. Whilst this was generally met with positive enthusiasm from the participants of this enquiry, all expressed a level of anxiety and very varied expectations at the outset of the programme. Greater clarity during induction and beforehand could reduce anxiety and promote a more positive experience of transition. It should be ensured that expectations are communicated with simplicity and clarity in course promotional material, during the recruitment and...
selection process and at the outset of the student’s professional learning. An acknowledgement or expression of these associated feelings during introductory sessions may also help to build positive student relationships and increase learner resilience in the long term through the building of a supportive cohort. The use of alumni (or current) students in this role, particularly NTS would personalise and increase the impact of this as a strategy.

5.2 Research recommendations at an institutional level

Recommendations at a wider institutional (T; transition) level echo in part those recommendations for individuals within an institution. These types of change will ensure that HE continues to be attractive for all those it seeks to include; further, it will ensure that once NTS commence an HE experience they remain and complete their academic qualification, thereby reducing attrition. The findings have demonstrated that programme teams and the way in which institutions continue to evolve to shape future HE systems can be pivotal in enabling successful transition and creating upward social mobility for learners.

The status of foundation years of study needs to be reconceptualised

Probably a few weeks into it, coz I realised how much I needed to learn and then by the end of it I realised it was beneficial, coz otherwise I’d of started a degree that I probably wouldn’t of liked and would have been a waste of time…I probably maybe would of quit.

(Bella_Phase 1)

For many participants the perception existed that undertaking a foundation year of study was unnecessary and appeared to be of low-status/value. The re-conceptualisation and effective communication of foundation years as being both useful and necessary for degree level study would enhance student’s perceived status and the perceived status of the course itself (thereby attracting a greater number of students). Effective communication of this as a tool for NTS to enter a previously inaccessible establishment would allow for efficient meeting of WP targets and aims. In particular this needs to be articulated through course promotion material and embraced by those responsible for initial recruitment, selection and teaching. In future, as well as targeting schools,
colleges or other centres where NTS may come into contact with such material, HE establishments could look to position staff members who were NTS or who have significantly engaged with NTS to positions where they are responsible for such roles.

**Institutional strategic aims**

*I’ve noticed now how the relationship between students and teachers [...] they’re more willing to help you and they’re more interested in you doing better.*

(Gill, phase 2)

The development of strategic aims needs to embrace an inclusive approach to provision for all members of the university community. These should not only acknowledge the differences and diversity of the learner body but should also seek to ensure that differences are celebrated and diversity valued. Strategic aims that enable all learners to have equal opportunity to demonstrate their potential should be developed and will thereby embody a more coherent institutional approach throughout all provision. Course leaders should advocate for and be part of creating aims that prioritise NTS as a way of integrating/engaging key staff and making ‘real’ the concerns of NTS.

**Support for non-traditional learner**

*but you feel as though as a mature student that you should know a lot of this stuff, but for me…it’s not like I’m back at school but it’s like I’ve never heard this stuff before, so it’s all new to me. Then I don’t ask so many questions of the lecturers, coz I feel stupid and I don’t want to make myself look stupid, coz there’s all these youngsters who are saying all this stuff around you*

(Sarah, phase 2)

Awareness of a potential reluctance of non-traditional learners to seek help from institutional support structures can result in better targeting of student support services to engage learners. This can reduce feelings of stress, anxiety and isolation and promote a more sustained engagement with HE. Reduction of wasted effort re-channelled into productive endeavour may allow students a greater level of success and contribution to the HE institution. Either the provision of structures that more adequately address the challenges of NTS or
an effective widening of existing structures, e.g. personal tutor systems or other strategies that re-address the potentially dehumanising aspects of HE courses and structures, may be of benefit. Creating a clear message and culture that the institution values ‘stupid’ questions because they lead to learning over ‘looking clever’ would be beneficial.

Careers advice

*Obviously having a profession and belonging to one, being able to obtain a good job in the future hopefully. It’s like a passport, that’s what they say, like a degree’s a passport to a good job.*

(Jess, phase 2).

Careers advice should be structured into programme provision in a coherent way throughout the duration of the programme. Career aspirations have been shown to be a key motivation for non-traditional learners, therefore on-going support and re-focussing around a long-term, achievable goal can reinforce motivation for engagement with HE and help to encourage them to realise future career aspirations. Such alignment may reduce attrition and provide resistance to negative factors throughout the student experience. Examples of successful professionals who have taken a non-traditional route to their career (i.e. through meetings, videos or written materials) may be a particular asset.

It is hoped that the recommendations arising from this educational enquiry offer suggestions that enable both individuals and institutions to empower our NTS rather than restrict them and force them into an existing system. Reflecting in part the works of Freire and Freire (1994), the findings have positively encouraged me to engage with praxis in such a way that HE can be for everyone who is willing to engage. It has reinforced the importance of values like inclusion, appreciating those who might not fit into our normal mould and inspired me to ensure that HE continues to be attractive and advantageous for all those it seeks to include. The following section of this chapter provides a reflective account of how the recommendations have impacted upon my personal-professional-practice as I have attempted to better empower the NTS I
teach by adopting less restrictive approaches that better seek to acknowledge and celebrate their diversity.

In order to clarify the specific impact of this study on my professional role I have included below a selection of examples of how I modified my own practice. These are, by necessity, all at the individual level (although I will note my role within the institutional level of HE) and only reflect some of the adjustments that I have made or could potentially be made.

5.3 Specific changes to my role and practice

Being more aware of the diversity of the student body and some of the apprehension that NTS have when accessing HE I have included a number of ice-breaker sessions into the induction period. These sessions are aimed at helping students relax together (particularly bearing in mind that they may be very different from one another), building constructive ways of them relating when they might otherwise find it difficult to interact and to sensitise the group to the diversity of needs and experience present. Valuing the skills and experience that NTS bring to the course (particularly but not only limited to those who are mature students or have their own families) is an interesting way of re-addressing a potential academic imbalance and I have attempted to create a sense that each student brings something worthwhile rather than creating a competition where the less traditional learner seems to be bottom of the status ladder.

Utilising this student diversity I began to use their existing knowledge and experiences to build examples and analogies rather than reverting to my own. In this was I have tried to become more inclusive of the student cohort and I hope that the changes in my practice have resulted in an increased relevancy of the curricula and that the way that I value the diversity of the student cohort has been more clearly expressed to my learners.
In terms of access to student support structures including academic support I have made a number of changes. Firstly, a “buddy-system” of students who have previously completed SFY encourage and assist the use of existing support as well as giving examples of where they struggled and what they found useful/did to get through difficult periods. Secondly, during induction days all students are given the chance to meet one-to-one with their personal tutor to being a positive relationship that can be of continued support. Thirdly, I have become aware of the power of language and have renamed the ‘support tutorials’ so that they convey a less negative message to those I request to attend. In addition I meet with students regularly in slightly more informal settings and attempt to build discussions around issues of concern to them, e.g. career paths etc.

In teaching sessions I have adapted my methods to include a greater amount and variety of group work. Within such tasks I ensure that I am available to each group separately to answer questions in order to reduce the anxiety around having to ask ‘stupid’ questions in front of a large group and to break down barriers that the teaching podium potentially introduces. Sessions also include a number of self-diagnostic elements that help students to see/assess their own progress and identify their own areas of need. Student ‘experts’ within an area are then available to others who require more support or the ‘non-experts’ can access increased online support to avoid having to ask questions repeatedly in a face-to-face setting. I have produced and made available a number of online teaching videos that allow students to re-access lectures if they did not understand or need refreshers.

In SFY I have focused on the benefits of particular skills to future module as well as providing examples of exemplar work completed in those module – thereby reinforcing the value of SFY and maintaining student engagement/interest. Linked to this is an issue I found to be personally challenging: becoming more aware of the fact that many NTS do not have recent academic experiences to draw upon (that often allow traditional students to be successful) and in contrast to my HE journey, it took me a while to
recognise this as a blind spot because I often assumed a level of understanding or skill that NTS did not possess. This required a conscious shift in my thinking and after some discomfort and a slow start to change I made some of the above changes (and more) in an attempt to be more sensitive and more helpful.

Students are encouraged to meet with personal tutors following the release of assessment results. Asking students to reflect upon their feedback is something that they have on occasions been reluctant to do, especially if they perceive that they have done badly, as they have felt that the focus is on failure. As an academic it is a difficult balance between getting students to think about areas where they have not been as successful as they hoped and identifying both strengths and ways to improve. This is an area that I continue to develop to try and avoid any de-motivating effects and help students recognise how to develop and be successful in the future. Information regarding expectations has been made more explicate and as per my recommendations the use of ‘students case studies’ to illustrate how people from diverse backgrounds found the initial transition into the HE environment and how their expectations were managed has helped to clarify. Student ambassadors are used during introductory sessions to help answer additional questions.

For my own part I have tried to be very clear within my teaching about what my expectations are, however I remain aware that these are not always aligned to those of my colleagues which can lead to a lack of conceptual clarity. Working with other colleagues, it is clear that at times there is a reluctance/reticence to acknowledge the difference for NTS compared to how the expectations of their traditional counterparts are more likely to have been formed. This also highlights an area where I have interacted at the institutional level to advocate for NTS and for changes to teaching or provision that will specifically benefit them at the same time as supporting more traditional students. Similarly the sharing of useful practice with colleagues has led to the adoption of some of these strategies by others and represents the beginning of an upward moving awareness of the needs of NTS that will hopefully become part of policy and strategy from the top down.
Finally I must note that my own views are still changing as I re-assess some long held assumptions concerning the value of different routes to HE. Putting aside any prejudice that might suggest that a traditional A-level student is somehow of ‘more worth’ or ‘higher-status’ than an NTS is confronting and unsettling (i.e. to be faced with the idea that I own such prejudice and also to change it and the associated behaviours). This has perhaps been one of the largest areas of change to my own views and has been helped through recognising and building relationships with NTS as individuals with their own sets of skills and abilities at their own ‘level’. I have benefitted from many of the techniques noted above in order to change my own views and incorporate a new set of perspectives into my role both personally and professionally.

5.4 Reflection on changes in my professional practice arising from research

In chapter one I described how the original inspiration for my choice of research topic had emerged from my experiences as an educator and also as a healthcare professional. Namely, my motivation regarding engaging with NTS arose from questions such as: how can learning become meaningful for and how can we retain NTS within HE? This section of my thesis is an attempt to articulate the professional learning that I have gained as a result of this research and to illustrate the way in which the implementation of the recommendations within my professional practice have impacted me. It is an attempt to contextualise the answers to some of these early questions, against my ongoing EdD journey to embed learning within practice. Returning to my medical background, Wilfred Trotter, British surgeon and pioneer in neurosurgery, criticised educators as often having ambition to empower students through education, yet failing to examine the practical proposition of such an undertaking. He further cited that those who hold such ambitions “often manifest but little of that activity themselves” (Trotter, 1939, p.1419). Via the undertaking of this enquiry and the subsequent changes to my professional practice, I consider that not only are Trotter’s (1939) criticisms addressed but
more significantly I have been empowered to make changes providing clear evidence that my initial ambition has manifested in significant activity. And if this is possible in one setting then it is to be hoped that it is possible in many more.

In contrast to the participants of this enquiry my own educational experiences have followed a very traditional form. I consider myself, in many respects, a product of an education system which provided a formulaic solution to learning. Throughout every stage of my education I was able to apply the same basic pattern or formula to learning and assessment which enabled me to successfully negotiate all elements of my education. I now better understand the differences that can arise for learners, such as the NTS participants of this enquiry, who had very different starting points into their HE journey. I have increased my awareness of who some of my learners are and how the way in which I engage with them can both promote and impede the nature of their transition into HE. I have come to understand better the powerful influence of time, age, being a student, family, academic achievement, pastoral care, future ambitions, work, institutional ethos, fitting in and assessment can have upon the way in which they perceive their learning journey make progress or even begin/continue that journey. Consequently, I have increased my awareness of the pivotal, and privileged, role that I hold in enabling successful negotiations and adjustments for NTS as they enter into HE. This recognition emphasises that despite previously linear approaches to practice I retain those most human endowments of imagination, conscience, self-awareness, independent will and creativity, and therefore the potential for learning, change and what Maslow (1943) calls self-actualisation still exists. In this way the experience of teaching NTS has in fact been a learning and freeing experience for myself.

The implementation of research recommendations in my practice has not, of course, always been comfortable. It has challenged my values and beliefs and invoked a sense of vulnerability in the acknowledgment that there are aspects of my professional practice that need to change. This awareness led to feelings of insecurity as I realised that my previous value position no longer aligned with the new knowledge gained from the research. Faced with such feelings a
variety of options were open to me and the healthiest, although perhaps not the easiest, one came to be that of continued engagement and re-creation as I discovered new data, understandings and points of view. In some very real ways the students changed me as a practitioner and I have come to believe that this is in fact appropriate in some ways – i.e. those ways that allow me to adapt myself so that I can assist any students to reach their potential. Coupled with this however was the necessity to remain the ‘adult’ in the relationship and to not compromise key elements like professionalism, good practice or technical/academic requirements. The NTS, of course, do not represent the totality of the student body and no one group should be slaved to another. The balancing of the needs of a small group within the alternate needs of a larger group is a complex issue. To illustrate: if I have capitulated to the desires of some of the NTS students for a greater careers focus I may have appeared to be assisting them to remain engaged with the course, helped with their future employment and been a considerate lecturer. However, had I done so I would also have ignored the competing needs of other students for whom this was not such a key issue and have sacrificed the more broad value of HE (i.e. not just as a route to better pay) and prevented investment in more transformative approaches to WP emerging. This constitutes a key dichotomy in my awareness and the point of most difficulty: how to balance the requirement for change with my own practice in order meet the needs of a varied group of students but without losing grasp of fundamental and key values/aspects of both myself and HE (particularly those broader aspects that students may not even be aware of because if their immediate individual needs).

My engagement with the participants of this study has particularly sensitised me to the need for ‘giving’ – particularly in light of the differing needs of NTS. Many of the changes required in fact necessitated sacrifice: sacrifice of time, of my own beliefs, of the comfort of my own beliefs, of the ability to choose to relate only to, with and in ways that suit me. I have re-evaluated the way in which I undertake my academic role so as to better relate to those learners who have HE starting points that are different from my own and to whom I have previously found relating difficult.
Whilst the recommendations of this enquiry have had a significant impact upon my own practice, it is also important to acknowledge that within interpretivist enquiries, the application of the recommendations beyond the setting, participants and context where the data were gathered is limited. The following section outlines the considerations in terms of generalisability of the study findings more broadly.

### 5.5 Generalisability of recommendations

The research data generated from this study should not be considered as wholly representative of all NTS experiences of transition into HE. The data reveals only those perceptions and experiences of the individual, as expressed at three moments in time during the course of one academic year. However, the recommendations presented are inclusive of the reflections and expectations of all the participants’ transitions expressed throughout the duration of data collection. Maxwell (1992) advised that the generalisability of the recommendations arising from a study necessitates consideration of the extent to which they might be applied to similar situations. Denzin and Lincoln (2005) concur, but suggest that within naturalistic studies, such as this, the terms ‘comparability’ and ‘transferability’ are more typically used. They suggest that in order for others to make use of the research recommendations, they need to be able to assess the typicality of the situation, the participants and settings. Schofield (1990) also agrees and suggests that in order for others to make this judgement there must be a clear, detailed and in-depth description of the settings, people and situation.

Whilst the data generated here cannot be generalised in a statistical sense, the recommendations arising from the findings may be used to inform practices in similar educational contexts involving NTS. Whilst NTS are by no means a homogenous group with precisely similar characteristics or concerns there may be an underlying common thread of ‘humanity’ that is applicable to many situations where students find themselves feeling ‘out of place’. This may apply only to similar socio-economic or cultural situations or it may be more generally applicable – without further study such a question is not possible to answer.
Perhaps these recommendations will most readily apply to contexts where NTS are making transitions into HE from foundation years of study at the same institution and to those contexts where the characteristics of NST mirror those of the participants of this study.
6 Conclusion

The culture of change is deeply embedded within education; many of these changes are driven by top-down approaches via successions of new national policies. This enquiry sought to explore one example of such a policy, WP. The findings and recommendations are derived from direct engagement with those NTS whom this policy seeks to engage. It has explored the point where the translation of national policy into institutional practice intersects with contemporary learners’ experience of transition into HE. The data that has been generated has provided a critical insight into the nature of NTS’ experiences and expectations of HE. Specifically, it has addressed the concept of transition-as-induction ($T_1$) and transition-as-development ($T_2$) to promote sustained engagement in HE for NTS. It was conducted within an interpretivist instrumental case study framework, this allowed participants’ to reveal in their own words the meaning of their transition into HE to them. Their expectations, experiences and reflections over one academic year have been analysed to provide an evidence base upon which to inform future practices; at both an individual level ($T_2$) and more broadly within the institution ($T_1$) where the study was undertaken.

In concluding this enquiry, it is evidenced that the actions necessary to sustain engagement and promote positive experiences of transition are more complex to address. More significantly, the associated support structures and a greater sense of institutional awareness of who today’s NTS are needed if the support for the intended outcomes of WP within HE are to be achieved. In the long-term, solutions offered by Gorard (2008;2013) of tackling the challenge during early years education may, in-part, help to better prepare and enthuse learners for the demands of HE. But in the short term, the need for all within HE to reflect on the NTS experience and consider the changes necessary to promote successful transitions and sustained engagement remain at the fore of where solutions are likely to arise. In acknowledgement of this, this study has sought to illuminate the challenge of how SEEHEI can renew itself to meet the demands of change.
arising from the WP agenda. In this way, it is conjectured that newly established HE provision such as SEEHEI, operating within the liminal zone of provision, can construct and maintain a place for themselves within the broader field of HE. Significantly this might in-part ensure that the differences between HE offerings are celebrated, rather than seeking to homogenise provision across the sector. Moreover, this approach will ensure that potential learners are offered a broad spectrum of HE choice that recognises and values diversity.

As we continue to experience increasing student diversity, the findings of this study have demonstrated that through an increased awareness of who our learners are we may become better informed to make positive changes that ensure barriers to HE are reduced and that it evolves to be open to everyone. The recommendations from this study have sought to espouse pedagogical perspective with some guidance towards specific practices that will ensure institutions embody an inclusive approach for our NTS within the HE community. It is of utmost importance that all of our learners are afforded the opportunities to achieve and demonstrate excellence in accordance with their abilities. In order to achieve this it is clear that we - as professionals and academics - must find a common goal to articulate through our institutional policies and in turn reinforce the notion that HE can be for everyone through a selection of awareness, pedagogy and practical strategies. We must continue to be aware of the human experience as part of a community and seek to provide an experience of transition that connects the individual student to the institution in meaningful ways in reflection of this. In this way it can be considered that as individual academics, we will remain accountable to both the students that the HE provision serves, and more broadly society within which the provision resides. As a consequence, our non-traditional learners may reasonably expect to benefit from greater connections to the institution along with all of the associated benefits to learning, economic progression, individual growth and meaningful relationships whilst we, as academics, can enjoy enhanced engagement and input from our increasingly varied student cohorts. At an institutional level we will of course thereby profit from decreasing attrition, enhanced retention (and attention) rates and, in the long term, an increasing amount of social capital gathered from a varied student group.
Specifically at the institution where this enquiry was conducted, the key drivers remain:

- To increase participation in HE
- To improve skill levels
- To raise levels of aspiration in education and careers

To this end, it is deemed that the findings of this study have positively supported that as a result of both institutional strategies and individual’s engagement to bring these into practice, all three of these drivers have been met to some extent via the self-reported experiences and aspirations of the participants.

Taylor and House (2010) recommended that for institutions to be successful in their desire to ensure their provision can be open to all potential learners, they need to accept that access for NTS does not end at the point of entry. Broadening appeal of HE and increasing the upward social mobility of NTS are two of the tangible ways in which the current success of WP initiative can be evidenced to have been successful. In order to achieve this, students need not only to enrol into HE, but they need to be successful in their transition between the various levels of study and sustain their engagement in order to complete their programmes of study and gain their qualification. In this way HE providers can demonstrate their commitment to meeting HEFCEs key principles and reaching out to adults who have missed out on HE in the past (HEFCE, 2011b, BIS, 2015).

Transitions into HE cannot be understood in isolation and the findings of this enquiry have evidenced that a number of complex and dynamic relationships impact upon both an individual’s expectation and reality of their experience. The influence’s themselves are also time and context bound and need to be understood within the specific context of HE provision (e.g. SEEHEI). A challenge for such understanding is that the current HE landscape is not only stratified, differentiated and troubled with structural inequalities, but perhaps more significantly it is a landscape which is also undergoing rapid change. Therefore the HE context of this research enquiry is itself in transition. This may hold the promise of potential to realise a more equitable system open to all, but it is a system in which change is not automatic. To this end, the recommendations have positively encouraged me to engage with praxis...
(namely: action that is informed and linked to values so that education enhances the individual, the institution and society) for NTS in such a way that HE can be for everyone who is willing to engage. It has reinforced the importance of considering values such as inclusion and how to value those who might not fit into our normal mould. In conclusion, this thesis advocates praxis for all of those engaged with the provision of HE opportunities for learners who might be considered as non-traditional; not solely because of an increased understanding of who they are and how we might better facilitate coherent transitional experiences for them; but more significantly as part of a commitment to make a difference in the world by enhancing community and empowering them to build social capital. The following section of this chapter provides a self-reflection upon the professional impact of undertaking this enquiry, before drawing my thesis to a close by providing a précis of the limitation and suggesting ways that this work could be extended.

6.1 Reflection upon professional impact of undertaking the enquiry

At the outset of my thesis I stated that I believed knowledge to be contextual and developed in a social realm. If this is true then the values and the meanings that I attribute to my experiences are, and will continue to be, understood through an ever shifting lens of personal experience. My understandings of WP, the way I complete my job roles and even the way I view myself have evolved during the completion of my thesis and in the future these will no doubt continue to do so. In many respects it has felt as though my professional role as an educator promoting the student experience can be seen to be both challenged and undermined by contemporary educational policy in practice.

My thesis journey began by questioning whether the systems of education we currently employ miss out on a wealth of expertise because some persons simply do not “fit” within them? Throughout the process of undertaking research for my thesis and the subsequent writing-up process I have been confronted with many (often conflicting) perspectives. At the start of my journey it would perhaps be fair to say that I was sceptical, both about the extent to which our
HE system embraces widening access for mature NTS, as well as what the participants would reveal about their experiences of HE.

What my journey throughout my EdD has illuminated for me is the value in stepping away from potentially oppressive measures such as key performance indicators and institutional metrics. That is not to say that we should not recognising the value of such metrics; they clearly have - and will continue to have - a place of significance in terms of funding and the future direction of our HE system. Indeed it is clear that we will continue to see measures aimed at ensuring greater transparency, so that institutions can continue to appropriately justify the cost to the individual of their education. But more importantly, so that our future learners may make informed and valid choices. Yet behind all of these metrics there remain our learners. All of these are individuals, each of whom enter into our HE systems of their own choice and have their own stories to tell. Is the reduction of their experience to a set of metrics, to placing a quantifiable number in front of a percentage sign really the best way for us to articulate the value and experience that our prospective students could gain from study at our institutions?

Despite my initial scepticism about the extent to which HE is presently capable of supporting and enabling non-traditional learners to access and progress through higher level studies I have become convinced that individuals can access HE successfully. Through the voices of this study’s participants my belief and faith in our present system - at least within the institution where this study has been conducted - is renewed and I have come to understand better the transformative nature of their experience as John explained:

"It’s changed my whole look towards life. I feel like a completely different person, I’ve become far more outgoing than I was and I’ve become interested in things that I never thought I’d become interested in. Like it sounds stupid, but when you go on the quiz machines in the pub, if you’ve got a science section I’ll pick that section, coz I think I might be half decent at that rather than food and drink or something like that. It’s kind of given me a different aspect of knowledge that I never thought I would ever have or would ever be able to gain."
I think that doing this has definitely been the most worthwhile decision I've ever made. I'm glad I decided to take the plunge as such, I'm glad I decided to jack everything in and come and do this; it's been worth it so much. There's aspects of my life that I want to change still, but I think the changes that have happened have all been positive and can only have benefitted me really.

(John, phase 3)

As I try to articulate what changes this study has borne in my own life it is difficult to separate out the important lessons. Through my research I have learnt that simple “data” or “metrics” do not tell the whole story when it comes to the participants and individuals who move through our HE system. They do not adequately address the fluctuating needs of a traditional learner on a day-to-day basis, let alone our non-traditional learners. Thanks to this experience I have begun to modify my own teaching and behaviour to try and help make HE accessible for a wider range of learners so that we don’t miss out on their potential. This thesis is, I hope, a written record of at least some of the many ways, thoughts, feelings and behaviours that I have had to consider and re-evaluate. It is not that such a journey can easily be expressed - as it deals with some of our most fundamental values, attitudes and perspectives - but constitutes the beginning of “looking again” at what we have come to accept as normal. As an academic working in HE, I hope that understandings such as those presented within my thesis combined with those understandings derived from research undertaken in different contexts throughout the HE sector will continue to inform us in both our educational practices and institutional policies. So that we can continue to ensure that such learners as those who have been participants in my journey to completing my EdD are enabled to access, make successful transitions into HE and sustain their engagement to achieve their qualification. Therefore enabling all of us to ensure that we do not miss out on potential because of a reluctance to foster it.
6.2 Limitations

This section aims to consider; the appropriateness of the methodological choices of the research, the sampling strategy, data collection tool and analysis techniques that were employed in order to undertake the enquiry. The limitations of the study are explored in order to inform future research designs and reflect on the effectiveness of measures implemented during the study to minimise the effects of limitations (Pope et al, 2000). The following section will systematically reflect on this enquiry’s strengths and weaknesses.

Social phenomena are always complex and the challenge for research is to reflect this. Attree (2006) commented that methodological challenges are prevalent in both education and social science research studies. The interpretive framework used to structure this research sought to articulate the voices of the students, and thereby facilitate the study’s aim of exploring the expectations and experiences of NTS during their transition into one HEI. Based on ontological relativism and relativist epistemology, the case study methodology provided a framework which guided the research process, and assisted in appropriate method (one-to-one semi structured interviews) being selected. In turn, these choices enabled the researcher to turn lay accounts into social scientific explanations of social phenomena (transition) which, as a result, permitted the global nature of the participant’s transition into HE to be explored. The study was conducted with an underlying aetiological assumption of there being a reality which could in fact be studied; the study findings therefore represent the participant’s reality, rather than necessarily the truth.

The choice of an instrumental case study design was deemed to have been appropriate, as the underpinning theory of NTS transition and engagement with HE was holistic, and no logical sub-units could be readily identified at the outset of the research. The use of semi-structured one-to-one interviews as a data collection method was chosen specifically to provide a framework derived from both the literature reviewed and the researchers ‘inside knowledge’ prior to commencement of data collection. This ensured that the study focus remained
constant throughout data collection, which was deemed an essential requirement due to the longitudinal nature of the data collection process. The use of a semi-structured interview framework further ensured that the study data could be successfully combined during data analysis. However, this did result in some individual emergent phenomenon not being investigated in detail, e.g. drop-out, and this is one aspect that could be explored further in future research.

The purposive sampling technique utilised for this study did not seek to represent all students as it was selectively biased towards the recruitment of NTS. Specifically, those who were undertaking a SFY programme of study during the data collection period, or who had done so in the year prior to commencement of data collection. This group of learners were deemed to be important to exploring the research aim. Purposive sampling was considered feasible within the time constraints of the study both as a way to contextualise the student’s experience and, as posited by Flick (2006), to add transferability and dependability to the findings. This technique proved successful in the recruitment of appropriate participants which enabled the researcher to gain an in-depth and rich understanding about NTS expectations and experience of transition into HE.

The response rates during initial recruitment may be positively understood to reflect a good levels of informal interest in the study. It may also, negatively, suggest that participants felt coerced as a result of the researcher assuming double-agency with them. Ward and Moule (2007) advocate using staff from a different programme to conduct interviews to limit this effect. However, the interpretive framework of the study necessitated the researcher’s direct engagement with participants. To limit the effects of coercion, the researcher was not involved in any assessment on any of the programmes from which the participants were recruited. Additionally, during data collection, participants were all asked about their motivation for contributing to the study. None gave reasons that would suggest coercion, or a desire to ‘please’ the researcher. Of those who did initially express and interest in participating, not all elected to
finally became involved in the study as participants. Similarly, of those that did contribute, not all did so on all three occasions when invited to interview throughout the year. That both students chose not to participate at all, or failed to complete the research further confirms the conclusion that the researcher assuming a double-agency role did not have a coercive effect on recruitment.

Kreuger and Casey (2000) suggest that participant verification of the transcriptions may have further increased the trustworthiness and credibility of the data. However, aligned with the suggestion of Bloor et al. (2001) who considered this unhelpful when time constrains are pressing and Barbour (2001) who advocated that participant verification of the data to be irrelevant - assuming the data collection and analysis process is systematic and transparent - full participant verification was not done in this instance. Instead, during second and third interview phases, a short summary of the previous interview was discussed with each participant. It was found that there was strong agreement between the interviewer’s summary and the interviewees’ recollection and meaning of the conversation. This aspect of participant verbal verification was judged to add an element of triangulation and therefore, the enquiry’s findings and recommendations may therefore deemed credible and trustworthy (Corbin and Strauss, 2008).

### 6.3 Suggestions for further research

The present global marketplace demands contemporary research situated in practice, not laboratories, in order that decisions based on the reality of context-bound evidence may be conceived and implemented. Practitioners researching their own practice can successfully lead them to adapt to changing political, economic and social pressures, through the self-determining and self-authoring nature of their research (Gray, 2013). Practitioners-as-researchers may therefore be deemed a prerequisite in today’s HE system. Necessary to bring about positive changes in their professional practice, to create and sustain high quality learning environments in which tomorrows graduates can flourish. As a
result of the findings of this study it is recommended that further research is necessary to explore the following areas:

- **Different phases of the student life cycle**

  Research that specifically considers NTS expectations and experiences further into their HE careers is necessary in order to ensure that institutional strategies and support can be appropriately targeted throughout the period of transition. This could establish if the same recommendations as those arising in this study (pertaining to initial parts of their life cycle) are echoed later in their HE engagement. Or if the support necessary later in the student life cycle as they approach graduation is different than that which can promote positive early transitions during initial engagement.

  - Furthermore such research could help to identify specific and significant points throughout the NTS lifecycle where tailored support can be most effectively delivered. To this end, exploration of this further work could help additionally in ensuring that resources are most efficiently and effectively utilised to have maximum benefit to both the individual and institution.

It is important to acknowledge that the findings of this study are based upon the participants who have self-selected to engage with this research study. For all but one of those whose expectations and experience has been captured as part of this research, their engagement has been successful (in terms of sustaining it throughout the year and progression into subsequently years of study). Yet, it is perhaps even more crucial for future research to engage with those individuals for whom their sustained engagement is not successful, to gain a better and deeper understanding of their transitions. Arguably, it is this group of individuals for whom changes to institutional policy and practices may have the greatest positive effect in terms of enabling them to sustain their engagement and benefit from all that HE can offer.
• **Understanding reasons for terminating engagement early**

Secondly, it is recommended that subsequent research should seek to engage individuals who opt to leave HE prior to completing their programmes of study. The expectations and experiences of transition of this group of learners should be explored to illuminate ways in which institutional practices have inhibited their engagement. New understandings arising from this research can help to develop policies and practices for all those within HE to support and encourage sustained engagement of NTS through to achievement of their qualification.
## Appendix 1

### Interview Schedule

**Sept & Oct – Interview 1**

**What are the experiences and expectations of students making the transition from level 3 to level 4 study?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Focus of the interview</th>
<th>Potential questions</th>
<th>Timing</th>
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</table>
| **1 – Background information and starting point for participants**<br>What has been their influences on making the choices to get to this point | **What is the starting point of the participants?**<br>  - What is their background?<br>  - How long ago was their previous education?<br>  - What was it they did previously?<br>  - Why have they chosen to return to study now?<br>  - Why have they chosen this course?<br>  - Why have they chosen this institution?<br>  - Why participate within my research? | - Can you tell me about your life before you came to study on this course?  
- Tell me about how you came to be studying [insert course here], and why now? [Would you say your choice was chance or deliberate?]  
- Why did you decide to stay [insert institution here]?  
- Have either of your parents been to university? |  |
| **2 – What is their experience of these choices and UCS**<br>What have been the influences upon their imagine future? | **What have been the influences upon their imagine future?**<br>  - Personal circumstances?<br>  - Finances?<br>  - Family / Friends?<br>  - Previous academic achievement? | - What do you remember about your first day here? How did you feel before starting induction?  
- What were you expecting?  
- Tell me about your experiences of being a student at [insert institution here].  
- Can you tell me about the kinds of support you've had since starting [insert institution here]?  
- What stands out about [insert institution here]? |  |
| **3 – What is the participants anticipated future**<br>What is their anticipated future?<br>Within the institution?<br>Upon completion of their current studies?<br>Beyond? | **What is their anticipated future?**<br>  - Within the institution?<br>  - Upon completion of their current studies?<br>  - Beyond? | - Where do you see yourself in the future?  
- What do you hope to do after you have finished [insert degree here]?  
- Do you think there are any barriers that might make that difficult? |  |
| **4 – Making sense of the situation**<br>How do students make sense of their situation?<br>Social?<br>Physical?<br>Psychological? | **How do students make sense of their situation?**<br>  - Social?<br>  - Physical?<br>  - Psychological? | - Looking back over the last year, what do you recall as being the low points of your experience at UCS?  
- Can you tell me about the highpoints of the year?  
- Can you tell me about how your life has changed since [insert institution here]? |  |

**Conclusion – is there anything else you'd like to tell me?**
Thank you for showing an interest in this project: this sheet is an invitation for you to take part. It will also tell you more about the project and what I would like you to do if you choose to participate. Please read this carefully before deciding whether or not to take part. If you do decide to take part, I thank you and look forward to working with you. If you decide not to take part there will be no disadvantage to you of any kind and I thank you for considering my request.

**What is the project about?**
The study is about exploring the experiences of students who are studying on either a Foundation Year course, or who have recently completed such a course and progressed to a science degree. I hope to gain a better understanding of why students do (or do not) choose to continue their studies from foundation to degree level.

**What is the purpose of the study?**
I am currently studying for my Doctorate in Education (EdD) and this study will form part of that. I am also interested in contributing to the field of educational research, particularly by contributing to the understanding of how students’ experiences during their education influence their choices of which course to study and when. I hope that the results of this study may positively enhance future policies.

**Who is taking part?**
I need a maximum number of 12 students who are starting on a foundation year course in September 2010 to be involved, and a maximum of 8 students who completed a foundation year course in June 2010 and have enrolled onto undergraduate science degree courses to be involved.

**What will I have to do?**
If you volunteer to participate within this study you will be required to participate in a maximum of five interviews. These will take place over a 12 month period. All interviews will be conducted at a time convenient to you and, with your permission, will be audio-recorded and transcribed.
Do I have to take part?
You do not have to take part in the study; it is up to you to decide. If you do wish to take part, I will give you an information sheet and also talk it through with you. I will then ask you to sign a consent form to show that you have agreed to take part.

Can I change my mind?
You can stop being in the study at any time without giving a reason and without any disadvantage to yourself of any kind.

What will happen if I don’t carry on with the study?
If you withdraw from the study, you will have the right to request that all of the information and data collected from you, to date, be destroyed and not be included in the study.

Expenses and payments?
I regret that I will not be providing any expenses or payment, however refreshments will be provided.

What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?
There are no obvious disadvantages of taking part in the study. All the data collected will remain confidential.

If you should require any support during or after your interview then you can access the Student Support service at

Disclose of information
If information is disclosed that compromises you or other members of , this will be reported in accordance with policies and procedures.

What if there is a problem?
If you have a concern about any aspect of this study, you should speak me, (the researcher) I will do my best to answer your question

Will my taking part in the study be kept confidential?
I will use a study identification number rather than your name so that all data held about you will be anonymous and you will not be able to be identified. If the data is included in a published article or poster presentation, it will be presented in such a way that you will not be able to be identified. All the information collected will be stored on a password protected computer in a locked and secure building, and you are welcome to request a copy of the results of the project.

All research data and results, in all media, will be confidential and will not be disclosed to third parties. My procedures for handling, processing, storage and destruction of data match the Data Protection Act 1998.

What will happen to the results of the research study?
The results of the study will form the basis of my EdD thesis and I also hope to be able to publish the results. You will not be identified in any report/publication, however I may use verbatim quotes taken from your interviews.
Who is organising or sponsoring the research?
The University of Exeter.

Further information and contact details:

Work: 01473 338544
Email: s.willis2@ucs.ac.uk

What if I have any questions?
If you have any questions, please feel free to ask me at any time.

What do I do next?
If you have read and understood everything that I will ask you to do and are happy to take part, please sign the consent form, which is attached to this sheet.

This project has been reviewed and approved by the Research Ethics Committee at the University of Exeter and University Campus Suffolk.
CONSENT FORM

I confirm that I have been fully informed about the aims and purposes of the project.

I understand that:

All interviews will be audio recorded

There is no compulsion for me to participate in this research project and, if I do choose to participate, I may at any stage withdraw my participation without giving any reason

I have the right to refuse permission for the publication of any information about me

Any information which I give will be used solely for the purposes of this research project, which may include publications and the use of verbatim quotes

All information I give will be treated as confidential

The researcher(s) will make every effort to preserve my anonymity

I agree to participate in this study YES / NO* (*delete as appropriate)

............................................. ...........................................
(Signature of participant) (Date)

..........................................
(Printed name of participant)

One copy of this form will be kept by the participant; a second copy will be kept by the researcher(s)

Contact phone number of researcher(s): (01473) 338544

If you have any concerns about the project that you would like to discuss, please contact:

s.willis2@ex.ac.uk

Data Protection Act: is a data collector and is registered with the Office of the Data Protection Commissioner as required to do under the Data Protection Act 1998. The information you provide will be used for research purposes and will be processed in accordance with the University’s registration and current data protection legislation. Data will be confidential to the researcher(s) and will not be disclosed to any unauthorised third parties without further agreement by the participant. Reports based on the data will be in anonymised form.
Certificate of ethical research approval

STUDENT RESEARCH/FIELDWORK/CASEWORK AND DISSERTATION/THESIS

You will need to complete this certificate when you undertake a piece of higher-level research (e.g. Masters, PhD, EdD level).

To activate this certificate you need to first sign it yourself, then have it signed by your supervisor and by the Chair of the School’s Ethics Committee.

For further information on ethical educational research access the guidelines on the BERA web site: http://www.bera.ac.uk/publications/guides.php and view the School’s statement in your handbooks.

Your name:       
Return address for this certificate:       
Degree/Programme of Study:       
Project Supervisor(s):       
Your email address:       
Tel:       

I hereby certify that I will abide by the details given overleaf and that I undertake in my dissertation / thesis (delete whichever is inappropriate) to respect the dignity and privacy of those participating in this research.

I confirm that if my research should change radically, I will complete a further form.

Signed:       date:       
Certificate of ethical research approval

Your student no: [redacted]

Title of your project:

An exploration of the workings of the English policy on Widening Participation framed through the experiences of students making the transition from level 3 to level 4 studies in one HEI.

Brief description of your research project:

At present, widening participation is an issue at the forefront of national and institutional level debates in higher education (HE) (DfES, 2003a; HEFCE, 2008; NAO, 2008). This has resulted in major policy drives to increase the numbers of students engaged with HE, under the rationale that presently, we live within a knowledge-based society which demands higher levels of skills within the labour force in order for the UK to maintain national and global economic success. Yet, whilst the numbers of participants within HE is one of the demonstrable outcomes for such policy drivers; the main focus of widening participation could arguably be understood to be about broadening the appeal of HE.

As the planned expansion and opening up of HE (DfES, 2003b) is being realised, it is becoming clear that expansion is not synonymous with inclusion. The research of Reay et al (2002) and Bathmaker and Thomas (2009) identified that; student’s choices regarding engagement with different types of HE provision is not only influenced by their own backgrounds and experiences, but specifically for those students for whom continuation of their studies from level 3 to level 4 within the same institution was possible, their decisions were further significantly influenced by institutional habitus. It could therefore be argued that whilst HE is currently possible for a greater number of people than ever before, it should not be assumed that all forms of HE are either universally available to all, or accessed by all potential students.

Understanding students decisions to engage (or not) in HE based upon their experiences and expectations derived from their experiences up to level 3 engagement with education can positively enhance recruitment and retention, promote future successful engagement with HE, inform future policy development, and help institutions target future support aimed at; promoting widening participation, broadening the appeal of HE and sustaining the expansion of HE.

This research is concerned with the experiences of students negotiating the transition from level 3 to level 4 studies at a higher education institution in the East of England. It is intended that the research will draw insights from the experiences of students undertaking a level 3 [redacted] and subsequently progressed onto level 4 undergraduate studies. It seeks to articulate the changing shape and experience of HE in England, by giving a voice to the student’s experience of moving between different levels of study within the same institution.

The aim of the study is to contribute to the understanding of the nature of transitions through HE, as experienced by students from non-traditional backgrounds. Specifically my research questions are:

1. What are the experiences and expectations of students making the transition from level 3 to level 4 study?
2. How can these experiences and expectations be used to identify and improve issues of policy and practice at a local level?
Give details of the participants in this research (giving ages of any children and/or young people involved):

Participants:

All participants shall be adults who are over 18 years old and competent to give consent.

The research will have two strands and seeks to recruit participants from students enrolled onto two different levels of study within a higher education institution in the East of England.

- **Strand A** (level 3 studies): Students enrolled onto Science Foundation Year programme (September 2010 intake).
- **Strand B** (level 4 studies): Students who have progressed from Science Foundation Year (2009 intake) and enrolled onto either the BSc (Hons) Sport and Exercise Science (September 2010 intake) or BSc (Hons) Nutrition and Human Health (September 2010 intake) programmes.

Number of Participants:

- **Strand A**: maximum of 12 students.
- **Strand B**: maximum of 6 students.

Sampling:

- **Strand A**: All students will be invited to participate in the study, whilst this will initially mean that a large number of students may be recruited, it is not anticipated that a significant number will be willing to participate with an extended study, therefore the actual number of students recruited is not anticipated to be in excess of the maximum stated above.
- **Strand B**: Purposive sampling will be used to identify potential participants who have progressed from Science Foundation Year to level 4 study on either BSc (Hons) Sport and Exercise Science or BSc (Hons) Nutrition and Human Health programmes.

All staff involved with the delivery of all programmes from which participants are to be recruited will be provided with an outline of the research and the opportunity to seek further information. Following completion of the research, a summary of the findings will be made available upon request.

Give details regarding the ethical issues of informed consent, anonymity and confidentiality (with special reference to any children or those with special needs) a blank consent form can be downloaded from the SELL student access on-line documents:

I will be following the Code of Ethics and Conduct set out by the British Educational Research Association [BERA] (BERA, 2004). In addition, I will seek ethical permission from the institution where the research is to be conducted prior to commencement of data collection. These in combination with published literature and the experiences of others within the field will be used to
Appendix 3

inform my ethical decisions throughout all stages of my research, including dissemination of the findings. Issues regarding: confidentiality, anonymity and informed consent will be carefully considered as detailed below.

Confidentiality: Records of the data collected (including transcripts and audio recordings) will be stored in a secure and safe place. Electronic information will only be accessed by the researcher with their username and password. This information will be stored on a secure system with recognised virus protection. Electronic and paper information will be locked in a secure building.

Anonymity: Information will also be coded to ensure anonymity. This will remain anonymous in the write up of the research. Collected written information will be destroyed by shredding and securely disposing when it is no longer required. All audio recordings will also be disposed of digitally.

Informed Consent: It will be essential to obtain informed consent from participants for both strands of the study. Records of when, how and from whom consent was obtained, will be recorded. Participants will be made aware of how the research findings will be used. Essentially, informed consent will be an ongoing process throughout the research. Participants will be reminded that they have the right to withdraw from the research at any given time and that data related to them will then be destroyed.

Reference:

Give details of the methods to be used for data collection and analysis and how you would ensure they do not cause any harm, detriment or unreasonable stress:

Data Collection

- Unstructured interviews: With the informed consent of participants, interviews will be audio-recorded and transcribed. This will then be coded thematically. The following identifies when it is anticipated that each of the interviews will be undertaken.

Students enrolling onto [programme] in Sept 2010:
Follow students through their enrolment onto the SFY and where possible follow them into their first term of study on either the BSc (Hons) [programme] or the BSc (Hons) [programme].

Three interviews – Sept-Oct 10 / Feb11 / May11

Students enrolling onto either the BSc (Hons) [programme] or the BSc (Hons) [programme] programmes in Sept 2010:
Follow them as they progress through their first year having made the transition from level 3 to level 4 study.

Three interviews – Oct 10 / Feb11 / May11

All interviews will be conducted in a private room at the study institution.

Data Analysis:

- Qualitative information will be transcribed and thematically coded.

Ensuring data collection does not cause harm

In addition to ethical considerations outlined previously, I will seek to ensure that by participating in this study, the participants are not caused any harm, detriment or unreasonable stress in the following ways:

Respect: The experiences, perceptions and views of participants will be paramount in this study. Throughout the research process I will endeavour to respect individual participants with regard to their emotional well-being, physical well-being, rights, dignity and personal values; including those
involving age, disability, education, ethnicity, gender, language, national origin, race, religion, sexual orientation, marital or family status and socio-economic status.

**Safe guarding:** Should participants require support during or following interviews, they will be able to access it via the HEIs Student Support Services. This will be outlined within the participant information sheet.

**Disclosure:** It will be made clear to participants that in the exceptional event that there is evidence or disclosure which gives rise to serious concerns about either the participants of the study or other parties within the HEI where the research is being conducted, information will be passed on to relevant bodies in accordance with existing policies and procedures at the study institution. This will be outlined within the participant information sheet.

**Complaints:** In the event that participants wish to complain about any aspect of the study, the participant information sheet will outline how this can be done and provide contact details for myself and my research supervisors at the [----------].

**Give details of any other ethical issues which may arise from this project (e.g. secure storage of videos/recorded interviews/photos/completed questionnaires or special arrangements made for participants with special needs etc.):**

All hardcopy raw data gathered as part of this research will be kept in a secure location within a locked filing cabinet. The names and contact details of all participants will be stored separately from all raw data, again in a locked filing cabinet. All hardcopy data will be treated as confidential at all times during the research process.

All electronic data will be stored on a PC and will be made secure with a login password and individual files will also be password protected. All electronic data will be treated as confidential at all times during the research process and coded in such a manner so that individual participants cannot be identified. All backed up electronic data will be anonymised and password protected.

All research data and results, in all media, will be confidential and will not be disclosed to third parties. The production of the EdD thesis and any subsequent publications / reports will be done in such a way as not to identify individuals or the institution involved, i.e. the data will be in anonymised form.

The research study will comply with the [----------] Data Protection Guidance for Research Students. All information and data generated as part of this research project will be kept in accordance with the Data Protection Act (1998).

**Give details of any exceptional factors, which may raise ethical issues (e.g. potential political or ideological conflicts which may pose danger or harm to participants):**

Students are essential participants in most educational research; however, their involvement frequently gives rise to ethical concerns relating to the power in professional relationships between student and teacher. Although such relations and privileged access are generally conducted with the best of intentions, without proper safe guards they can result in unintended abuse.

Reflecting upon this, in respect of this study, acknowledgement of my teaching and assessing role on the Science Foundation Year programme means that particular care must be taken to ensure that these participants participation is purely voluntary and not influenced by the teaching and assessing relationship that I hold with them in any way.

**Relationship with Strand A participants:**

- **Teaching and Assessing on Science Foundation Year programme from which participants are being recruited.**
In order to address the possible coercive effects of such power imbalances within the context of this proposed study, the following steps will be taken to ensure that the student’s participation is voluntary:

- Prior to the induction days for each of the programmes from which it is intended to recruit participants to be involved in the study, they will be written to by a member of the administration team and provided with a sheet briefly detailing the project and a return sheet for them to complete and return to indicate if they may be willing to participate within the study upon enrolment to their respective programme of study.

- Upon commencement of the induction process, a short verbal overview of the project will be provided to students from the Science Foundation Year programme to invite them (as enrolled students) to participate within the study. They will then be asked to leave their names and contact email addresses so that they can then subsequently be contacted by the researcher (myself) to arrange for voluntary informed consent of all participants and commencement of the data collection process. This will be given by a member of academic staff with no connection to any of the programmes of study from which participants are being sought.

The unstructured nature of the data collection method may result in changes in research interests during the data collection process can also create moral dilemmas for the researcher. Such dilemmas may arise as a result of discussions spawning new interests which may potentially touch on sensitive matters where formal permission for conducting interviews had not been granted. In such circumstances, additional ethical approval may be necessary.

This form should now be printed out, signed by you below and sent to your supervisor to sign. Your supervisor will forward this document to the School’s Research Support Office for the Chair of the School’s Ethics Committee to countersign. A unique approval reference will be added and this certificate will be given by a member of academic staff with no connection to any of the programmes of study from which participants are being sought.

I hereby certify that I will abide by the details given above and that I undertake in my dissertation / thesis (delete whichever is inappropriate) to respect the dignity and privacy of those participating in this research.

I confirm that if my research should change radically, I will complete a further form.

Signed: ___________________________ date: ___________________________

N.B. You should not start the fieldwork part of the project until you have the signature of your supervisor

This project has been approved for the period: ___________ until: ___________

By (above mentioned supervisor’s signature): ___________________________ date: ___________

N.B. To Supervisor: Please ensure that ethical issues are addressed annually in your report and if any changes in the research occurs a further form is completed.

SELL unique approval reference:……………………………………………….

Signed:………………………………….date:…………………………..

Chair of the School’s Ethics Committee
Appendix 4

ETHICS APPROVAL FOR NON CLINICAL RESEARCH INVOLVING HUMANS AND ANIMALS
APPLICATION FORM FOR ETHICAL APPROVAL
(STAFF AND STUDENTS)

PLEASE NOTE:
The Key Principles of Ethical Research are;

- The emotional well being, physical well being, rights, dignity and personal values of research participants should be secured;
- Research participants and contributors should be fully informed regarding the purpose, methods and end use of the research. They should be clear on what their participation involves and any risks that are associated with the process. These risks should be clearly articulated and if possible quantified;
- Research participants must participate in a voluntary way, free from coercion. Participants have the right to withdraw at any time;
- Research must be independent and any conflicts of interest or partiality must be explicit;
- Normally information provided by the participants should be anonymous. At all times confidentiality must be assured.

We aim to eliminate any risk associated with research, as far as it is reasonable to do so.

Applications (completed application form with any accompanying documents) must be submitted to the School/Centre Ethics Panel in advance of the intended start date for data collection. If research is undertaken without approval it will not be eligible for submission and could lead to disciplinary action.

Students working within the NHS should note that they will need to apply for ethical approval through the Trust and not this group. Research involving people who lack capacity is subject to the Mental Capacity Act and must also be approved by the National Research Ethics Service, as should any prison based research.

Where research is being undertaken outside of a School or Centre, the application for ethical approval should be submitted to the School/Centre Panel that is deemed most appropriate. Please contact the Chair of the Ethics Committee for advice if in doubt where to submit application.

LATE SUBMISSIONS

Please note that submissions that are received late will NOT be considered until the next meeting of the Committee, save in the most exceptional circumstances. Delay in starting research will not normally be accepted as an exceptional circumstance.
ETHICS APPROVAL APPLICATION FORM FOR NON CLINICAL RESEARCH INVOLVING HUMANS/ANIMALS

Please give an answer to ALL questions. Failure to do so will result in automatic voidance of application. You may use the term ’not applicable’ where necessary.

1. APPLICANT DETAILS

1.1 Name of applicant

1.2 Staff ID

1.3 School/Department/Centre

1.4 Course/Programme

1.5 Date of application

2. I AM CARRYING THIS PROJECT OUT AS:

- [ ] Staff Research Project
- [x] Postgraduate Doctoral Research
- [ ] Postgraduate Masters Research
- [ ] Undergraduate (Degree or Diploma Dissertation)
- [ ] Externally Funded Project (State Funding Body)
- [ ] Other please describe

This project has been discussed and agreed by senior academic staff at the University of Exeter, who will be responsible for the supervision of the research process in part fulfillment of the requirements of the award of Doctor of Education from University of Exeter.

3. PROPOSED DURATION OF PROJECT

From: ___________________________ (dd/mm/yy) To: ___________________________ (dd/mm/yy)

If you are unable to start and finish by these dates, please inform the relevant School/Centre Ethics Panel in writing.

4. RESEARCH STUDENTS. Please give details of your supervisor(s)

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<th>2 FIRST NAME</th>
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<th>3 EMAIL (UCS e-mail address only)</th>
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5. STAFF RESEARCHERS. Please give full details of all researchers involved in the project.
6. TITLE OF RESEARCH PROJECT AND A BRIEF DESCRIPTION:

Title: An exploration of the workings of the English policy on Widening Participation framed through the experiences of students making the transition from level 3 to level 4 studies in one Higher Education Institution.

At present, widening participation is an issue at the forefront of national and institutional level debates in higher education (HE) (DfES, 2003a; HEFCE, 2008; NAO, 2008). This has resulted in major policy drives to increase the numbers of students engaged with HE, under the rationale that presently, we live within a knowledge-based society which demands higher levels of skills within the labour force in order for the UK to maintain national and global economic success. Yet, whilst the numbers of participants within HE is one of the demonstrable outcomes for such policy drivers; the main focus of widening participation could arguably be understood to be about broadening the appeal of HE.

As the planned expansion and opening up of HE (DfES, 2003b) is being realised, it is becoming clear that expansion is not synonymous with inclusion. The research of Reay et al. (2002) and Bathmaker and Thomas (2009) identified that; student’s choices regarding engagement with different types of HE provision is not only influenced by their own backgrounds and experiences, but specifically for those students for whom continuation of their studies from level 3 to level 4 within the same institution was possible, their decisions were further significantly influenced by institutional habitus. It could therefore be argued that whilst HE is currently possible for a greater number of people than ever before, it should not be assumed that all forms of HE are either universally available to all, or accessed by all potential students.

Understanding students decisions to engage (or not) in HE based upon their experiences and expectations derived from their experiences up to level 3 engagement with education can positively enhance recruitment and retention, promote future successful engagement with HE, inform future policy development, and help institutions target future support aimed at; promoting widening participation, broadening the appeal of HE and sustaining the expansion of HE.

This research is concerned with the experiences of students negotiating the transition from level 3 to level 4 studies at a higher education institution in England. It is intended that the research will draw insights from the experiences of students undertaking a level 3 Science Foundation Year (SFY) programme, and those who have completed the SFY and subsequently progressed onto level 4 undergraduate studies. It seeks to articulate the changing shape and experience of HE in England, by giving a voice to the student’s experience of moving between different levels of study within the same institution.

The aim of the study is to contribute to the understanding of the nature of transitions through HE, as experienced by students from non-traditional backgrounds. Specifically my research questions are:

3. What are the experiences and expectations of students making the transition from level 3 to level 4 study?

4. How can these experiences and expectations be used to identify and improve issues of policy and practice at a local level?

References:
7. **METHOD OF DATA COLLECTION** *(Tick as many as apply)*

- Questionnaire (attach a copy)
- Interviews (attach a copy)
- Observation (Please attach an observation proforma)
- Audio-taping interviewees or events (with consent)
- Focus Groups
- Biometric measurement (Please attach a measurement proforma)
- Physiological measurement (Please attach a measurement proforma)
- Performance measurement (Please attach a measurement proforma)
- Physiological self-assessment (Please provide details)
- Psychological self-assessment (Please provide details)
- Psychological experimentation (Please provide details)
- Animal Feeding/Therapeutic trials (Please provide details)
- Adding to or changing an aspect of an animal’s environment (including enforcing physical exercise) (Please provide details)
- Animal Breeding projects (Please provide details)
- Wild animal trapping – license will be required for some animal species (Please provide details)
- Other * Please explain. Use no more than 50 words:

8. **TARGET PARTICIPANT GROUP**: Please indicate the targeted participant group by ticking all boxes that apply. Expand any responses necessary in the space provided at “Other”.

- Students or staff of this University: **X**
- People from non-English speaking backgrounds
- Vulnerable Adults (over 18 years old with learning disabilities, mental health difficulties, confusion, dementia physical illness and other impairment preventing informed consent)
- Vulnerable Children with learning disabilities, mental health difficulties, confusion, and other impairment preventing informed consent)*
- Children/legal minors (under 18 years old) *
- Parental or Guardian consent
- Adult or youth offenders detained at Her Majesty’s convenience
- Other:

* CRB check must be complete prior to approval

| Number of Participants | Maximum of 20 |

9. **RECRUITMENT**

Please state the method of recruitment of participants.
Participants:
All participants shall be adults who are over 18 years old and competent to give consent.

The research will have two strands and seeks to recruit participants from students enrolled onto two different levels of study within the university.

- **Strand A** (level 3 studies): Students enrolled onto the Science Foundation Year programme (September 2010 intake).

- **Strand B** (level 4 studies): Students who have progressed from Science Foundation Year (2009 intake) and enrolled onto either the BSc (Hons) Sport and Exercise Science or BSc (Hons) Nutrition and Human Health programmes (September 2010 intake).

Number of Participants:
- **Strand A**: maximum of 12 students.
- **Strand B**: maximum of 6 students.

Sampling:
- **Strand A**: All students will be invited to participate in the study, whilst this will initially mean that a large number of students may be recruited, it is not anticipated that a significant number will be willing to participate with an extended study, therefore the actual number of students recruited is not anticipated to be in excess of the maximum stated above.

- **Strand B**: Purposive sampling will be used to identify potential participants who have progressed from Science Foundation Year to level 4 studies on either BSc (Hons) Sport and Exercise Science or BSc (Hons) Nutrition and Human Health programmes.

All staff involved with the delivery of all programmes from which participants are to be recruited have been provided with an outline of the research and the opportunity to seek further information. Following completion of the research, a summary of the findings will be made available upon request.

Support for accessing students in both level three and level 4 studies has been sought from relevant Programme Area Director. Please see separate attachment.

Recruitment:
Recruitment for both strands to the research will be undertaken in the same manner, as detailed below:

- Prior to the induction days for each of the programmes from which it is hoped to recruit participants to be involved in the study, students will be written to by a member of the administration team and provided with a sheet briefly detailing the project and a return sheet for them to complete and return to indicate if they may be willing to participate within the study upon enrolment to their respective programme of study. Please see separate attachment for additional information regarding information to be sent to potential participants.

- Upon commencement of the induction process, a short verbal overview of the project will be provided to students from the Science Foundation Year, BSc (Hons) Sport and Exercise Science and BSc (Hons) Nutrition and Human Health programmes to invite them (as enrolled students) to participate within the study. They will then be asked to leave their names and contact email addresses so that they can then subsequently be contacted by the researcher (myself) to arrange for voluntary informed consent of all participants and commencement of the data collection process. This verbal overview of the project will be given by a member of academic staff with no connection to any of the programmes of study from which participants are being recruited.
Unstructured interviews: With the informed consent of participants, interviews will be audio-recorded and transcribed. This will then be coded thematically. The following identifies when it is anticipated that each of the interviews will be undertaken.

Individual audio-recorded interviews will be conducted at [___] at the following times over twelve months (Sept 2010 – Dec 2011):

- **Strand A**: Three interviews per participant – Sept 10 / Feb11 / May11
- **Strand B**: Three interviews per participant – Oct 10 / Feb11 / May11

Please see separate attachment for additional information regarding interviews.

10. **RELATIONSHIP WITH PARTICIPANTS**: As the researcher do you have any relationship with the participant such as a familial friend, colleague, patient, client, student?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>NO</th>
<th>YES</th>
<th>X</th>
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   If YES, you need to explain the relationship and the steps to be taken by you to ensure that the subject’s participation is purely voluntary and not influenced by the relationship in any way. You should also explain any further measures you might take to ensure their privacy, confidentiality and anonymity.

   Attach a separate document in which these issues are explored – Please see attachment.

11. **LOCATION OF RESEARCH** (Tick as many as apply)

   - UCS [X]
   - 5 Other
   - 6 Location(s)

   Please identify location(s):

   Is a risk assessment required for this location? **NO** If so, please attach

12. **DISSEMINATION OF RESULTS**

   Other than submitting your research project for assessment purposes please state if you intend to communicate your findings elsewhere?

   - YES [X]
   - NO

   (If YES, please state how you intend to communicate your findings)

   - Doctoral thesis will be published on the [___] archive and the British Library Thesis Service.
   - Findings may also be used for journal and / or conference publication.

13. **CONFIDENTIALITY**

   How will you ensure information on participants remains confidential?

   All hardcopy raw data gathered as part of this research will be kept in a secure location within a locked filing cabinet. The names and contact details of all participants will be stored separately from all raw data, again in a locked filing cabinet. All hardcopy data will be treated as confidential at all times during the research process.

   All electronic data will be stored on a PC will be made secure with a login password and individual files will also be password protected. All electronic data will be treated as confidential at all times during the research process and coded in such a manner so that individual participants cannot be identified. All backed up electronic data will be anonymised and password protected.
All research data and results, in all media, will be confidential and will not be disclosed to third parties. The production of the EdD thesis and any subsequent publications / reports will be done in such a way as not to identify individuals or the institution involved, i.e. the data will be in anonymised form.

The research study will comply with the [please see additional information] Data Protection Guidance for Research Students. All information and data generated as part of this research project will be kept in accordance with the Data Protection Act (1998). Specifically in respect of the Institution through which this research will be supervised:

is a data collector and is registered with the Office of the Data Protection Commissioner as required to do under the Data Protection Act 1998. The information gathered as part of this research will be used for research purposes only and will be processed in accordance with the University’s registration and current data protection legislation.

Data will be confidential to the researcher and will not be disclosed to any unauthorised third parties without further agreement by the participants.

14. ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Please state the ethical considerations and how you intend to handle them. Consider the risks (to participants and self) and the measures taken to minimise

I will be following the Code of Ethics and Conduct set out by the British Educational Research Association [BERA] (BERA, 2004). Issues regarding respect, confidentiality and informed consent will be carefully considered as detailed below.

*Respect:* The experiences, perceptions and views of participants will be paramount in this study. Throughout the research process I will endeavor to respect individual participants with regard to their emotional well being, physical well being, rights, dignity and personal values; including those involving age, disability, education, ethnicity, gender, language, national origin, race, religion, sexual orientation, marital or family status and socio-economic status.

*Confidentiality:* Records of the data collected (including transcripts and audio recordings) will be stored in a secure and safe place. Electronic information will only be accessed by the researcher with their username and password. This information will be stored on a secure system with recognised virus protection. Electronic and paper information will be locked in a secure building. Information will also be coded to ensure anonymity. This will remain anonymous in the write up of the research. Collected written information will be destroyed by shredding and securely disposing of it when it is no longer required. All audio recordings will also be disposed of digitally.

*Informed Consent:* It will be essential to obtain informed consent from participants for both strands of the study. Records of when, how and from whom consent was obtained, will be recorded. Participants will be made aware of how the research findings will be used. Essentially, informed consent will be an ongoing process throughout the research. Participants will be reminded that they have the right to withdraw from the research at any given time and that data related to them will be destroyed.

*Disclosure:* It will be made clear to participants that in the exceptional event that there is evidence or disclosure which gives rise to serious concerns about either the participant’s of the study or other parties within [please see additional information], information will be passed on to relevant bodies in accordance with existing policies and procedures as outlined within the participant information sheet, programme handbooks and available on [please see additional information]. This will be outlined within the participant information sheet.

*Safe guarding:* Should participants require support during or following interviews, they will be able to access it via the institutional Student Support Services.

*Complaints:* In the event that participants wish to complain about any aspect of the study, the participant information sheet will outline how this can be done and provide contact details for myself and my research supervisors at the [please see additional information].

During the data collection, data analysis and write up, data (audio recordings, interview data and individual data) will be securely stored in a locked cabinet in a secure building. As previously mentioned, electronic information will only be accessed by the researcher with their username
and password. Electronic information will also be stored on a secure system, within a locked building with recognised virus protection. It will be destroyed when it is no longer required.

Reference:

For further details of the above Ethical Considerations in respect of the Participant Information Sheet please see separate attachment for details.

Additional information – please attach to this form. Your application will not be able to be progressed until these documents are available for consideration. For undergraduate applications, please do not attach your research proposal. In addition to any elements indicated in sections 7 or 10 above, please indicate other additional information that is attached:

- ✔ Participant information sheet
- ✔ Informed Consent form
- ✔ Other (Please list)
  - Method of data collection – Interviews
  - Participant Information Sheet
  - Participant Consent form for participation
  - Support form Programme Area Director to access students for research
  - Letter for potential level 3 participants
  - Flyer advertising study to be sent with letter to potential level 3 participants
  - Letter for potential level 4 participants
  - Flyer advertising study to be sent with letter to potential level 4 participants
  - Relationship with participants
  - University of Exeter’s Data Protection Guidance for Research Students

DECLARATION BY RESEARCHER

- The information contained herein is, to the best of my knowledge and belief, accurate.
- I have attempted to identify all risks related to the research that may arise in conducting this research and acknowledge my obligations and the rights of the participants.
- I understand that my research work cannot commence until FULL ethical approval has been given by the School/Centre Ethics Panel.

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<th>Applicant</th>
<th>Signature</th>
<th>Date</th>
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DECLARATION BY SUPERVISOR

I have reviewed this form and accompanying documentation and am satisfied that this application is appropriate for consideration for ethical approval by a Ethics Panel.
Supervisor One*

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<th>Signature</th>
<th>Date</th>
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* For staff projects where there is no direct supervisor, this application should be countersigned by a member of the Ethics Committee.

School/Centre Ethics Panel outcome

[ ] Approved

[ ] Approved with Recommendations (see comments section)

[ ] Approved with Conditions (see comments section)

[ ] Not Approved (see comments section)

Comments:

Chair of School/Centre Ethics Panel

[ ] [Blank]

Date

[ ] [Blank]

Original to be kept by School/Centre Ethics Panel Chair
Copy to be included in the research report (e.g. Dissertation)
Appendix 5

Level 3 student participation letter:

«First_Name» «Surname»  
«Home_Address_1»  
«Home_Address_2»  
«Home_Address_3»  
«Home_Address_4»  
«Home_Address_5»  
«Home_Postcode»

1st September 2010

Dear «First_Name»

I am writing to you as you will shortly be enrolling onto the foundation year of [ ] course at [ ] University Campus Suffolk. Enclosed with this letter is an invitation for you to consider participating in a research study starting in late September 2010.

Please consider the enclosed invitation to participate within the study; it will only take a couple of minutes.

If you would be willing to consider participating following your formal enrolment onto the Science Foundation Year course, please complete and return the slip at the bottom of this letter in the pre-paid envelope supplied.

Participation within the study is purely voluntary and return of this slip below does not mean that you have to participate. Further information regarding this study will be provided during your induction day at [ ] or can be obtained from the contact details provided on the invitation.

Kind regards,

[ ADMIN PERSON ]

Enclosures:  Recruitment poster  
Pre-paid envelope

(Please detach and return)

Name:………………………………………………………………….

I am willing to consider participating within a study about student experience at [ ].
Level 4 student participation letter:

«First_Name» «Surname»
«Home_Address_1»
«Home_Address_2»
«Home_Address_3»
«Home_Address_4»
«Home_Address_5»
«Home_Postcode»

1st September 2010

Dear «First_Name»

I am writing to you as you will shortly be enrolling onto either the BSc (Hons) [ ] or BSc (Hons) [ ] degree course at University Campus Suffolk. Enclosed with this letter is an invitation for you to consider participating in a research study starting in late September 2010.

Please consider the enclosed invitation to participate within the study; it will only take a couple of minutes.

If you would be willing to consider participating following your formal enrolment onto either the BSc (Hons) [ ] or BSc (Hons) [ ], please complete and return the slip at the bottom of this letter in the pre-paid envelope supplied.

Participation within the study is purely voluntary and return of this slip below does not mean that you have to participate. Further information regarding this study will be provided during your induction day at [ ] or can be obtained from the contact details provided on the invitation.

Kind regards,

ADMIN PERSON

Enclosures: Recruitment poster
Pre-paid envelope

(Please detach and return)

Name:………………………………………………………………….

I am willing to consider participating within a study about student experience at [ ].
Advertising leaflet included with letters to level 3 and level 4 students inviting them to participate:

PARTICIPANTS NEEDED FOR RESEARCH

Are you about to start a course at [insert institution]?

I am looking for volunteers to take part in a study about student experiences at [insert institution].

As a participant in this study:

• You would be asked to participate in confidential audio-recorded interviews about your experiences as a student.

• Your participation would involve a maximum of five interview sessions between Sept 2010 and Nov 2011, each of which is approximately 20 minutes long.

For more information about this study, or to volunteer for this study, please contact:

[redacted]

Email: [redacted]

This study has been reviewed by, and received ethics clearance from, the Research Ethics Committee at [insert institution].

This research is being conducted as part of doctoral research thesis under the supervision of [redacted].
Appendix 6

*Respect:* The experiences, perceptions and views of participants were paramount to the enquiry. Throughout the conduct of the interviews, questions were phrased in such a way as to respect individual participants with regard to their emotional well-being, physical well-being, rights, dignity and personal values; including those involving age, disability, education, ethnicity, gender, language, national origin, race, religion, sexual orientation, marital or family status and socio-economic status.

*Safe guarding:* Should participants have required support during or following interviews, they were able to access it via the SEEHEIs Student Support Services. This was outlined within the participant information sheet.

*Disclosure:* It was made clear to participants that in the exceptional event that there is evidence or disclosure which gives rise to serious concerns about either the participants of the study or other individuals within SEEHEI, information would be passed on to relevant bodies in accordance with existing policies and procedures at SEEHEI. This was also outlined within the participant information sheet.

*Complaints:* In the event that participants wished to complain about any aspect of the study, the participant information sheet detailed how this could be done.

*Data storage:* All hardcopy raw data gathered as part of this research was kept in a secure location within a lockable filing cabinet. The names and contact details of all participants were stored separately from all raw data, again in a lockable filing cabinet. All hardcopy data was treated as confidential at all times.
During the research process. All electronic data was stored on a PC and made secure with a login password and individual files were also password protected. All electronic data was treated as confidential at all times during the research process and coded in such a manner so that individual participants cannot be identified. All backed up electronic data was irretrievably anonymised and password protected. All research data and results, in all media, were confidential and were not disclosed to third parties. All information and data generated as part of this research project was kept in accordance with the Data Protection Act (1998).
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